



A Memoir

Blest by the Dark Angel

Transformed and Healed through Depression

Ann Keiffer

Facts about depression and treatment that could save a life

- **MAJOR WARNING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION:** Persistent sadness; hopelessness; difficulty in making decisions; fatigue or loss of energy; irritability; inability to concentrate; noticeable changes in eating, sleeping, or sexual habits; thoughts of suicide.
- **YOU ARE NOT ALONE:** If you are depressed, you are not alone. Clinical depression is one of the most common mental health problems. In fact, depression is so prevalent it has been called the “common cold” of mental illness.
- **DEPRESSION CAN STRIKE ANYONE:** Each year more than 19 million Americans—children, teens, men, and women—experience clinical depression.*
- **TAKE SERIOUSLY ANY TALK OF SUICIDE:** Depression is the principle cause of 30,000 suicides each year.
- **MULTIPLE RISK FACTORS:** Clinical depression may be brought on by a single factor or a combination of factors, including: **biology** (changes in brain chemistry), **cognitive issues** (such as negative thinking), **gender** (women experience depression at a rate twice that of men), **medication** (side effects), **genetics** (family history of depression), **co-occurrence** (brought on by another illness), **situational** (stressful life events).

- **DIAGNOSIS IS KEY TO RECOVERY:** Depression in anyone at any age requires diagnosis and treatment. Though women experience clinical depression at a rate much higher than that of men, some researchers think statistics for men may be under-reported. Men may find it more difficult to seek help, and so go undiagnosed. Or men's depression may be categorized as an associated problem, such as stress, substance-abuse, physical-abuse, etc.
- **NO SHAME, NO BLAME:** Fewer than half of all depression-sufferers seek treatment. This may be because they believe depression is an embarrassing personal weakness, rather than the serious medical illness it is. Depression is not a weakness of character. It is not something to hide. It is an illness that requires treatment. It is a reason to find the physical- and mental-health support needed for healing.
- **HAVE COURAGE, REACH OUT:** Most people suffer for nearly a decade without treatment. People may try to brush-off depression as just "the blues, nothing serious." Or they may attempt to treat themselves by self-medicating. The most important way for depression-sufferers to help themselves is to get the physical- and mental-health support necessary for healing.
- **DEPRESSION IS A TREATABLE DISEASE:** People can and do recover, often feeling they are stronger, happier, and better able to cope. Help is available in every community.

** All statistics from Mental Health America
(formerly National Mental Health Association)*

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Foreword by Judith Duerk,
Therapist and Author of *Circle of Stones*

Photography by John Keiffer



ShadowDancePress

Walnut Creek, California



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shadowdancepress@comcast.net

Paperback: ISBN 978-0-9893801-0-2
ebook: ISBN 978-0-9893801-1-9

Design: Diana Russell Design
Photographs: John Keiffer

Printed and bound in USA

An earlier version of this book
was published in 1991 by LuraMedia
as *Gift of the Dark Angel*

The events depicted in this book are true.
The names of certain people and
organizations have been changed.

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*To my well-loved father,
who went before
and did the best he could.
May this be your healing, too.*

*To my son John,
for going into the unknown
—over and over—
and creating with me.*

*To my husband Larry,
for walking every mile with me,
honoring my creative process,
and loving me with nothing held back.*

Jacob Wrestles the Angel

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place, Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

Hebrew Scriptures
Genesis 32: 24-30, RSV

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Foreword

By Judith Duerk

Surely one of the most challenging experiences in life today is to go through a depression. Yet, even more challenging than that is to remain faithful to it. . .to allow oneself to experience it deeply enough and with humility enough to come through the depression with a greater sense of the depth and meaning possible in one's life. Furthermore, to be willing to see that those very qualities of depth and meaning could never have revealed themselves if one had gone on living insistently in "the old habits" or by "the old rules."

