

Depression confession

“Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme ce sera moi.”
(“I mean to present to my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.”)
(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Les Confessions”)

Why am I writing this? Is it because I feel unreal, non-existent? “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Do I exist, if no one knows about me? The fact is, our sense of “self” develops from our social experience. Without seeing ourselves mirrored in the others we wouldn't know who we are, we would not “exist”. And that is what gives life meaning – the sense of connection to other human beings and to the world. That's why we reach out, cry, scream, sing, pray, send radio signals into the outer space... That's why we tell our stories. In fact, we can't help it. Everything we do speaks for us, everything plays a role: our actions, our words, and even our silence.

Silence also tells stories. Often these are stories of fear, insecurity and isolation. My story is one of them. But now I would like to break the silence and tell about a faithful companion of mine, my depression, who has been part of my life for about 15 years. It is still very much there, that “black dog” of Churchill, that demon that kills all joy, all hope, all desires. It keeps talking to me: “You – dumb, worthless good-for-nothing, how pathetic you are! Do you even call it a “story”? Who would want to listen to this?”

You are right as always, my dear demon, my story is pathetic. There is no drama in it, no action. I haven't suffered any real abuse or poverty, I haven't been sold into slavery or sent off to war. I have no real scars to show. Sometimes all my suffering seems invalid, non-existent, unreal – like some bad dream. How often was I ashamed of it and wished for some “real” suffering, some “real” disease, something valid, visible, worthwhile! And yet, depression is as real and as incapacitating as a broken leg or imprisonment.

So forgive me, my demon, I am going to ignore you for a while and tell what I want to tell. For me, to get this out of the system, to be able to think, talk, write about something else. And for others like me, suffering in silence this lonely invisible suffering that no one gives credit for, not even they themselves. By doing this I would like to share my belief that any human life is equally valuable and any story is worth telling. So here we go:

My depression “officially” started when I was 15 years old. It doesn't mean that my life was without trouble before that. In fact, I have been an outstanding troublemaker ever since I was born. But there was a definite shift and it happened pretty much exactly on my 15th birthday. I suppose, the accumulated effect of all negative experiences reached certain critical value and a *phase transition* occurred. In a nutshell this *transition* can be described as a change from “I feel shit because shit happens to me” to “I feel shit because nothing good could ever happen to me, because there is something fundamentally wrong with me, so there is no point to even try to make things better”.

I didn't call it “depression” back then. I didn't know what it was or how to describe it. Once I wrote in my diary that it was like being stuck under a decomposing dead whale. It is a pretty good analogy.

It was something huge, heavy, paralysing, filling existence with an almost constant pain and nausea. So overwhelming and powerful that it felt like there is no future, no hope, no point to even bother trying to save myself. Getting up in the morning and trying to exist was a huge effort and thoughts of suicide accompanied me all the time.

How did it come to that? Who or what is there to blame? There is no simple answer to these questions. There was not a single event or experience that caused it, but all the events that took place and all my particular life experiences combined (not mentioning all the belief systems of my ancestors and the genetic material accumulated over millennia...). My life couldn't have been any other way. But still, it is useful to identify the main issues, the main themes. In my case these themes are *meaninglessness* and *loneliness*. And, judging by all the sad songs and poems out there, these are far from being uncommon.

The first one arose from being discouraged from doing things that I enjoyed and being forced into doing something I didn't enjoy and was not good at. Somehow everything that used to bring me joy was turned into a nightmare until I reached the point when I didn't feel like doing anything at all. I only did what others expected me to do. I lost the ability to play, to be “in the flow”, to do things just for fun. I became some sort of automaton, repeating the same meaningless routines over and over again, just not to fall apart.

The second issue originated much earlier, far back into infancy where my memory doesn't reach. Somehow I turned out extremely socially inept from very early on, which caused a lot of bullying at school and social withdrawal and, hence, even worse social incompetence. No matter what I did I just didn't fit in anywhere and eventually resigned to my role of an eternal outcast. And out of a simple feeling of loneliness it grew into a deeply ingrained belief in some fundamental impossibility of the human connection.

These feelings of meaninglessness and loneliness certainly contributed to my depression and also became its consequences. They were growing out of each other, feeding each other, became inseparable: “What is the point in doing, feeling, thinking anything if there is no one to share it with? What is the point to reach out to others if I have nothing worth sharing?” I was stuck in a downward spiral that was leading me deeper and deeper into my personal hell.

The worst torture in this hell was isolation, which I myself inflicted upon me. As much as I may regret it now, I realise that I couldn't have acted differently back then. I felt that my life was hanging from a thin thread and a faintest gust of wind from the outside would tear it and send me into the ultimate abyss. Isolation was the only way I knew to protect myself, my integrity, my last scraps of self-worth. And the sense of self-worth for a human being is as indispensable as air: when we lose it – we die.

I built a fortress around myself and imprisoned myself there. Cautiously I was observing people from my lair, trying to avoid any contact. They puzzled and scared me. I felt that I was an outsider, a freak, an alien, a stranger to others and even to myself. I felt that I didn't belong to the society, or even to the human race. And, at the same time, a powerful longing was growing inside me – for companionship, for connection, for love... The more I tried to numb it, the stronger it became, tearing me apart from the inside.

