

Carrying Heavy Loads

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Luke 13:10-17

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA
March 11, 2007*

About two months ago, Art Buchwald died. For those who might not know who Art Buchwald was, he was a humorist and political columnist. In his heyday in the 1970s, his columns were syndicated in over 400 newspapers. He won the Pulitzer Prize and wrote several novels and plays. But mostly he made people smile, poking fun at politicians in specific and life in general. When asked shortly before his death how he wanted to be remembered, he said, "I want to be remembered as someone who made people laugh and feel better."

Several years ago at Emory University, Buchwald gave the Second Annual Rosalyn Carter Lecture in Mental Health Journalism. The title of his speech was "Depression's Not All It's Cracked Up To Be." Buchwald claimed to be imminently qualified to speak on the topic of depression for two reasons. First, he had lived in Washington, D.C. for over 40 years, which as he put it is a place "riddled with unstable people holding high public office [who] are either severely depressed or [who] depress other people." Second, he himself had battled depression. On two occasions his depression was bad enough to warrant hospitalization. He used to say that if he had another serious bout of depression, he could be inducted into the Bipolar Hall of Fame.

Buchwald's gift was the ability to talk honestly about depression as a serious disease, and yet to remind people that you do emerge from the depths and despair. With therapy and medicine, with the support of others, depression doesn't last forever; there is light at the end of the tunnel. His humor and honesty helped remove the stigma attached to admitting one suffers from serious depression and offered hope to sufferers and family members alike. When you're carrying a heavy load like depression in your life, the first step in the healing process is being able to name openly what you're suffering.

In today's world, when it almost seems a crime to be anything less than chronically happy and spiritually upbeat, it's good to remember how scripture is honest about those times when we endure "dark nights of the soul," when we are depressed and have lost all hope. Psalm 88 says eloquently, "My soul is full of troubles. I am counted among those who go down to the abyss; like those who have no help, like those whom you remember no more." In 1 Kings 19, the prophet Elijah became so depressed that he sat down under a tree and prayed to die, saying "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." Those voices are a critical part of our faith tradition. Without an honest acknowledgment of life's shadows, we can have no appreciation of the light. Without an honest remembrance of the cross of Calvary, we have no true capacity to dance with Mary Magdalene outside an empty tomb on Easter morning.

In 2004, Buchwald sat on a panel with author William Styron and “60 Minutes” co-anchor Mike Wallace, all three of whom are good friends and who suffer from depression. They called themselves “The Blues Brothers.” Wallace talked about how hard it was to live with the stigma associated with being depressed. He said, “You’re in pain. You’re lower than a snake’s belly. You can’t sleep, you can’t eat, and you’re ashamed. That’s the worst part because you don’t want to tell anyone how you are feeling.”

Once, when hospitalized for depression, Buchwald got angry with his doctor when he said, “I understand your pain.” No doctor or anybody else can understand what a depression is really like unless they’ve been depressed. Buchwald described it as plunging into a terrible inky lake. You lose all self-respect. You are sure everyone knows your dirty, dark secrets. You feel suicidal, even homicidal. Buchwald was once presented a “Lifetime Achievement Award for Depression,” supposedly for his advice: “Don’t commit suicide, because you might change your mind two weeks later.” He loved to say that he never killed himself because his goal in life was to have a big obituary in the New York Times and he was afraid Al Gore would die on the same day and take up all the space. But with all seriousness, Buchwald would also tell people, “Don’t hurt yourself. You will not only not be solving your problems, but you will be hurting the ones you love.”

Buchwald openly admitted that the main things that saved his life were the hospital staff, doctors, family and friends who were there for him during his depression. They checked on him, called him, talked with him. They helped him remember that he wasn’t alone. When I surveyed some of the material on how congregations can respond to people with mental illness, it repeated over and over again how important it is to check in with people suffering from depression: send cards, telephone, keep in contact both with them and their family, partners or spouses. Remind them of your love and God’s love for them, and that this illness is not a punishment sent upon them until they get their life set right by God’s standards. Be there for them, close enough to reach out and touch them and help them ease out from beneath the heavy load they’re carrying.

