



JESUS WEPT

WHEN FAITH
AND DEPRESSION MEET

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P R E F A C E

There were dire warnings of dreadful heat and humidity for today; it would be hot enough to wilt the briskest of spirits. But it's turned out to be not that bad here. We haven't even needed to turn on the fan upstairs. Sometimes the terrible things a person expects to happen just don't. You gear up for the worst, and then an anticlimactic little inconvenience is all you get. It's almost a disappointment; now where am I going to put all that worry?

Somewhere far away, I hope. Worry beforehand has so little of any use to contribute to what actually happens—it neither causes nor cures anything, ever. I do not think it prepares us for misfortunes in any good way—it simply gives us the chance to experience every sorrow twice, once before it happens and then again when it does. I, for one, would rather be strolling down the sidewalk without a care in the world one day and be crushed by a falling grand piano, than creep fearfully around every corner, afraid that something bad is lurking on the other side.

Well, but if you had known about the baby grand, you wouldn't have walked down that street. You would have taken a different route. Maybe, maybe not. They fall fast, those

baby grands. By the time I had enough information about the impending disaster to choose another route, the piano would already be on the ground, with me flat as a cartoon beneath it.

Of course, such sensible reasons not to worry are only effective for people who already don't. Those for whom anxiety is a regular visitor can't turn it off easily in response to reasonable and convincing argument. Chronic fear is not about lack of information: it comes from within. The same is true of chronic sorrow: it does no good to point out to the sufferer that she is really blessed in many ways, that things really aren't so bad, that many other people have it much worse, even if all those things are true. Depression comes from within, not from outside us.

There can be so many reasons for these internal woes. The brain's chemistry authors many of them, and they improve markedly with the right medicine, rightly managed. The trauma of early life or current stress often contributes to this sorry chemical soup, and often the right talk therapy or behavioral therapy helps. Many people spend years struggling to understand themselves and to heal.

For many years, I've thought about how religious faith helps or hinders this struggle, which is my own and that of many other people. Just how prayer might be a means

toward healing, and how difficult it can be for those afflicted in this way to pray at all. How hard it can be to heed and act on Jesus' words, *Let not your heart be troubled*, without either lying or sounding falsely pious. Whether you're religious or not, one thing is certain: depression is not for sissies. Living with it is hard.

PROLOGUE: WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Everybody gets sad now and then. You're sad when your mother dies; you cry every day, maybe several times a day, perhaps for weeks or even months. Or you're sad when you lose your job. You move away from the old neighborhood, and you're sad to leave all those dear people.

Sorrow comes and then, after a time, it goes. Almost always, it leaves a scar—a big one or a little one, depending on what it is. But sorrow is the usual human response to loss. Sorrow is as normal as toenails. And it's not what this book is about.

Depression *isn't* something everybody has. It is not normal. While it may take root in the shock of a sudden sorrow or a profound life change, it may also just come for no reason at all that the naked eye can see, invited in by a wrong-place-at-the-wrong-time neurochemical moment which is hidden from public view. Depression is the sapping of spiritual strength and joy, the graying of everything. Its onset can be sudden—or it can be gradual, a growing awareness that something is missing and nothing is working

as it should, a creeping inability to honor any of one's own achievements or claim any of one's own blessings.

Depression for me is the ever-present cloud that sits most of the time just to the side of my vision, not so much menacing as simply present, constant witness to its presence and capacity to reenter my life with no more notice than an ordinary Sunday afternoon.

—MARTY

Among many other things, depression is a profound mistrust of the self: it anxiously asks the world for validation, but then can never seem to hear anything back but negative criticism. It leaps to bitter conclusions: *This is my fault. This won't work. I can't do anything right. Things never work out well for me.* And it distrusts whatever positive feedback the world offers in rebuttal: *What do they know?* depression asks scornfully. *If people really knew me, they'd be singing a different tune.*

I feel shaky when I think about my depression. It can resurface in an instant.

