

FADING LIGHT: THE SPIRIT AND
SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER
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INTRODUCTION

She sits at the breakfast table, dreading the onslaught of a familiar darkness that even this unseasonably warm and bright November morning cannot repel. Already she can feel the gathering cold as it probes her windows for an easy course of attack. Her friends don't know why she doesn't return their calls and emails.

He is bogged down in traffic, pushing radio buttons for something – anything – that will distract him from the rush and routine of yet another round of windswept, sunless days. What he wouldn't give to slip from under these gray skies. He's flat. His partner thinks their relationship is the problem.

She's late for school again, having slept through the alarm and made by her father to roll out of a warm bed. Two tests today. Didn't study. Couldn't focus. How could a senior year that started so well become so meaningless by November? Her mother wants her to see a psychiatrist.

His wife of 44 years has become his lifeline now that the fields have been shaved of their corn stubble and put to bed. His primary interests have narrowed to just two: sitting in his recliner and looking out through frosted windowpanes. Even the grandchildren are starting to avoid him.

With apologies to our Scandinavian and Germanic members, I sometimes think human beings were not intended to live so far away from the Equator as to need wool coats, Thinsulate underwear and electric socks. Maybe creatures whose body temperature hovers around that of an average Miami summer day were never meant for such below-freezing behavior as shoveling snow and scraping ice off Subaru. Heck, if our early primate ancestors had put the kibosh on anything north of the Tropic of Cancer and anything south of the Tropic of Capricorn, we could all be wearing shorts right now! And talk about global warming and carbon footprints, can you imagine the reduction in greenhouse gasses if the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes had been left to God and the mosquitoes? Think of it, Nora friends, the fishing house would never have been invented. Same with road salt. And no gargantuan malls or losing football teams named after bloodthirsty barbarians! Hey, had humankind stayed between the Tropics, the world might not be a better place, but at least it would be spared those people who wire blinking Christmas wreathes to the grills of their cars!

But, enough silliness. The lust for moderate climates noted, the fact is that you and I live in this land where light fades to darkness and warmth yields to cold.

And, call it a matter of the spirit or a matter of simple brain chemistry, some 10 million Americans experience a free-floating funk that begins as early as October and lifts as late as April. Reflecting on the four vignettes that began this sermon, it's enough to make one dread talking with friends, feel a strain in our primary relationships, lose interest in school or gaze out the window for a sun that's gone south for the winter. For those 10 million or so, winter is a burdened heart and a tormented soul. Perhaps you're one of them.

This is a sermon about a serious topic. This month will end with much lower temperatures and much less sunlight than this bright, balmy morning would have us believe. Sure, the holidays will provide temporary diversion, but we know what's coming at us: gray skies, cold winds and long nights. And so we pause here on the front edge of increasing darkness and cold to talk about what the psychological folks call Seasonal Affective Disorder, appropriately referred to as SAD. So let's talk about the spirit in winter, and the winter in our spirits.

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER: BRAIN CHEMICALS

SAD is today recognized and treated by mental health professionals as a true disorder, but that wasn't always the case. Those of us of a certain age knew it as the "winter blahs" or "winter blues". We called it being melancholy – a term that comes much closer to describing a spiritual phenomenon than blues or blahs. But whatever it's called, it manifests itself as a cluster of feelings and behaviors:

- Tendency to isolate
- Increased mood swings
- Changes in eating
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of energy
- Lack of interest in people and things
- Negativity
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- Hopelessness
- Decreased libido

These are not signs of weakness or defect or moral fiber; we now know that SAD, like every form of depression, has to do with brain chemicals. Permit me to just touch on what's going on biochemically.

At the base of the brain is this nut-sized thing called the pineal gland. Its job is to make the "feel good" chemicals for the brain, especially serotonin. Save for a birth complication or brain damage, the kind of pineal gland we develop is, more or less, the combination of the pineal glands of our parents.

