

**Transpersonal Psychotherapy
Graduate Certificate**

Combination of Two Essays:

Existential Grief
&
The Dark Night of the Soul

**Mapping the soul's journey through Depression, Existential Grief and
the Dark Night of the Soul.**

12th February, 2005.

Gary Caganoff

Introduction

Though I wash myself with snow water... yet shalt thou plunge me in the mire.
(Job to G-d, Book of Job, in Jung, p59)

Major Depression is the top psychological disorder of the western world. 80% of suicide deaths in the US are people suffering from Major Depression. At the present rate of increase Major Depression will be the second most disabling condition in the world by 2020, behind heart disease (Website Reference #1). Governments and private companies spend billions of dollars in research to help prevent the condition, yet they still can't agree on what causes it and how best to treat it.

The aim of this essay is to explore the links between depression and the process of purgation. Depression in western medicine is seen as a mental ailment, something to be stopped with drugs and 'therapy'. However in the Transpersonal I have experienced a fusion between depression, existential grief, and possibly purgation, which builds a case for not trying to stop depression, but supporting the person through the entire process by using methods of Transpersonal Psychotherapy. I agree with Grof (1989) who suggests that people who are being diagnosed with mental diseases are more likely having a 'spiritual emergency', where the condition is more a crisis of the evolution of consciousness rather than a mental disease (1989, Grof, pp x, 2).

Jung (1995, A. Jaffe, in Jung, p12) knew all too well that the healing of psychic illness was very much dependent on the patient's religious attitude. St. John of the Cross (E. Allison Peers, Dark Night of the Soul, Introduction, Website Reference #7) explains purgation to be the divine stripping of the soul's imperfections, preparing it for Union with G-d. With the loss of the mysterious and the spiritual in our everyday world of instant gratification and global information it may be said that depression is not really what we believe it to be, as defined by the medical experts. Instead, depression might be the expression of the soul being stuck and yearning for freedom? Could depression be an unconscious aching for something more than this earthly existence that comes not only from the heart but also from the Soul and the Spirit of the person?

If the true purpose of humanity, as it is said in just about every mystical and religious tradition, is to unite with G-d, then can it be said that if people strayed from that true purpose then they would walk in the wilderness of their own seemingly meaningless existence? Thus creating all the symptoms of depression. Hell on earth.

Depression

St. John himself makes a distinction between depression and purgation, which he calls The

Dark Night, and recognises that there is a link between them. He refers to the state of melancholia, and that when melancholia accompanies The Dark Night it increases the intensity of purgation. This suggests that depression and The Dark Night are separate, and that depression can also play a part in the process of purgation. (Dark Night of the Soul, Website Reference #8 p1, & #9 chapter IX)

Recognising different types of depression, which he calls 'aridities' (arid, barren), St. John distinguishes the difference between what we are now calling depression and purgation.

...these aridities might frequently proceed, not from the night and purgation...but from sins and imperfections, or from weakness and lukewarmness ...
(Dark Night of the Soul, Website Reference #9, chapter IX)

Moral imperfections and spiritual weakness is not the path to God. Our path to God, through purgation, 'should not be accompanied by a particular interest in the things of the world'. (Dark Night of the Soul, Website Reference #8, p2) St. John, like Buddha and many other great saints and sages, is talking about avoiding attachment to material things. Attachment creates suffering and a with-drawl of our attention of the path to Unity. These 'sins' acted out in weakness keeps our souls walking the barren desert landscapes, perhaps for millions of lifetimes. In the 'aridity' of our present world this has resulted in the breakdown of the human community and the destruction of the environment. We have created a mundane world where souls get lost in the desert, and mirages distract them from the reality of the arid landscape, the emptiness of their own being.

In the recent past, up until the present, drugs have been the most popular way of dealing with depression. Questions are now beginning to surface on whether they are actually working or not. The big question mark is held against the fact that there is not enough adequate scientific data to support the use of medication in treating depression. (Website Reference #11) It is known that less than 10% of the cases of depression are caused by neurochemical and hormonal imbalances, which medications claim to treat. However, these imbalances are simply symptoms of depression, not causes. (Website Reference #2) (This is an example of the inconsistency in medical research) It is suggested that, 'the root cause of 90% of depression is not a chemical imbalance' (Website Reference #5), but is socially constructed. It is recognised now that one of the main causes of depression is due to social change (Website Reference #2). Over the past 50 years society has changed so radically that we can't help but compare the recent increase in 'psychological disorders' to the rapid rate of 'progress'. In this short time span we have seen:

- a breakdown in the extended family
- a dispersal of communities
- an increased focus on material wealth
- an overwhelming prevalence of news media
- and an increase in focus on the individual

(Website Reference #2)

Looking outside of mainstream psychology we can go deeper into this large and almost neglected area.

