

Blue Monday  
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 UCV

About three years ago, Cliff Arnall, a researcher/instructor at the University of Cardiff, calculated that the third Monday in January is, by far, the most depressing day in the year. He has made a strong case for the singular gloominess of this day; a day that just so happens to be coming up right around the corner; *as in tomorrow*. Think about it! the cozy Christmas season glow is now but a dim memory, then add cold leaden weather—we're still a couple of weeks away from the mid point between winter and spring; then add the fact that many a new year's resolution has already been broken, excessive holiday season credit card bills are just now coming due and arriving in your mailbox, add to this that Monday is the beginning of a new work week, and thus generally reviled any way; you couple all of this with that nagging, incessant, inner voice that says "Steven! You've got to get a grip on your life, *now!*" Now add all that cumulative damage up—and what spews out is a sure fire formula for a very depressing day ahead.

So! Dear congregation, we've have all been warned. Blue Monday dawns tomorrow, heading toward us like a rogue iceberg looking for a reckoning, and a wreck; time to take evasive action and maneuver around or bowl our way over it.

I was fascinated to learn about the origins and applications of the term Blue Monday. I found "Blue Monday" in the title of a well-known pop song by the great, late music group Joy Division; "Goodbye Blue Monday" is subtitle of Kurt Vonnegut's satirical novel *Breakfast of Champions*; it's the road name of a contemporary blues band, the moniker of premier middle-distance race horse, a vodka cocktail, and a junk shop/concert venue for up-and-coming bands in Brooklyn, New York. Of particular note, I found mention of "Blue Monday" in exhibit catalogues from the Canada Science and Technology Museum and the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Massachusetts, where I read the following entry:

*Blue Monday (the popular term for laundry day before the turn of the century) hinted to more than the blueing agent used in rinse water, it also signaled the drudgery involved in the washing process. [After having sorted and soaked soiled and stained articles in warm water overnight, on early Monday morning gallons] of water were hauled...to the stove and then brought to a boil. The...scrubbing and scouring [and wring out] of the family's washables then began...In this way, a woman exposed her hands to water, extreme temperatures, and caustic cleaning agents...A rinsing stage followed [with garments immersed in] rinse water tinted with a blueing agent that counteracted the yellowing caused by soaps. Again, excess water was removed by hand...lugged damp outside and lifted and pegged to a clothesline to dry. The cycle repeated for each load--a process that took all day. The following morning, the arduous task of starching and ironing began.*

This morning, for once, I take my hat off in honour of those countless women; to their weekly sisyphusian ordeal; to bless their dear, tough, working hands, their backs bent over stoves, tubs, and scouring boards. Their laundry pegged to the wind like battlefield banners. Their arduous labour, their ardour! "Blue Monday" indeed!

The drudgery, the ordeal, the battle, the fidelity, the courage, done down through the centuries and across cultures, carried out anonymously, without glory, with barely a footnote in the epic narratives of human history, but it's the very stuff and substance of being human, of being alive...Blue Monday brings me before you to consider, to think, and to talk about depression. I didn't know how I was going to write what I had and wanted to say today. There's so much; it's so complicated; it's become so personal; and I want so desperately to find and convey some ray, some reason for hope.

Depression has been with the human family for as long as we have been self-conscious, complex creatures; women and men, in youth and age, who have had to contend with love, loss, hope, and disappointment, with the universal ordeal of growing up through the perilous stages of life in order to achieve that project we call our *SELVES*, that life-long work of becoming a human being.

We read in Hebrew Scriptures that King Saul of ancient Israel was haunted by depression. Its symptoms were described with remarkable accuracy by Hippocrates, the 4<sup>th</sup> century founder of the medical arts. In the medieval Christian world depression and those struggling with it were deeply stigmatized. Depression was seen as mark of god's disfavour, a sacrilege because those suffering with it were accused of not believing in ultimate redemption, of being resistant to looking on the "sunny side of life." Depressives were demonized as vessels of the great vice of *sloth*, and during the Inquisition they could be accused, tried, incarcerated and put to death for this supposed sin. In their struggle against what they saw as the irrational and soul destroying strictures and doctrines of the church, Renaissance humanists and 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics revalued and even glamourized melancholy; depression was seen, by them, as a grievous but essential gift of the true artist.