—PATRICIA

And depression confounds those who must live alongside it. They offer what counsel they have, the things that have worked well in *their* lives to ease them out of sorrow,

not realizing that depression and sorrow are not the same thing: *Think pleasant thoughts. Spend time in nature. Cuddle your cat. Always remember that the glass is half full, not half empty. Think of all the things you do so well. Remember that God loves you. Remember that I love you.* You listen patiently and feel more alone than ever: the one you love most does not understand you. Alone, and furious with yourself, because—once in a while—you know that it is not the one who loves you who does not understand: it is you. It is you who no longer understand the world. You know that the positive things he is saying are absolutely true, that she is right about all these things, that they would all help if you could just do them. You may know this, in your mind—but your spirit does *not* know. You are hopelessly out of step with the parade of life, and you cannot seem to find your way back into it on your own. This insight fills you with shame. It's not enough that you have been robbed of all your joy: you must also confront the fact that it was an inside job. *I am doing this to myself.*

Sometimes you are not even sure you *want* to find your way back.

Another attribute of the misery associated with chronic fear and chronic sorrow is that, perversely, I like them, and do not really want to let them go. They confirm me.

—FRANKLIN

Yes, you think, life may very well be beautiful. But I can't live it. It is just too heavy. Sometimes you just want to lie very still and let the hours pass. Let weeks pass, years, whatever, as long as you can be still. The level of your exhaustion appalls you.

When I can pull myself out of the well-worn groove of thoughts of lack: not enough money, not enough talent, not enough intelligence, not enough support, not enough . . . whatever, and when I can list my many blessings, light edges the clouds. . . . The odd thing to me is realizing I can make this choice, but refusing to do so.

—MARIE

Of course, not all depression is that profound. Many people have a habit of life that enshrines it without really knowing that's what it is: a dreary template of mild discouragement into which everything must somehow fit. They hold down jobs, raise families, take care of business—they do it all. People who know them might have no idea that anything is amiss. They do their best—they always have. But there is little joy in any of it.

I truly want to be a person of worth. Anxiety and worry are constant companions, affecting sleep patterns and other things. . . . I truly don't want to let anyone with expectations of me to be let down by a less than excellent effort at the

performance of perceived duty. It's arguably a conundrum of my own making, and so it's a life journey to undo that personal Gordian knot and rely on a loving and merciful, not to mention omniscient and omnipresent, all-powerful God.

—CAROL

Anxiety and worry are much more constant in their attentions to these souls than serenity and delight have ever been. They might not ever have thought of describing themselves as depressed—even the term may be foreign to them. They might never have sought treatment for it, might consider any suggestion that they do an insult. They are not aware that there is any way through life other than the bleak path they have always walked.

Depression has been a tenant in my life for a long, long time. Not the *huge* depression some have but the daily visitor who is there when I wake up until I go to sleep. The hardest part of this depression is that you don't know what is wrong so you can't get help. It took me fifty-four years to figure it out.

—RUTH

This book explores depression in the many people of faith who have experienced it. It cannot claim to do so fully: like all human experience, depression fits itself to the vessel it has chosen, and no two of us are the same. No two courses of healing are ever quite the same, either: one size

definitely does *not* fit all. The uniqueness of depression's mark on each soul can perplex and even annoy the people who love someone suffering from it, and want very much to help. They research remedies: *Didn't she try that doctor I told her about? Why didn't that new drug work? Did he follow up on that herbal thing I showed him? Didn't she read that book I gave her?*

One of my toughest challenges is the ignorance of well-meaning people who are close to me but can't understand the depression as an actual physical as well as mental problem. They keep trying to "fix it" or me. When I have a relapse even though I am taking my meds as usual and I talk to my nearest and dearest I am totally talking to a brick wall. Why do you think it is so hard for people to comprehend? I become frustrated and so do they. When I really have a bad day and can hardly move out of bed I just want the world to go away.

—FRANCES

They try to be so careful of what they say. For months. For years, maybe. *I don't want to say something that makes her feel any worse*, they tell themselves. After a time, though, they get tired of walking on eggs: something small and annoying happens, and they snap off a peevish remark. They suddenly realize that they've actually been angry at

this sad figure in their lives for quite a while, at the very same time as they were just as full of worry. *Damn it!* they say, *Life is tough. It's tough for everyone. You've got it pretty damn good compared to some people. Get over it.* It actually felt good to say this out loud, they reflect later, a little surprised at themselves for having done it. And, besides, it probably didn't hurt the depressed person. I mean, she didn't *say* anything.