It seems that depression has grown out of despair for the 'things of the world'. Depression is caused by society shifting away from stable communities living within healthy environments, which for millions of years has grounded and supported us in every way imaginable. This huge

shift has caused us to lose our sense of interconnection not only with ourselves but with the remaining hundreds of millions of plant and animal species on the planet – and the rivers and the mountains, and the ocean and the air, and the fire in all things. Our unconscious state has brought about the destruction of the planet's environment to such an extent that it has come to a point where it is believed that 'the planet cannot be saved' (The Crucible Centre, Handouts a8). The loss of community and the perceived loss of connection to nature has shocked both the collective and individual psyches to such an extent that more than 20% of people are suffering from varying degrees of depression.

Society lives within a deadly psychotic depression that eats away at every resolve we make, at every passion and every attempt to change our course. We are easily distracted from anything serious by the glimmering trash of our culture.

(The Crucible Centre, Handouts a8).

The latest research tells us that depression is fast accelerating out of control.

People born since 1945 are 10 times more likely to suffer from depression than those born before. That is an astounding figure, and it cannot be explained away by people going to the doctor more, or depression being diagnosed more easily, as these were taken into account in the study. Human biology doesn't change that quickly. The most widely accepted explanation for this sort of phenomenon is that society has changed. (Website Reference #2)

From an ecopsychology point of view society is suffering from 'collective myopia', (Abram, quoted by Sewal, in Roszak, p202) which is a manifestation of psychic numbing; a psychological defence against the world's pain. (Sewall in Roszak, p202) We remain numb to the truth because it hurts too much.

In response we...choose between a variety of convenient distractions... build defences, (and) twist ourselves into something we collectively label as variations on the themes of madness and depression...(ibid)

Jung (1995, p166) believed that the loss of connection between ourselves and 'the world of our ancestors' (therefore the loss of myth) causes schizophrenia, suggesting a psychological division between the true nature of the world, revealed by consciously recognising subconscious archetypes (in myths and dreams), and the behavioural expectancies put onto us by society. This division is so great that it causes a psychological split. With the loss of the importance of the sacred in our mundane world we are pressured even more to conform to the shallow logic of our times. This would create a psychological tendency to numb ourselves from the pain of the world and the pain of our own soul – hence suppressing all things in our unconscious not just to simply please others, but to also suppress our deepest fears. At this stage of the game we are not even aware of the desert landscape but only of the mirages that present themselves. We constantly drink them in, but somehow our thirst is never quenched. And it never will be quenched because these mirages are all illusions of egocentric attachments. It is the state furthest removed from G-d.

When soul is too dominant, we lose connection with the infinite source and fall under the thrall of the world...(Tarrant, 1999, p20)

All the dramas of the world, its politics, ideologies, dogmas, deceptive truths and lies are all the

games that keep people focused only on the mirages. They don't realise that they are wandering through the driest desert of existence. Only in moments of crises do such people have any awareness of where they are, and if they hold that awareness then the reality of the desert will become more and more apparent. These people feel a great contradiction between the empty fullness of the mirages and the full emptiness of the desert. Living in a soulless society their own soul is suffering from great loneliness. Depression is experienced because the soul wanders lost in the arid landscape where there seems to be nothing different. The soul intuitively begins searching for the very thing that is different.

Once the soul has started its journey a shift begins to take place. As the soul moves out of the desert it moves to another place; a landscape conducive to exploring its inner most feelings and emotions. In practical therapeutic terms this is where we have to go deeper. We have to explore the area beneath the material dramas of humanity. For people to find relief from depression they have to get beneath the surface of their own life dramas, and the dramas of the world, realising it is more an issue of the soul rather than cognitive behavioural patterns. This means moving out of the barren desert and into the waterlogged marshlands, the quagmire of emotion. In Transpersonal terms this means beginning to understand and work through the illusions projected by the ego. This doesn't bring relief from depression, however it is the start of something different.

