

Theological reflection

The meaningless abyss of depression

For the participants in this study, meaning, and the ways in which it can be lost and regained within the context of depression, was central to their experience of depression. *If life had meaning, then it was possible for people to cope with the considerable difficulties that depression imposed upon their lives.*

As one participant put it:

I don't depend on there being direct, individual meaning in my particular circumstances or situation and all the bad things that happen to me. I'm quite happy to live with the idea that, you know, in a fallen world there are things that happen to people just sort of through chance and circumstance. But what one does need to believe is that all of that is happening in an ultimately meaningful framework.

However, if that 'ultimately meaningful framework' collapses, as is the case when they tumble into the depths of depression, the person is catapulted into a deep, dark void that is deeply disturbing and spiritually devastating.

When I'm in a phase that I am able to believe that there is a God who gives meaning to that universe, then I have hope. But there have been spells when I haven't been able to believe that, and that has been absolutely terrifying. That's been falling into the abyss. That is seriously nasty!

Depression is a profoundly, existentially lonely place. It is a place where even God is often absent. The resonance with the lament psalms is obvious:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Psalm 13:1-2

The experience of depression is an experience of desolation.

The imagery of the abyss in the above quotation powerfully symbolizes the terrifying black pit of *meaninglessness* into which a person slides during the experience of depression. The only foothold out of the abyss is the possibility that there is meaning beyond the pain of one's present situation. If this foothold is torn away, there is as one participant put it: 'nothing but "nothingness" and darkness'.

You would go to bed at night and it was dark outside, and it felt dark inside. All creative energy was gone, it just wasn't there. When I woke in the morning, although it was dawn, inside nothing had changed and it was still dark.

The abyss is filled with doubt about God, self, others and the order of the world. It is a meaningless void within which strength, hope and light are drained, leaving the person in a dark and lonely place. *Even when well this woman felt like she was walking around the edge of the abyss, knowing that at any time she could tumble back down into the darkness.* Even when she was well she was terrified. The experience was unrelentingly negative even when her depression was reasonably well controlled.

Trapped into living: the logic of suicide

When the experience of depression is understood in this way, suicide becomes an alternative which is considerably more logical than might normally be assumed. To live like this is to live with deep pain and hopelessness; modes of pain and hopelessness within which faith and religion are often absent but which, even when present, can function in unexpected ways. A person's faith can be an unwelcome preventative factor blocking the 'obvious' solution of suicide.

It's a bad thing [not being able to commit suicide] when

you're feeling incredibly depressed and you're stuck in life. It's like . . . em . . . I just wish I didn't know about God. You know? 'Cause then it would be easier to actually just say 'That's it! I can't take any more!' But in the end when I feel better, I feel probably . . . that, well it's probably just as well (laughs) that I knew him. You know? But I think there's always this em . . . it's a double-edged sword I think.

It is interesting to note that here, the introduction of faith into a conversation intended to heal (for example a counselling session), might in fact be received in a negative and perhaps scathing manner. If the counsellor, pastor or friend is not aware of this hidden tension with regard to the role of faith in the experience of depression, significant issues may arise.

The idea that faith can be an unwelcome guest emerged on a number of occasions in various interviews. One man put it like this:

I've had experiences where faith was, at the time, the last thing I wanted, because I felt it *trapped me into living*, because I . . . I suppose it was when I was most suicidal, and . . . the only thing that I could think of was killing myself and so the fact that *I knew God and had a faith* made it very difficult for me because I knew deep down that God wouldn't particularly want me to kill myself, so I would be going against his word I suppose, to actually do it. And so it was like a trap (laughs) because I couldn't get out of that; I couldn't . . . I suppose in a way it was fear, fear of the consequences of doing it, eternal damnation or whatever. You know this fear of, I've got to meet and . . . I've done this, what's he going to say to me? (laughs) You know? So that's probably what's going on in my brain at the time was the fact that my greatest need and wish was to be dead, but I couldn't do it because God was there and I shouldn't I suppose.

Other themes that emerged from the study indicate that the knowledge of being loved by God provides the strength that enables people to cling on to faith and life in times of deep

distress. However, at the same time, the fear of that same God acts to prevent self-harm, even though self-harm may be the (understandable) desire of the individual and the best perceived solution. Life with depression is lived in the midst of this tension between being pleased about being alive, and a feeling of being 'stuck in life', an experience which can be both frustrating and at times annoying.

