

CHAPEL TALK: DECEMBER 14, 2009 ST. OLAF COLLEGE BOE CHAPEL

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT, FROM DEPRESSION TO JOY

BIBLICAL TEXTS: PSALMS 130 AND 42

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The psalmists understood depression: “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” (Psalm 130)

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’” (Psalm 42)

Depression is the terrible certainty that God has either abandoned you or forgotten your name. Depression is knowing that the landscape of your soul is filled with junk---an old tire, a broken machine, a dead tree --- the bleak landscape of one of my favorite New Yorker cartoons entitled, “Life Without Mozart”.

During a therapy session many years ago, I said to my therapist, “I feel like I am fighting for my soul.” The loss of core identity and the sense of hopelessness about ever finding who you are again --- that creative person with energy who moves forward in the world with a sense of trust -- this reality was mine when I was in the depths of depression. It was a living hell to be separated from both my Self and my God.

In my childhood, Grandma Bess was one of my clearest sources of unconditional love. She was hilarious in her comments on life, she made wonderful German food like streusel-topped coffee cakes with cinnamon-kissed apple slices, she played the piano with the joyful rippling arpeggi of one who had improvised for vaudeville and silent movies. I was her little furnace she always said when we snuggled together in our flannel nightgowns through the cold Minnesota winter night. And she had the most wondrous name, one that sounded more Catholic than German-Lutheran: Bessie Florentina Rosina Paegel.

Grandma was a powerful musical critic of even the high and the mighty: “She’s not so hot” would be her firm assessment of many a famous opera star on the radio program, “The Firestone Hour”. But her most scathing indictment was when she said a person was “uebergesnappt”, untranslatable, but roughly, “so smart that you are stupid”. I have known some of those folks in academia over the years. Maybe we should have a special award at the end of the year for the Ueber-uebergesnappt Professor at St. Olaf.

When I was in junior high, Grandma Bess lived with my family for a few months to recover from shock treatments for depression. I could only imagine the horror of the wires strapped to her head and her cries when it happened. But the greater fear for me was to see her vacant eyes, the lost self, the silent person moving through our home like a ghost of her loving self. Gradually, Grandma would recover, but not her memories of the months before the hospital. They were wiped out along with other aspects of who she was. I vowed that I would never go through this in my life and I became afraid of the

“curse of depression” in our family since in each German-American generation some were suffering.

Actually, I had already experienced my first depressive episode. When I was nine, our family moved for the second time in three years when my father became Superintendent of Schools in Owatonna, Minnesota. Every afternoon I came home from fourth grade and cried in my bedroom from the loneliness and difficulty of starting all over again making new friends. I was painfully shy and a bookworm who read six books a week because that was the maximum you could check out of the public library. I just got better on my own later that year when I began playing the violin and I made a new best friend, Michelle. This was the first time, but not the last, when I experienced the power of music and friendship to heal sorrow in my life.

In graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I had another brush with depression, but this time it manifested itself as a breakdown of my physical body from the stress and anxiety of meeting ever-higher benchmarks, academically and musically. Even though I was a straight “A” student and a Bronze Tablet Scholar representing the top 1% of graduates at our large university of 36,000 students, I became fearful of not achieving at the top level of my expectations for myself. On Beethoven’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dec. 16, 1970, I woke up paralyzed with such a high fever that I could not get out of bed. I was supposed to play a performance of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony that evening at Krannert Great Hall with the University Chorus, Orchestra and Soloists. Instead, I was hooked up to IV’s at Carle Clinic at the downbeat of that concert, too sick with a serious kidney infection to even realize what I was missing. I might have died without the invention of penicillin less than a half-century earlier.

During the dark winter months that followed, I came face to face with the knowledge that being a perfectionist was going to kill me. After months of recovery, I emerged wan and exhausted, but determined to live a more balanced life.

About twenty-five years ago, my struggle with depression returned in a new, frightening way. I had some serious personal challenges in my home life and work life, but again, on the surface, my life was going well. I was receiving grants to support my fieldwork in Norwegian folk music in Norway, I was a successful freelancer in the Cities playing opera and oratorio, and I liked my work teaching music at St. Olaf. One day I began to think in a very calm and dispassionate way just how I would do it IF I were to take my own life. This is when a still, small voice inside of me asked, “Why would I commit suicide? I love music, nature, my family, my friends, books, foreign language films. I am NOT a person who would kill herself. So why do I feel like this?”

This was the beginning of my true journey of healing. I knew that something was so far out of balance in my life, that I had to wake up and take steps to save myself from an early end. I found a wonderful therapist in town, I took medication and without missing a day of teaching or performing, I returned to my true self over a period of a year and a half. These insights stood me in such good stead, that I was free of depression for more than twenty-five years until last winter.

It returned with a vengeance. Was it my family biochemistry predisposing me, was it seasonal affective disorder, or the real economic depression that collapsed all of our dreams of a funded retirement? I don’t know the answer. I only know that I tried to

stave it off once again. I exercised more, ate less sugar, journaled daily, talked to trusted friends about how terrible I felt, and prayed. All of my tried and true coping strategies were failing me. I resisted starting medication in favor of natural ways of balancing my life.