In-Here | Out-There | Formation of Ego

Soul wanders ever deeper into the marsh of emotion; looking for catharsis, the authentic story, the reason for its pain. (Tarrant, 1999, p20)

In ecopsychology the beginnings of our 'collective myopia', lies in 'the historic and conceptual, objective split between 'in-here' and 'out-there'' (Roszak, quoted by Sewall in Roszak, p202). In the Transpersonal, influenced by Jungian and Buddhist perspectives, these problems are caused by the split between the ego and the Self, the perceived split between ourselves and G-d. So, the main difference, or perhaps the only difference between depression in the desert and depression in the marsh is that the former is based on not knowing that there is anything different, which is an indifference that incapacitates. The latter comes from realising that there must be something different – something more than this. This is an indication that the ego is loosening its grip, that some of the contents of the unconscious are beginning to become conscious. This also begins to awaken the soul so it may begin to set itself free, 'For only the soul can unmake the prison it has so carefully constructed' (Pizer, M. Crucible Handouts, n1). Jung (1995, p419) says that, 'the soul must contain in itself the faculty of relation to God... otherwise a connection could never come about'. It is the soul's desire to move out of the desert in order to reconnect with G-d. The soul could wander the forests and the mountains but in order to reach G-d it has to go through the marshlands, the quagmire of emotion. It cannot be avoided. Eva Pierrakos (Saly, J., Thesenger, D, 1990) explains that you cannot reach G-d without confronting your deepest most fearful feelings. In Buddhism this is also a belief. Jung knew this too. That is why in the Transpersonal we almost always concentrate on the dark, or 'negative' aspects of the unconscious. The soul must be worked with because, as Jung says, 'the soul is the totality of all psychic processes' (Jung, Crucible Handouts, n2). And if soul 'contains in itself the faculty of relation to God', then working with the psyche, and therefore working with soul, is the only

way to move towards Unity with G-d. The Transpersonal work starts with exposing the illusions created by the ego. Jung backs this up when talking of schizophrenia, expressing that, 'morbidly drops away when the gulf between the ego and the unconscious is closed (Jung, 1995, p167).

Wallowing through the marshlands involves living the pain that comes with this 'in-here, out-there' split. It can take some time to realise this split. My experience is that this wallowing is driven by the pain of confusion, anger, and frustration - the emotional dramas of life that create massive psychic pain that never wants to leave. Depression goes to greater depths and if you can confront the fear then half the work is done. This is where the Transpersonal is so effective. It's techniques, most notably energetic processing and breathwork, enables you to safely confront the fear and explore the depths of the pain. It may take a few years, but that's no problem compared to how many lifetimes more you would go on wallowing. Transpersonal psychotherapy speeds up the process.

My own process of going into the pain involved particular key stages that are common. In grief we feel the pain of abandonment; girlfriends walking out, not receiving the love that you yearn for, mother not being around when you needed her when you were a baby, etc. When you experience this grief and begin to go even deeper into the feeling a realisation hits you that these are just the surface dramas of something much more profound. This is when the grief of abandonment turns existential. It becomes the grief of existence, the realisation that you are disconnected from G-d.

In the womb we are connected to G-d, we are the void, we exist only in spaciousness. Universal energy flows freely through your entire being. This free flow of energy incorporates the higher elements of Self, Spirit, and Soul, as well as the lower elements of intuition, essence, and life-force (Crucible Handouts, v1). In the womb we are 'one' with G-d, we have no awareness of ourself. When we are born we begin to lose this 'oneness' as we learn the false nature of duality. We become aware of the 'I' and the 'you', the subject and the object. Our original form is distorted by,

- the karma we bring with us
- the energetic nodes we inherit and imbibe
- the way we are born, and
- the decisions we make about life, both in the womb and afterwards

(Crucible Handouts, v1).

As the original form becomes more distorted we begin to feel unsafe resting in the spaciousness of the void. The subsequent separation from it then brings on, 'not the experience of space, but the feeling of emptiness' (Crucible Handouts, v1). When we experience this loss we withdraw from the core of our being. This is where we meet inconsolable grief (ibid). However, the pain of this is protected by the inner critic, which draws on the power that resided in the Self (ibid). The inner critic is one of our most powerful aspects and was the main instigator that took me to such extremes in my life. As a voice inside me it said, 'impossible, you can't do it'. However, another voice in me said, 'I'll show you its not impossible. I can do it!' This huge conflict virtually ran my life from mid teenage years to mid thirties . It is only in the last five years that the inner critic has quietened considerably. It was this conflict that caused my wallowing in the marshlands, wanting sometimes to die, but all the time yearning for love: and never achieving either, so well were these two matched. My time in the marsh was a time of great loneliness.

