

“Reinterpreting Depression”

“A depression can be a golden opportunity given to us by life to face head-on issues that matter greatly to our hearts, but which, out of haste or ignorance, have been swept under the carpet.”-Elif Shafak

When I read this quote in Elif Shafak’s exploration of post-partum depression in “Black Milk,” I was struck by the interpretation of depression as something that can be considered ‘not all bad.’ Being trained in any professional mental health field, one is faced with the reality of ‘the diagnosis.’ Though it can certainly be harmful to some in it’s labeling-a label which typically follows a person for the remainder of his/her life despite the ability to cope or not-diagnoses are often necessary in order to get necessary treatment. Insurance companies, after all, will not pay for someone to discuss their sad feelings alone; those sad feelings must be significant enough that they warrant a diagnosis classified in the DSM (now in it’s IV-TR edition).

The word “depression” has become common language in our times. Many people in our society now seek out the help of a therapist to sort through difficult feelings or challenging times in their lives. It looms over our heads with a pervasive sadness that seems to permeate our modern lives. Is this a product of advanced technology, the push to make more money, work harder, do more? We are surrounded by ads for anti-depressants and doctors seem to write prescriptions for them as if they were multi-vitamins. It seems almost assumed that one would be depressed in this fast paced world.

Certainly there are grades of sadness/depression, and different types. Depression that is based on a family or individual history of mental health problems and difficulty coping (considered “endogenous”) may be more resistant to treatment and require medication to help pull someone from the depths of their emotion. However, there is also the depression that can overcome us when we find ourselves in challenging times-overwhelmed, overstretched, unsure how to proceed (“exogenous” depression). Because this depression is more connected to external stimuli, we can learn how to adjust and alter our coping mechanisms in order to find new ways to move beyond the difficult times. Often, such a depression is better treated with talk therapy than medication.

Reading Elif Shafak’s quote again, I think it is naïve to believe that anybody facing depression would be able to see it as “a golden opportunity given to us by life to face head-on issues that matter greatly to our hearts.” But this

may speak to those who believe that the light is still at the end of the tunnel...if they can just keep pushing through.