For going through a depression with honesty changes us. It changes our plans. And it changes the things we believed that we must live by. It *forms* us to go against the usual practices of modern life: of keeping constantly busy, of hurrying oneself every moment, of working as hard as one possibly can at every task, and of competing, at all times, with all of one's energies, leaving little strength or spirit left over for relating, and no matter the cost, to succeed at all of this!

Moreover, hardly anything in contemporary society is as deeply feared as depression. Our culture places great value on outer appearances and little on the inner life of the individual. We are frantic to get ahead and suppress our feeling needs, at great cost. Depression is the insistence of our inner nature that we come to a more honest balance. Like the dragon hiding behind the mountain, it is hardly mentioned and rarely dealt with.

Ann Keiffer draws our respect as a remarkable exception and an encouraging and brave example. Ann lived *with awareness* through a depression, allowing herself to experience it, rather than rising above it in busy denial, and worked with it until it offered up its truth for her life.

Ann takes us with her on a journey of great challenge and great honesty. Rather than hiding the depression, with a sense of

embarrassment for not being buoyant and “up,” as modern standards seem to demand, Ann shares with us her experience of one of the true challenges of life, and the depth and meaning that going through that challenge with honesty can reveal.

Ann describes poignantly her sense of inadequacy and even shame during this time and her painful awareness of how forbidden depression is in our society as others failed to reach out to her. Their own doubts and fears deepened her isolation.

Alone, she waited. Finally, there was a turning. Ann found a source of true witnessing, and her pain was validated.

Like many women today, Ann realized she must bring into greater balance her needs in the Masculine and Feminine realms. As she worked with this, with the values of Doing and Being, she came to new awareness of her needs in the Feminine—her need for quiet, for time alone, time in nature, time to Be. She began, slowly, to restructure her life, moment by moment, allowing these needs to be the center, rather than the periphery.

Ann had the faith to believe that there was meaning in her depression and the courage to write about it in her own subjective terms, sharing that meaning with others. She had been visited by the Dark Angel, Blest with a stronger and deeper sense of life and of her own self-hood.

Judith Duerk,
Therapist and Author of *Circle of Stones*

Introduction

You are about to enter with me into a period of my life that encompassed immense struggle, sadness and loss...and unexpectedly, also transformation. In the safety of these pages, you will get an intimate look at the experience of depression from the inside out. I believe you will come to understand why I now say I believe even the darkest periods in a person's life hold transforming possibilities.

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This book was originally published under the title *Gift of the Dark Angel: A Woman's Journey through Depression toward Wholeness*. That book went out of print when the publishing house was sold. I have revised and updated this edition to present the full story, the evolution of my own understanding of all I experienced during the time surrounding my depression and in its continued unfolding in my life. This new edition also includes fourteen photographs and poems that came knocking on the door of my life in a most mysterious way...

Following publication of the original book, I had the opportunity to give a number of talks about depression for book stores, libraries, churches and women's groups. While it was satisfying to share my story in this way and to get to know readers in person, I felt there was more creative work I needed to do on the subject of depression. But I had no idea what that was.

One night I woke abruptly, galvanized by a feeling of urgency and the after-images of a dream. In the dream I had seen a series of blurry impressions of black-and-white photographs, and in the dream I knew the images were about the way I had experienced depression and the concomitant possibility for transformation. I did not see actual images in the dream, just hazy blurs. But this was it. I knew what I needed to do. I felt I was being called to bring this visual work into the world, to translate the amorphous blurs of my dream into actual images with the power to reach out and teach about depression in a unique, evocative way.

Synchronously, my son John had graduated from California College of the Arts with a degree in photography. He was not working as a photographer, but he had the skills...as well as a purist's love of black-and-white images. I could hardly wait until morning so I could call him. At 8:00 AM when he answered the phone the next day, I told him I had a project, and I wanted to know if he would be willing to work with me on it. He listened as I poured out my account of the dream and my sense of an exhibit about depression. Knowing me as he does, he said he would be willing to work with me *if* I treated it like an art project and didn't try to finish it in an hour. And so we began...

