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## DEPRESSION The Black Demon

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by

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My curriculum vitae in depression is extensive. I have fought bouts of depression on and off for most of my adult life, starting with a near suicidal depression when I was twenty-five years old which landed me in hospital. The context of this episode was terribly important with regard to my future direction because I had placed the total well-being of my life in the hands of a person I deeply loved, and when he departed, I was left destitute with no sense of self and no sense of purpose or meaning to anything. The legacy of that lesson took time to absorb but it amounted to my having to try to create a life that was less dependent on others and more reliant on myself, or at best getting a better balance between the two.

I was raised as a woman to believe that having a husband, children and a home of my own would satisfy my needs - give me a reason for living - as well as being brought up in the tradition of the American Constitution which said that I had the 'right to happiness'. No wonder then that my entry into 'adult life' was so harsh because the gap between what I 'expected' and what I experienced was so different. Nothing in the way of

tragedy or sorrow marked my early years. Nor did my education at any stage confront me with the 'nitty gritty' of life. I was protected and cocooned from all adversity until my twenty-fifth year when losing a loved one nearly did me in. It took me many more years, involving the leave-taking from my native U.S. and settling in Madrid, to realize that countries, just like families, can create the kind of expectations that make us 'accept with grace' or not, whatever befalls us.

Now it is twenty years later - after my first encounter with 'hell'. The last sixteen years I've spent here in Spain, a country that has a long history of adversity for much of its population. The historical fact has rubbed off on the peoples' psyches for they have the attitude that existence is a series of misfortunes that are intrinsic to life, a somewhat more pessimistic approach than the youthful optimism so noteworthy in my native U.S. Yes it is this very 'pessimism' which 'tempers' their demand that life be a continuous feast of pleasure. Their attitude thus reflects the following quote which has often sustained me during hard times:

'As life becomes harder and more threatening, it also becomes richer because the fewer the expectations we have, the more the good things of life become unexpected gifts which we accept with GRATITUDE'

This attitude of forbearance thus fosters the 'acceptance with grace' of whatever circumstances may hit us. This is in stark contrast to attitudes I find on my yearly visits back to the U.S. where people tend to feel 'it must be my fault' if things aren't going well in the outer or the inner world. So, not only is there this lack of acceptance of adversity in my Anglo world, but the depression tht comes from it is weighed down by the added burden of BLAME. This Latin world I live in has taught me to 'let go', to accept as an inescapable part of life the black demon of depression.

Having just given a brief context for the cultural aspect of depression, let me go now to the personal. I am visited with a certain regularity by my black demon for a host of reasons, one of which is normal for the female sex and is tied to our menstrual cycles. I teach English part time to Spaniards, earning very little money, especially when I consider my former 'high professional salary' as a psychiatric social worker in the U.S. Of course this was a voluntary change but the present day economic demands, even when someone like myself wants to live simply, require a lot more money for this same, simple life style. The psychological novel I wrote called SEDUCTION BY A SOLAR SMILE which was published in London by Charles Skilton is about

to become an 'orphan' - a book without a publisher - because the publisher is seriously ill. I must now step into his shoes and carry on with the selling of my book which living in another country. Plus, there is a very meaningful connection in my life with a dear friend who is in prison. Thus, there is ample feeding ground for a combination of frustration and depression.

Fortunately, after much practice over the years, I am now on very familiar terms with my 'black demon'. When it appears, I run to my typewriter and begin a letter describing this miserable feeling in all of its glory. I address my letter to the two people I know who will understand my feelings, people who are also coping with depression. Knowing there are 'sympathetic listeners' who will write back, reduces the sense of isolation that depression produces. After drawing in great detail with words what this monster is saying and doing to me, I find that I can defuse the impact of it and reduce the 'blah' feeling it brings. In fact, I laugh at the bloody thing and, in daring to laugh, I don't fall further into any hellish pits. By accepting the fact that I am depressed means that I have swivelled my attitude once again, from responding to how life 'should be' to how 'it is' at a given moment. I have learned by arduous lessons that when I ask for, or demand something that I feel SHOULD be given to me, and I don't get it, then the 'discrepancy' between what I think 'should' be from what really is - well this is a potent cause of depression and probably the basis of most

depressions.

In this context, I should like to cite the help I got from the late Krishnamurti in a gem of a book called *The First and Last Freedom*, a book of wisdom that gets to the essence of what troubles most of us and how our faulty attitudes can be quickly transformed. I read him when I need to be reminded that 'flowing with a depression is more advantageous than 'struggling' to eliminate it. I think that depression may be, in many circumstances, incorrectly seen as something pathological, when in fact it is an intrinsic part of the counterpoint, or rhythm of life in its ebb and flow, its ups and downs.

There are many concrete events outside of ourselves which are situational sources of depression such as the loss of a loved one, unemployment, a sick child, money troubles. These are the visible causes of despair, the events that we can only react to, not control. But they fall within the whole range of possibilities that makes up any human life and thus are more 'normal' than we want to believe.

There is also another source of depression which I feel is on the increase. It is concerned more with the spiritual part of people, their interior world which feels empty, barren, desiccated, un nourished. We all know the story of the rich man or woman who has every material comfort possible and yet suffers from a chronic feeling that something is missing from life. And rightly so. Our century has trained us to think

that a high standard of living is the goal of existence. If anything, I find that this very high standard has only created a lot of material clutter which has kept people from perceiving and experiencing the very real nourishment that the human spirit requires. The needs of the 'invisible' part of our selves cannot be ignored, otherwise signals appear within us of a type of malaise that takes the form of depression.

I lived the transition from an addiction to material goodies when I left my three-story antique-filled house in the U.S. for a spartan lifestyle in Spain. All I took with me were my books and records. In making such a transition I found that the energies that used to be directed toward the buying and maintaining of my 'stuff' were getting redirected towards new endeavours, especially towards budding intellectual curiosity that sent me on a trail of studies that investigated the meaning of existence, my existence. Through all of this, my spirit was getting nourished and this gave me a means to counterbalance my depressions when they came.

I noticed too, that the creative sense I had had as a child not only returned in my late thirties but that my capacity to 'improvise' seemed to have no boundaries. If I didn't have the money to buy a barbecue pit, I could improvise one using a flower pot, aluminium foil and charcoal. I could go into a textile shop and with a few remnants create clothing to rival that found in designers' shops. By starting to write out my thoughts

and feelings, a way of dialoguing with oneself, I observed that the content of my writing began to expand and to deepen. What this all suggested to me was the following. I had tried in my earlier life to follow all of the 'outer rules' and norms that others had taught me would lead to a happy, successful life. When my interior sense registered mostly dissatisfaction, I knew something was wrong. The

happy, successful life did not happen; I realised that the meaningfulness of my life, or anyone's life, cannot be borrowed from others. It must be ~~created~~ from within me, a long and arduous process. One of the wisest lessons I ever learned came from observing nature: every flower has its own seed, and only one particular flower will grow from one particular seed.

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1 ETTY: A Diary 1941-43. Triad/Panther Books, London 1985. p 176.

2 LARSEN: Seduction by a Solar Smile. Charles Skilton, London 1987  
(can be obtained via George Pilip Services Ltd., Arndale Road, Wick,  
West Sussex BN17 7EN. (0903 715599) )

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