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On Depression, Anthony Bourdain, and Life As Lived

Todd Alcott · Saturday, June 9th, 2018

There are no two worlds that mean less to me than high fashion and celebrity cooking, so it's a measure of their brilliance and potency that I know who Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain were, and what they stood for, and why they were so admired, and why they are so mourned.

I don't know what to say about depression. I've lived with it all my life, from my earliest memories. The comic strip *Peanuts* went off in my head like a bomb, for reasons I couldn't express. Charlie Brown was my hero. It was only when Charles Schulz was near death, and he gave an interview where he characterized his creation as "a comic strip about depression" that the gears fell into place for me. Charlie Brown isn't just depressed, he's a perfect distillation of depression. No happiness ever lasted for him, no victory made an impact, no work of art or piece of music transported him for long.

As a child, and even as a young man, I didn't know that depression was a condition. I just thought it was how life is. Even in the 1980s, the Prozac Era, when people started talking about depression in earnest, I scoffed at the magazine articles. "What is the big deal?" I thought. "Why are they making an issue out of the way I feel every day? That's just how life is."

People who don't have depression don't understand it and can't understand it. Even people who have depression don't understand it, why it comes, why it goes, what changes it, what lifts it. I'm disturbed by Bourdain's death because lately I've had success with my own depression simply through changing my diet, and I figured if there were anyone on the planet who knew how diet affects depression, it would be Bourdain.

When a depressed person takes their own life, the standard line from survivors is "We had no idea." The depressed person is trained from an early age to mask their ailment. I myself made up a joke about it: "I used to struggle with depression, but now I'm like, 'Eh, you win.'" No one wants to hear about you being depressed. Everyone says "Check in with your friends and loved ones, you never know," but no one wants to do that. Why would they? There's nothing they can do anyway. What are they going to do? Anything a non-depressed person could think of to say is going to sound like an insincere homily to the depressed person.

Not only do non-depressed people not understand depression, they generally treat it as something you're doing to inconvenience them. Can anyone imagine a situation where a colleague or employee gains sympathy or understanding from their non-depressed co-workers and corporate overlords? Or, in the case of titans like Spade and Bourdain, from their employees and underlings? They both had attained so much success in their chosen fields; it was impossible to think that they

would have anything to be depressed about.

I'm a freelance writer in Hollywood; if you tell someone you're depressed it's exactly the same as telling them you have bubonic plague. No one wants to work with someone who's depressed, or even talk to someone who's depressed. Everyone in the business must be happy and joyous and funny at all times, they have to be "good in the room." Who wants to hang out with a gloomy Gus?

So the depressed person learns to pretend, as a matter of survival, to put on a clown suit and dance for the sake of appearances, while aching to return home and get under the covers. A few years ago there was a commercial for a depression medicine that featured a cartoon woman who was followed around by a hovering blue bathrobe. The bathrobe symbolized her depression, and I never learned the name of the medicine because that bathrobe looked so comfortable. The bathrobe was her friend and understood her, and only wanted for her to go home and snuggle up in its blue comfort.

How many times, in the midst of a relationship quarrel, has a depressive heard their non-depressive mate say something like "And we can't do x, because you're depressed all the time!" No one wants to deal with depression, they just want you to fix it – take a pill, engage in an activity, go for a hike, pretend to be happier, fake it 'til you make it. That's the only thing they know to suggest.

I have depressive friends. When we check in with each other, we'll always say "How are you feeling?" and answer with a percentage, 20% or 40% or 70%, meaning, "this percent of me wants to be alive." It's gallows humor, but we take comfort in it because it's something we share, we understand each other.

Meanwhile, we have a president who openly mocks disabled people, so I don't imagine a national understanding of depression to come along anytime soon. Depression is seen as a sign of weakness and the afflicted as something to be shunned.

So no, I don't have any answers. Like anyone, I've had my ups and downs in life. Sometimes I've felt fine even though beset by troubles, other times I've been suicidal when everything's going my way. When I'm not depressed, depression seems as mysterious to me as it does to people who've never been depressed. The mind remains unfathomable.

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