



In the Shadow of God's Wings

Susan Gregg-Schroeder



"Part of my journey has been to understand my bleakest times as times of fertile darkness. When a person begins to live into their darkness, embrace it, and even befriend it, God's presence is most often revealed. And when persons with a mental illness are able to use their faith and spirituality as a source of healing and support, they discover a renewed sense of vision, hope and possibilities for the future."

*~ Susan Gregg-Schroeder, "The Face of Depression,"
Circuit Rider, January/February 2003*

Susan Gregg-Schroeder is Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries for the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church, and is the author of In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression. In the following excerpts from her book, Susan describes her personal journey through clinical depression, including a stay in the hospital, and how her faith and spirituality were integral to her healing and recovery. Susan leads workshops, retreats, and conferences to educate people about depression as a treatable illness, and to erase the stigma of mental illness in faith communities. She is an ordained minister and a certified pastoral care specialist. For more information and resources on how

congregations can support their members who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses, please visit Susan online at Mental Health Ministries at <http://www.mentalhealthministries.net>. Also, please know that the National Mental Health Association has designated May as Mental Health Month.

Grace in the Shadow

Grace happens! This insight came to me on a particularly difficult morning after a night of little sleep. That morning it took supreme effort on my part to crawl out of bed, shower, dress, and leave for work. As I drove along the freeway, wondering how I was going to make it through the day, I spotted a bumper sticker on the car in front of me. It contained just two words: Grace Happens. Taking this as a personal message for me, I walked into the office with a sense of expectancy instead of dread. . .

Grace often happens when we least expect it. As I look back I can see many moments when God's grace broke into my life in unexpected ways. That's what grace is all about. We can't will God's grace or control it. It comes as a gift, often when we are most vulnerable, afraid, hopeless, and alone.

One such moment occurred when my spiritual director brought me Communion during my first stay in the hospital. The sacrament of Communion has always been special to me. This ritual meal connects me to the divine and to other people. The partaking of the Communion elements mysteriously invites God's presence in the innermost part of ourselves. Usually we celebrate Communion before an elaborate altar. But

on this occasion there was no altar, or even a table, available in my sparse hospital room. Looking around, we found a trash can. We emptied the trash and turned the can upside down to use as a makeshift altar. . . The literal emptying of that trash can remains a powerful symbol. We all have trash in our lives that we need to empty and release. But some trash is hard to let go of. This is especially true of familiar yet destructive patterns of living or closely held worldviews. As the upside-down wastebasket became an altar, I experienced God's presence even in the difficult process of emptying myself. . .

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Grace seldom comes as a profound, single, life-changing event. More often it emerges as a whisper; yet it can carry a person through the next few hours or even days: mornings when I shared bagels and coffee with a friend who listened, offerings of food when I could not begin to plan dinner for the family, phone calls that came at those low moments to lift my spirits and to remind me that I was still connected with others, the memorable sermon or church anthem that touched my soul in a way I cannot describe. Grace happens!

Gifts of the Shadow

. . . Depression is a powerful teacher if we will let it speak. Too often, however, we do not allow depression to share its gifts with us. Thomas Moore in his book *Care of the Soul* states that "If we persist in our modern way of treating depression as an illness to be cured only mechanically and chemically we may lose the gifts of soul that only depression can provide." I recall a reading

from twentieth-century preacher Leslie Weatherhead in which he comments that most of us prefer sunlight and happiness. But Weatherhead claims that he learned more in his personal dark times than in the light. He called such learnings “treasures of the darkness,” and no one can take these treasures from us. Gifts discovered in the shadow are like “treasures of the darkness” in that they remain a part of us forever.

Gifts are least expected when the veil of darkness suddenly descends upon us. I felt stripped of everything familiar—my patterns of living and especially my ways of experiencing God’s presence. I felt lost, not knowing what direction to take; yet, at the same time, I felt helpless and immobilized to move in any direction. Depression is a bewildering experience and certainly not a time to recognize or appreciate God’s hidden work in our lives. Sandra Cronk in *Dark Night Journey* sees the dark night as time for “an intensive re-patterning of our whole being.” This drastic transformation does not occur without deep emotional pain.

The more I struggled to regain my bearings and sense of control, the deeper I descended into the darkness. Cronk goes on to say that,

Letting go of the need to control our spiritual path is especially helpful in the dark night because in these times we do not choose a path. We experience the path as given. Walking in trust, along the path that is given, is our way of saying yes to God.

When you suddenly find yourself alone and without direction, walking this path requires a trust that is difficult to come by. I tried to feel the emptiness in

search of meaning; but the harder I tried to control my emotional and spiritual life and tried to control and manipulate God, the more desolate I felt.

I learned that the darkness does not yield because we will it to do so. Rather, it becomes more intense. I was in unfamiliar territory; my predominant emotion was fear. My old patterns of behavior no longer worked, and I lost a sense of my own identity. I experienced only the void of God's absence, and a deep emptiness surrounded me.

The gifts of the shadow do not yield themselves easily. They begin to emerge from the depths only as we are willing to let go and be present to the darkness. I have found strength and solace in the many who have traveled this dark path before me. I found myself clinging to their words of consolation and hope. One particular prayer from Thomas Merton has been especially helpful.

I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

I often felt “lost and in the shadow of death.” My fears were so strong that for a long time I was numb, unable to move in the darkness. Gradually, with the encouragement and patience of my pastoral counselor, I was able to find the courage to begin to grope around in the darkness. Through this painstaking exploration of the hidden places in my soul, I began to discover that my depression was an unasked-for opportunity to explore the depths of my inner self. Deepak Chopra says, “When you embrace and become intimate with your Shadow Self, you get in touch with the totality of your Being. In that totality lies wholeness. You are holy and you are healed.”

Emerging from the Shadow

. . . Most of us would not choose to embark on a journey into the dark night of the soul. But, in retrospect, I know that my depression forced me to become an explorer, a person who needed to discover who I was and to Whom I belonged. My emergence from the shadow is an ongoing journey of self-discovery, a journey that will take the rest of my life. The journey will involve some backward steps and setbacks, but I know deep inside that my healing continues.

Susan Gregg-Schroeder is one of our frequent writers. This piece is from her book, In the Shadow of God's Wings: Grace in the Midst of Depression, Upper Room Books, 1997. This book and its accompanying Group Study Guide are available at www.upperroom.org or 1-800-972-0433. Used by permission of Upper Room Books.