Today, as we know all-too-well, it is almost a medical and social services industry unto itself. Whatever romantic cachet depression may have briefly enjoyed, depression has been stigmatized and labeled a disease, a pathology, by our Prozac laden culture. On the one hand, face it: in a "Lulu Lemon world" we're all supposed to look good and feel good. On the other hand, corporate and bureaucratic worlds, the market sector, education, politics and 24 hour a day media cycles are governed by implacable deadlines, shift work, test scores, and production quotas. In both these worlds—obsessed by exuberant health and the quantifiable product outcomes that must be achieved on schedule, the depressed are grievously burdened, fall behind, shunted aside and made to feel that they just don't belong.

In May 2006, Canada's Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, after having heard testimony from mental health professionals and over 2000 personal stories submitted by Canadians from every Province in this nation, issued a Final Report where it concluded, with dismay, that widespread, punitive stigma and discrimination against people living with depression and other chronic mental and emotional conditions are deeply engrained and widespread features of our landscape. The Senate Committee's report quoted a study carried out by the Canadian Mental Health Association nearly fifty years ago, and concluded that these "words continue to still ring true today." (see "Out of the Shadows...., 2006, page vii.) Here's the quote:

In no other field, except perhaps leprosy, has there been as much confusion, misdirection, and discrimination.... Down through the ages [people struggling with depression] have been estranged by society and cast out to wander in the wilderness.... Even today, it is all too often considered a crime to be punished, a sin to be expiated, a possessing demon to be exorcised, a disgrace to be hushed up, a personal weakness to be deplored, or a welfare problem to be handled as cheaply as possible.

According to the World Health Organization, depression afflicts 154 million people and has become the world's leading cause of disability. In a recent Ipsos Reid survey, one in six workers in Canada reported having been diagnosed with clinical depression. A full 10% of our population is currently struggling courageously with its symptoms and with the debilitating effects of depression in their lives. We know or have heard about the symptoms: Here's a list I took from a recent article in the *Vancouver Sun*: an overwhelming feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and discouragement; the near paralyzing listlessness; persistent, negative thoughts that "I'm a failure," that "I'm no good," and that "nobody could or should care for me." The loneliness, the not "wanting anybody to see me." The guilt and low self-esteem: "It's all my fault," "I should be punished." The physical problems, the obsessive ideation. The suicidal thoughts and wishes: "It's no use," "I'd be better off dead." The alarming number that follow through. From Hippocrates

to our own families, this black cord of distress and melancholy has been sewn through the fabric of our common human story.

But there's more: something unprecedented and ominous is emerging. Cases of depression world-wide are increasing at a near exponential rate. Depression is clearly a growing condition of the times in which we live. According to Andrew Solomon, the "climbing rates of depression are without question the consequences of modernity." And he cites the pace of life, technological chaos, an imperiled environment, alienation of people from one another, the breakdown of traditional family structures, endemic loneliness, and the failure of systems of belief—be they religious, moral, political, or social, anything that seemed once to have given meaning and direction to life, has become catastrophically weak and vulnerable. "It is clear now more than ever before," says Bill Wilkerson, "that the sources of this [condition] rest in the social environment we live in and the brain's response to that environment." (see Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon*, and statistics and the Wilkerson quote in Don Butler, "Depression taking its toll in the workplace, *Vancouver Sun*, January 12, 2008)

What is also unprecedented is the rise of the rates and seriousness of depression among our youth and young adults. "People are now being diagnosed with depression as adolescents, and the average age for diagnosis" shows that it erupts in the lives of people in their early to mid-20s. Tom Insel, of the US National Institute for Mental Health, says that clearly, "this is one of the most significant, chronic [threats] afflicting young people today. To not address it means that we put our youngest members of society in considerable jeopardy." (see Butler) The 2006 Senate Committee Report that I mentioned earlier, reports that "depression is concentrated among men and women in their prime working years and among people aged fifteen to twenty-four." ("Out of the Shadows..." 2006, page 177)

In East Asian societies, this phenomenon has taken on the form of what the Japanese call *hikikomori*; that is, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of young men in their late teens and early twenties are literally refusing to come out of their rooms and houses for months, even years at a time. The competitive pressures in the Japanese educational system are so intense, failure to fulfill expected social roles and perpetuate the status quo is so ignominious, that a whole generational cohort of young people are reclusively withdrawing from society altogether, and locking themselves away.

