

Auriel Schluter

Depression

Steph's story

In the first of two articles on depression, I'd like to tell you about Steph.

Steph's Story

Steph had been battling depression for a while. As she did so, two illustrations often came to mind. She was in a racing car, speeding along next to the high performance guys, when her engine packed up. She found herself in a layby needing repair. She looked around, wondering why no one was stopping to help. She was confused. Wasn't she a valuable member of the team? Why was she being ignored? She trusted God and these were her Christian brothers – why did they not help? They just kept racing by in the fast lane. They didn't even glance in her direction as they sped by. Over time, she realised that it was because they had no idea what to do. They had neither the experience nor the skills. They had a job to do, and she would only hold them back. She was an embarrassment. After a while, she met others in the layby. They knew how she felt; they too needed repair. Eventually, some people arrived who knew how to help. With these two groups,

she felt safe. She began to talk about her problems. She started to find ways to get back on the road.

The second illustration she found in a book*. It seemed to describe her perfectly.

The grandmother dropped the valuable antique china teapot onto the floor. It shattered into pieces, but she carefully gathered them up, though others might have thought that a pointless exercise. A few months later, a visitor noticed a cracked and crooked pot in her kitchen, missing both a handle and a spout. Other than those details, it was unmistakably the repaired remains of the teapot. Later on, the grandmother filled it with soil. She planted seeds and over time, brightly coloured flowers began to grow. It was no longer used for pouring tea, but it was still a teapot. It was simply put to a new use. Through the process of restoration, it had been given a new part to play in her kitchen. It made the grandmother smile. It gave her hope.

The first illustration helped Steph find perspective on what she was experiencing. The second helped her to track her journey over the next few years.

It took a couple of years to diagnose her depression. It began with several stress-related physical symptoms like IBS and tics. Then, given her age, she suspected oestrogen deficiency. Her functioning level was way down but she hid this well – no one realised that after each task, she flopped back under the duvet. She was aware that depression was often seen as a spiritual failure, and she certainly did not want to go there. As for anti-depressants, well, that was an admission of sin, wasn't it?

Eventually, her GP forced her to concede that she was experiencing depression. He helpfully described it as 'a certain personality meeting a certain set of circumstances.' However, he didn't suggest any talking therapy, he just prescribed pills.

As long as she had been 'the woman who coped with anything you throw at her', she was valued. Now that she wasn't coping, it seemed she had nothing to offer. Part of her was proud of the label; she didn't want to lose it. But another part of her was screaming to be let out of the pigeon-hole she had been assigned. In her circles, you were either 'doing ministry' or you were the one being 'ministered to'. There was no overlap at all.

Steph was advised by a friend to remove herself from her situation. It was only triggering increasing anxiety and depression. She chose a country where there were supportive friends and a course she could complete. She hoped this plan might make her acceptable once more. She found helpful books in the library, and they started her on a voyage of discovery. The first thing she learned was that she was not alone. She was able to weep, though only in the company of certain people.

She had started her journey.

On her return home, she signed up for counselling training. After all, ministering to others was still her goal. But she immediately faced a challenge. The counselling course included the requirement

to receive counselling, and that meant delving into the mysteries of the self. She felt nervous about 'stepping out of line.' She felt that this was how others viewed it. Yet, in God's mercy, this was where the healing began. God, rather than disapproving of her weakness, now met her in it and gently led her through to a new way of being. He gave her a new future, where the whole experience of depression would itself be of value.

The first thing she realised was that she had never felt listened to before. Nor had she really listened to others properly. Even in the best and happiest of families, dynamics function in ways that shape attitudes and responses. In her family, she was both the only girl and the youngest by several years; in effect, this had rendered her voiceless. As a child, she had picked up the message that disappointment builds character, all teasing is good

for you, and conflict and anger are to be avoided at all costs. Instead, a happy face and unerring good humour must be displayed at all times. It was essential to 'cope well.' Her own mother's life had not been easy; she had wanted to pass on the coping mechanisms she had used. Loss

just had to be accepted, not mourned.

Through counselling, Steph realised that her current losses were tapping into ones she had not processed in the past. She realised that an outward show of strength along with inward withdrawal and denial were coping strategies she had brought with her from her childhood. Her current depression was an extreme version of that.

And she had done *a lot of 'coping.'*

When she was sixteen, her parents had returned overseas; she had been forced to cope by developing an independent spirit. She had also coped with her future parents-in-law's overt disapproval. She had coped with her mother's premature death and her inability to fly home for the funeral. She had coped with living in many different countries

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and facing multiple transitions. Coping is what she did. She did it well. But the truth was, the adult she had become possessed a fragile core, one frozen at the time of initial trauma. She had never acknowledged or dealt with the emotions inside. The sixteen-year-old had not experienced an adult home life in which to learn a whole range of adult life skills. This now 'almost empty nest mother' had an uncomforted child inside.

At age sixteen, she had prayed for God to take her to Heaven as she did not wish to live this life. This same wish now returned, but with a different spin – she thought the world would be better off without her – she was valueless.

Facing the losses of the past, accessing the trauma, the grief, and expressing long buried emotions all played a part. Exploring the feelings of guilt and shame, and knowing where to take them was key. She also learned that ways of responding, which were set in the past, might not be appropriate in new circumstances. By re-assessing the dynamic that existed in her family through adult eyes, she found new understanding, choices and growth. She recognised that repressed anger can turn inwards and cause damage. She also came to see that God's priorities are often different from those we encounter amongst his people, and that suffering members are close to His heart. All of these things contributed to the healing process.

Steph learnt that integrity involved speaking out

her views, even when they might not meet with approval. She started to find strength in standing up for what she really believed. Her own disintegration had occurred in part because she had tried to fit in against her better judgment; she had invalidated her own instincts.

Spiritually, she learnt that Grace covered shame as well as guilt. She saw how David and others were unafraid to express their emotions, and that Job's comforters sincerely missed the point. She saw how gently and holistically God dealt with Elijah in his burnout and depression. She learned a lot from his searching questions – repeated over and over – about his own limited perspective. Looking back, Steph saw that although her plans for those ten years had been sabotaged by her depression, God had been reforming her whole being. He had made her for the plans He had for her instead. They were years she would never want to repeat, but they were years she would not have done without.

The experience of the layby prepared her to be able to help others. The broken teapot was not thrown away, just reformed with a different function.

The cracks show but the flowers flourish.



**Turning Point* by Jennifer Rees Larcombe

Auriel Schluter

Auriel Schluter is a pastoral counsellor working part-time as an independent practitioner in Cambridge. She sees people from many churches in the region and beyond. Currently, she is offering sessions by Zoom.

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