
DEPRESSION a cosmic view

by

Phoebe Wyss

In the land of Narnia, during the reign of the wicked queen, it was always winter and never Christmas. But that was a fairy-story. Such a state of affairs contradicts the cosmic laws as we know them. The extreme of winter is always balanced by the opposite pole of summer. No winter is endless, unless we choose to see it so.

Hamlet saw it so - 'I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth. . . this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy the air, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestical roof, fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.'

Robert Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy', published in 1621, treated the subject of depression within the framework of the ancient holistic Weltanschauung. He analysed its various forms according to their relationship with planetary aspects. At the beginning of the 17th. century, understanding of the correspondences between astrological constellations and physical and mental illness had reached a high

degree of sophistication. Basic to the science of medicine was the doctrine of the four Humours described by Hippocrates. Physicians such as Paracelsus regarded disease as a state of imbalance between these humours in body and soul. The four humours correspond to the four elements, fundamental symbols in astrology's grand system. Earth (cold and dry) is associated with the phlegmatic temperament; water (cold and humid) with the melancholic; air (warm and humid) with the sanguine; and fire (warm and dry) with the choleric.

The illustration on the title page of the 'Anatomy of Melancholy' is headed by the symbol of the planet Saturn. Saturn in mythology was a Titan, an earth god, and when he is strong in a birthchart a predominance of the psychological quality symbolized by earth is indicated. Saturn is the planetary ruler of the sign of Capricorn. Those with sun or moon affiliated in Capricorn are according to astrological teaching, especially prone to depression. In addition, a hard aspect between the moon and Saturn is a classical indication of a depressive tendency. The moon is a

water planet and corresponds in its cycles to the flow of our feelings and moods. Saturn in aspect to the moon blocks the natural flow and weighs heavily on our spirits. Depression can therefore be seen as an over-dose of Saturn - a preponderance of the element earth mixed with water, to the detriment of the lighter elements of air and fire.

To envisage the state of mind of a depressed person, we can use our associations with the earth in mid-winter. The time of the winter solstice, when Capricorns are born, is the darkest time of the year. The frozen earth is unyielding to the plough. The landscape is harsh, naked and colourless. 'in the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth was hard as iron, water like a stone.' 'Coagula' was the alchemical term for the process of making the volatile solid. Coagulated air becomes water, water becomes ice. In the soul of the depressed, 'coagula' has reached an extreme and there is a pathological preponderance of the solid. Feelings are like water turned to ice or else, under weight of earth, become muddy and bogged down. Their natural outward flow is blocked and the person becomes, for example, soggy with self pity.

Earth stands as a symbol for the solid, the material. Its characteristics are coldness, hardness, dryness, weight, opacity, solidity, durability, rigidity. In contrast to the other elements it shows clear contours and structures. The astrologer translates these physical

features into psychological characteristics. People with a preponderance of Saturn's earth are, according to the teaching of astrology, serious, realistic, factual, fixed, resistant, cold, materialistic and dependent on order and structure. They often feel lonely - as if they are in solitary confinement - because of their consciousness of boundary lines. The other elements flow into each other but earth is hard and separate. So the saturnine earth person - the person prone to depression - feels out in the cold and unrelated.

Earth is relatively resistant to change. It banks and contains rivers and its rocky bulwarks resist the onslaught of the tides. Thus a saturnine person tends to control their feelings and to control themselves against the feelings of others by developing a 'body armour'. They live within structures that become increasingly rigid with time, and also by middle-age little spontaneity and flexibility may remain. Their problem is that they have too little fire - on a psychological level' this means warmth, enthusiasm, hope, but also aggression and the ability to take action. Hamlet's depression prevented him from taking the necessary steps to revenge his father. In order to kill the king he needed fire, and this element was lacking in him.

A saturnine earth person tends to see the material reality as the only reality. The material body is therefore the only body they have, and so they are condemned to death as their bodies will die.

Death will take away all they have. A deep cynicism develops out of this vision of the pointlessness of life, especially as they grow older when the natural fire of youth dwindles, they become more and more inert. They walk with a stoop. They sit with head bowed - bent towards the earth. Thus the higher elements of air and fire are excluded from their vision. They look downwards to where it is darkest, rather than upwards towards the source of the light.

The mind is its own place and in itself, can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven' wrote Milton. Hell is what the depressed person experiences. Helplessness and passivity, because of the lack of motivating fire, characterize the state of those in the abyss. They become practically incapable of taking an initiative and acting to change their state of mind. Like the poor devils in Milton's hell, they are tormented by the remembrance of happier days in the past, or are envious of those who seem to be out there in the sunshine. There is often a rancour in their suffering - 'Oh Sun, how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state I fell' says Milton's fallen angel. Envy and bitterness close off the depressed person more thoroughly, shut the door that was before but ajar and could have permitted their escape. The classic 'sin of despair' makes them their own prison warders. Because of their pessimistic belief in the hopelessness of their plight, their sentence is prolonged. Thus depressed people are not only resistant to being cheered up, they

also often try to uncheer anyone else who is being cheery. 'Christmas,' says Scrooge, 'is humbug.'