Lord, have mercy.

CHAPTER 1

JESUS WEPT

At first, I didn't know I was depressed. I thought I was just religious.

I knew I was beyond tired, beyond exhausted. I knew I was out of shape. I knew I was overworked. What I didn't know was that there was any way *not* to be any of those things. But then, part of depression *is* not knowing things can be other than the way they are. *This is horrible*, you think, *but I cannot change it. I have always been here and I always will be here. I can't leave.* Maybe there are little things you can do to make life more livable, but the basics are set, and the basics are not good. This is how things look from the trough.

In my office, a beautiful womblike room with wine-red walls and dark wood and stained glass windows, I tried to

create an oasis of beauty and quiet that would calm and nurture others, and might even calm and nurture *me*. I bought bunches of roses at the corner vegetable stand and arranged them in clear, round bowls of clean water. I lit scented candles, whose tiny flames reflected and multiplied in the facets of their crystal holders. I rocked in the wooden rocking chair. I played the chants of medieval monks and nuns, the music of Bach. Once in a while I played the Beatles, or something by Paul Simon. Not often, though: they reminded me too painfully of the confident young woman I was when those songs were new, and that young woman just didn't understand. *Get over it*, she said, dismissively.

I sneaked out the back door of the church and across the street to the chiropractor. *Your shoulders are like a rock*, he said every time. *I know*, I would answer. All my muscles were knots of anxious readiness. Readiness for what, I cannot say.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen—the heaped-up voicemail messages filled me with dread. Someone wanting something, someone to whom I owed work, someone reminding me of something I had failed to do. “Save,” I pressed, over and over. *Save me*, I thought sometimes, and sometimes something dark answered that nobody could save me.

My prayer was the weariness of a child exhausted from too much crying. Prayer in the beautiful wine-colored office

was prayer blinking back tears, prayer curiously devoid of hope, prayer even more curiously uninterested in its own outcome. I pressed “Save” and prayed to be saved myself. But I began to suspect that I would not be saved until I left my church and my family and my mind and my body, all the other things I could no longer lift, behind. There was no salvation for me, not here on the earth. The most I could hope for was silence.

And I began to long for that final silence. In my longing, death did not look cold. Or sad. It looked languorous, that motionless end of everything here. Seductive, calling me. I tried it out on my husband, the only person I trusted with such a dark vision.

“I want you to know something about how I feel. It’s important to me that you listen.”

“OK.” He knew of my pain, but did not know what to do about it. Not being able to do anything was hard on him.

“What I have to tell you is that I want to be dead.”

He said nothing. He waited.

“I want to stop and not have to start again.” He still did not move or speak. This I didn’t like. I wanted him to *do* something. I didn’t know what it was, but I wanted it. Even now, I still do not know what it was that I wanted him to do.

“Listen, I’m not going to kill myself. I don’t want you to think I might do that. I won’t.” This needed emphasizing.

I was not suicidal: no hoarding of pills, no planning of my own execution, no “ideation.” I would not kill myself. But I wanted to *be dead*. Wanted it to *happen* to me. I wanted to be taken out.

“When you’re dead,” I went on, “you don’t have to do anything. You just lie in your box. You’re in the ground with earthworms and seeds and other dead people, and you don’t know or care. You don’t mind. You are quiet.” I paused, and then I added, “And your spirit finally knows what it is to be with God, with nothing in the way, and it’s a wonderful thing to be with God.” I added that religious part almost as an afterthought, although I was pretty sure it was the case. I thought about heaven a lot.

This was a hurtful thing to say to one who loved me deeply. That I wanted to die, that the sweetness of his presence was not sweet enough to make me want to live.

Duty, on the other hand, *was* enough to keep me alive. I had a duty to be alive. I had a duty to him, to my children and grandchildren, to my church. I am not a person who shirks duty. I would not shirk the duty of being alive.

But I didn’t have to like it.