Some of us developed brains that produced lots of feel-good chemicals, others, not so much. Some of us developed brains that kicked those chemicals back and forth between receptors, others developed brains that were less active and therefore more likely to manifest depression and/or other mental health issues. *Again, clinical depression, seasonal or otherwise, is always a matter of heredity, not character, not motivation and certainly not morality.*

Here's what we know about Seasonal Affective Disorder in the United States:

- Some 70-80% of those who suffer with SAD are women
- The average age of onset is somewhere in the mid-30s
- SAD is related to latitude
- The three most effective treatments are: light therapy, antidepressants and talk therapy
- Treatment is aided by: exercise, healthy diet (including Vitamin D), adequate sleep, time outdoors, relationships (love and or/otherwise), participation in groups and organizations and prayer

Research is ongoing. For instance, we know that the older antidepressants are not as effective as newer ones, SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) in particular.

So, what does science tell us about SAD? That it's common. That it's chemical. And it's treatable. If you and I were all head and no heart, we could stop right there, eat lunch and rush home in time to watch the San Diego Chargers open up a can of butt-whoopin' on the Vikings! But, as the Tin Man told Dorothy, we're heart as well as head. So what's going on with the heart – spirit, soul, if you prefer – when the head is deprived of sunlight? What about the *human* part?

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER: THE SPIRIT

India is not the first place one might think of when the subject turns to winter. Mother Teresa wrote of the stifling heat of Calcutta's slums, the point of reference for mainstream Americans. But winter comes to India, especially in the eastern, central and northern mountain ranges. And some of the most popular Sufi poems come from those mountain ranges. Take this one from the fifteenth century poet, Sultan Bahu:

*On a dark, black night, love lights a lamp.
You can't hear the voice of the One whose love carries your heart away.
Forests, marshes and frightening swamps
Where one fears tigers with every breath.
Those whose love is perfect, Bahu,
Cross deserts, seas and jungles.
Love saw me weak and it came, taking over my home.
Like a fussy child, it will not sleep nor let me sleep.*

*It asks for watermelons in winter, where can I find them?
But all rational thoughts were forgotten, Bahu,
When love clapped its hands.*

Love – God, if you prefer – is the province of the Sufi poets. They experienced God as a verb as well as a noun – an *experience* as well as a being. (The Christian phrase, “God is love” is the Western equivalent of their relational and experiential theology.) So what is it that Bahu is telling us about God and winter watermelons? Gary Schmidt and Susan Felch, editors of the book from which I earlier read a passage, interpret it this way:

Love blossoms in the spring, we say, but winter is also the irrational season of love. When our minds slow down and our hearts are quieted, we turn expectantly to the “dark, black night” where “love lights a lamp.” ...Bahu, whose name reflects his intimacy with God, writes from a particular place: the Punjab region of India. But the longing for love, for God, that Bahu expresses is universal. And winter love, perhaps because it is hard won, exults triumphantly. It claps its hands, it outshines the moon, it faces down every tiger, every fear.

What if our susceptibility to Seasonal Affective Disorder, chemical basis acknowledged and understood by the brain, is pure *experience* when talking about the spirit? The spirit – code for all of our immeasurable and hard-to-explain *inner* life – does not exist to quantify or classify; that thing we call spirit (soul) simply *experiences*. Our minds differ from person to person; just read the letters to the editor of any decent-sized newspaper. The body? The slight but significant physical differences between even identical twins makes it clear that no two bodies are exactly alike; just spend some time in a public setting and be amazed at the vast array of sizes, shapes and colors of the human being. But this inner experience that is absolutely real yet absolutely beyond definition, is what makes us all the same. And, for many, it’s the spirit that agonizes most when the Earth tilts and the darkness grows.