Jesus did that. For eighteen years, almost half a lifetime back in biblical days, a woman carried a heavy load – a crippled back that kept her from standing up straight. It was something more than a slight hunchback or osteoporosis. She was bent over, unable to look people in the eyes. Her visual field was not the blue sky or the distant horizon but only the ground around her feet or what she could manage to see with a sidelong glance. No secret depressive tendencies here; her stigma was obvious to all. That was her world, her reality day after day, month after month.

Notice, though, the four verbs used in vs. 12-13, where it says, “Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ And he laid his hands on her.” Preacher Jana Childers has remarked that if you’re going to make eye-contact with a woman physically bent over, you have to bend down yourself. In fact, Christ may well have had to kneel in front of her so they could look one another in the eyes. It’s a beautiful image of Jesus kneeling before this outcast, unnamed woman,

squatting down however far it was necessary to see her eye to eye, to cup her face and offer hope to one whose horizon of sight was only the dirt road around her feet. Such is the nature of our loving God.

When Jesus called to this woman and spoke to her, he was close enough to touch her, to lay his hands on her – something likely very few people had dared or desired to do for years. And then the bible doesn't say Jesus healed her. It uses a much stronger verb – 'apuluo' which means "to set free." He loosed her from her affliction; he set her free, unburdening her by removing her heavy load. At last she could stand up straight again, look people in the eye, see the horizon as a destination of hope, and with that begin praising God.

For people with diseases of mental illness and serious depression, the pattern toward wholeness is the same as this bible story. We see and recognize those who are suffering; we call them by name, as sisters and brothers in Christ, as friends and loved ones. We get close enough to look them in the eye, to listen as they speak, to lay our hands on them. And we seek to help carry their heavy load, checking in with them, reminding them that they're not alone in the darkness and to get help when we can't honestly provide it. Buchwald the depressive became a great friend and resource to his friends who also suffered from depression. He said: "This is what I learned from my depression. You help people, who do not believe there is any help [out there], help you at the same time." Although Buchwald didn't use explicit biblical language, his words are a clear statement of faith. Like the Golden Rule to do to others as you would have them do to you; to love others as Christ has first loved us, we are here on Earth to embody hope and love and help for others, who don't believe there is any hope, love and true help in this world, and in the process be helped ourselves. Like St. Francis' prayer, it is in giving that we receive; in loving, that we are loved; in helping one another carry their heavy burdens that we all are set free, able to straighten up at last and praise God.

About a year ago, Art Buchwald's kidneys were failing so he went into hospice care to die. The problem was he didn't die, so he did what he always did in life – he wrote a book and he went to his summer home on Martha's Vineyard. For all the people who weren't comfortable talking about depression, Buchwald helped them laugh about it. For all the people who weren't comfortable talking about dying, for several months he entertained friends and guests and helped them laugh about death as well. This is the man who in commencement speeches would tell the graduates with great mocking solemnity, "We have given you a perfect world. Don't screw it up." This is the man who deflected talking about heaven and would say instead, "The big question we still have to ask is not where we're going, but what we are doing here in the first place."

Like a friend who is there when you feel that all have abandoned you to the abyss, like one who bends down to look you in the face and lays hands on you when you're bent and distorted and struggling down life's road, like one who says with a smile and twinkle in the eye, "This is a perfect world. Don't screw it up", such is the nature of God and the nature of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

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Reference:

Art Buchwald, Too Soon to Say Goodbye, 2006.

Art Buchwald, "Depression's Not All It's Cracked Up To Be," Sept. 15, 1999 lecture, Emory University.

Jana Childers, "The Kyphotic Woman", *30 Good Minutes*, Feb. 6, 2005.