Brainstorm: Finding hope with William Styron

by Norman B. Bendroth in the May 1, 2007 issue

In 1992 I had a clinical depression. It was a long time in coming, but in hindsight it was inevitable. I was the pastor of a struggling, urban church where the turnover rate was about 25 percent every fall. We did amazing things for a church our size, but we were dying. I came to this conclusion on a gray March afternoon while hunkered down in my study trying to write a sermon on the atonement.

Behind the stormy sky in my mind, I saw not a smiling Providence offering a gesture of boundless love in sharing his son Jesus, but a scowling ogre, an angry, petulant father looking for someone to take the blame for the creation's botch of it all and heaping it on a poor, innocent kid. I knew intuitively that there must be a better way of looking at this mystery, but at that moment it was a horror. God was a brute robbing me of any joy. With Job I said: "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me. I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came." Whether this torment was a function of the descending depression or a contribution to it, I cannot say, but I called my wife and said, "I can't do this anymore. I'm coming unglued."

I later learned that I came by depression naturally. Both my father's father and mother had "nervous breakdowns." My great-grandfather, who had immigrated to Boston in 1898, would frequently go back to the old country for extended periods to recuperate from bouts of melancholia. Somewhere buried in my genetic weed bed were the tendencies that undid me.

While slogging through the early stages of Prozac, I began reading William Styron's *Darkness Visible*: *A Memoir of Madness*. Most people knew Styron for his controversial novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and for *Sophie's Choice*, a poignant memoir of the Holocaust seen through the eyes of a survivor. Both books received awards and rave reviews. Lesser known is this 84-page book that Styron penned after a severe bout with depression in 1985. I sat in my bed that night and

read it cover to cover, then turned to my wife and said, “He’s telling my story.”

Styron called depression a “brainstorm,” an expression that gave me a shot of hope because Styron was describing exactly what was going on in my head. “Told that someone’s mood disorder has evolved into a storm—a veritable howling tempest in the brain, which is indeed what a clinical depression resembles like nothing else—even the uninformed laymen might display sympathy rather than the standard reaction that ‘depression’ evokes, something akin to ‘So what?’ or ‘You’ll pull out of it’ or ‘We all have bad days.’”

That was it. *I couldn’t turn my head off*. There was a tsunami coursing through my mind and there was nothing I could do about it.

Styron spoke of reaching the limits of his agony. He knew he could not continue a life in which he “moved from pain to pain.” He met with his lawyer and rewrote his will, made vain attempts at writing a suicide note, and carefully wrapped up a notebook containing haphazard writings in a paper towel, put it in a box of Post Raisin Bran and deposited it into the trash barrel.

On one bone-chilling December night he endured “a curious inner convulsion that I can describe only as despair beyond despair.” He admitted to himself that he could not live another day and was planning his demise. With his wife in bed, he bundled himself up on a sofa and forced himself to watch a video with an actress who had been in a play that he had written. The characters, in 19th-century Boston, are strolling down a corridor in a music conservatory, when suddenly they hear a contralto voice singing a soaring passage from the Brahms *Alto Rhapsody*. He writes:

> This sound . . . pierced my heart like a dagger, and in a flood of swift recollection I thought of all the joys this house had known: the children who had rushed through its rooms, the festivals, the love and work, the honestly earned slumber, the voices and nimble commotion, the perennial tribe of cats and dogs and birds. . . . All this I realized was more than I could ever abandon, even as what I had set out to do so deliberately was more than I could inflict upon those memories, and upon those, so close to me, with whom the memories were bound. And just as powerfully I realized I could not commit this desecration on myself.

He woke his wife and checked into a hospital, where he clawed his way back to sanity.

While I never contemplated how I would commit suicide, there were days when my depression was so great that I thought nonexistence would be preferable to enduring the pain any longer. Although I didn't have an epiphany moment like Styron, I did know that this world is so full of goodness, beauty and truth that it grieved me terribly that I would even consider checking out of it. The song that pierced my heart might have been Bonnie Raitt and John Prine singing "Angel from Montgomery," but the effect was the same.

I have lived 12 years now depression-free. I have had setbacks and struggles, but nothing of the kind that leveled me in 1992. I liken my infirmity to an ankle I sprained playing intramural basketball in seminary and then again a few years later. The ankle eventually healed, but for years it was weaker than the other. It would let me know it was there if I moved suddenly or bounded two steps at a time, so I had to take care when I put pressure on it. The same went for my psyche. There were circumstances that I knew would be stressful, so I had to take extra care—get plenty of sleep, pray, see my therapist, exercise or have lunch with a friend. I learned the tricks my mind would play on me and I built some resiliency skills. My ankle no longer bothers me and my depression is behind me (although I still wonder when the ogre will jump out of the closet again), and by God's grace my capacity for serenity and joy has been restored.

All this history came rushing back when I heard of Styron's death last year. I mourned his passing, for along with my faith, my family and my sense of humor, he was the turnkey on my road to recovery. His words still bring comfort. "By far the great majority of the people who go through even the severest depression survive it, and live ever afterward at least as happily as their unafflicted counterparts. Save for the awfulness of certain memories it leaves, acute depression inflicts few permanent wounds."

With Styron I can testify that the return from the abyss "is not unlike the ascent of the poet, trudging upward and upward out of hell's black depths and at last emerging into what he saw as 'the shining world.'"