Abandonment

A common theme that ran through the interviews was the experience of feelings of abandonment both by God and by those around the person.

I know that God is in control, but, when one's emotions and mood and everything are up for grabs, it's actually exceedingly hard to feel that. That then gives rise to a conflict, because what you feel and what you know are not saying the same things. So you get . . . what I probably got a lot of was a sense of abandonment and the feeling that God's walked off and left me. Where is He now? What use is this faith thing anyway? So that then becomes an inner conflict.

The essence of this man's faith has to do with his perception of engaging in a loving relationship with God. 'Faith to me is not religion as such. It's a personal relationship with God.' Such a relationship cannot be maintained by intellect alone. As with any other personal relationships it demands *emotion and feeling*. Yet, during times of depression *he cannot feel his relationship with God in the way that he has done in the past*. This conflict between intellectual and experiential knowledge leads to a sense of abandonment by God. *Like a lover who knows in his head that his partner cares for him, but in his daily life does not experience that care in either words or actions, so also this man finds himself caught up in a conflict between what he knows in his head and what he does not feel in his heart*. If his faith were purely legalistic this might be easier. However, as his faith is deeply experiential and relational, this is a

serious problem for him. He no longer *feels* loved by God. This experience is much more than a theological crisis. It is a crisis of being and identity.

The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1961) in his trenchant critique of Cartesian dualism points to the ways in which human beings are 'created' in and through their relationships with others. In a very real sense we are persons-in-relation. **We depend on one another for our identities and understandings of the world.** I am only a father because of my children, a husband because of my wife, a lecturer because of my occupation, and so forth. My personal identity and the way I view the world and my place within it is not a pre-set given, but rather the product of my relational interactions with other human beings and my social and cultural context, including the ways in which I interpret and utilize God.

This observation is helpful in interpreting and understanding feelings of abandonment. All of the participants in the study appeared to have an intrinsic form of spirituality, that is, their religious/spiritual tradition was considered to be a fundamental part of their lives, the foundational bond that they used to bind themselves to the world. Depression destroys this bond and leaves the person with a serious crisis of identity and spirituality. The sense of being abandoned by God is more than just a negative cognition. It is indicative of a serious existential crisis. 'If God has abandoned me, then what and who am I?' If a person can no longer relate to God, and if their self-image and interpretation of the world is dependent on their experience of God, then to experience such abandonment is, in a very real sense, to lose a part of themselves. The experience of being abandoned by God leaves them with a wide, gaping wound where once there had been a powerful source of hope, love, meaning and purpose. Thus the person is thrown into a void of unknowing that is much more profound and devastating than simply the lowering of their mood. In the midst of the sadness of depression, there is a significant loss of self which the person has to struggle to understand and come to terms with. Depression destroys that which is most dear

and significant to a person. It challenges a person at the very core of their being and forces them to reconsider who they are and what their life is really about.

Conclusion

These abstracts begin to show how the method of hermeneutical phenomenology functions, the type of data it will provide and the implications for practice that follow from this. By providing deep and often surprising insights into the experience of depression, hermeneutic phenomenology has enabled us to see and to begin to understand the **hidden spiritual dynamics within the lived experience of depression.** Depression is clearly much more than simply a lowering of a person's mood. Depression is a condition that affects the person in their entirety producing a **deep spiritual, existential, physical, psychological and relational crisis that embraces them in every dimension.** Within such a context even faith and religion begin to function and be perceived in quite different ways. Irrespective of whether its roots lie within a person's biology, psychology or trauma within their social experiences, the consequences of depression permeate the whole experience of the person, and cannot be reduced to a single aspect.

Such reflections, insights and understandings provide useful data for rethinking and reframing the healing practices used by counsellors, pastors and friends who minister to people with depression. They also raise important theological issues. For example, bearing in mind the types of experience described above, the way that depression **erodes faith and meaning and the clear logic of suicide when viewed from a different frame,** how are we to understand the theological dynamics of suicide? Is it truly an unforgivable sin, or, is there a theological frame wherein it may be perceived as a breach of the gift of life that God gives to human beings, but an understandable and forgivable response to horrific experiences. This in turn raises issues and questions relating to the theology of suffering and whether or not the inability to sustain faith through suffering