

Taking the “self” out of Self-pity

By

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“Poor me...poor me...pour me a drink.” This is one of the many catchy mottoes from Alcoholics Anonymous. However, you don’t need to be an alcoholic to wallow in self-pity. Lately, it has occurred to me that much of what we call moodiness, the blues, or despair is really self-pity. We are looking at our current life situation, perhaps comparing ourselves to others and coming up short. We feel helpless to do anything about it and slump into the morass of feeling sorry for ourselves. Perhaps a fresh look at this pervasive malady will shed new light on a very old problem. I would like to look at this unfortunate condition through three lenses; the skeptical, monotheistic and spiritual (monistic) viewpoints. Monistic spirituality (the idea that All is One) is becoming increasingly popular and is my modality. However, I think self-pity can be minimized via monotheism or even skepticism. However, as we shall see later, the real healing comes from integrating and experiencing our Oneness with God. The three views of humankind have one idea in common. We must take the “self” out of self pity in order to heal. How we get the “self” out depends upon how we view life.

For the purposes of this article, I will define a skeptic as someone who doubts that there is a God. Skeptics fall into two groups. Atheists profess to know that there is no God, agnostics simply doubt it. Both groups, however, see human beings as primarily separate, biological creatures, competing with each other for scarce resources. Survival goes to the fittest and brightest. Natural selection weeds out the weak and unfit. Life is therefore seen as a struggle of physical bodies to survive and prosper due to a combination of hard work, talent and confidence. From this point of view, we are either “winners” or “losers.” Even the “winners,” however, often think they are not doing well enough. Thus, there are many more losers than winners, in terms of how people feel. There is a strong tendency to become self absorbed and self pitying in such a paradigm. After all, the only thing that matters is surviving and “winning” at the game of life. This means more than just accumulating wealth. It means that things should always-or almost always-go your way. If you think you are a good person-and most people think they are-then you should be guaranteed health, wealth and little or no misfortune. Anyone who sees life this way, is bound to be at least moderately narcissistic and could easily fall prey to feelings of self pity when things are not going right.

I remember my dismay after having a heart attack four years ago. “How could this happen to me?” I mused to myself. “I am thin, have normal cholesterol, exercise, eat a vegetarian diet, have a good attitude and am a good person. How could I get a heart attack while that other guy who is fat, lazy, atheistic and depressed doesn’t have a heart attack?” Wow, if that wasn’t self pity, what was? I realized I was making what I call “the deal with the empty chair.” I felt that if I did everything right, I should never get sick.

“Why me?” might be the motto of the self-pitying person. The key to the self-pity is that there is nobody in the other chair making such a deal. The deal was all in my head, based on the “good boy who does all the right things” solution to inevitable problems in life, especially from the materialist, skeptical point of view. Not only that, although I believe I am spiritual, my body became the focus when I got sick. I reverted to the skeptical materialist point of view. My spirituality became “spiritual materialism. I wanted god to heal my physical body, NOW!!!! From a material point of view, I began to think that that health is a very complex thing. The controllable factors like diet and exercise do not guarantee anything. There are also genetic, environmental, and unconscious psychological factors which may be beyond our control. We may even be in denial about certain related factors as I will explain in my own case.

I was in denial about the importance of dental health on my heart. I did not floss and refused to use the prescribed dental rinse because it contained an antibiotic. Bad move. I also have a genetic inflammatory disease called Familial Mediterranean Fever (FMF). There is a preventative medication, colchicine. I refused to take it. In my prideful way, I wanted to be medication free. Thus, I had an FMF attack 5 days before the heart attack. I saw no connection. I now believe that inflammation from the gums and FMF were the physical triggers to my problem. I could have done something, but didn't know about the connections. I am not blaming myself. It was a combination of lack of knowledge and denial. However, even if I had all the knowledge and physically did “everything right,” it still could have happened. Health is not totally controllable. From a skeptic's point of view, one should take as much control as possible and let go of the results. Acceptance of uncontrollable factors, like genetics and environment is part of taking responsibility for one's life. It is the mentally healthy way of dealing with problems in living. For skeptics, taking responsibility (not blame) for one's health and accepting what you get takes the narcissistic self out of self-pity. From this point of view, self-pity can be healed.

The weakness of this system, however, is that it places inordinate pressure on the conscious ego. How much knowledge does one have to have to survive? How much self-care is enough? When should one take a pill? Go to a doctor? Run to the emergency room? Exactly how and when does a person surrender to fate and the uncontrollable factors in life and health? These are difficult problems indeed and cannot be completely solved without going outside the ego-body system. Thus, I have been impelled to go beyond the body and ego into the realm of God and faith.

