

I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression

by Todd A. Peperkorn



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To my wife, Kathryn; my pastor, Rev. John M. Berg; and to the people of Messiah Lutheran Church in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

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Foreword

By Rev. Matthew C. Harrison

The anniversary accounts of great pastors and leaders of the church have rarely dealt with the “dark side,” the real spiritual struggles and attacks that have often driven pastors and leaders into the abyss of mental illness — clinical depression. I remember reading a document about Synod’s second president, Friedrich Wyneken, which stated something like, “Wyneken was always a tireless missionary and pastor, serving courageously for the Lord.” Reality is much more nuanced, in fact, much more cruciform. Wyneken wrote to C.F.W. Walther on December 5, 1863 about his lifelong struggle with mental illness and poor health.

The matter stirred up between us by the devil is finished, dead and buried, I hope to God. But should you, my dear Walther, note something in my demeanor against you, that gives you pause to think — that it may be that the matter still troubles me, do not believe it, but bring the matter openly to me. From the time I was a young man, as far back as I can remember into my earliest childhood, I have suffered horribly from melancholy [depression] and hypochondria, as now in my old age the physical weaknesses all show themselves again, which I already suffered as a child — for instance Asthma. Thus goes it also with my physical nature. How shall I describe it? Hypochondria overcomes me in spite of the fact that I fight and fight against it. I am gripped ever more powerfully by its suffocating arms, so that I am happiest were I had nothing to do with any one, I have to force myself when I have to mingle with people. I am happiest to sit alone in my chair and am consumed in my own stupidity. Then it can happen

that I become very unbearable and my dear brothers must have patience with me, but at the same time they have to correct me quite openly and forcefully. That helps the best, at least for the moment.¹

Walther was sympathetic. He lived with his own deep struggles with depression, as did his son.² Luther knew this struggle too. He faced it both before his understanding of the Gospel, and after. The language he uses in describing the power of the Law breathes of his struggles.

But the chief office or force of the Law is to reveal original sin with all its fruit. It shows us how very low our nature has fallen, how we have become utterly corrupted... In this way, we become terrified, humbled, depressed. We despair and anxiously want help, but see no escape. SA III.II.4

Often, because of physiology and or prolonged stress and other factors too complex to understand, believing the Gospel of free forgiveness does not take away depression. Many go untreated, ashamed, and believing that a “strong faith” would preclude such difficulties, and so the path to wellness is through a restoration of such faith. Not so. “Poor mental health does not necessarily denote poor spiritual health. Too many factors pertain to both to allow for any sure correlation.”³ In fact, in the kingdom of Christ, God values exactly the opposite of what we value. He values weakness,

1 Wyneken to Walther, Dec. 5, 1863; Walther Correspondence, Concordia Historical Institute. Translation Matthew Harrison.

2 See Walther’s Letter to the German Evangelical *Gesamtgemeinde*, Feb. 3, 1860; Concordia Historical Institute Walther Correspondence, admitting his complete mental and physical breakdown. We would call Walther’s condition “clinical depression.”

3 Robert Preus, *Clergy Mental Health and the Doctrine of Justification*, Concordia Theological Quarterly, 1984, 48 (2 & 3), 120. Used with permission.

the weakness of the cross.

Most often the “Why do I suffer?” questions are not answered in this life. We do state in faith with the Formula of Concord, that suffering is divinely ordained and purposeful nevertheless:

God in his purpose has ordained before the time of the world by what crosses and sufferings He would conform every one of his elect to the image of his Son. His cross shall and must work together for good... F.C., S.D. XI.49

Rev. Todd Peperkorn has taken a courageous step in both writing, and allowing this booklet to be published. It is a journey into and through his own deepest struggles. This book will be a profound blessing to many. Pouring forth from the “jar of clay” which is Todd, is a profound stream of mercy, grace, love, and vital experience.

“I will boast all the more of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Pastor Matthew Harrison
St. Louis
Rogate 2009

I Trust When Dark My Road

Introduction

By Dr. Beverly K. Yahnke

When one's mind and soul journey across the ghastly landscape of clinical depression, the adventure may challenge faith, hope, and life itself.

