Further Words on Sitting with Sorrow

A reader left this comment in response to a recent post about sitting still with depression:
I too struggle with despair and have done so all my remembered life. Sometimes it is just in the background, other times mind numbing. My T will ask what has triggered it and I never have an answer for her. I have never tried sitting with it. Something to think about and maybe even try if I can find the courage to do so. Thank you.

My policy is to answer every comment, even if with just a few words. From my own experience, I know leaving a comment on a blog and having it sit there ignored can be annoying. I much prefer to get some kind of response. Since my readership is by no means huge, and the number of comments never overwhelming, I always reply. After writing two responses to the above comment, and losing them both to computer glitches, I moved over to the word processor and wrote a more formal answer. It got quite long, and used up my blogging time for the day. Since what I wrote seems like it might interest more than just one person, I'm going to cheat and use it as my post for today. So here's my response to this dear reader; I hope others can glean some useful words from the text:

Lostinamaze?

Like you, I have been dogged by despair all my life. The death (probably suicide) of my mother when I was six, which followed years of repeated psychiatric hospitalizations, set the stage. But whatever the cause, depression has robbed me of many years of enjoyment, by making so much of my time on this planet feel like living in Hell.

The good news is, and I want to say this emphatically to you and anyone else who suffers, one can make progress against the darkness. In recent years, I have worked hard to get better, and have been blessed to find some guidance that has made growth possible. (I've spent much of my adulthood in therapy, but often I either was not trying hard, or was stuck with a therapist who lacked the kind of skill I needed.) My years of introspective therapy may have helped, but CBT and (more recently) ACT have been decisive. (Books to search out include ?Mind Over Mood' for CBT, and ?Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life' for ACT.)

My ACT therapist's trick of making me sit still with depression is a spin-off from a pain management technique used in mindfulness meditation. I actually learned it years ago, but quit implementing it. The idea is to mentally move toward, rather than away from the sensations. To explore them like neighborhoods in a large, confusing city.

For physical pain one might ask: Does the hurt burn, stab, throb, or ache? Where in the body does it sit? Does it move around? Does it wax and wane, or is it steady? And so on?
With depression the steps are very similar: Is there pain in the chest, or stomach, or whole body? Is it an ache, a sinking feeling, or a sensation of deadness? Do I feel restless, or irritable, or lethargic? And so on?

By investigating, one gets distracted from snap value judgments, and begins to look more dispassionately at one's sorrow. The panic, hatred and revulsion get replaced with grudging curiosity. It's a bit like carrying on a conversation with a crotchety and snide relative at Thanksgiving, rather than storming into the next room and complaining about him.

It's hard. And it does not lessen the pain (ACT insists that is not the goal) as much as reduce the aversion. But it helps.

I would also suggest Tom Wootton's book 'The Depression Advantage.' In interest of full disclosure (since I'm plugging his book,) Tom is a friend of mine. He has been advancing the notion that 'depression is beautiful.' Believe me, I found it a very hard sell at first. But Tom does have a point, even if I won't go as far as he does with it: there is a sense in which depression deepens experience. It helps one get in touch with life, humanity, and maybe even God (for those who believe.) If nothing else, I have come to realize, sorrow informs my writing. It helps to remember how many artists throughout history have mined their grief for inspiration.

I know this all sounds facile. And maybe you already know far more than I do about these things?I always worry that I will sound pedantic and give offense. I just want to spread the message that depression can be befriended, or at least tolerated.

By the way, I’d suggest gathering and practicing tools to combat negative thinking (i.e., CBT) either first or at the same time as starting this 'sitting' work. That way one approaches the project with a sense of at least some control over one's mood states. This step may not be essential, but it made me feel a little safer to have some emotion-modulating skill before letting the sorrowful feelings flow through me without resistance.

I am not a psychiatrist or psychologist or any kind of mental health care worker. I am not recommending that anyone read just my blog and start practicing this technique. In fact, there is a danger of making things worse if one falls into feeding depression with negativity, rather than staying neutral in one's exploration. Please do not overwhelm yourself. My point is only that in this third millennium of the current era, effective techniques exist for working with troublesome moods. Books abound, and well-trained therapists can be enlisted.

Good luck, and thank you for being such a consistent reader of my blog.

--Will