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PART 2

Setting out on the journey

6

Some Essentials



Foundation stones

When you have weathered the storm of an episode of depression, one thing is certain: you will never want go through another. You will want to do everything you possibly can to avoid that valley of dark shadows and stay in the light that is at last driving those shadows and the fear from your mind.

I wish I could offer you a map and straightforward directions showing a clear route along the road of recovery. The truth is that there are as many routes and pathways as there are travelers, and each of us has to find our own way.

We might all walk through similar landscapes, face similar challenges, and struggle with similar difficulties and threats to the peace and health of our minds. If this is the case, then I hope that in describing some of my experiences and passing on lessons I'm learning along the way, I will be writing something that speaks to you and maybe supports you along your path. I'm sure that if we ever were to meet, you would be able to do the same for me.

There are three foundation stones I would encourage you to put down for your path of recovery.

The first is your determination to avoid at all costs a return journey into your particular Darkness. But you will need more than the desire not to follow that path again. You will need determination and motivation to make positive choices and to follow positive and healthy ways of living as you reach out for recovery for your bruised and battered mind.

Your mental health and stability must be your “treasure hidden in a field” (Matthew 13:44) or your “pearl of great value” (Matthew 13:45). They need to be so important and necessary to you that, like the treasure finder and the merchant, you will be prepared to do whatever it takes to take hold of them and keep them.

Does that sound selfish or self-centered? Perhaps it does, but I know for myself that I cannot serve God in the way I believe he has called me to serve him when my mind is preoccupied by its pain, and I’m having difficulty coping with ordinary day-to-day living.

The second foundation stone I suggest is this: the belief that while we all need God’s grace and healing in our lives, we also need to take responsibility for our part in the process of recovery. Medication may ease the symptoms of depression and a time of rest may loosen the tight knots of stress. What medication can’t do is resolve the various problems, issues, and lifestyle choices that contributed to an episode of depression in the first place. While these remain at large and untamed, they will continue to cause trouble and may trigger further episodes of depression.

Identifying, understanding, and finding some sort of resolution of these difficulties within ourselves may be a long-term and painful process. We may need the help and support of a psychotherapist or counselor, and in some cases this can be arranged through a primary doctor or consultant psychiatrist.

The third element of our foundation is a resolution to be kind to ourselves, to nurture the seed of recovery that was first planted in us when we said “yes” to the question, “Do you want to be made well?” Like the mustard seed Jesus talks about (Matthew 13:31–32), the seed of recovery may be very small indeed, barely noticeable, but when planted in the right soil and nurtured, it grows and grows until it reaches our whole being, bringing healing for ourselves and hospitality for others.

Choice

“Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6).

“Of course I do,” we say, amazed that anyone could ask such a question. Who would want to be left in such distress, ill health and isolation? Of course we want to be made well, preferably straight away without our having to do anything for ourselves.

But let’s look a bit more closely at this question: it may not be quite as simple and straightforward as it first seemed.

The question Jesus asks comes from a story told in chapter 5 of Saint John’s Gospel (verses 2–9). It seems that there was a popular belief or legend that an angel of the Lord would come

down from time to time and stir up the waters of a pool known as Beth-zatha in Jerusalem. It was said that the first person to step in the pool after this stirring would be healed of whatever ailment afflicted him or her.

So, many invalids would spend time beside the pool, watching and waiting for the signs of stirring in the water. Among those invalids is a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years. We don't know what's wrong with him, although it clearly affects his mobility, or whether he's been waiting by the pool for all those years.

When Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" The man doesn't actually answer the question directly. Instead he explains that he's never managed to get into the water because he has no one to help him.

If we pause at this point in the story, we can reflect on how it might be compared with our stories of needing to be made well from depression and other mental distress.

These are my reflections, which may resonate with those of others but we will each have individual thoughts and ideas drawn from our own experiences.

It doesn't sound as if this man has very much hope of ever being the first one in the pool after it's been stirred up. We hear nothing about him asking for help; presumably all the others who are by the pool are either invalids themselves or accompanying relatives or friends, and they will assist them rather than the man. So why does he stay, with no prospect of healing?

Perhaps he has given up any real hope of a cure but is resigned to staying where he is. He's used to this place and knows the people around him, has nowhere else to go, and nothing else to do. It would actually be quite scary to try and find other places to be, other people to meet, other activities that he might just manage.

And what if he was healed? He might be dependent on others for his livelihood at the moment. How would he earn money if he could work? His days are mapped out for him; what would it be like to have to make decisions about what he does each day? What would it be like to have to take responsibility for his own life, not to be a victim of ill health or injury?

Although he may not realize it, perhaps he's thinking to himself, "I'm used to my life, it's safe and predictable, I know who I am and the people I meet. I'm actually quite comfortable here and it's not often the water gets stirred up anyway."

I've spent some time with this story because I've come to believe that actually we do need to make a clear decision that we want to be made well. During the emergency days we thought about earlier, our pain, distress, anxiety, and fear are so high that we're desperate for them all to be eased and are in no doubt of our need for healing. But sometimes when the crisis stage ebbs away, we might be tempted to ignore all the longer-term implications of our experience or feel too daunted by the difficulties we'd face if we started dealing with them.

After the man in our story has explained to Jesus why he can't get into the pool to be made well, Jesus says, "Stand up, take

your mat and walk.” And the man does just that. I can picture Jesus holding out his hand to help the man stand up, and the man reaching up to grasp the hand of Jesus—his “yes” to the question, “Do you want to be made well?” I like to imagine Jesus holding out his scarred hand to help me stand up and move forward, and me grasping his hand—my “yes” to his gift of new life offered in love.

Commitment

*God of our salvation,
help us to turn away from those habits
which harm our bodies
and poison our minds
and to choose again your gift of life,
revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.
(Additional Collect for Fifth Sunday before Lent)²*

Our decision to choose life, to choose to become well, is unlikely to be a “one-off” decision. On the road of recovery, as in all aspects of our lives, we will know moments of doubt, weakness, indecision, and failure. We may not always realize that we have left the road of recovery and need to get back onto it. We may not have heard the voice of our internal GPS saying, “Turn around when possible!”

This collect has become special to me because it expresses so well what I want to pray when I’ve forgotten or neglected to choose life-giving ways over harmful ways.

Experience has taught me that very often we can't do the "right" or "good" things until we've stopped doing the "wrong" or "bad" things. And very often the "harmful" things we are doing are those that harm ourselves in some way. They may harm others as well, but here we are thinking about our own bodies and minds first.

Only we ourselves know what habits we have that "harm our bodies and poison our minds." There are many possible ones:

- Overeating
- Watching mindless television programs
- Smoking
- Playing mind-numbing computer games
- Taking illegal drugs
- Dwelling on past hurts
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Gossiping or being judgmental
- Driving too fast or in a risky manner
- Nursing a grudge
- Failing to exercise
- Harming one's self

These are just a few—we will all have some we could do without!

Turning away from these may simply require a bit more self-control and restraint, but there may be some that we can turn away from only with professional help. Addictions, self-harming and eating disorders, and other harmful ways of being have complex causes and need careful professional treatment.

Deciding that with God's help we will turn away from destructive habits is in itself part of choosing life. It's repentance—turning round to face the right direction. But there's so much more to choosing life than that. We need to make healthy, loving, joyful, and creative choices so that we may have the gift of life in all its abundance that Jesus offers.

When we think about some of the life-giving choices we may want or need to make along the road of recovery, let's remember that our commitment to making these choices may need regular reviewing and renewing!

Don't look back!

*Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

(“A Song of the New Creation,” CWDP, p. 293)