Far too many well-intentioned Christians are imbued with the conviction that strong people of faith simply don't become depressed. Some have come to believe that by virtue of one's baptism, one ought to be insulated from perils of mind and mood. Others whisper unkindly that those who cast their cares upon the Lord simply wouldn't fall prey to a disease that leaves its victims emotionally desolate, despairing and regarding suicide as a refuge and a comfort — a certain means to stopping relentless pain.

Although Christians are willing to acknowledge that illness and tragedy can befall God's children, many are less charitable about characterizing depression as a legitimate, biologically based illness. Sadly, clinical depression is often misunderstood as a character flaw, a deficit of will or an absence of sufficient faith. Some glance aside, wagging their heads sadly believing that depressed people simply don't choose to "snap out of it" or that they just don't choose to "suck it up" and get on with what it is they've been given to do.

Such myths betray naiveté or ignorance on the part of those who spin them. True clinical depression is not simply a "blue mood" or a bad day at the office from which one rebounds with the dawning of a new day. Depression creeps into every pore of one's life, depriving otherwise nice and normal people of hope, joy, and love. Depression veritably seems to let the helium out of the balloon of life, often insidiously, until souls are left bereft of any capacity or desire to take on even the most fundamental requirements of daily living. Exhaustion and demoralization supplant vibrancy and productivity. The

depressed soul withdraws into a cocoon of its own making, isolating oneself from the love and interaction that one desperately needs and desires. In the vacuum of depression there is no energy to do anything, there is no ability to think or to read, there is nothing that invites laughter. Depression must surely be a first cousin to hell on earth, for in the midst of suffering, the soul often feels hopeless and separated from God.

Those of us who have never been afflicted with depression would be absolutely shocked to discover how many of the people in our personal and professional circles have been casualties of mental illness. Conventional estimates of the prevalence of this disease are stunning: one out of every four women will suffer at least one episode of depression during their lifetime; one out of every eight men will experience the illness. The worst news is that nearly two out of three people with depression do not receive the treatment they need either because they have become accustomed to feeling that way, or because their shame about being dysfunction prevents them from seeking care. Still others just keep suffering because at some philosophical level they hate to admit any kind of weakness.

As a result, there are few first-person accounts of the descent into the abyss of depression. For those who have traveled that pathway and who have, by the grace of God, been restored to health, there is often great shame or fear about the prospect that others may learn about their diagnosis and disability. There is often a very legitimate fear that others will misunderstand their illness and judge them in ways that are personally or professionally hurtful or damaging. Very few would regard depression as a life-transforming experience from which one can extract blessing, wisdom, and passion for service.

That is why Rev. Todd Peperkorn's autobiographical account is a gift to us, particularly those of us who are God's

blood-bought children. Peperkorn, a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pastor, has granted us the privilege of looking deeply into the heart, mind, and soul of a Christian in the clenches of mental illness. We are a bit unnerved to imagine that a Lutheran pastor, called to preach God's Holy Word and to faithfully administer the Sacraments, could possibly suffer such a fate. He challenges all our myths. In his story we see a bright, articulate man serving his church and his parish as God gave Him light. We can detect his zeal for service and love for his family and his people. We watch him enjoying his early successes and we know that God will use this man powerfully. That's why we're shocked to bear witness as Peperkorn describes how he melted away from his parish, his churchly projects, his people, his family, and his friends. We're heartbroken to imagine that any illness could be so catastrophic that it results in God's own servant living in a perpetual fog and having a desire to end his own life.

Peperkorn invites us into the world of a depressed Christian who remains reliant upon God's grace. We walk with him through his early stages of dysfunction until he arrives at a place of professional paralysis, diagnosis, and disability leave from his parish. His journey educates all of us about the realities of clinical depression. He discusses without embarrassment the travails, the treatments, the pharmacological decisions, and the personal struggle that attends the arduous process of healing.