By denying the grief of our loss we begin to play ‘the game of life’ in order for us to fit into the safety of society. We cover up the original inner self and instead look outwards at the mirages that are presented to us. ‘All the basic egoic games are created to cover the grief from this original loss’ (Crucible Handouts, v1). This is where we take on the roles of victim and/or perpetrator. In the Transpersonal we allow ourselves to go beneath these egoic games and to experience the pain of the loss and the grief of our existence.

Loss of Affective Ego

From my own experience it was the loneliness I felt that was the base emotion for keeping me in existential grief. The existential loneliness was the soulful longing to be loved by G-d. What triggered this in me was my experience of the basement that I explored in Kabul: a basement beneath a building that saw the imprisonment, torture, and death of tens of thousands of men, women, and children during the 25 years of war. Drawing on the energy of the basement I felt the people’s complete abandonment and absolute loneliness on all levels. Exploring this ‘underworld’ triggered off my own issues of abandonment and loneliness. The Transpersonal helped me go down into the depths of myself to meet them head on – in the existential dimension.

Soon after entering existential grief I experienced the loss of my affective ego, or, what Rumi writes of, as a ‘burning down of the house’; where nothing that you know makes sense anymore, and everything you do and have done has no meaning. This is where the affective energy that holds the empirical ego in place drains out of consciousness (website reference #8). From my experience and from accounts by others the affective loss of ego seems to be that, ‘the sense of the interior landscape has been vastly altered’ (ibid). This began taking place in me on Pumpkin Island in 2003 where the breakdown of my ‘knowing’ led me to a single soulful cry that came out of the darkest depths of the mire, ‘G-d help me!’ As soon as I cried these words to G-d I felt a change. This was something new, something different. I knew then that there was no turning back.

This experience led me into admitting to myself that I was truly lost, which forced me, by sheer exhaustion, to stop fighting. Only then did I begin to sink, begin to drown in inconsolable grief that spanned a period of twelve months. I was so beyond help that I knew no one could reach me (though I was wonderfully supported). When you drop into the depths of the mire you then reach the vast underground caverns of your self. Here is where the realisation takes place; the realisation of your illusion that you are disconnected from G-d. Here, in the depths of your self, is where your heart truly begins to open to G-d and your soul has found relief.

The Dark Night

The Dark Night is, ‘a double whammy – it is our worst horrors and our soul’s deepest needs in relationship to God’ (Crucible Handouts v2). St. John writes,

Into this dark night souls begin to enter when God draws them forth from the state of beginners- which is the state of those that meditate on the spiritual road- and begins to set them in the state of progressives- which is that of those who are already contemplatives- to the end that, after passing through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect, which is that of the Divine union of the soul with God.

(Dark Night of the Soul, website reference #9, chpt 1)

The Dark Night is when the soul can no longer pray, meditate, or reflect in the world of the senses, using imagination, intellect, memory and will. Here is where G-d communicates Him(Her)self by pure spirit. (S)He communicates Him(Her)self by way of contemplation, which is only accessible to the higher aspects of soul. (Dark Night of the Soul, website reference #9, chpt, 9)

The one thing that defines the Dark Night from other states of grief and depression is that it includes infused contemplation. This is the one thing that brings about the Dark Night, 'because it is communicated to the spirit, not by the ordinary channels of the faculties, but in the depths of the soul...' (website reference #8). 'When once the soul begins to enter therein, its inability to reflect with the faculties grows ever greater' (Dark Night of the Soul, website reference #9, chpt IX).

Depression can intensify the experience of purification, as St. John has said, but it is not the Dark Night simply because it doesn't include infused contemplation. Working with depression on the energetic level can almost certainly lead one to existential grief and the loss of effective ego. The loss of affective ego is also not the Dark Night, but is a gateway into purification. It comes near the beginning of contemplation. It begins with a prayer that doesn't come from the mind, imagination, or even will, but from the soul's realisation of its own absolute hopelessness. 'G-d help me!' This then leads one into infused contemplation.

Contemplation is naught else than a secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which, if it be permitted, enkindles the soul with the spirit of love.

(Dark Night of the Soul, website reference #9, chpt X).

On the journey through the Dark Night you cannot see any way out of the darkness because your normal senses of perception are bypassed. However, 'The self is in the dark because it is blinded by a light greater than it can bear', and the impure soul suffers greatly when the Divine Light shines upon it. (St. John, Crucible Handouts, v2). In the Dark Night there is total surrender to the process of purification. The only thing that feeds you is G-d's love. Only at the end do you recognise this, and only at the end do you realise that this is all you ever wanted.

The Dark Night gives us a new way of praying, not based on our old faculties, but based on 'loving receptivity' (website reference #8).

