# SPIRIT DUST

Death is a Dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
"Dissolve," says Death — The Spirit, "Sir,
I have another Trust" —

Emily Dickinson



## MEDITATIONS

for WOMEN with DEPRESSION

Maura Hanrahan



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#### **PROLOGUE**



"De-pres-sion." Three innocent syllables make up such a benign-sounding word. It conjures up images of a downward slope in a road or a slump in the stock market. It suggests something passing, even fleeting: certainly a temporary thing to get through on the way to somewhere else. It's hardly evocative of the cancerous nature of the condition, a still-mysterious illness that can wound, damage, and even kill. Depression snakes through once-solid marriages, injects poison into workplaces and careers, and rips lives to pieces.

In the 1930s, they recognized the inadequacy of the word and had the good sense to put "Great" before it. They knew "depression" was just too mild, too insufficient, for a phenomenon that engulfed people. Maybe what we are going through right now is the "Almost-Great" Depression (or maybe it will turn into the "Greater Than the Great" Depression).

More than a groove in an otherwise smooth road, depression is a giant pothole in the making. At first, it might be a dip in a green valley or a sour mood that refuses to be shaken off.

It can become a maelstrom that grips us entirely. It alternates between a blizzard of despair and the aridness of a desert, not a Joshua tree in sight. In either case, the ground is rarely level and it feels like it might be swept away at any moment. Put bluntly, depression is hellish and can kill you.

Depression — "mind storm" might be a more apt phrase — is among the worst things that can happen to you. Later, when its waters have long receded, it seems that it might also be one of the best.

I suffer from depression. I have also learned from it. I could not have written this little book otherwise. But this book is about you, not about me, and so I have described my own journey with the disease for those who might want to read it. It is in the Epilogue at the end of the book.

What I want you to read are these meditations, as often and in whatever order you please, in the hope that they will help you deal with the "spirit and dust" of depression.



The wisdom of Christian women mystics has been a real palliative for me in dealing with my depression. These are women from the tenth century right up to our own. Among them are Blessed Julian of Norwich, who lived much of her life cloistered in a "cell" in England; Julian's friend, Margery Kempe; Saint Jane de Chantal, a wise, motherly religious leader from France; American poet Anne Bradshaw; and the lively Edwina Gateley, who works with women on the margins today.

Many of these women lived with illness, including depression. On a daily basis, they were part of societies and a church that saw them as second class — not as good as men, the descendants of Adam's rib and Eve's sin, if you like. At times they lost sight of God and felt deserted by God. Other times they were almost over-powered by the love of God. Their problems were ours; their lives were ours. In their words there is much wisdom, love, and healing. Spending time with them has helped me close some of my wounds, slowly but surely. Sit with the women mystics awhile. There, I hope you will find some solace and respite.



Father, pour the oil of Your bountiful mercy on my wounds, for You are my only hope; heal me.

## Saint Jane de Chantal

### **IGNORANCE**



Why, if there is so much information available, do we not know about depression? Is it a secret? A conspiracy of silence? Or is it just that no one cares? Or that we are afraid to talk about it?

One in eight people will be hospitalized for depression during their lifetime. One in ten adults will experience depression. In the United States alone, this is no less than nineteen million people. Some of them will die from this illness.

After eight years of university education, including graduate school, however, I knew virtually nothing about depression, even though most of these years had been spent in the study of the social sciences. I attended three universities — three thriving, lively educational facilities in two different countries. I walked across three different stages to collect diplomas representing three degrees. I was hyper-educated, yet my ignorance of this reality for so many people, especially women, was practically boundless.

What a shock when I became depressed myself. I had no clue what was even happening to me, much less what do to about it. As I finally came to grips with my diagnosis, I discovered that depression is a complete mystery to almost everyone I know.



My cell will not be one of stone or wood but of self-knowledge.

Saint Catherine of Siena

## **PMS**



"PMS. That's your problem," the chubby, jocular doctor says, chuckling. "It'll pass."

He brushes his thinning hair back over the top of his head. He tucks his stethoscope in the pocket of his white coat and ushers me to the door that leads back out to his waiting room. "Back to the cold, cold world," a voice says in my head.

Never mind that this PMS episode goes on from January 1st until New Year's Eve, never taking a vacation or even an afternoon off.

Surely a woman doctor will understand and make better sense of it: This one has blue eyes and I search them for any sign of kindliness, but it isn't there.

"It's part of a woman's life," the woman doctor says. "You just have to get used to it."

My eyes can hardly focus as I walk down the stairs from her office. In the dismissiveness of her words, I hear judgment, an insinuation of inadequacy, and an impatience with my impatience.

What if she is right? Then what? This is normal? This is how a woman's life is lived?

My blood, my woman's blood, freezes in my veins.



From now on, I put myself in your divine hands. Do what you like with me.

Saint Teresa of Los Andes

## MISSING GOD



Where is God? Not in the pink and yellow roses in the little shop on the corner, not in a husband's deep kiss or in the downy fur of a small kitten.

Where is God? God can no longer be found in a stream of words on paper or in lush paint on canvas. God is not in the bread that sits on our tongues, the water that flows down our throats, or the air that puffs up our lungs. There is a deadness to all these things, these things that give life.

Without God, there is no almighty protector, no giver of life and of comfort. There is only aloneness. There is no mother, no father, no sister, no brother, no partner with warm arms that embrace and hold. Without God, there is no solace even in the silence and stillness; there is just an empty barren ground stretching on for miles, the echoes hollow.

If God is gone, there is nothing. One who cannot feel the presence of God is as naked and helpless as a newborn mouse. And, unlike the baby mouse, one has a keen awareness that this is so.



Who is this maker, lover and sustainer God? I do not have the words to express it. Until I am united with God, I can never have true rest or peace. I can never know until I am held so close to God that there is nothing between us.

Blessed Julian of Norwich

#### **HELPLESSNESS**



Slowly swirls of steam rise up from the pot. They're white and ghost-like, little tendrils that dissipate as they reach higher. The water that has birthed them rumbles, growls, and finally boils. Soon it's at fever pitch.

The water moans and pasta bobs in the water. Once hard and curly, it now slackens by the second. As the noise increases, the ribbons of stream rise further. Then there is a volcano of bubbles.

Dinner is done.

But my body has become catatonic, as immoveable as cast concrete. The bubbles seem to shout now. Finally they begin to climb out of the pot, sloshing over the stovetop, hissing along the way.

Still, I can do nothing but watch. Something has taken hold of my spirit and the weakened body that houses it. There is too only numbness and no opening for fear.



God said not, "You shall not be tempested, you shall not be afflicted," but "You shall not be overcome."

Blessed Julian of Norwich