

“LIVING WITH DEPRESSION”
A Sermon offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
September 28, 2014
Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

THE MORNING READING

Our reading is entitled: Blessings, by Mark Belletini, adapted

- Blessed is every breath I take.
- Blessed is every fear I face.
- Blessed are my family and friends.
- Blessed is my love, the depth of my strength which is deeper than my present brokenness.
- Blessed is Love that forever remembers my future, and trembles with my tremors.
- Blessed is the courage that I did not know I had.
- Blessed is the song of life, one of whose notes is me.
- And blessed is my dream of peace for all those I love, beginning with myself.

THE SERMON

“LIVING WITH DEPRESSION”
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Blessed is my dream of peace for all those
I love, beginning with myself.

“I lost my husband and best friend . . . I am utterly heartbroken.” Those were the words of Susan Schneider, Robin Williams’ wife, shortly after he took his own life in August. Robin Williams’ death seemed to unsettle many of us, perhaps because there was a seeming incongruity between the sheer joy of his comedy and the inner alienation of his own life. As I listened to the conversation and media analysis that followed the announcement of his death, I was struck, and then angered, by how many times I heard variations of: “He was talented, a genius. He was successful. He was loved around the world. He had everything to live for. *Why would he kill himself?*” Anyone who said that

doesn't know how hard is the struggle. Anyone who said that hasn't lived with depression.

What depression is *not*: depression is not being sad; it is not having the blues; it is not experiencing a rough day. Depression is anguish. Depression is isolation. Depression is illness. Like cancer, depression is your body malfunctioning. And sometimes, that malfunction wears you down to the point you can no longer hold onto hope.

Chase Twitchell writes: "What happens in depression, for reasons that are still unknown, is that . . . certain neurotransmitters [in the brain] . . . do not work properly, causing a disruption in the flow of information between nerve cells . . . the message gets lost as it travels, eventually affecting cellular metabolism, hormone balance, and the circadian system, the clock that determines cycles of rest and activity. This translates into disturbances of mood, sleep, hunger, sex, memory formation, physical energy, hormone secretion . . . and body temperature." (Unholy Ghost, p. 23-24)

That is what depression *is*; but what does depression *feel* like? The answer is as varied as the 121 million adults worldwide who currently live with depression. "It's a trip to the country of nothingness," says one person. (Ibid, p. 43) For someone else: "I had the painful sensation that I was dead, or worse, had never been born . . . I didn't exist." (Ibid. 64) Another says: "When we finally found the right balance of meds, the impenetrable fog between me and everyone else at last lifted." J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, described her own bout with severe depression as an "absence of being able to envisage that you will ever be cheerful again." In her Harry Potter books, the black-hooded Dementors that guard the Fortress of Azkaban and surround Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry are based on her experiences with depression. She writes: they "drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air . . . every good feeling, every happy memory [is] sucked out of you . . . you [are] left with nothing." (Harry Potter and the Prison of Azkaban)

One member of our congregation has suffered from depression for more than 35 years. He gave me permission to share his thoughts: "Acceptance," he says, "is the first word which comes to mind—not just society, acquaintances, friends, even my immediate family—but accepting *myself* that what I suffer is a real disease with real, concrete, debilitating effects. One of the unfortunate results of depression is the inability to maintain anything resembling a balanced view of one's world and, in fact, life itself. Even as I write this, even in the face of insurmountable evidence to the contrary, there remains a sliver of doubt in my mind that depression is not just some vestige of poor self-discipline. It would be better to have lost an arm or a leg in some respects—not that those who have lost limbs do not have even greater suffering—[but the] loss of limb is at least a visible, real reminder of disability, whereas depression is hidden and therefore is both more ominous and insidious." He continues: "At its worst, depression descends like an oppressive weight to blacken one's mind, spreading negative thoughts, fear, and anxiety in overwhelming waves with little respite during an episode. In the midst of these thoughts one can barely function. Thoughts about one's worthlessness, uselessness and lack of purpose preoccupy and dominate one's mind. Into such a context it's easy to

see how one might have difficulty interacting with other people, which is why a depressed person often withdraws altogether from social interaction. It follows that ending one's life is not so terribly illogical out of this mindset." A mix of medication, meditation, positive thought reframing and vigorous exercise now helps keep his depression at bay.

Former New York Times columnist Virginia Heffernan writes: "This is what would happen [to me]. In the middle of movie theaters, meetings, and restaurants, I would suddenly have to leave. Jamming my arms into my coat sleeves, I would face away from anyone who could see me, my wrists tightening. I felt asthmatic. If someone noticed that I was rushing, I'd evince artificial warmth designed to get that person away . . . and then, over and over, I would say I was sick—sick with any documented ailment that came into my head, any ailment I could think of except "depression," which no one, no matter what the brochures . . . say, will ever believe is a real sickness. I didn't think of it as a sickness either. I thought of it as work. Once I got outside, I would crawl into a taxi, sink down behind the divider . . . and I'd cry until I felt blood-poisoned with tears." (Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression, p. 8-9) Medication and therapy have now helped restore Heffernan to a more balanced place.

This, my friends, is living with depression.

David Karp, a professor of sociology at Boston College shares his own experience: "I spent each day struggling to appear competent . . . Everyone else—my wife, my kids, coworkers, friends, the guy who sold me my morning coffee—seemed to be moving through their days peacefully, laughing and having fun. I resented them because they were having such an easy time of it and because I felt utterly cut off from them emotionally. I felt angry because there was no way they could understand what I was experiencing . . . I dragged along, feeling barely alive." He continues: "Some people experience depression primarily as a kind of mental misery. Mine has always had a physical component as well. As I saw it, my mind made a choice each day about how to torment my body. One day . . . brought chest pains that could easily be mistaken for a heart attack. Sometimes, I felt an awful heaviness in my eyes, pressure in my head . . . shaky hands and legs, or some combination of all these things." (Ibid. 142-43)

Poet Jane Kenyon also felt depression in her body. In one poem she wrote:

I had to ask two times
before my hand would scratch my ear.