We’ve already talked about the behavioral stuff – things to do that ease the sting and grind of SAD. But before one can start a new exercise program or explore drug therapy, he or she has to at least want some inner, *spiritual* shifts:

- From isolation to “forced connections”
- From denying mood swings to recognizing and owning them
- From eating too little or too much to a *relational* view of food
- From sleeping too little or too much to a *relational* view of sleep
- From justifying irritability as an “out there”, to an “in here” issue
- From poor concentration to learning about pace and focus
- From lack of energy to recognizing and respecting one’s physical limits
- From lack of interest in people and things to social experimentation
- From negativity to a willingness to at least entertain goodness
- From alcohol and other drugs to either controlled use or help

But talking about this stuff is a good deal easier than putting it in practice, especially when SAD is in its full fury. So let's peel the onion back a little further. Brain chemistry – especially those pathways that are well-traveled (often referred to as being set in one's way, a la old dogs and new tricks) – is not a particularly easy thing to change. Things like light therapy, exercise and counseling are proven aids in the struggle to live with SAD, but first one has to *want to want* to make these shifts. Otherwise we're tilting at the proverbial windmill while the spirit suffers.

Wanting to want to is like medicine. It's the liver and onions your mother-in-law cooked just for you. It's the dentist who decides you need a root canal after all. It's the co-worker who has mistaken you for a place to dump her or his emotional garbage and ongoing drama. It's the choice to remember that life is short and taking yourself too seriously is certain death for the spirit, winter, spring summer or fall. It's the decision to do something different, even if every bone in your body screams for you to stay home or have another drink or lash out against those who are trying to love you. It is, as Alcoholics Anonymous says, *faking it 'til you make it*.

Two quick illustrations:

The actors James Earl Jones and Robert Duvall headlined a film made in the mid-90s called "A Family Thing". Two sixty-something men, one black and one white, learn that they are related, this despite their ambivalence toward folks of another color. The theme is strained, to be sure, but I remember the film for a single, short scene. Duvall's character is angry and mad at the world. Stomping his way across the street he sees a fellow, a person of dull wit and little means, smiling as is his usual countenance. In his agitated state, Duvall decides to ask him why in hell is he so happy? My memory might be a little faded, but the response I recall was something like: "Because I make sure that I've always got one more thing to look forward to."

Seasonal Affective Disorder is a protracted, spirit-stretching test of the will to live rather than just exist. Sometimes the best plan is to have one more thing in mind. Just one. Fake it 'til you make it.

Second quick story. I'm in a 10-room, 1820s-era Unitarian parsonage in Eastport, Maine, a place I've mentioned to you before. My best ministry to that congregation was to strip every shred of carpet and every sheet of wallpaper from every room in the place. I started on Labor Day and by Thanksgiving it was nearly a war zone. By Christmas it was a war zone. And by Valentine's Day the demolition work was done.

February can be mighty gray on the Maine coast. Rain, snow and sleet are the norm for most of the winter. It was against that backdrop of a stripped parsonage and a nasty March storm that a former minister's surviving wife came to see the

old place. I warned her that the gutted entrance and staircase matched the rest of the ceilings, walls and floors. She said precious little as I followed her from level to level, room to room. As the water boiled for tea, she said, "I think that what you're doing is a great favor to this church. You've shown them that a fine old house was under all that stuff. But, you...you must carry your sunshine on the inside." Fake it 'til you make it.

Make sure you have something to look forward to. Carry your sunshine on the inside. Good counsel, especially if your spirit sinks come November.

Once more, hear the words of the Sufi poet. They have something to do with teaching the spirit to want to want. They have something to do with making sure that we always have one more thing to look forward to, just one. They have something to do with carrying our sunshine on the inside. They remind us that even winter must yield to love. From Sultan Bahu:

*Love saw me weak and it came, taking over my home.
Like a fussy child, it will not sleep nor let me sleep.
It asks for watermelons in winter, where can I find them?
But all rational thoughts were forgotten, Bahu,
When love clapped its hands.*

Seasonal Affective Disorder is real, folks. People suffer. Sadly, some even suicide. As these days darken and grow short, no one can take away another's pain, but everyone is in need of a little watermelon in winter. Don't pass up a chance to comfort and be comforted through the coming days. Don't miss a chance to love and be loved.