

“EVERYDAY DEPRESSION: OUR POTENTIAL ALLY”
Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
January 19, 2025

Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode

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Sermon Title & Description: “Everyday Depression: Our Potential Ally” – Exploring why everyday depression comes to us, what it intends, and what meaning it may hold for us.

Lighting the Chalice

Let there be light – the light of joy, the light of happiness, and the light of contentment.

May it illuminate our paths and fill our lives with peace.

And let there be dark – for it is from our dark places that we are brought forward.

Tried and tested, and impelled toward growth, it is in these places that we realize compassion and learn to love.

And there was day and there was night.

And there was joy and there was sorrow.

And it was good. (Andrew Pakula)

Greeting & Opening Words

Thank you, Bob, for opening the service and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in this sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually. The Opening Words for our service are from the Rev. Tim Haley:

Amid all the noise in our lives, we take this moment to sit in silence –

to give thanks for another day;

to give thanks for all those in our lives who have brought us warmth and love;

to give thanks for the gift of life.

We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.

Let us open ourselves, here, now, to the process of becoming more whole –

of living more fully;

of giving and forgiving more freely;

of understanding more completely the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

Introduction to Responsive Reading

Tomorrow, Monday, January 20, is a day we celebrate and honor the life and message of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a modern apostle of the “ethic of love.” I’d like to begin our service by raising up Dr. King’s message of love with a responsive reading consisting of his words.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

CONGREGATION: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

MINISTER: There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted.

CONGREGATION: Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.

MINISTER: We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.

CONGREGATION: The foundation of such a method is love.

MINISTER: Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.

CONGREGATION: One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

MINISTER: We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.

CONGREGATION: We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Network of Mutuality")

Opening Hymn #131: "Love Will Guide Us"

1. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
hope inside us will lead the way
on the road from greed to giving.
Love will guide us through the hard night.

2. If you cannot sing like angels,
if you cannot speak before thousands,
you can give from deep within you.
You can change the world with your love.

3. Love will guide us, peace has tried us,
hope inside us will lead the way
on the road from greed to giving.
Love will guide us through the hard night.

(Words, Sally Rogers; traditional music, arr. by Betty A. Wylder)

Reading

Since we are in the middle of winter, and since depression is often associated with winter, I thought this would be an appropriate time to consider this complex and important subject.

In my sermon message this morning, I will look at depression not as an enemy or an illness but as a potential friend. I will approach depression as a natural, normal, and even necessary part of our lives, a reality that can have meaning and value for us if properly received and understood.

My reading in this regard is a meditation that comes from a slim volume titled *Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself*, written by Judith Duerk.

As the title indicates, it's a book addressed to women, and the meditation I will read is addressed to women, but, certainly, it has general applicability.

“How might your life have been different, if, when you were a young woman, the first time you felt feelings of depression, an older woman had come to sit with you? If she had come to sit with you, as someone had come to sit with her the first time she had feelings of depression? To simply sit, quietly, perhaps wordlessly – to sit with you, during your dark time?

“And how might your life have been different if the woman had accepted your feelings of depression? Had accepted them so completely and fully that you began to feel safe with them. If there had been no judgment and no questioning ... no attempt to make you smile, to betray your feelings, to deny your darkness. If the woman had simply sat in silence with you, with your pain, and in the darkest moments had been able to reflect it to you ... to reflect to you your pain ... to witness ... attend ... and by her quiet respect for it, to help you learn to respect it ... your own pain and depression ... to witness, attend and respect your depression ... and to see that just as the woman had faith in it, you also might have a glimmer of faith that there was meaning and truth in your darkness.

“How might your life be different?”

(Judith Duerk, *Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself*, p. 69)

Meditative Music #97: “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”

For our Meditative Music, I've asked Harmony to sing the three verses of the African American spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

It's a lament that connects with the African American experience of slavery related to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day tomorrow ... and with the theme of dislocation, loneliness, and sorrow.

1. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
a long way from home, a long way from home.

2. Sometimes I feel like I have no friend,
sometimes I feel like I have no friend,
sometimes I feel like I have no friend,
a long way from home, a long way from home.

3. Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone,
a long way from home, a long way from home.

(Words & music: African American spiritual, c. 1750-1875))

Sermon: "EVERYDAY DEPRESSION; OUR POTENTIAL ALLY"

Introduction

Depression doesn't have a very good reputation with us.