After coming through a particularly difficult bout, treated with a combination of drugs and therapy, Kenyon put these words onto paper:

Pharmaceutical wonders are at work
but I believe only in this moment
of well-being. Unholy ghost,
you are certain to come again.

Coarse, mean, you'll put your feet
on the coffee table, lean back,
and turn me into someone who can't
take the trouble to speak; someone
who can't sleep, or who does nothing
but sleep; can't read, or call
for an appointment for help.¹

It is not only the individual with depression who suffers. Jane Kenyon's husband, Donald Hall, himself a poet living in New Hampshire, remembers: "Ten years after we were married . . . Jane sank under a torment and torrent of wild crying. At home she curled on the sofa in the fetal position and wept for three days. I wanted to hold and comfort her, as I had earlier done when she was low, but now I could not touch her. If I touched her, she would want to scream . . . It was heartbreaking not . . . being able to give comfort . . . Later Jane visited [a psychiatrist]. He prescribed a variety of drugs, and talked with her continually, kind, supportive, sympathetic. With [pharmaceutical] help, Jane avoided deepest depression most of the time, but misery lurked at the edges of her daily life, and sometimes sprang from the shadows. I remember Jane on the bathroom floor banging her head against toilet and pipes. Another time she arrived trembling after driving back from Concord: she had fought all the way the impulse to drive off the road into a boulder or a stone wall . . . Her friends sympathized entirely . . . but also suffered . . . Sometimes I put visitors off at Jane's urging. I telephoned a dying friend to tell him he could not visit. I canceled a skiing visit from my son and friends because Jane could not see anyone," Donald Hall continues: "One of the hardest things, if you are depressed, is to try to hold yourself up in the presence of others, especially others whom you love. I remember a birthday for granddaughters at my daughter's house. Jane stood looking on, wretched, hardly able to speak . . . My daughter looked at her and said, "You're miserable, aren't you?" . . . Depression was a third party in our marriage . . . depression's ghost was omnipresent for both of us." (Ibid.164-170)

For some family members, depression becomes too much. Philip remembers: "When I met my husband, he was a passionate, optimistic person, always discovering and sharing new things that delighted him. He was always seeing, seeking out, and pursuing new opportunities. But then—was it slowly or suddenly?—something shifted. His thoughts became more and more negative, more and more of the time. Nothing seemed to give him much pleasure any more, even things that he used to love. He seemed to be drifting deeper and deeper into murkier and murkier waters—and didn't seem to see that there was any way to get back to shore. Nothing I offered seemed to help. All of my attempts, as imperfect as they were, seemed just to irritate him. I started to feel helpless and hopeless myself. It felt as though he was drowning and instead of letting me help pull him out, it felt as though he was determined to pull me under with him. He wouldn't reach out for professional help—and when he finally did, he wouldn't follow through

¹ Note: These two poems are cited in the book "Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression" by Nell Casey

with any of their recommendations for very long. When it reached its worst, his listlessness and despair boiled up into anger. If I had been stronger and more compassionate, I would have stayed by him as he went through all of this, even just to be there as a caring presence and loving witness to his struggles. But as things went on and on with no sign of improvement, I left. It was all so mysterious and sad. Where did the vibrant creative man that I had known—and loved—go?”

The sister of someone with depression remembers: “I wanted to be there for Maud, I knew that was what she needed (the one thing people always say about depression is that stubborn, consistent support helps even when it seems like it doesn’t), but . . . sometimes it felt like a trade-off: I had to throw my life over in order to save hers.” (Ibid. p. 276)

Now, I need to acknowledge that many of the stories I’ve shared are from severe cases of depression. Not all depression reaches that degree, or the degree Robin Williams and his family faced. Not all depression ends with the total loss of all hope. Some do. But for many of us, a combination of talk therapy, behavior modification and medication takes the edge off the pain and lifts the fog that would otherwise keep us distanced from life. We are once again able to fully live and celebrate life, and this is a blessing, an amazing grace. For others of us, we move between times of normalcy and times of anguish. And for some, we remain in the depths, sustaining ourselves as best we can. Some of us self medicate. Some of us self medicate far too much. Some of us just get by...for now. And some of us suffer in silence, never telling anyone what our life truly feels like. For those of us in that silent place...please, please, please tell someone. Talk to your spouse or partner, a friend, a family member. Tell me. Call a therapist (I can give you a referral if you need one). Talk to your doctor. Call a hotline. Go online to IMALive.com (an instant e-chat support service).

For those of us who have a loved one who lives with depression, please talk with someone. Seek out support, perhaps even a support group.

Depression is not something to face alone. There is no magic cure-all, but there is medication, there are skilled mental health professionals, there is behavior modification, there is positive thought reframing, there is exercise, there is the promise of restored hope and purpose . . . and there are those of us who will offer you stubborn, consistent, and caring support.

And remember, always remember, even if we do not believe it is true, that:

Blessed is . . . the depth of our
strength which is deeper than
our present brokenness.

Blessed is Love
That forever remembers our future,
And trembles with our tremors.

Blessed is the courage that we did not know we had.

Blessed is the song of life,
one of whose notes is yours.

And blessed is our dream of peace for all those
we love, beginning with ourselves.²

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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² Blessings (adapted) from Sonata for Voice and Silence by Mark Belletini, p. 72-73