

Turning Toward Our Frankenstein **By Joen Snyder O'Neal**

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In the late sixties, when I was a graduate student in theatre at Berkeley, I attended an avant-garde theatre performance entitled Frankenstein. The play started out with a completely bare stage. Over the course of the next hour and a half the actors, working silently and intently, built up a large erector-set kind of structure on the stage, finally adding lights and sound machines. When the structure was complete, the actors turned to face the audience for the first time, then suddenly rushed down the aisles into the house. I passed out.

It seems to me that we humans create our own Frankensteins in the same way. Bit by bit we put all sorts of elaborative embellishments onto the structures we build up in our minds. We believe in them, we cling to them, and then we find they scare us, creating deep psychic disturbance.

The other day I spoke with a dear long-time friend who has been suffering a lot. The face of that suffering is a dark and unrelenting depression. For years she has taken various anti-depressant medications and received other kinds of therapy with little result. Now she has reached a point where she feels little hope for the future. So we talked about depression, and about Buddhist practice with depression.

When we suffer a lot, the overwhelming tendency is to do everything in our power to make our pain go away, or else to get ourselves away from the pain. We thrash and run around, desperately seeking some way out. We take refuge in addictions, in busyness, and in blaming, all so that we won't have to face the suffering that is present.

Depression is a very difficult body/mind state to be with. The feeling tone is heavy, solid, extremely dense — like steel and cement. When we are in the middle of it, we have little energy. We feel completely overwhelmed by the mood of darkness and despair. It's hard to remember or imagine life without depression. When we practice mindfulness with any aspect of our experience, including depression, the first step is to fully acknowledge it as it is. Beyond our likes and dislikes, there is a reality that is present, and we allow ourselves — we make a choice — to see this reality. Then, the next step is to embody it. We stay out of the story — we leave it alone — and instead, we feel what the body is doing. We sit with it; we stay with the process. We feel what it is that time, life, history, and the world have brought into being.

When we sit and stop our usual fixation on the story, we are able to see deeply. For instance, in penetrating depression we may see anger. As we look more deeply at our anger we may begin to see fear and grief underneath. Before I was born, my grandfather, already an old man, built, with almost no help, a house in the woods. It took him almost twenty years. After his death we rehabbed the house. We found, stuck here and there, as part of the inner structure of the house, things like turtle shells, and branches

and twigs from the dogwood trees in the front yard. It was unusual stuff to find in the walls of a house, but when we saw the inner workings of the house, we saw more clearly my grandfather's life, and we felt tenderness for him and for his creation.

We need to soften our heart/mind to whatever is present — twigs, turtle shells, fear, grief. In talking with my friend I suggested that she might consider turning towards her depression and working with it with lovingkindness. That she might relinquish the hostility she feels towards the present condition of her mind and body, and instead cultivate some tenderness and compassion towards it, and thus, towards herself. Most important in working with our Frankensteins is that we hold them in spaciousness. This awareness of spaciousness can arise through our meditation practice (zazen). Through zazen we begin to relinquish our tightly held belief in the small self and the tightly held story that holds it together. We can return to the empty stage over and over and, when we create, do so with more compassion for the process and more wisdom — and less fear — in the results.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests a mantra* that we can use with our friends and family, and also our inner demons: “Darling, I know you are suffering, and I am here for you.” I suggested this to my friend—that she move in close to the being called “depression” and make contact through the use of this mantra. In this way we bring our bodhisattva practice, the great practice of saving all sentient beings, into the middle of our own heart.

*A mantra is a sound that has the power to be spiritually transformative.