In response to this intimidating multitude of social expectations and the fierce competition in the educational system, with its rigid zero-sum game ideology, I know of one Korean family that's made an extraordinary sacrifice for the sake of their children's well-being. The parents weren't allowed to immigrate, so they sent their two children to Canada to attend high school and university. Though they return to Korea from time to time to see their parents, these two young people have lived now in BC for six years. They've learned a new language, adapted to a new culture, and achieved success in school; all the while taking care of themselves, and displaying a deeply moving sense of self and character.

No doubt, in the best of times and in the most benign of societies, the project of growing to adulthood and achieving one's self is perilous, difficult, and painful. But looking at the facts about the steeply rising rates of depression and its onslaught, particularly on our young people, it's clear to me more than ever before that the sources of depression rest in the social environment in which our children, our neighbours, and our colleagues struggle to achieve wholeness. If we look close to home, what would we say about the world into which our young people are coming-of-age? And what would we be willing to sacrifice in order to enable them to successfully weather the ordeal of becoming a whole human being and to live in a world full of hope and meaning?

The roots of depression are so complex; treatments for it are so confounding; its myriad manifestations are so chronic, widespread, and grinding! How or why should something so apparently debilitating and pernicious persistently cling to our biochemical, environmental, and cultural DNA? Is there something

depression is trying to tell us? Is there a message, an evolutionary value in this condition, with its intensification of feeling, thought and behaviour, a *way of being* built into our psyches that must be expressed, though its expression comes at such great cost and pain by those who are its hosts? Andrew Solomon put it like this: "I hated being depressed, but it was also in depression that I learned my own acreage, [the place where] I discovered the full extent of my soul." (Solomon, 12) People, is it possible that depression is a strategy for the survival of individuals and of our species? The hikikomori withdraw from a world gone mad with heartless competition and punishing expectations that *you will conform and perpetuate the status quo or else*.

Closer to home, to be sure, those who we call depressed are going through a hell of self-doubt, anxiety, crushing fatigue, and unwarranted guilt. They are also pruning, sculpting, ruminating, pondering, and focusing their thoughts and feelings, learning their own landscape, and discovering the full extent of their souls. As well, they may, perhaps, be struggling courageously, desperately, for our sake, in order to get us to slow down and look at ourselves and the world we have made; to transform what is malign and chaotic in our own social environment into something containing wisdom, healing, and the waters of life. (see Robert Corrington, *Riding the Windhorse: Manic-Depressive Disorder and the Quest for Wholeness*, 90, 67)

It may turn out, one day we may come to see, that there is a mysterious cunning wisdom in nature that encodes for depression in our genes and in the biochemistry of our brains for the sake of our survival. According to the Unitarian philosopher Robert Corrington, depression represents one of the ways in which nature manifests its demonic and divine powers and the human hunger for meaning. (Corrington 47, 63)

In ancient Greece, Asclepius, the very god of the art of healing, and his teacher, Chiron the centaur, both suffered from chronic, debilitating wounds; they are the archetypal physicians who, in identification with their own wounds, created sanctuaries for healing in order to treat others and bring them back to health. And in the legends of King Arthur, it is the Wounded King, the Fisher King, into whose hands the Holy Grail was entrusted for safe keeping.

The world is as broken asunder as is the self; both are in need of healing. Those who suffer from depression, who recuse themselves from the disorder of the world, they may indeed be our Wounded Healers, our Fisher Kings, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts to make room for their suffering and their healing.

Let us be patient, compassionate and hungry to heal and to be healed. To those of us who are courageously struggling with depression, please know that we love you and care about you. We need your critical, sensitive voice, your creative lives, your art, music, and writing. We need to be reminded that without the dark, there can be no light. Without the dark there can be no light. Our fates and lives are deeply interwoven and connected. On this day before Blue Monday, let us sing and share our union. Singing together, celebrating our life together in community, I am told, is a good way to beat the January Blues, a good way to say hail and farewell, goodbye to Blue Monday.