When I lived for three months in the Priest's Hut, which was the middle months of my one year experience of existential grief, Monique gave me a picture of Sri Ramana Maharshi. His eyes, and only his eyes helped me intensify my infused contemplation. At first his loving eyes caused me to sink further into the existential grief of loneliness. Everything had drained out of my life. I had next to nothing left in me. Ramana's eyes were the only thing that gave me any reference to what I was seeking. His eyes took me through my deepest grief of abandonment.

All I did was sit and watch the emotions rise and pass away, rise and pass away, confronting all fears. It seemed never ending. Then one day on the floor of the Priest's Hut, holding Ramana's picture in my hands, eyes filled with tears, my heart literally burst open with love and light. I cried in great relief for several more days, feeling so much love. I felt my vibration level go up, and I remained in this state for at least a couple of weeks before it began to subside. Soon I found I could switch on this higher vibration whenever I wanted – during meditation, and during massage and therapy sessions with clients. I felt for the first time in my life I was in the flow of life. (I wrote about this peak experience in my last essay on Pierrakos). Indeed my whole way of meditating literally changed. I had also learned to pray. My new way of being was re-building itself, not on the old ways of the mind, but from the new way of the heart.

I'm still not sure if this experience was a passage through The Dark Night, however I am full of gratitude for the experience and indebted to my dear teachers and friends at The Crucible. I can truly say that my depression has gone, to the point that I can't even remember what it was like, my loneliness has been annihilated, and my love is ever expanding.

Conclusion

If we are soul, and if we are spirit, then it is our ultimate destiny to unite with G-d. Jung says that in the centre of the mandala is the Self, and that reaching the centre is a kind of circumambulation through the psyche. The mandala is, 'formation, transformation, Eternal Mind's eternal recreation' (Jung, 1995, p221). So, if there is no set path to purgation then we can't prove nor disprove whether depression and even loss of the affective ego is a part of the Dark Night. However, we can say that both can be instrumental in steering us towards it.

Nicholas Cusanos wrote,

The nature of God is a circle
Where the centre is everywhere
And the circumference is nowhere

If this is so then there is no 'path' to G-d. There is, but it is an illusion, just like all the other games played by the ego. The landscapes of the soul; the desert, the marsh, the caverns, the mountains, are all an illusion. If the centre of G-d is everywhere then G-d is already in us. No path is needed to get there. We are already there, it's just that it hasn't been realised yet. This is why the painful journey is so necessary, to wake us up to the reality of ourselves and discover that it's all really just a great big joke.

If there is one path that exists – just one - then it would be that of the breath. The breath is a central aspect of major spiritual practices from Kabbalah to Buddhism. In just one small breath you can travel so deep that you just might reach that centre – finding Unity with G-d in an instant. It is possible. Just surrender and trust...

*If prayer is pure and untainted
Surely that holy breath*

*That rises from your lips
Will join with the breath of heaven
That is always flowing
Into you from above...
Thus that part of God
Which is within you
Is reunited with its source.*

(anon, 19th Century Hasidic Master, in Abram, 1996, p247)

Bibliography

- Abram, D. (1996) The Spell of the Sensuous, Vintage Books, New York.
Crucible Centre, The (2004) Handout Notes, Diploma in Wholistic Psychotherapy, The Crucible Centre, Hartley Vale.
Grof, S. (1989) Spiritual Emergency, Penguin Putnam Inc, New York.
Jung, C.J. (1995) Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Fontana Press, London.
Roszak, T. et,al (1995) Ecopsychology, chapter by Sewall, L. The Skill of Ecological Perception. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.
Saly, J., Thesenger, D. (1990) The Pathwork of Self Transformation, Eva Pierrakos, Bantam (New age) Publications, United States.
Tarrant, J. (1999) The Light Inside the Dark: Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life. Hodder and Stoughten, Sydney.

Website References:

- 1/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/facts.htm
- 2/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/causes2.htm
- 5/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/info_summary.htm
- 7/ http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/catholicclassics/johnofthecross/dark_night/darknight1.cfm
- 8/ www.innerexplorations.com/forum/dark.htm
- 9/ http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/catholicclassics/johnofthecross/dark_night/darknight1a.cfm

Related Sites

- 3/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/causes3.htm
- 4/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/causes.htm
- 6/ http://www.clinical-depression.co.uk/Depression_Information/teen.htm
- 10/ <http://www.depression.com/psychotherapy.html>
- 11/ http://www.cognitivetherapy.com/raising_qs.html
- 12/ http://www.psychologyinfo.com/depression/depression_types.html