At night I lit more candles in crystal holders and eased myself into hot baths of lavender-scented water. The scent of the lavender rose with the steam; the heat of the water eased my aching joints. I took my old prayer book into

the bath with me, my wet hands pocking the thin pages with marks of water drops. The ancient words of the Church's daily prayer rose from me, thick with my tears. At other times, I took the same prayers to the chapel, where everything was clean and good, where the sun slanted through the stained glass and pooled rainbows on the floor. There, I often was not alone: another worshipper would join me, and the ancient words were a sweet conversation: "O God, make speed to save us." "O Lord, make haste to help us." *How lovely this is*, I would think as we went back and forth. *How lovely*, as we sang the words antiphonally at Sunday vespers. The depressed often report a loss of the experience of beauty, a flatness that covers everything once held dear and colors it grey. That was not my experience: rarely in my life has the beauty of prayer, of art, of music, of *everything* been more vivid to me than during those painful days. And rarely have I been so unable to derive anything from it beyond the ache of my own isolation. It was as if I beheld intense beauty through an impenetrable window of thick glass. I could not tear myself away from the loveliness, but neither could I myself become lovely.

The tomb of my misery barricaded itself against the persistent rapping of my anger at its door. *No, I am not angry*. Sorrow was august, but anger was unacceptable. But a tic-like drumming of my clenched hand against my right

thigh when someone irritated me became more and more frequent. “Stop that!” my daughter ordered when she saw me. “Do you know how you look when you do that? If you’re mad, just say so.” Mad? *Moi*? My anger was silent, or so I thought. In reality, it was getting louder: my voice more clipped, my tolerance of small inconveniences more slim, my strange beating of myself more obvious to others, more self-mutilating than before. It cannot have been a comfortable thing to see.

I will get up and take a walk in the morning, I promised myself each night. The endorphins generated by walking will help me feel better. Then I will have some energy. But my eyes flew open at ungodly hours—two, three. I would creep from our bed and take up residence in the guest room, tuning the radio to the BBC. Only the Brits and I were up at that hour. I would lie there in the scented dark—more candles—and listen to the cricket scores until I fell asleep. And then, at the normal waking time, I could not arise until it was time to go to work. I worked all day, every day. I worked from early morning until late at night. I worked and slept and woke up to listen to the cricket scores and slept again, fitfully. And then I arose and went back to work.

It seemed necessary, all this working. Necessary, but it seemed also to do little good.

My desk was covered with ineffectual piles of unmet obligations; one was dispatched only at the expense of another, and none were ever satisfied. I gave hurried lip service to healthy-minded ideas about what the clergy should do: they should take time for themselves, they should have a life outside the parish, they should get enough rest, they should take a sabbatical. But the “shoulds” in each of these unexceptionable recommendations rang in my ears louder than anything else, drowning out any grace they might have offered me. All of their gentle counsels took their places among the mountains of my unmet obligations. They felt no different from any of the others. Beyond the feeble palliation of stolen massages and scented baths and candles in crystal holders, my behavior gave not the slightest indication that I understood anything at all about self-care.

Oddly, so oddly that it can only have been by the grace of a loving God—who must by now have regarded me and those entrusted to my care with real alarm—my desperate condition ordinarily did not get in the way of my doing many people genuine good. From somewhere in its depths I daily summoned reserves of empathy and patience beyond what made any sense at all. I managed to preach with power. Looking back, I recall now that many of my sermons *were* about dying and going to heaven. Too many. And they were too heartfelt. That, and the surreptitious beatings

I endured at my own hand, would have been signs of my distress to anyone who knew the code. But few people did. And I certainly wasn't talking.

We will be true to Thee 'til death, we all sang one summer Sunday morning at the end of the 9:30 service. Another hymn about martyrdom, a favorite of mine. Something was strange, though: the room seemed to be concentrated in a tunnel ringed with black. Everything seemed to have slowed down. I sank to the floor at the chapel steps. *I'll just rest*. For how long? A minute? A year? Eventually, I awakened, covered with my own vomit and surrounded by a circle of frightened faces, protesting only weakly when the emergency medical services came to cart me away and not at all when a cardiologist who was suddenly *mine* cleaned out a blocked artery in my heart as casually as he would have unstopped a kitchen drainpipe.

Oh. *That's* what's wrong. I have a heart condition. Neat and clean, a heart condition—except for the vomit. Physical and, it later turned out, electrical as well. Arrhythmia. Medicines for it, lots of medicines. Maybe a pacemaker. This was *electrical*. Oh, good.