A few days later John came to the house lugging his camera equipment, lights, and a backdrop. I had made a list of some specific things I wanted to say about depression through our images. My own depression was long gone, but when my son came toward me with his camera, real tears sprang to my eyes. The camera wanted to know everything about depression for everyone who had ever been depressed and everyone who had ever had to witness a loved one or friend sinking into the quicksand of depression. Click. Click. Click. The camera worked fast. Try this. Try that. Experimentation. In a few weeks we had gotten the shots we were after. We had also gotten powerful images we had never planned.

Fourteen black-and-white images. I laid them out on my desk, lingered over each one, and fourteen accompanying poems practically typed themselves on my keyboard. I arranged the images and poems in a portfolio and took them to the director of the mental health department of our county. As a result, through a local foundation, John and I received a grant to produce a traveling art exhibit consisting of the images and poems, facts about depression, and local mental health hotline numbers to call for help.

I had already gotten to work booking public venues where the art exhibit would reach a wide cross-section of people and be

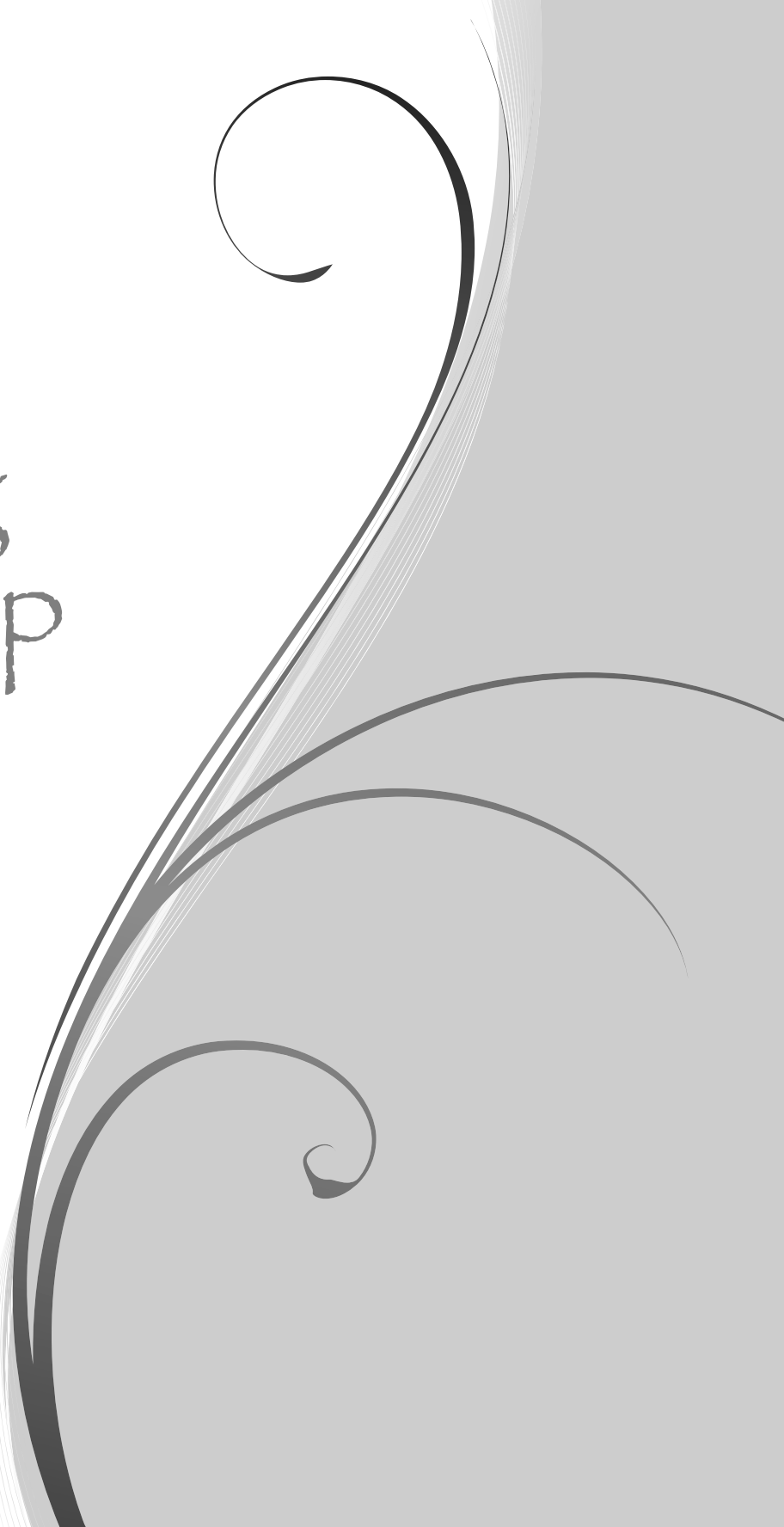
My own depression was long gone, but when my son came toward me with his camera, real tears sprang to my eyes.