Peperkorn's story also offers us warning and counsel about the way we lead our lives, prompting us to wonder if we, too, might be succumbing to frenetic tangles of productivity and multi-layered obligations. We are invited to re-examine the allocation of our time, re-evaluating whether we are devoting enough precious ticks of the clock to our vocations as spouse, parent, and child — or if we have adopted a plan of embracing our work in lieu of love and life. The text is a particular gift to his brothers, the clergy, as they reflect on their own lives and

consider what they have come to believe about mental illness and the spiritual care they offer to souls thus afflicted.

Finally, we see clearly that wearing a stole does not preempt depression. In fact, we're led to wonder if clergy, by virtue of all that they are asked to do in service of so many people, might be particularly vulnerable to precisely this form of illness. So, as we greet our pastor at the close of the service this Sunday morning, perhaps we ought to wrap him and his family in prayer, asking that God will equip this man to do all that he is called to do, enfold him in His grace, and sustain him. And we might renew our efforts in every way to support our pastors and their ministry among us.

Preface

*In God my faithful God,
I trust when dark my road;
Great woes may overtake me,
Yet He will not forsake me.
My troubles He can alter;
His hand lets nothing falter.¹*

It was Good Friday, but it was not good for me. I was three months into being diagnosed with major clinical depression, and everything was a struggle. For three months I had tried to act like a pastor, even though I was on disability. I preached, taught Bible class, and was “around” far more than the fog in my brain should have let me. So it is that I found myself contemplating my own death on the day of the Lord’s death. Contemplating, planning, expecting to die, if not that day, then very soon.

How did I get there? How did I get to the place where I would be considering that darkest of all escapes — suicide — on the day when we commemorate our Lord’s death for us all? That is the question this story seeks to answer.

Major depression strikes as many as one in ten people in America² — probably more. It is a frightful disease of the mind, turning one inward, sucking out the very marrow of personality, until there is nothing left but darkness. It is a great weight that never lets up, never releases the sufferer from its crushing power. Various studies indicate that the number of pastors who suffer from depression (either diagnosed or undiagnosed) is between 20 and 40 percent.

1 *Lutheran Service Book*, “In God, My Faithful God,” Stanza 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 745. Public domain.

2 Mark H. Beers, *The Merck Manual 18th Edition* (Whitehouse Station, NJ: Merck, 2006), 1704.

For many, this is what it means to be a pastor. You suffer, you sacrifice, you can feel the walls closing in and the waters coming up, but you carry on. Why? Because you want to be a faithful pastor.

But no matter how hard you work or pray or exercise or whatever, depression still closes in. You cannot ignore it. Maybe it is because of the stress of the Ministry in 21st century America. Maybe there are triggers in your life — including genetics, or food, or over-stimulation. There are as many opinions as to the cause of depression and anxiety as there are pills to try to cure it. Some things we know. Depression is real, it is devastating, and, for some, it is almost impossible to escape.

So what is the cure? Overcoming depression is not a matter of “cheer up!” or “just have more faith and joy!” or some pious version of “get over it!” I knew the Gospel. I knew all the right answers. I had it all figured out and preached it Sunday after Sunday. But our Lord, in His mercy, chose to crush me, cause me to suffer with Him, so that the faith He gave me in Holy Baptism would be stronger, clearer, and more focused. By traveling down that dark road, I have come to understand what the light of Christ is all about.

Understand that the journey in this book is not the diagnosis of a psychiatrist, the counsel of a psychologist, or the proverbial shoulder of a friend. I write as a pastor, husband, and father. I write because I care deeply about all my brothers in office, as well as all of those to whom they minister. Pastors endure much suffering, often unnecessarily. There are plenty of crosses and suffering that come with the Holy Ministry. There is no reason to take more suffering upon ourselves.

At the same time, I would not give up my sickness today for anything in the world. God has used it to chasten me, change me, make me a better husband and father, and shape me as a better pastor. How is it that such suffering and

pain can bring about so much good? Where is God in the darkness and the fog of what we so blithely call “depression” or “melancholy” or even “sadness”?