I would rest. I tried and failed to write—too tired. My pulse was in the thirties—no wonder I was too tired. I read murder mysteries. I dozed through visitors. I slept all night and much of each day. I came home. I sat at the picnic

table. It was beautiful and green in the garden. A heart condition. How lovely.

I was back at work in two weeks. The vestry made me promise to moderate my work schedule. *Yes, I will.* And I did. I kept a log of my working hours. I didn't count the telephone work from home, or the fourteen-hour Sundays. *Progress, not perfection,* I told myself cheerfully. I told myself and others that I was slowing down. That was not true. What I was doing was speeding up, slowly.

When the World Trade Center collapsed, though, there was no pretending anymore. All bets were off. Prayer vigils. Food collections—food, and clean socks and eyedrops and stuffed animals, pouring into the church from all sides. We were in New York, and we could get these things to the site, couldn't we? Yes, certainly. Tragedy brings out the best in people, but it also brings out the worst: the drunks got drunker, the crazy got crazier, the needier got needier. All around me, people were either rising magnificently to the occasion, or falling apart. Some were doing both.

Interestingly, *I* felt better. Of course I can help. Of course I have time to talk. Of course I will go. Who could stay away? The pile of twisted metal and plastic and paper and dust, of hidden bits of human flesh and bone rose high above the ground and went down many stories below it. Workers swarmed over it like ants. The train stations and

construction fences wore papers with color photocopies of the missing: *Maybe she became confused and wandered off, and at this very minute maybe she is somewhere in this city, huddled with other amnesiac WTC office workers around a rusty trash can with a fire burning in it to keep them all warm. Maybe. Maybe.* Because you can't disprove the negative, can you?

This was terrible. It was so terrible that my own darkness became irrelevant, a grandiose bid for neurotic attention. *Don't you know what's happened here? How can you even think about your own despair at a time like this?* And I didn't. Not me. And—again by the grace of a loving God, who sighed and used even me—I and the people of God with whom I lived and worked put our shoulders into helping, all of us, became part of the greatest outpouring of human kindness New York had seen in a long, long time.

My adversary just waited. It knew I was no match for it, that it didn't matter how important my important work was. It knew its patience would be rewarded, but I did not know. I thought I was better. It was good to have a sense of purpose again. Good to feel effective. Good to know there were concrete, exhausting tasks on which to spend myself. Good to lead. Good to be *good*. Vestry records from those months show that I reported that I was completely healed, that I was my old self now. The drug of care for

others coursed through my veins—I see now that it was a hallucinogen. It allowed me to believe that I was fine. I was anything but fine.

Because I could not allow myself to acknowledge my own hidden pain, my body once again did the honors. Another collapse: I began to stammer slightly during the announcements, saw the same tunneling blackness, said that I needed to sit down, looked without speaking at the same alarmed faces and allowed myself to be led away.

Nobody was buying my lies now. I had not slowed down like I said I would. I had attempted to bury my disease in the dry leaves of my frantic performance, in the embroidery of my duties. More heart medicine. More reassuringly technical scans and tests. And something else, now: medicine that would insinuate itself into the chemistry of my brain, that would tamper with my own way of interpreting what happened in my world. The juice of joy was in short supply among the neurons; the medicine would help me make more. Imagine.

The heart thing was real. I had a real blocked artery. The arrhythmia was real, too. Dangerous things, both of them. But I know that the real reason I could not continue was the crushing weight of unacknowledged despair I carried with me everywhere. I believe that my body's wisdom triumphed over my mind's denial so that I could live, and

I believe that I would have died if my body had not given out and given up. I never would have killed myself, but I would have seen to it that the church killed me. Had it been left to me, I never would have stopped. And I would be dead now.

And I am not dead. I am alive. My life has changed dramatically. I have said good-bye to people and things I hated to leave, chief among them that brave, funny little church and all the beloved people in it. I have told the truth about what I can and cannot give. Sparingly, I have even told it out loud, in public, and have been rewarded for that judicious sharing by the answering stories of many other good and faithful people who have battled my old enemy, too. *You're depressed?* one of them will ask, seeming a bit surprised that I would own up to such a thing in front of people, and I answer with a firm *Yes*. That's probably the most useful thing I say to anyone there.