easily accessible for viewing. For three years my husband Larry and I took the exhibit down once a month, laid back the rear seats in the car, loaded the exhibit and all its columns and moorings, drove it to the next scheduled venue, carried it in, and reassembled it in that location. My cherished keepsake for this long devotion is a series of notebooks which hung with the exhibit, each one filled with comments written by viewers. So much heartache. So much truth. So many expressions of appreciation for “showing” what depression looks like and how it feels.

Now I bring that exhibit to you along with my story. May you find meaning here.

Chapter 1

Lighting the Lamp



When I was thirty-eight, without warning, I plummeted into the deepest black abyss of depression.

When I was thirty-six years old, I had it made. Two years before, I'd given up my regular paycheck to chase down a chance at a dream. More than anything, I'd wanted to become an advertising copywriter. By the time I was thirty-six, without any formal training and by the skin of my own wits, I'd pulled it off. *More* than pulled it off—I'd gotten myself hired by one of the best ad agencies in the business. I was full of enthusiasm and the joy of life, higher than the cow that jumped over the moon. On top of this, I had an adoring husband and a terrific teenage son. If not the Queen of Hearts and Happiness, I felt, at the very least, like a princess in line to the throne.

When I was thirty-eight, without warning, I plummeted into the deepest black abyss of depression—an abyss as desolate and final as a grave. Alone, at the bottom of that grave, I struggled with the Dark Angel of depression for more than a year. I was deadened by fatigue, sick and spiritless, so brain-weary even the smallest decisions overwhelmed me. Though I wept for want of sleep, I could not rest. Though I hungered for health, I could not eat. I lost hope, lost my way, lost myself, and finally lost all reason to live.

Why did this depression fell me? By what means was I resurrected from it? Why do I now consider my sojourn in hell both a grace and a blessing? In the beginning, I thought these questions were a matter only for my own personal catechism. But I now believe that my story, the meaning and soul-direction I found buried in my depression, may have significance for other people, too. Especially other women.

When I was in my late twenties, I had a Technicolor dream that hinted strongly of an inner conflict, and the dream has remained straight-pinned to my memory for years:

I am planning to sew some new clothes for myself. I have purchased a crisp cotton fabric, woven in a cheerful plaid of Crayola hues: chartreuse, yellow, hot pink, and orange. The fabric is laid out on the

table, but I am confused. The only pattern I own is for a man's suit, and I am disturbed because I have forgotten the tricks I used to know that would make a man's suit fit me.

I knew this dream was important. I even suspected it was a kind of warning—that my fabric wasn't suited to a pattern meant for a man, that I was at risk for making a life that did not fit me. But what *was* the Masculine pattern of which the dream warned? I was petite, at ease in relationships, cooperative, and easily competent—in what way was I a Masculine woman? Too young and too early bent, I did not recognize that my basic operating principle—my relentless drive to “make things happen,” my incessant “doing” and striving—was a Masculine value. And I had no idea how little I valued or understood my own Feminine soul.