We don't like it when we are depressed ... and when we are depressed, we don't like to admit it to others.

We regard depression as a weakness, as an abnormal state of being.

When we're depressed and when we see others who are depressed, our tendency is to try to pull or lift ourselves or them out of that depression ... to get on top of it, to overcome it, to conquer it, to mask it with a smile, to do something cheery to chase the depression away.

Thus, we tend not to honor depression or see it as having any value.

Quite the opposite: we tend to treat depression as an enemy ... to fight it, to flee it, to try to escape from it.

And, indeed, with that approach depression does become our enemy, and sometimes it will capture us and not let us go, nor do we receive its potential benefits.

This morning, I want to try to redeem the reputation of depression. I will do so by speaking about its place in our lives and what it can bring to us.

My sermon divides into four parts:

- 1) First, depression as a normal, natural phenomenon.
- 2) Secondly, occasions for depression – that is, occasions which call for depression, occasions which should depress us.
- 3) Thirdly, levels or degrees of depression.
- 4) And, fourthly, how to cultivate the gifts that depression can bring us.

And let me say at the start that this morning I'm not speaking about "clinical depression," which would be a topic for another time.

Today, I'm talking about the depression that everyone experiences to one degree or another, the depression I believe everyone *ought* to experience to one degree or another.

I. Depression as a natural phenomenon

The depression I'm talking about today is something that, to me, is totally natural:

as natural and as rhythmic as the tides that come in and go out,
as natural as the inhalation and exhalation of our breath,
as natural as the cycling of day and night, or of summer and winter.

Today, I'm treating depression simply as one-half of the equation of reality; I'm looking at depression as the other side of elevation.

An image for depression

My central image today in regard to depression is that of a natural depression in the earth – a low spot, a valley.

A depression in the earth is not negative; it's simply down as opposed to up, and, of course, there is no up without a down.

My image of depression also has to do with the place where water can be found. Water seeks out the low places; it gravitates to depressions in the land.

Thus, if and when we are dry and thirsty, then that is where we need to go ... to a low place, to a depression ... where living waters can be found to renew, invigorate, and heal us.

Confusing cause and effect in regard to depression

Sometimes we speak of the feeling of depression as being in a desert wilderness where there is no water, where everything is dry, arid, and lifeless.

And, indeed, that's how a depression may feel. And so, understandably, we may conclude that it's the depression that is causing the dryness; we may believe the depression is the problem.

But that, I believe, is a mistake and a confusion ... and, actually, the opposite is the case: *It's not the depression that causes the dryness; rather, the depression comes to us when we are going dry and losing vitality.*

And here's a second important point: *The depression comes not to aggravate the problem but to cure it. Depression comes to bring us to a place where we can again find water.*

When we are dry, we need to go a low place ... and we need to lie low ... and be still ... and wait ... and wait some more ... and then the water will come to that place. The water will find its way down to us in that low place. It will trickle and seep down to that place of depression.

Depression – not an enemy

So, to my way of thinking, depression is not an enemy, but, rather, a *messenger* with a message for us.

And the message depression has for us is this:

that we need to make some adjustment to our reality,
that the way we are doing things, or the way we are taking things, is not working,
that we have to stop the direction in which we are going,
that we can't keep going on as we are,
that we have to make some changes in our life.

And depression is actually the force that stops us; it stops us when we won't stop ourselves.

Of course, our tendency to is to blame the messenger – shoot the messenger, regard it as an enemy ... when, actually, the messenger has come to warn us and to save us from the disaster that awaits us in the direction we are going.

Depression – not an illness

Nor is depression an illness – at least, not in the way I am speaking of it today.

Rather, depression is an agent in healing our illnesses. It provides the place for the cure, the place where the medicine can be received and taken. It's in depression that the adjustment to reality can be made.

So, depression may be thought of as a vessel, a container, or a sanctuary that holds us and protects us. We can take refuge in depression. It can insulate us from the world while we shut down, incubate, and make repairs.

Or, to use another image of nature: Depression is a place where the overused and worn-out land is allowed to lie *fallow* ... a place to be inactive, to not move, to not produce, to let stand, to rest, to receive.

The feeling tone of depression

If we can approach depression in this way as a natural and needed phenomenon, we may find it is not such a horrible place to be after all.

Depression can have its own texture, its own qualities, its own feeling tone. It's not just a place to try to get out of as fast as we can. It's a perfectly legitimate state of being in its own right.

