

The Relentless Power of Life

Acts 9:36-43

There are times in every person's life when you wake up in the morning and feel dead. This could be due to any of a number of reasons, such as physical fatigue or weariness, the effects of a bad cold or flu, perhaps a fitful and anxious night of sleep, or the most incriminating of all, i.e., a paralyzing headache and hangover due to excessive debauchery and moral depravity. Whatever the underlying cause, you wake up in the morning and feel so bad you wish you had the local mortician on speed-dial.

When it gets this bad, it's hard to rise up and do anything productive. Basic bodily functions don't seem to function; routine tasks seem incredibly complex and difficult; normal conversations using familiar words are challenging at best. All you want to do is climb back into the bed and forget about the rest of life. A little more rest, a bit more Sabbath slumber, and somehow it's then possible to crawl out and maneuver through a mercifully shorter day with less ineptness. That's all you can hope for. We all have days like this. Yes, one might feel like death warmed over, but life still pulsates somewhere underneath those covers.

However, that's not true for everyone. A lot of people wake up in the morning and still feel dead. It's not a physical matter, mind you. They feel dead because somewhere in the core of their being, in their sense of self or purpose, something is cold and lifeless. They feel dead because they are unhappy with themselves or their current state of life; they feel dead because the possibilities they thought were present and real for them are no longer. They feel dead because they have lost a relationship they cherished

and it is gone forever; they feel dead because they are bored with their daily routine or burdened by the tasks and duties laid upon them.

People can feel dead because they are invariably self-destructive and can't find a way out of their downward spiral; they feel dead because no one seems to care about their growing depression or uninspired presence. They feel dead because they don't even react to complaints directed at them or respond appreciatively to words of empathy and concern. They feel dead because in the rush of life, they seem motionless and checked out; they feel dead because the pulse of life doesn't even appear to be evident within them.

When a person wakes up in the morning and feels dead, there's not a pill or a potion or a program or a prayer that will instantly make things better. There are no quick fixes when you're close to death. In the darkest places before the dawn, death seems more real than life.

A well-known Russian proverb claims: "If you wake up feeling no pain, you know you're dead."¹ That's certainly true if human existence is defined as nothing but misery, which the characteristically bleak Russian outlook would affirm. However, there are many people who feel dead because of their pain. They feel as if the vitality of life has been drained out of them because of their suffering, both perceived and real.

I know people like this. In rare moments, I'll feel like this myself. No one wants to feel dead, but that isn't the issue; one arrives at this place without recognizing the path that gets you there. You suddenly awake one day and realize you feel very dull and unresponsive, perhaps even more than you ever have before.

¹Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* Scribner, 2001, pg. 24.

At first, it's not a comforting place; it actually is quite disturbing, though you don't really know how to articulate the feelings to yourself, let alone to someone else. After a while, though, one grows more accustomed to the darkness and you accept it as your new normal, a place that eventually becomes too familiar. The changes in behavior soon become noticeable to others—those who want you to be well (even some who insist on fixing you), but it becomes hard to express what you feel or even what you want. No one seems to understand; it's like trying to explain a nighttime dream that can't be adequately expressed in daylight language. Whatever you say doesn't quite capture what you feel. It's not as if you plan to become socially isolated, it's just that what you're focused on is inside of you—inside your head or your heart—and no one else is there but you. You become isolated because you're alone inside of yourself.

If this sounds like depression and melancholy, that is exactly what it is. It's estimated that twenty-five percent of the human population suffers from some form of mental illness in their lifetime—most of it in some presentation of depression. Andrew Solomon in his seminal book on the subject, *The Noonday Demon*, begins with this fascinating declaration: “Depression is the flaw in love.” He goes on:

To be creatures who love, we must be creatures who can despair at what we lose, and depression is the mechanism of that despair. When it comes, it degrades one's self and ultimately eclipses the capacity to give or receive affection. It is the aloneness within us made manifest, and it destroys not only connection to others but also the ability to be peacefully alone with oneself. Love, though it is no prophylactic against depression, is what cushions the mind and protects it from itself. Medications and psychotherapy can renew that protection, making it easier to love and to be loved, and that is why they work. In good spirits, some love themselves and some love others and some love work and some love God: any of these passions can furnish that vital sense of purpose that is the opposite of depression. Love forsakes us from time to time, and we forsake love. In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the

meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance.²

That's what often occurs for those who suffer mild to severe depression—they feel insignificant. They don't matter. In a word, they feel dead so, unfortunately, too many conclude they might as well be dead.