Shortly after my man's-suit dream, I was attending a seminar in which we were introduced to a technique called “active imagination,” a process whereby the imagination could be employed to solve problems, encourage relaxation, and provide insightful guidance. With our eyes closed, we were asked to imagine for ourselves “a safe place,” a place where we could retreat when we needed to seek our own answers. This safe place was to have two doors. And on that day, each of those two doors was to open in turn, revealing someone with whom we needed to communicate.

For my safe place, I built a room paneled in redwood, hung it with ferns as befit the times, and installed two doors which, for some reason, rose slowly from bottom to top. But I was not prepared for the two people who arrived:

The door on the right side of my safe place slowly rises. I see a pair of black, threatening, sharp-toed cowboy boots, followed by black pants and a black silk shirt with three of its buttons left undone to reveal a chestful of gold chains and medallions. Here he is: a handsome gunslinger with jet-black hair, a black hat, and a villain's thin black mustache. His name is Duke. He doesn't walk;

My fabric wasn't suited to a pattern meant for a man. I was at risk for making a life that did not fit me.

he swaggers. A bar-brawler, a guy who drives a car like a weapon, Duke radiates raw Masculine power—a power which, in his case, is twisted by a mean spirit.

It was not the first time I had seen Duke. I had already met him once before in a dream—a dream in which he was menacing a woman, threatening to torture her, pinning her to the ground with one black boot placed on her chest. And I was the woman in that dream.

Duke was the opposite of any man I ever would have wanted to know. In fact, I would have walked through a sewer to avoid any man like him. Still, I found myself inexplicably drawn to him, mesmerized by his ruthlessness and power. Duke, I later realized, was the representation of my own inner Masculine values, the force that drove me to do and achieve. And when I abdicated my authority to him, Duke was the force that became my *undoing*.

When the door on the left side of my safe place was raised, it revealed a person who was Duke's opposite in every way:

The first thing I see is a pair of dirty feet with broken toenails and the calluses of hard-traveling. Incongruously, as the door rises higher, I see the skirt of a pink satin, tiered dress, one very like a dress I wore when I played the part of a dancing doll in an operetta when I was a little girl. But, in this case, the dress belongs to a woman.

As the door continues to rise slowly all the way to the top, I see beautiful, womanly hands, and then a long strand of pearls looping down from a slender neck. Finally, I am looking on the wavy, golden hair of a Southern belle and the pretty, but despairing, face of Valentine.

For that was her name. I knew it surely. Just as I knew that she represented my own inner Feminine. But what was the meaning of those dirty, hardened feet? And why was she so sad? Unfortu-

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nately, Valentine would become sadder still—and very sick—before I would actually come to appreciate her value. The healing of Valentine would be my own healing.

In her book *Circle of Stones*, Judith Duerk, a therapist with a Jungian perspective, writes:

Collective attitudes have evolved fostering archetypal Masculine doing and achieving values. As woman entered the work realm outside her home...there was little recognition that her process as a woman was of a different nature or that doing/achievement values were not complete or valid for her.

The issue is not whether a woman can achieve, but that preoccupation with achievement may deny a descent into her deeper nature which a woman must make to touch her true strengths...the power of the Feminine...comes of being, not doing...¹

How might such a compulsion towards doing and achieving—and our reluctance to put value on reflection, quiet time, and introversion—relate to the fact that women experience clinical depression at a rate twice that of men in the United States?² How might such a compulsion relate to my own depression? Judith Duerk goes on to describe what may happen if we, as women, allow ourselves to become driven in our pursuit of achievement, mere slaves to a daily onslaught of tasks and busy-ness:

If a woman is caught in over-extended lifestyle and achievement-oriented values, depression or illness may offer the only opportunity to allow her to be with herself. As she ignores her own needs for quiet and self-nurture, the voice of the deeper Self may call through depression. If a woman cannot let herself hear her own needs, but continues to adhere fearfully to a lifestyle that denies her inner growth and deepening, the voice of the Self may

How might such a compulsion towards doing and achieving relate to the fact that women experience clinical depression at a rate twice that of men in the United States?