Better Answers

Yes, God is the answer to healing self-pity. But who or what is God and what does He/She want of me? Traditional monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam view God as a super-being that controls everything. In the Old Testament, the loving God keeps trying to teach his disobedient creations (from Adam onward) to love and revere him. Then, everything will be wonderful. As we know, human beings keep disobeying orders and keep getting punished by God who is slow to anger, but does get angry at his creations. Of course, we humans never get the point and keep going our own

“selfish” ways. Thus, we keep getting punished by the angry God who loves us and just wants us to get the spiritual point; love him and each other and then he will be quick to forgive.

The New Testament tried to correct the vision of an angry God by emphasizing the perfect love, Jesus, God’s son had for humanity. Of course, people still did not listen and he had to die for our sins. That is the traditional interpretation. However, monistic interpretations, like the contemporary Course in Miracles, differ on the meaning as we shall see later. At any rate, it is very helpful in healing self pity or healing anything for that matter, to believe that a loving God is on your side waiting to help. Prayer becomes the vehicle we use for the healing. We ask God to do the healing. We may or may not have to do anything ourselves. But we go outside the ego system of total self reliance and ask a higher power, however we understand it, to help us. Thus, we are not alone and isolated in a hostile world of uncontrollable factors. Help from an outside source is available. Healing is ours for the asking. Further, death is not an obliteration of who we are. We are essentially an immortal soul, just temporarily housed in a body. When the body dies, we are simply released into an invisible, spiritual realm, sometimes called Heaven. The idea is to pray for guidance, listen for answers, perhaps take some action-or perhaps just have faith and trust that whatever happens will be for the highest good of our soul.

For anyone with faith, this is a big improvement over the skeptical materialist, courageously facing his inability to control his eventual demise and obliteration from a meaningless, random world. There is a reason why religions continue to flourish in an increasingly complex, scientific, materialistic world. A belief in God gives people hope that their life has meaning. It takes the pressure off the constant need for vigilance and control. The higher power, God, understands and knows things that we humans do not know. Thus, the development of faith is a key element in healing self pity. The self can do some things to survive and prosper, but the real power is in God. Most skeptics say that they would like to believe in God but can’t understand why a loving God would create and maintain a world such as ours, full of suffering. The answer, given to us in the book of Job, is that we do not understand everything and we must learn something through our suffering, faith and trust in God. Out of the worst suffering comes spiritual growth. Perhaps even physical death leads to a better state of being. This is the lesson of traditional religious belief. The problem with monotheism is that it seems to imply a separation between humankind and God. Thus, monistic spirituality-a belief that we are all One with God is more helpful. With monistic spirituality, physical death is not a big issue. It is not physical death that releases us into the experience of God. It is understanding and experience that elevate us into oneness, peace and love.

The Spirituality of Oneness

The Oneness of God is always there. We are one in God. In truth, we never left this unending source of love, peace and bliss. The very nature of the One source of all being is immutable and immortal. Our experience on Earth, however, is nothing like this heavenly state. Instead we are dogged by a gnawing sense of fear, guilt and danger. When things don’t go our way, we get angry and petulant. These emotions are very disturbing,

mentally and physically, so we develop defenses to keep them out of our awareness. We automatically repress most of the disturbing emotions. What we cannot repress we consciously suppress. What we cannot suppress or repress we outright deny and project onto other people. It is as if we are saying, “My unhappiness isn’t my fault...it is your fault.” We may blame others, the “bureaucracy”, the government or even God, anyone but ourselves. Such denial and projection, of course, leads to conflict. Individually we have disagreements, screaming matches, even physical fights. En masse, we have wars. The very existence of the planet depends on withdrawing our projections, stopping our denial and repression and recognizing what is really going on at the psycho-spiritual level. We are feeling separate from our Source, God and thus feel separate from each other. The answer to all our problems, including the indulgence of self pity, is reconnecting with the Source, experiencing the peace and love of the Source. This reconnection involves a true “self-ectomy.” The recognition that the self is a made up concoction of cognitive and emotional experiences of a lifetime is a shock. The “you” that You think you are is a series of learned beliefs based upon your experiences as a separate individual. We are taught from the word “go” that we are nothing but a separate person having sensations and experiences in a body. Our natural tendency is to cling to that which is familiar. It is familiar to feel alone and isolated in a hostile, competitive world. Most of our everyday experiences reinforce this view. It is very hard to see that our beliefs create our experiences. We feel that the experiences just randomly happen to us. Then we create the beliefs. We have everything backwards.