You might think to yourself, why are we talking about depression in church? Aren't we supposed to focus on things that are uplifting and hopeful? Isn't faith supposed to be the great antidote or remedy to meaninglessness?

Yes, this is true. Faith is a means through which we may discover significance and purpose in life. But at the same time, all of us are human and many people suffer in ways that often carry a stigma with them in polite company. Hence, a very real and difficult part of living is never addressed or acknowledged in the places that highlight spiritual help. In a company of the faithful, that can be even more painful for someone to bear, since it seems as if even God doesn't care about the troubled state of a person's soul.

That's not true. Faith isn't designed just for the healthy of mind and body. Faith is intended for those who yearn to be well, even when they struggle to grasp the nature and depth of their suffering. As Solomon states in his book:

[R]eligious belief is one of the primary ways that people accommodate depression...It cannot usually pull people out of depression; indeed, even the most religious people find that their faith thins or vanishes during the depths of depression. It can, however, defend against the complaint, and it can help people to survive depressive episodes...Many of the goals of cognitive and psychoanalytic therapy are accomplished by the systems of belief that underlie the world's primary religions—the refocusing of energy outside the self, the discovery of self-

² Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Scribner, 2001, pg. 15.

regard, the patience, the breadth of understanding. Faith is a great gift...Hope is a great prophylactic, and faith in its essence offers hope. ³

In my personal view, sometimes the help we seek is expressed and personified in biblical stories—those who received the healing touch from God—a healing presence that reached into the human psyche and soul more often and more deeply than we realize. Such is how I read this story from Acts of the healing of Dorcas—she who once was dead.

Though tradition would tell us otherwise, I don't think this is about a literal physical raising of the dead. If it were, like many of the stories from Scripture, it would simply lie outside of human experience (even though modern medical intervention can resuscitate people up until they are deemed clinically deceased). For most of human history, including the biblical times, a story like this could only stand in the realm of the unbelievable—forcing us to embrace a “Ripley's Believe It or Not!” type of religious faith. That's why many people are skeptical about biblical claims and religious faith—so much of it lies outside of human experience if taken literally. Yet, many people of faith are content to take things literally and suspend the laws of nature in order to preserve what they believe is the integrity of the story—that Nature be damned, God will make impossible, incredible things occur, as long as we believe it will happen. Some are fine with that, while many others aren't.

Honestly, I'm not one who can accept that divine truth depends on us espousing a “Ripley's Believe It or Not”-type of faith. I don't need to read stories literally to believe in the truth of what they are proclaiming. On the contrary, I need to reconcile my religious beliefs with what seems to be reality—even if my awareness of reality changes over time. Consequently, I

³ibid., pg. 130.

find value in mining the symbolic meaning of these stories, which is precisely what I think was intended by the biblical writers.

So, how is this story from Acts to be understood? For one thing, this story of Dorcas' resuscitation is nearly a carbon copy of the story of Jairus' daughter, when Jesus revived the 12-year-old child of the synagogue leader (Mk 5:21-43; cf. Mt. 9:18-26; Lk. 8:40-56). If you look at it closely, it even includes the Apostle Peter echoing Jesus' words to Jairus' daughter (*talitha qumi*; in the Aramaic means, "little one, get up"), except in this story a letter is changed in *talitha* to make it, Tabitha, which is the Aramaic form of the name, Dorcas. In other words, it's a very similar story, but with an intentional play on words.

This story also happens to parallel the anecdote of when Jesus healed the son of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17; Mk. 5:21-24, 35-43). Together they reflect the respective stories of Elijah and Elisha, when they raised the children of widows (I Kgs. 17:17-24; II Kgs. 4:32-37), and confirmed God's concern for the most vulnerable in society with hope and renewal, but also in demonstrating God's merciful love for those outside of Israel—two important themes in Jesus' ministry. In the Gospel of John, this same message is conveyed in the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead—Lazarus representing the poor and poor in spirit, who were yet to experience the promises of the Gospel. All this is to say, these stories are told to demonstrate the continuity of Jesus and his apostles belonging to the great prophetic heritage of Elijah and Elisha and of God's desire to renew the lives of the "dead," or those who had no real life in their world.