Paradoxically, it can feel good to feel bad. It can feel right to go to pieces when we need to go to pieces:

to weep when we need to weep,
to grieve when we need to grieve,
to be sad when we need to be sad,
or to be gloomy when we need to be gloomy.

Also, there's a certain pleasure in taking things slowly, in not moving, in not talking, in not doing, in being inert.

The blues can be okay. Rainy days, cloudy days, stormy days, can be okay. Not only do they bring variety; they can also bring relief.

II. Occasions for depression

Secondly, what are some occasions for depression, occasions that *call* for going down and lying low?

I operate with the assumption that any blow that we receive – physical, mental, spiritual – *ought* to bring depression.

Any significant loss ought to depress us.
Any meaningful connection that is severed ought to send us down.
Any disappointment or any failure, calls for depressing.
Any hope, dream, expectation, or aspiration that is dashed ought to bring us down.
Any outside event – natural, social, or political; local, regional, national, or beyond – that threatens or undoes our life calls for depressing.

All of these situations want to depress us; they call for adjustment.

Also, any kind of extroverted activity calls for its opposite. Any output of energy calls for its counterpart.

And the more prolonged, focused, and concentrated the activity, the longer will be the time of recovery, the length of depressing.

Any going up, any climbing of the mountain – again, whether physical, mental, or spiritual – must have its compensating downward movement. One must come down off the mountain. And the higher one climbs, the further down one must go.

Outside versus inside calls for depression

Now, all of these calls to depress have to do basically with things that occur to us from the outside: losses we experience, ways in which we are thwarted, ways we have expended ourselves. These are primarily external circumstances to which we have to adjust.

But there are other calls to depress that come from the inside:

Perhaps, something in our nature is not being lived out and wants and needs to be lived out.

Perhaps, our life is too one-sided.

Perhaps, our orientation to life is too materialistic, and we're denying our spiritual side.

Or the other way around: Perhaps, we're trying to be too "spiritual" and disdaining the physical, the material, the bodily.

Or, perhaps, we're all in the head, not in the heart; or all in the heart and not in the head.

If we are one-sided, the other sides will eventually let us know by pulling us down from the inside.

Moving to a different stage of life

Or, perhaps, we're moving on to a different stage of life, but not paying attention to the fact that we're not where we were before.

Depression may be letting us know that a change of life is upon us, and that an adjustment has to be made.

Depression in relation to unprocessed emotion

Or, again, and this is very common, depression may indicate that we are swallowing some emotion.

You've probably heard that depression is anger turned inward. One swallows one's anger; doesn't dare speak of it; doesn't even know it exists. This swallowed anger will pull one down from the inside and bring depression.

But it seems to me that depression could relate to any unprocessed emotion.

Any emotion that is swallowed doesn't simply dissipate or lose its reality. It still has energy, and it's that energy that will pull us down in an attempt to get at it.

In all these cases, it's not something external to us forcing us to adjust, but something inside us that wants to be lived out or recognized. It pulls us down to try to get our attention.

Thus, occasions for depression can have both external and internal causes.

III. Levels of depression

Thirdly, there are also levels or degrees of depression. And here I'll make just two broad categories: "everyday depression" and "substantial depression."

"Everyday depression"

"Everyday depression" is the depression we *should* have every day. Every day we should depress. If we've done anything at all in the realm of accomplishment, then we should depress, be still, shut down for a time.

Poet Robert Bly's advice

Robert Bly, the poet, perhaps following the biblical injunction not to let the sun go down on your anger, says that every day we ought to tell our spouse or partner why we're angry with him or her. Sometimes, he says, it may take a little while to figure out what that anger is, but he advises that we wait unto we do.

I don't know how literally Bly wants us to take this but there's an important point here, namely, that we need "daily de-contamination," just like we need daily rest.

Every day emotional burrs and emotional lint particles become attached to us, and every day we need to spend some time picking them off.

Most of us probably don't do this very well; we don't maintain our daily practice of depressing and of de-contaminating.

We just go and go, and avoid and avoid, and divert and divert, and distract and distract until we're cranky, moody, bitchy, or even worse, addicted.

Addiction and the refusal to depress

I have the idea that addiction is very much related to the refusal to depress. It's an attempt to stay high, an attempt to avoid going into the ashes.