There is hope, no matter how dark the road. That hope is what this story is all about.

I Trust When Dark My Road

Chapter One: Building Up to the Fall

No one ever learned anything apart from suffering.
- Malcolm Muggeridge

As a young pastor, I believed I could change the world. I always believed it. I assumed that I was one of the few chosen ones who truly “got it,” and that it was my mission to spread the truth to all and sundry, even to most of the other “idiot” pastors out there who didn’t get it as well as I clearly did. Perhaps this is a typical sign of youthful exuberance. I’m sure that’s true, but it was also a sign of my own arrogance and pride, and in my firmly held belief that I really could do anything. I have the sort of personality that people would call a “connector”.³ I reach out to people, am very comfortable in social situations, and I’m often a leader in whatever groups or settings where I associate. I could do anything.

Everything in my life to that point had borne that out. I was home schooled from 6th through 12th grade. Through the faithful teaching of my father and mother, I learned how to think for myself, do research, take on new projects, and that basically I could go anywhere my mind would take me. Choirs, languages, music, computers, history, and obscure theology books were the building blocks of my high school education. Most of my friends and all of my mentors were older than me. I was more comfortable in a group of adults than with a group of kids my own age. I was used to being alone, playing computer games in the basement, listening to music, going online (very high-tech at the time), and contemplating my future.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000).

Pastors

The pastors of my youth tended to be lively. Two men in particular were instrumental in my own desire to become a pastor. The first was Dale Ness. He and his wife, Hazel, had eight children. He was the pastor at our small church, as well as the sole teacher at our elementary school (20 students in grades K-8). If that wasn't enough, he was also the sole proprietor and worker-bee of Holy Cross Press, a small printing company that produced Sunday school materials, books, and booklets, all on an ancient lightning press that required huge amounts of time to set the plates and make it work. In the eyes of this young boy, Pastor Ness was a hero, a superman among men. As a pastor in my later years, I sought to emulate his endless energy. I didn't realize then that he was pouring himself out on the altar of his own work until there was nothing left.

He was a great pastor, but looking back I can see signs of burnout, stress, and perhaps depression. He put on a cheerful face. He was always singing or teasing and playing with the children. But sometimes he would go through days of melancholy, or the cheerful super-pastor would lose his patience over what seemed to be little things. I don't know if he was ever diagnosed, but much of his behavior could now easily point to clinical depression. He was able to keep going far longer than most people, but eventually he was done.

One Sunday he announced his resignation from the ministry and that he was moving to Idaho with his family. Just like that. There was speculation about burnout, depression, and stress — all of the usual indicators. In three weeks, one of my best friends (Ness's son Peter) and the man I looked up to as a model of what it meant to be a pastor were gone.

The second pastor who influenced me as a young man was Connor Corkran. A feisty Irishman, he was an excellent preacher and a well-trained theologian. He saw in this young confirmand the desire to go beyond memorization into

digging, rooting out theological problems, and learning the history of the church. In seventh grade he gave me C.F.W. Walther's *Law and Gospel* as a primer to my theological education.⁴ Over the years until he retired, Pastor Corkran gave me all sorts of books to read and digest: Chemnitz, Luther, Pieper, Herman Sasse, whatever he thought might pique my interest. It usually did. Shortly before I went to college he retired. But by then he had filled me with a desire to read and drink in everything I could get my hands on. And with all this knowledge I could do anything.

College

I flew through college with few academic hurdles. The college in the cornfields was a great school; small but challenging, Lutheran but with enough diversity to draw out that feistiness I inherited. I was a leader in everything from choir to yearbook to speech. Greek, Hebrew, and Latin required hard work because I had demanding teachers, but I generally excelled at languages. I dated and participated in large and varied social groups.

The darkness that I would come to know later only flashed in and out from time to time. Sometimes it lasted for days, sometimes weeks. I figured it was just emotions, not enough sleep, girl trouble, or being too busy. I had a friend then whom, I believe in retrospect, suffered from severe clinical depression. I saw him, looked up to him, and observed how he always seemed to pull it off no matter what. It was easy for me to believe, *if he can do it, why can't I?* So I generally did.