A brief look at developmental psychology confirms the idea that our belief systems are learned. With great difficulty and trauma, we learn that we are separate from others at the physical level. We learn strategies to “survive.” The first half of most lives is concerned with developing beliefs that seem to insure survival and perhaps success. At mid-life, most people take it as fact that we are separate in body and mind. We do not realize, however, that our very separation and individuality is the cause of our suffering. Instead, we feel that we are somehow inadequate or unworthy of happiness. It is a personal failing, not a species wide mistake that makes us suffer. Or, we are helpless victims in an uncaring brutal world. Either way, at mid life, we face a choice, continue to stubbornly reiterate and re-experience the materialization of our beliefs. With this choice, we will continue to suffer. Or, we can choose to dis-identify with the beliefs and see what else there is to “Us.” In the absence of any scientific “proof” that there is any more to us than the obvious ego-brain-body-idea, most people choose the former. However, there are some who simply intuit that there is something more to us than just a brain-body that dies and becomes nothing. For the latter smaller group there are many places to turn.

There are many traditions that tell us of this spiritual adventure. Among them are the ancient Advaita (no two) Vedanta, Ancient Kabbalistic Judaism, the Existential Metapsychiatry of Dr. Thomas Hora, The Infinite way of Joel Goldsmith and the contemporary opus, “A Course in Miracles.” For the purposes of this article, I will merge these philosophies into a spirituality of Oneness.

According to the writings of Rabbi Isaac Luria (16th Century) the physical world was started by an IMPLOSION (called-Tzim-Tsum)of God. Instead of an explosion

there was an implosion. This means that all is still One. However, the vessels designed to hold the contents of the implosion couldn't take the heat and seemed to shatter into shards of light. We humans, indeed, the entire physical world is composed of these seeming shards of Godly light. This is a spiritual big-bang theory. The implosion part insinuates that the seeming separation is not real. The seemingly separate shards are still part of God. They simply need to be raised back into the oneness through human thoughts and deeds. In Judaism fervently following 613 laws (mitzvot) of good conduct, spiritual values and loving kindness (kavannah) raises the sparks and re-institutes the Oneness.

This coincides well with the Course in Miracles mythology. Here, a perfect, loving, peaceful God is rolling along when a "tiny mad idea" occurs. Some part of the Oneness falls under the illusion that it could split off and set up its own kingdom, the material world, separate from the Source (God) and independent of Him. In reality, this is impossible, but it seems to be real. Within the material world are people, who have no idea what happened and follow along with the worldly program of individual existence in material form. The problem is that once the illusion seems real, it engenders sin and guilt. The guilt is about a metaphysical "running away from home" and thinking it is independent of the Source (father) when the truth of it is that it could never really be separate from the source and is just fooling itself. The guilt is about disobedience. Then there is the fear of Godly retribution (amply demonstrated in the Jewish Old Testament). Guilt, however, is too painful to feel, so anger is created by denying any responsibility for this mess of a world and blaming it on someone else (other people, God). This in turn creates more fear that God will retaliate angrily. The rest is human history. People feel alone, isolated and are suffering, and denying any responsibility for it. In particular, they deny that their suffering has any connection to God or spirituality. They would rather see the material as real and God as non-existent non-caring or punitive. Thus, we have the human situation. As I see it, the spirituality of Oneness is the only way out of this self-created trap.

Both A course in Miracles and Dr. Thomas Hora agree that experiencing the love and peace of God can be accomplished. The path is to use your life as a giant lesson plan. Each time you suffer, think of what spiritual lesson or value is being learned. Then, instead of retreating into self pity, depression or anxiety, make the shift in thinking that is required. It is a spiritual-cognitive shift. According to the course, we must learn to see all of humankind as One and the same-Spirit. This enables us to practice forgiveness and the development of "holy relationships." This is the only reason we are on Earth having physical experiences.

Dr. Hora says there are only two intelligent questions; "What is the meaning of what seems to be?" and "What is what really is?" I believe that answering these questions at each and every upsetting experience will lead us into the experience and understanding of spiritual values and spiritual living. It will enable us to really be forgiving of others and eventually ourselves. If we keep choosing peace, instead of the seeming "rightness" of our material obsession, we can attain a life free of self pity and full of peace, love, and gratitude.

