

Till Morning Comes



Tim Farrington On Creativity, Depression, And The Dark Night Of The Soul

D. PATRICK MILLER

Blake, Byron, Tennyson, Woolf, Poe, Plath, Kierkegaard, Pound, Hemingway, Van Gogh, Tennessee Williams, David Foster Wallace: the ranks of notable writers and artists who have suffered, too often fatally, from depression seem endless.

A 1995 Scientific American article says that “artists experience up to eighteen times the rate of suicide seen in the general population, eight to ten times the rate of depression, and ten to twenty times the rate of manic-depression and its milder form, cyclothymia.” These statistics, taken from a number of studies, suggest an association between creativity and madness. But in his 2005 book, *Against Depression*, psychiatrist Peter D. Kramer, author of *Listening To Prozac*, argues that this malady has no more to do with creativity than, say, arthritis does, and that both are simply painful diseases that should be treated with the most effective medications we can prescribe.

Tim Farrington is a novelist who has been hospitalized for depression in the past. As he writes in his recent nonfiction book *A Hell of Mercy: A Meditation on Depression and the Dark Night of the Soul* (HarperOne), Farrington’s descent began at a young age: “I spent my senior year of high school in Honolulu listening to the darker songs of the early Elton John, cutting calculus class to read D.T. Suzuki, slipping away to the Buddhist temple, . . . and in general letting the warp and woof of my tidy American future unravel.” He writes that his first significant bout of depression was not incapacitating, however, and left him in a philosophical quandary:

Was I truly depressed or just awakening to the First Noble Truth of Buddhism, the insight that samsaric life is misery? My melancholy seemed like simple realism: if you weren’t depressed, you obviously didn’t know what was going on. I was becoming conscious of what Gurdjieff called “the horror of the situation.” And so I took long walks and thought about death and the suffering of innocents. I wrote bad poetry. I did not go to Stanford.

Farrington went in and out of various universities while pursuing his own independent study of Western philosophy and “living on cornflakes and macaroni and cheese.” Eventually he settled into Buddhism and New Age practices, lived ascetically

in an ashram and later in an urban commune that encouraged the rotation of sexual partners. (They posted a schedule to help everyone keep track.) He married and divorced, cleaned houses in San Francisco while writing several novels that he threw away, and eventually moved to Virginia Beach, Virginia, to teach Sunday school and focus on his body of work.

I like to say that I “discovered” Farrington when I read an early short story of his in this magazine and recommended it to a literary agent. His first published novel, *The California Book of the Dead* (Pocket), was a humorous portrait of West Coast New Age culture, and he followed it with the philosophical romances *The Monk Downstairs* and *The Monk Upstairs* (both HarperOne). He ventured into mystery writing under the pseudonym Frank Devlin and most recently garnered critical acclaim for *Lizzie’s War* (HarperOne), the story of a Vietnam War-era family that draws deeply on Farrington’s own background as the child of a military father. His fiction is often so funny you’d never guess the author had spent a fair amount of time in the darker corners of the human experience.

Farrington says he is “by no means an expert” on depression. “I’m more like a veteran, I suppose: just one more guy with some stories from the front, someone who kept his head down as best he could.” Nonetheless Farrington is both erudite and refreshingly plain-spoken about the thorny paradoxes that crop up in the discussion of creativity, madness, and the soul.

Miller: You’ve struggled most of your life with depression. How would you define it?

Farrington: Dryness, emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness. A loss of the juice of life, a loss of the energy to engage life, and a loss of any joy or pleasure in that engagement. In deep depression it seems useless, even painful, to lift a finger. It’s a Catch-22: I am aware that I am making my incapacitation worse through neglect and inertia, but any effort to fix it seems pointless at best.

The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* lists nine criteria for major depression, at least five of which must be present during a two-week period. These range from “depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day” to fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal ideation.

I think everyone has a basic intuitive understanding of depression as a morbid state that’s beyond life’s usual lows. The main feature of depression for me, the thing that distinguishes it from sadness and grief, is the sense of hopelessness — that

there's nothing I can do to change this misery or get out of it. There is hope in purgatory; we can suffer and believe it has a purpose in the long run. In the hell of depression, however, hope seems gone forever.

Miller: Would you compare depression to a fever — that is, a symptom indicating something is wrong but not what that something is exactly?

Farrington: That's not a bad metaphor. All fevers indicate some underlying condition that's often difficult to identify immediately. The fever is part of the body's attempt to heal itself, mobilizing the immune system and creating an internal environment that's too hot for the infectious elements. Left to run its course, a fever will usually correct the problem, but of course too high a fever can prove fatal.

The parallels with depression are easy to draw: You may experience the occasional moderate depression that serves as a wake-up call to change something in your life. Or the depression may pass without your ever understanding where it came from. But, like high fevers, intense and prolonged depressions demand urgent attention. And this is when you have to decide whether to let the depression run its course or to take medication that might help you “cool down” and function normally. Just as a high fever can cause brain damage, recent studies seem to show that prolonged depression may have long-term effects on the brain's physical structure and chemistry.

When I lived in an ashram, we used to talk about our inner crap getting “burned up in the fire of the spirit.” Depression can be like that. If you know what you're doing, it's one way to go, but it's risky.

Miller: Many spiritual practices talk of overcoming the ego or surrendering to God. Is there a point where surrender or the shrinking of the ego brings on the symptoms of depression? Is a depressive state a necessary stage in the spiritual path?

Farrington: Dealing with the ego is central to any spiritual practice, but so many of the practices we undertake to overcome, shrink, extinguish, or otherwise move beyond the ego are too easily co-opted *by* the ego. We can end up feeling holier-than-thou pretty quickly. On the other hand, as we deepen our spiritual practice, we can also become more capable of recognizing the ego's hidden agendas. You could see it as a kind of spiritual arms race: for every soulful insight that frees us from the ego's control, there is an answering psychic intrigue by the ego, which finds a new way to co-opt each bit of awakening and steer it back toward the same old self-serving purposes.

The crisis comes when we begin to realize that *all* our spiritual efforts are suffused with ego, and there is no way out of that bind. The Zen koan is a technique for precipitating such a crisis. A koan is a question for which the ego has no answer. After the ego has tried all of its tricks and strategems and failed, the structure of the ego itself begins to fail. Con-



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fronted with this loss of certainty and terrifying experience of helplessness, we often teeter on the edge of depression, and it doesn't take much to make us fall in. I wouldn't go so far as to say that depression is a necessary stage in the spiritual path, but it seems to me that the path always travels through a territory where one's particular mental instabilities are going to be exacerbated.

I honestly don't know if it's possible to avoid depression as we move into the cloud of unknowing. I do know that it is possible, eventually, to come out of the cloud and live in genuine surrender, with faith, humility, and a realistic trust in the divine, and *without* depression. But that is a long, intricate process that cannot be hurried or manipulated. Given the psychic stakes and our basic

human feebleness, that process will always be prone to disruption and despair. Look at Jesus: He prayed to have the cup of his suffering taken away before he surrendered to it. He fell three times on the way up the hill and felt a sense of abandonment on the cross. It took him three days to get out of the tomb. Of course he went through the process faster than most of us.

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