One year in particular was full of ups and (mostly) downs. The year is still a blur to me even now. There were lots of late night trips to various food joints under the guise of "homework", but there was little joy. I would wake up for

4 C. F. W. Walther, *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986). Used with permission.

7:30 a.m. Hebrew and somehow slog myself through the day. I would go back to my room and try to do homework, or keep myself occupied anyway that I could. Anything I could do to distract me from myself was good. Yet through it all I taught myself to put on a good face, appear invulnerable, and never let anyone see the darkness creeping in around me. They probably knew, but I was too blind to see it.

As I left college for seminary, there was no doubt about my future. I would go through seminary easily, focusing either on Hebrew or church history. I would be in the top choir, work on student publications, and after graduation pursue an advanced degree, probably a doctorate. I could do anything.

Seminary

The fog came again not long into my first year at seminary. My girlfriend from college dumped me for someone who was still on campus. I was completely and utterly crushed. I offered to quit my studies for her and rethink my whole future. Fortunately, she still dumped me. Over Christmas break I could barely move or function. Getting out of bed was a victory, and that was often as far as it went. Choir tour (to Florida no less!) was dreary. I didn't care. Yet even then, I was able to mask my true nature.

The fog passed, though, and I was back to taking over the world in no time. I did an inner city vicarage, headed up student publications on campus, and served my regular vicarage in Texas. I married a wonderful woman whom I knew in college. Everything was up with the world.

My fourth year at seminary was messy. It was a difficult time for me as a student and for the seminary community. The seminary president was retiring, and we were seeking another. As student body president, my role as a "connector" was in full swing. There were parties, social events, and committees (even the presidential search committee), while

juggling classes, friends, and newly married life. But somehow I managed (in my mind) to hold it all together. Looking back, I can see that depression was beginning to become a way of life. I would expend all of my energy on whatever was in front of me, try to keep all the plates spinning in the air, and every once in a while they would just crash. Each time I would go through “the mood” I would wait it out, perhaps drink more beer, or find other distractions. I didn’t know what the cause was. It never occurred to me that there could be some medical explanation.

One thing this did for me was create the idea that real, lasting happiness was for someone else. I would try different remedies to shake off this sinking feeling. It might be alcohol, sarcasm, or popularity, anything that could feed the disappearing ego. What it also did at the time was hone my mask-making ability. I could do all of these things and never let others know the personal struggles I was facing. I never talked about it with my wife, my pastor⁵, or any of my close friends. It’s as though this fog had enveloped me and I couldn’t reach out. Even if I could, I wouldn’t know what to say or why.

Seminary Work

For three years after graduation I worked as a seminary admissions counselor. In many respects it was a lot of fun. There was a camaraderie that comes with new beginnings with close friends. There was energy on campus with a new president and new opportunities. The seminary was going

5 This is perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of seminary life. As of this writing, neither LCMS seminary has a campus pastor. The home pastors of these men and their families are far away. Faculty members have authority over students, so seeking them out is awkward at best. There simply is no one else. It is no wonder that pastors go out into the field with the idea that they don’t need to be cared for themselves. They learn it at seminary.

places: Russia and the whole former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia. We were at the beginning of something big, something significant.

That time was defined, as much as anything, by a way of thinking. It was an attitude of optimism. As the years went on, that attitude of optimism became an unspoken slogan — the invisible uniform everybody wore. If you weren't optimistic and upbeat, then you were not serving the seminary.

I don't say this to fault the seminary, which I love dearly to this day. It is the nature of institutions. Students come, money is given, and things run smoothly — if the appearance of happiness and contentment is what everyone sees. One reason I was good as an admissions counselor was that I knew how to put up a mask and hide behind this façade of optimism. Of course, with any good mask elements of truth make it believable. I *was* optimistic about the seminary. (I still am.) But I was not optimistic about *me*. It became stifling; the stark contrast to my own inner turmoil was too much.