Astrology teaches us that each experience in life has its sense in the general pattern of our development. Also that we will suffer as long as we need to suffer in order to learn a lesson. The planetary constellation is a birth-chart, symbolizing a tendency to depression, does not compel the subject to be depressed but indicates that depression is a challenge they will need to meet. The planetary cycles after birth indicate when the phases of depression are likely to occur, but do not cause them. The rhythms of the psyche are turned to the rhythms of the stars but there is no cause-effect relationship between them.

A phase of depression may be needed in middle-age as a counterweight to a youth when, through a temporary preponderance of air and fire, life was lived too lightly and flippantly. Perhaps our lifestyle in the past was too extroverted, and an experience of depression is needed to lead us to a deeper awareness of our inner life. Winters are cold, dark and long, but they are a necessary contrast to summer, and only in Narnia are they eternal, and without even a Christmas.

The alchemists were always searching for the secret of transforming one element into another. They sought for recipes to right the balance between the humours and thus cure the sick soul. This was the inner, psychological rather

than the outer, physical alchemy. First each element should be clarified and known distinctly from the other. 'Thou shalt separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, softly, with great ingenuity,' (Hermes Trismegistos) Following this, the excess of one element should be transformed into its opposite. 'Make the earth light and give weight to the fire.'

When enough is enough, and the depressed person is ready to change consciousness, there are esoteric cures on a simple, practical, everyday level that they can use to right the balance of the elements. The first step is the cultivation of appropriate inner images. They should envisage the dawn - the sky gradually brightening and the golden sun appearing on the horizon. They should imagine winter dying into spring, the blackbird singing and the first crocuses budding. They should meditate, in the hours between midnight and daybreak, on the return of the light. Similarly they should tune into the energies prevalent in nature in the period between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

A simple correction of posture can bring more sky into the field of vision, and shift their consciousness from the lower to the upper part of the body - the seat of air and fire. They should open their windows literally and symbolically to let in the fresh air. They should take regular, deep breaths, and learn to enjoy breathing as a sensual experience, appreciating the revitalising and energising function. In this way they will

increase the proportion of air in the constitution and feel correspondingly lighter and freer. They should give up cigarettes and booze. These have, in the long run, the reverse effect, acting as a damper on our air and fire. Fresh air and exercise, however, fan the inner flames.

They should let the sunshine in. Moles, who have lived long underground, cringe and blink at first, but they soon get used to the light. They should bare their bodies and open their hearts to receive the rays of the sun. These beams are rays of love coming to us from the warm heart of the universe. Gradually their own inner fire will start to burn with more power, and become radiant. And this radiance can reflect outwards giving warmth and light to others.

One must allow feelings to unfreeze, and let inner brooks and streams flow. Maybe the sheet of ice, blocking the spring of water, formed because of fear of collected anger, will slowly thaw and allow the angry thoughts and feelings to be expressed. When the feelings can flow again, the dry earth can become fertile.

One does not need to be an ancient alchemist, or believe in astrology for these exercises to work. The rays of the sun are just as warm, whatever one's belief system. All that is needed is to suspend for a time the black thoughts and deep within oneself see and feel the sun's rays, and the clouds floating lightly and freely, changing shape and merging with each other, and to be open to the feeling that there

are no divisions in nature, that
everything is part of everything

else and that we are all part of a
grand and ordered cosmic dance.

Inheritance

Yesterday I could hear always,
Among the stirring reeds,
Among the forgotten melodies,
In the recesses of patient memory,
The whine of ancient hunger
And the howl of fear.
I could see, in the aforesaid,
The bright spears of my fathers,
And their forges, drear
And dark, beside the winter sea,
In caves long hidden -
And their minstrelsy unlit by love,
Though woven with bird song,
And torn with passion
And clash of arms,
Had its sad echoes in the heart of me.

Even in childhood, by the windy shore,
When waves came crashing on the moveless rocks,
I heard the shields of Vikings smiting sore
Against each other - trembled at their shocks.

O my brave masters of the distant, cold
And comfortless past,
Was it for this?
Only an echo in an unknown mind
And marks upon a page,
And a wild cry. caught on a passing wind
Your meagre heritage?

Today the secrets of the timeless stars
Lie close at hand,
But all your glory
Born of dauntless hearts,
Crumbles upon the sand
Among your shipwrecked spars
For we have come too far, too far behind,
Too far to understand.

Marion B Alford