An everyday example of everyday de-contamination

It's hard to learn how to practice a daily maintenance depression so that we don't have to get really, deeply depressed. But let me give you a little example from my own life, a little success story, on how to de-contaminate.

Some years ago – this was before I retired – on a Monday morning at the beginning of a new work week, I was feeling resistance to starting the week. I was having a hard time getting out of bed, having a hard time moving or feeling any interest in anything. I just lay there ... and wanted to lay there!

Finally, I risked a little something by saying out loud to Flossie, my wife, what I was feeling.

At first, I wasn't certain what I was feeling. Then I hit upon the word "unsettled." I was feeling unsettled.

And I began, then, to enumerate the different ways in which I was feeling unsettled. It turned out to be quite a number.

After I finished speaking, Flossie made a suggestion to me in terms of changing something in my schedule, and this opened everything up and I was released from the depression and ready to go again.

This is an example of "everyday depression" and "everyday de-contamination." My willingness to stay with the depression and to try to name what was pulling me down opened the situation up.

It was as if the powers pulling me down said, "Okay, now you've seen us; you have dared to address us and call us by name; now you may go."

"Substantial depression"

Besides "everyday depressions" there are, what I'll call, "substantial depressions." These are depressions that correspond to great setbacks, to severe injuries, illnesses, and losses ... to divorces, deaths of loved ones, uprootings in occupation or from a community.

And for these substantial depressions, one must expect to go into the valley, not just into a slight depression, but deep into the valley – "into the valley so low," as the old song puts it. And there one must lie very still, perhaps for a very long time.

A traditional period of mourning

We used to have the cultural and religious tradition of wearing clothes of mourning for a designated period of time after the death of a spouse.

This tradition, though we no longer practice it, has a great deal to recommend it ... in that it acknowledges the need, both to the mourner and to the outside world, that there must be a time to depress after a great loss.

This tradition provided a safe and contained space in which the ego is given time to grieve its losses and heal its severed connections.

For any great change or turning in one's life, one needs a comparable depression in order to adjust. And the question is not whether the depression will come, the question is how it will be received.

Anytime we are deeply injured in body, soul, or spirit, then mending and healing needs to take place ... and depression is the "sanctuary" where the heart and mind can be given a chance to adjust to what reality has brought us.

Substantial depression and the swallowing of emotion

Substantial depression can also occur, as I've suggested, in relation to chronic repression of emotion.

Perhaps, we have been living our whole life swallowing our anger ... or, perhaps, our joy and exuberance. These habits over a lifetime may eventually bring us into a deep depression.

But, again, the depression is not the culprit but the place of the cure.

The depression comes to us asking us, begging us, pleading with us to, please, please, pay attention to what we've swallowed because it's an important part of our reality.

The depression asks us to accept a part of us that we've thought was unacceptable – maybe it was our weakness, maybe it was our anger, maybe it was our tenderness.

The depression is saying, "You can't deny the truth of your own being any longer; no longer can you deny the reality of your own feeling and emotion."

Substantial depression in relation to making sense of life

Substantial depression can also be related, not to any particular loss or swallowed emotion, but to the attempt to make sense out of the world.

This world that we find ourselves in – not of our own choosing – is a confusing place. And it's often a very hard place. It seems in a number of ways to be getting harder – more troubled, more problematic. What sense can we make of all of this? How do we move forward?

Thus, substantial depression can be related to a search for meaning. This is what is called “the dark night of the soul” or “the night sea-journey.”

These are spiritual depressions in which one is desperately trying to make sense out of life – times when the world seems dense and opaque, and life pointless.

This is a type of depression that young people often experience as they try to find their way in the world ... as they try to find a religious philosophy for their lives.

Looking back at my own life, I think I was depressed all through college. I functioned, but I was struggling, searching, “sweating through fog,” as the poet Walt Whitman puts it. I was in a spiritual darkness to which the curtain did not really lift until years later.

But here, again, the depression is not the illness, but the place where an adjustment can be made. One has to go into the night, and to the bottom of the sea, and into the farther reaches of the soul ... for here are the places where materials can be found out of which the new meanings can be forged.

And if one has some courage to go into the chaos and darkness, and if one has some trust in the process, and if one has some teachers and guides to call upon for assistance, then the depression will do its job.

IV. Cultivating depression

Fourthly, and finally, how do we cultivate depression and receive its gifts?