This longing found an answer: I madly fell in love. Not with a person, but with the whole new dark and beautiful world – the world of Rammstein. It was a sick love, full of jealousy and self-doubt. But it saved my life back then, gave me a goal, a dream, something to fight for. As Nietzsche said: “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*”. I thought that I maybe was born in a “wrong” place and if I moved to the “right” place I would have a chance. Germany became this sacred place, this long lost home that I was yearning for. All my efforts and mental energy were now directed towards this goal.

With a lot of hard work and a quite a bit of luck my dream came true. I got a scholarship and moved to study in Berlin. And it did not betray my expectations: I loved the place and certainly felt more comfortable and “at home” there than I ever did before. For the first time I tried, I *dared* to “have a life”, to approach people, to get back to things I used to enjoy as a child. I felt strong, I felt that anything was possible. And, in a way, this played a cruel trick on me. I weakened my guard, and all the pain and rage and loneliness that were buried deep inside me – came up to the surface and it was a disaster.

The facade of my fortress started to shatter, and as soon as the first stone fell out – it all started to fall apart. I was losing control: more and more frequent violent outbursts against myself and others, increasingly irrational and self-destructive behaviour. My every action was a desperate cry for help. And at the same time I stubbornly rejected help, pushed people away from me. In fact, I couldn't bear people being nice to me, it simply enraged me: “Can't you see what a monster I am?!” I was externalising my self-hate, trying to make others hate and despise me as much as I did.

After a few hospital admissions with self-harm I finally accepted the option of seeing a psychologist or a psychiatrist. For the first time the word “depression” came up. I never thought of it that way before. I always thought that there was something fundamentally *wrong* with the world or with me, that no one on earth felt the way I did. And suddenly it seemed like my case might fit into some general scheme after all. Finally I felt like I might *belong* somewhere – among the sick, among the mad. And thus began my long journey of trying to find a way out.

I started with psychiatrists and tried out various antidepressants. They brought me no good except for the opportunity of a painless suicide, which I eventually took. More as a test rather than seriously: I gave plenty of chance to find me and get me to a hospital in time. Instead of discouraging me from any further attempts, it only confirmed my view of how easy and painless it was. From then on, this escape option always was (and still is) at the back of my mind. Strangely enough, this incident didn't stop doctors from prescribing me more and more pills, which I ended up collecting and carrying with me around the world for many years afterwards – just in case...

As chemistry was failing, I turned to psychotherapy. This was even more frustrating. The whole “depression” issue was vague and obscure, I couldn't even formulate it properly. Psychologists didn't seem to be able to clarify anything either. No solutions were offered, no realisations were made. That brief feeling of *belonging* that I had at the start disappeared: even in the mental clinic everyone seemed to make progress and move on – only I was inert, stuck in another world, “under a bell jar”: nothing could get through to me. Everyone who tried to help me eventually gave up and I felt that I was a lost case, or was not trying hard enough, or didn't want to be helped.

In the meantime, my life was falling apart. I destroyed my friendships and relationships, I failed my

studies. My scholarship expired, I couldn't find a job and prolong my visa. I could no longer stay in Germany and coming back to Russia was unthinkable. I knew that I rather die than go back there and even now, after all these years, I still feel this way. I barely tried to save myself anymore. Instead, I dissociated, detached from myself, from my thoughts and feelings, from my own destiny. There was no dignity, no pride left, my self-value was no more. I embraced the idea of death.

But, as it often happens in seemingly hopeless situations, life offered a solution: an opportunity to start it all over in Australia! It seemed like a crazy, doomed idea. I was totally burned out. How could I possibly succeed? And yet, it was perfect. Considering the mess that I left behind I could only possibly start over on the other side of the planet, where no one knew me. What if I fail? I already failed everything I could. What if I die? I already died many times inside. Everything that could go wrong already went wrong. There was nothing to lose.

And there, in the most unlikely place on earth, for the first time in my life things started working out. Slowly and not without trouble, but they did. Even I, with all my scepticism, could not deny that. Mostly thanks to three amazing people who, independently, brought me back to life: my PhD supervisor Jon, my psychologist Frank and my counsellor Greg. Regardless of their formal roles, they just happened to be people who had wisdom to see “the big picture” and generosity to share it with me, who taught me to trust myself again, to be kind to myself irrespective of my failures or achievements.

Still, it took years to notice any improvement. It was the reverse process: small realisations and understandings were summing up until they reached a certain threshold and the opposite transition occurred. As if to create the perfect symmetry, this also happened around my (30th) birthday. The fog that was surrounding me for so many years lifted a bit and for the first time I could see clearly. What do I see? Who am I? A wreck with no skills, no passions, no goals – only a baggage of bad memories and a deadly fatigue. What shall I do with my life now? Where shall I find my self-worth?

And again I hear my demon talking to me. Only now it talks as a friend. It has been my voice all along: “You are still alive, my dear. What else can you wish for? What would you be without me? Would you value companionship the way you do without having experienced all that loneliness? Would there be home without exile, gratitude without loss? Look how much strength and courage you discovered! How much compassion and understanding of human condition! You can help others. You will help others. In fact, you've been helping others all along: by demonstrating an example of a human life, with all its struggles and misfortunes. I am so proud of you.”

Thank you, my demon.

Inna Lukyanenko, 2017