

# Making something good out of depression

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Without warning, depression hit me one day. Then came the panic attacks and mental paralysis. Life suddenly had no meaning. I found myself wanting to go back to sleep, hoping that when I awoke, I would be normal again. As I sat helplessly staring out the window, I remembered what an old Benedictine teacher once said to me, “You have enough under your skullcap, get out in our garden and get dirt under your fingernails.”

I put on a pair of old jeans and a shirt, got outdoors and began trimming bushes, weeding and cutting the lawn around the rectory. Within a week, I was back to normal.

Reflecting on those moments of anxiety, I realized that they were a blessing in disguise, even if I didn’t see it at the time.

Later in life, they taught me to detect depression in our parishioners and helped me to speak more sympathetically to similar experiences they go through. I also realized everyone goes through moments of depression. It can happen to anyone. It can hit a woman after giving birth to a beautiful child or be caused by chronic pain. It can come from being bombarded continuously by bad news, losing a job, fear of aging or fear of dying.

We can learn much about handling these difficult moments from the Benedictines. The monastic saying “ora et labora” means pray and work. Benedictines are expected to pray often but also to make manual labor an integral part of being a monk.

Before the technical age of machines, much of our work was done by hand. As difficult as this was, it nourished the human spirit. There is rewarding joy in producing something from beginning to end.

When, for example, we plant a garden, nurture it and experience its growth, the process of starting from scratch and ending up with a fruitful garden is one of life's marvels. Through our efforts, we become co-creators with the ultimate Creator. We also develop a relationship with God the creator that is so intimate and fundamental that it is like a relationship with our parents.

Manual labor, creating something with our hands, working with our Creator - seen through these eyes - can help life's difficulties take on new and beautiful meaning that can help us battle depression and other ailments. It can be where we find our lifelong partner in God.

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