I believe our culture's refusal to honor and cultivate depression is related to our greatest problems. It's related to:

- our addictions,
- our obsessive materialism,
- our love of violence,
- our yearning for titillation and excitement,
- our frantic pace of life.

Our culture longs to be depressed. Our culture is depressed and doesn't know it; it doesn't know how to go about being depressed.

And, individually, we need to give depression its rights and cultivate it so it can give us its gifts of healing and renewal. Here, briefly, in conclusion, are a few ways I can think of to cultivate depression:

* Spend time alone. Put a sign on your door that reads: “Depression time, enter at your own risk.”

* Go to the ocean – which for us fortunate folks is nearby – and let the ocean’s rolling and rhythmic waves wash out your resistance to what needs to change. Let the sight and sound of the sea wear you down and slowly adjust you, as water wears down the hardest of objects.

* Or watch the rain on the windows. Better yet, stand in the rain or walk in the rain. Or, failing that, take a long shower or a long bath.

* Or, go to the mountains – which, again, for us fortunate folks are nearby – and let their height and immensity make you small, bring you down, even you out.

* The use of fire may help to cultivate depression. Sit before a campfire or a fire in the fireplace. Light a candle in the darkness.

* Take a slow walk, maybe in a woods. But not *exercise* ... which is a way to escape depression ... and there’s a time for that ... but today I’m talking about staying with your depression and allowing it to work for you.

* Play music, preferably slow, sad music.

* Read novels and poems that you know well that touch you emotionally, and which have a full complement of sadness and grief.

* Or movies of the same sort.

* Do direct work with the unconscious, with the “night consciousness.” Write in a journal, work with your dreams, do active imagination. There are a multitude of disciplines that help to calm us down and bring us down.

* Have a conversation with a partner, friend, or counselor. Someplace to hear yourself talk where there is no one to judge you. A place where you can be ordinary, weak, vulnerable, where you can go to pieces if you need to.

* And be such a friend or counselor for others. Allow and encourage them to stay with the depression. Don’t try to cheer them up or immediately pull them out of it.

* And, mostly, I think we can cultivate depression by not trying to escape from it, but, rather, by allowing ourselves the “privilege” of being depressed, allowing depression to be our friend, our ally, the one who comes to us to let us know that there’s an adjustment that needs to be made in our life, and also the one who provides the place where that adjustment can be made.

Closing Hymn #311: “Let It Be a Dance”

Our closing hymn is number 311 in our gray-covered *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnals. The words and music of this hymn are those of the Rev. Ric Masten, a Unitarian Universalist minstrel-troubadour type of minister, who died in 2009.

In his travels, when Ric would visit various congregations and when they were about to sing this popular hymn he had written, he would ask the members of the congregation to find the phrase “bear the pain” that is found near the end of the third verse.

In our hymnals “bear” is spelled “b-e-a-r.” And, indeed, “bear/bare” is the word he had intended all right, but not spelled “b-e-a-r,” but rather “b-a-r-e,” a big difference ... because the process that he wanted to promote was that of sharing our pain with others by openly revealing it to others, and not hiding it and stoically carrying it.

And, so, Ric would ask the members of the congregation to, please, take out a pencil, or preferably a pen, and put a line through “b-e-a-r” and write instead “b-a-r-e.”

Harmony and LeRoy will lead us in singing “Let It Be a Dance.”

(Chorus)

Let it be a dance we do.
May I have this dance with you?
Through the good times and the bad times, too,
let it be a dance.

1. Let a dancing song be heard.
Play the music, say the words,
and fill the sky with sailing birds.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance. Let it be a dance.
Learn to follow, learn to lead,
feel the rhythm, fill the need
to reap the harvest, plant the seed.
Let it be a dance.

(Chorus)

2. Everybody turn and spin,
let your body learn to bend,
and, like a willow with the wind,
let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance. Let it be a dance.
A child is born, the old must die;
a time for joy, a time to cry.
Take it as it passes by.
Let it be a dance.

(Chorus)

3. Morning star comes out at night,
without the dark there is no light.
If nothing's wrong, then nothing's right.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance. Let it be a dance.
Let the sun shine, let it rain;
share the laughter, **bare** the pain,
and round and round we go again.
Let it be a dance.

(Words & music: Ric Masten; Betty A. Wylder, arr.)

Closing Words

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from the Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons:

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

(Rev. Kendyl R. Gibbons)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment, or
The Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, January 19, 2025. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus there.)