In an effort to start sleeping through the night again, I went to see Dr. Gary Carlson in June. He gave me some very helpful natural supplement suggestions and told me about the “Resilience Training” program that Dr. Henry Emmons had developed at the Penny George Institute for Health and Healing at Abbot-Northwestern in Minneapolis. This program was starting in two days and was already filled, but, thanks to Henry’s generosity in letting me join, I was able to start the eight-week program.

I recommend this wonderful program to anyone who is suffering with depression or severe anxiety. It integrates mindfulness meditation, nutritional counseling, body fitness assessment and personalized physical fitness training, and a life coach to help form life goals with eight weeks of group work once a week. Sessions are offered both in the evening and the daytime to accommodate different schedules.

This “Resilience Program” teaches that the call of depression is to open: to open our hearts, souls, minds and bodies to the way it is now and, by fully embracing this moment through mindfulness awareness, to move towards healing. Depression is not something anyone would choose to experience: it is deeply painful, life-threatening for some, and frightening to lose oneself and all hope that life will ever be better. And the truth is that we cannot protect ourselves against the deep discontinuities of life: loss of loved ones, illness, economic hardships, death. Life is change and we need the resilience to meet it like a willow tree whose supple branches can bend and sway in the wind rather than be brittle and snap, crashing to the ground.

Here is a great poem about healing from deep pain by D.H. Lawrence that a dear friend sent to me last summer when she knew that I was suffering. It is a mysterious poem, a poem to ponder over and over, but listen to the ripples of meaning that emanate from the words:

#### SONG OF A MAN WHO HAS COME THROUGH

By D.H. Lawrence

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!  
A fine wind is blowing the new direction of Time.  
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!  
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate,  
    a winged gift!  
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and  
    am borrowed  
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through  
    the chaos of the world

Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;  
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge  
Driven by invisible blows,  
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder,  
    we shall find the Hesperides.  
Oh, for the wonder that bubble into my soul,  
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,  
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?  
What is the knocking at the door in the night?  
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.  
Admit them, admit them.

I would like to recognize Dr. Henry Emmons not only for this brilliant and wholistic program, not just for his excellent book “The Chemistry of Joy”, but also for the compassion and care which both he and Dr. Susan Bourgerie, his co-leader for our group, showed to everyone. Their concern for each of us, and their confidence in us, gave us the safe place to begin our healing process. They made it seem possible to move from depression to actual JOY, not just to a place free from pain. Henry, would you stand, please? Thank you so much.

I am worried about our St. Olaf community: students, faculty and staff. In the thirty-three years I have worked here, I have seen more serious emotional distress year by year. It seems to me that a lot of the substance abuse issues on campus are masks for depression and other emotional problems. How can we as a community embrace the concepts of resilience and emotional health? I know that many people are taking this seriously on campus, but we MUST do more. We have a crisis of people in deep pain here and the stresses of academic excellence and artistic excellence are taking a huge human toll.

I don't have the answers, but let me set forth a couple of provocative questions.

What if we were to act as our brother's and sister's keepers –to keep them from harm, to let the right people know when we fear for someone's life or wellbeing? Yes, we have privacy laws and we must be respectful toward those we seek to help or to find help for, but to be silent witnesses to a life lost or destroyed is morally wrong.

What if every professor cut 10% of the workload from every class, every lesson, every ensemble, every group project, every lab, every reading list? We are asking too much work from our students. They need time to absorb the information, to integrate the content, not just to stuff it inside of them like gluttons on a rampage. What can we cut out and still have a great artistic and academic life at St. Olaf College?

How can we integrate wellness, not just dealing with crises, into our student campus life? Can we have meditation rooms in each dorm, can we have yoga classes be even more present all over campus?

I would like to close with a poem I wrote a few years ago; it is a celebration of one's individual life and the precious opportunity we have as human beings to live in the most powerful way we know how.

## BODY MUSIC

By Andrea Een

Sing as if your life depended on it

Inside

Vast reaches of indigo, starry

Molecules, faint threads of

Atom trails, tiny points

Of sub-particle energy

Rotate, hum.

Sing the correct pitch

For every bodily process.

Nothing dense, mostly

Liquid sound vibrations:

Middle C in bone conduction

Low A in large muscles

Nervous E's like a taut violin string.

In the anechoic chamber,

Ears still buzz with sound:

Breaking waves

Twittering birds from a kingdom

Of blind creatures living in high cliffs

Flutter, beat the pale sky.

At death, explosive vibration launches the soul  
Its descending siren moan  
Decays slowly into silence.

The dead vibrate  
In huge dimming wave-lengths,  
Like elephants signaling  
The sister herd  
Across miles of African plain  
Too low, too ancient, too infrequent  
For modern ears to notice.

Sing as if your life depended on it  
Even when you cannot hear your song  
Above the noise.