Eventually I could no longer hold up the façade. And when my desire to serve as a parish pastor outweighed my desire to serve the seminary, I accepted a call to Messiah Lutheran Church in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Messiah

Messiah is a wonderful parish with many loving and caring families. My predecessor lives in the next town over, and we have a good relationship. At the parish level, many things have happened since I've been here. We started a school together with a neighboring parish (Christ Lutheran Academy). There has been an explosion of young families (and thus children) at the church. While the parish has not changed dramatically in size, it has grown spiritually, and has been good to me and my family.

Why is it, then, that after a few short years I began to feel restless, listless? Why was I avoiding my vocation as pastor

in pursuit of other enterprises? My compassion and ability to bear others' burdens diminished, and I unconsciously started avoiding unpleasant things I had to do in the parish. I hated the telephone, because it meant I would have to deal with someone in need. I dreaded shut-in calls. Interaction with parishioners became more and more painful. I couldn't handle the stressful situations which every parish has. On top of that, the stress of life with a young family became a burden far out of proportion with reality. I found myself stuck with impossible choices. Do I go to a meeting that will totally deplete me, or go home and struggle to have the energy to play with my children and pretend to enjoy it?

First to go were personal interactions. My open-door policy became a shut-door policy. I hid from people and problems. It seemed like there would be no end to the torture of normal parish life.

What I had most desired had become my cross and my suffering. Sermons started to be recycled or borrowed. The very things that I love most about the Ministry (preaching, conducting the liturgy, teaching) became flat, boring, and one more obligation to carry me down to the depths. After six years, I just couldn't do it anymore. I was going quickly down into the life-draining toilet of depression, and from where I stood there was no way out. I didn't know what was wrong.

So What is Depression?

This is how I have experienced depression, coupled with an unhealthy dose of general anxiety. (More on anxiety later.) Experiences will vary from person to person, as each one's brain acts differently. Depression is difficult to describe. Words like darkness often come to mind; a fog of the brain, walking through thick water, seeing the world as only the faintest of grays, not seeing outside of yourself at all.

To the outsider, depression and other diseases of the mind are a complete mystery. Those who suffer with depression

are often viewed as lazy, anti-social, unreliable, high-maintenance, or a problem in some fashion. Because of this misconception, depression, for those who go through it, is something to hide, mask, overlook, or just suffer through in deep silence. You don't talk about it. Though we claim to be enlightened and tolerant, the stigma of depression hits too close to home for many people. It is best not to talk about it at all. Most sufferers don't even know they are sick; depression becomes an undetected cancer of the mind that grows and grows until there is no room for anything else.

We know more about the science of clinical depression now than 10 or 15 years ago, but in many ways our knowledge has remained static. William Styron, in his classic, 1990 autobiographical account of his struggles with depression, *Darkness Visible*, pointed out that depression is chemically induced through the neurotransmitters of the brain.⁶ Something goes wrong, and there is a depletion of two chemicals: norepinephrine and serotonin. Accompanying this is an increase in the hormone cortisol. Styron was no doctor, but his basic definition holds up. Even now, almost 20 years later, that clinical definition has hardly changed at all.⁷ The psychotherapy versus pharmacology debates of 20 years ago continue to rage, but now we also have alternative medicines, meditation, and many other ways our self-help culture attempts to gain mastery over this disease.

However the inscrutability and the stigma of depression remain as firmly entrenched as 20 years ago. Most suffer in silence, some seek help of one sort or another, but few receive the healing they need in mind, body, and soul.⁸

6 William Styron, *Darkness Visible, a Memoir of Madness* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1990), 47.

7 Mark H. Beers, *The Merck Manual 18th Edition*, (Whitehouse Station, NJ: Merck) 1704ff.

8 Ronald C. Kessler, Patricia Berglund, Olga Demler, Robert Jin, Doreen Koretz, Kathleen R. Merikangas, A. John Rush, Ellen