As you can see, this message relates more to the living than to those who have passed away. In all of these stories, the emphasis is on the divine claim of life—the relentless power of life that overcomes the depressing fate

of mortal existence toward nothingness and insignificance by transforming the lives of people from hopelessness to hope, from despair to deliverance, from vulnerability to vitality. What's renewed are human spirits and souls from a state of misery and pain to one of healing and renewal!

This is represented in Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter, whose death was symbolic of the death of the twelve tribes of Israel—the seeming end of their existence (in the exile and especially later after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple), until they recovered and were restored by the arc of history in the mercy and love of God. In a similar way, Dorcas' death represented the despair of faithful Christian disciples, believing Jews and gentiles alike, who believed in Jesus' return and were devout and righteous in how they lived (evidenced by her good works and acts of charity) and yet, lived and died without experiencing the fulfillment of God's promised reign in their lifetimes—that in the real world, they were still poor and insignificant.

The point is, much like Ezekiel's magnificent metaphorical vision of the restoration of Israel (Ezk. 34)—ossified dry bones that were being reconnected and recovered by flesh—these stories of resuscitated lives were proclaiming the same promise and hope. Those who were living in depression closer to death would be delivered from their miserable state by the power of God's Spirit in their lives and in the world. In this story, this promise is brought home poignantly in the meaning of her name; whether as Dorcas in the Greek or as Tabitha in Aramaic, the name meant, “gazelle!” A spiritually and emotionally dead person was being restored to reclaim the vitality and purpose of life, as if to leap as freely as a gazelle!

Friends, there is a relentless power to life as God has fashioned it. We will never grasp its complexity or the fullness of its nature, but God has

inspired the spark of life to exist in this universe in ways that will never cease to amaze us or transform what is. The power of life is relentless, even over despair and death. The vitality and purposefulness of human life is constantly rising up, even in the most difficult of circumstances, out of the deepest valleys, and through the darkest of nights. Hope does not die, even when it is overwhelmed for a time by despair.

Even if this is hard to appreciate in the midst of the suffering, periods of depression actually have a redemptive power of healing within themselves. They are transformative experiences, to be sure—they force us to reevaluate what’s important to us and what provides meaning. The dark night of the soul is, as the mystics and spiritual sages often knew, a profound spiritual blessing, as paradoxical as that might appear. But it is true, for it’s an opportunity to grasp what is, and what is not, eternal.

In more conventional terms Andrew Solomon describes what is redemptive about these dark nights of the soul:

People who have been through a depression and are stabilized often have a heightened awareness of the joyfulness of everyday existence. They have a capacity for a kind of ready ecstasy and for an intense appreciation for all that is good in their life. If they were decent people to begin with, they may well have become remarkably generous... ⁴

Even in the most desperate plea of the depressive—“Why?” or “Why me?”—lie the seeds of self-examination, a process that is usually fruitful...That is, perhaps, the greatest revelation I have had: not that depression is compelling but that the people who suffer from it may become compelling because of it. I hope that this basic fact will offer sustenance to those who suffer and will inspire patience and love in those who witness that suffering... ⁵

The opposite of depression is not happiness but vitality, and my life...is vital, even when I am sad...I have discovered what I would have to call a soul, a part of myself I could never have imagined until one day...when hell came to pay me a surprise visit...I hate those feelings, but I know they have driven me to look deeper at life, to find and cling to reasons for living...Every day, I choose,

⁴Ibid., pg. 434.

⁵Ibid., pp. 438-439.

sometimes gamely and sometimes against the moment's reason, to be alive. Is that not a rare joy? ⁶

It is a rare joy to those who have lives of quiet desperation, but a beautiful joy that heaven knows in full and earth discovers time and time again. To believe in this constitutes faith—in hope, in love, in grace—the very essentials of human life. In each one's journey, the relentless power of life beckons us to believe this, just as God intended.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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⁶Ibid., pg. 443.