



Dedication

This e-book is dedicated to the memory of a friend, Trey Pennington, who lost his battle with inner darkness on September 4, 2011.



Trey was gracious gentleman, and a storyteller. His story is most eloquently told in the hundreds of lives he touched.

The brief story you're about to read is written in the hope that others might escape the grip of depression and despondency. If you think you may be depressed, or love someone who is, perhaps this brief look through the eyes of someone who has been there and is recovering will help you take the next step.

Foreword

I've put off publishing this story long enough. Depression and darkness have claimed another victim; one who seemed (to many) to have it together on the outside, but who was tormented below the surface.

Depression utterly debilitates some of its victims. Others soldier on, unaware, or in denial, or alone in soul, until all energy is sapped and hope fades away.

For years – decades, actually – I was chronically depressed and didn't know it. Like a polluted well, my mind was mired in negativity and self-loathing, even if I was outwardly high-functioning. The weather each day included rain with little sun, and the 10-day forecast never seemed to look a whole lot better.

“Normal” people typically go through their days with a mix of sun and clouds, bright sun one day, a bit of rain another, maybe a storm here or there. Depressed people have a mix of clouds and clouds – most of them dark. This soul-weather is very frustrating for them, and for the people who love them.

Men especially aren't encouraged to come forward and admit they have a problem – particularly if it could fall under the category of “mental illness.” Depression is lonely – it isolates and torments quietly, in the inner recesses of the mind and soul. I was surrounded by people, but felt very alone.

I had a problem, and it was in my head. The longer I tried to fight and control it without what was really needed – an adjustment in brain chemistry – the more futile the effort was.

You don't pound in nails with a paintbrush. You find a hammer.

I did a lot of pounding with paintbrushes. I'm apparently stubborn enough to think that walls eventually move if you beat your head against them repeatedly. Maybe you, or someone you love, have fallen into the same trap.

If you keep up the confident façade on the outside while you're crumbling on the inside, I have one message for you – ***you're not alone.*** I'm telling you my story so you won't stay alone.

If you're battling self-loathing, a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness, if you keep up the confident façade on the outside while you're crumbling on the inside, I have one message for you – ***you're not alone***. I'm telling you my story so you won't stay alone.

1. Looking In

This is a story of recovery - recovery from depression. It's a story still being written, with script much lighter and more playful than the dark fonts that dominated the early pages.

There are beams of light throughout, and a dawning of hope and freedom as the tale unfolds. As much as I would like to portray my life as a path strewn with rose petals and rays of sunshine, much of it (on the inside) has actually resembled pushing a rock uphill. Under rainclouds. With night perpetually falling.

On the outside, I appeared to be confident and competent. I was driven, idealistic – successful by most measures. I came across as smart and witty and well-grounded. None of that was deceit by design. It was management by necessity.

Inside, however, was a tormented soul. Dark clouds covered my path as I looked behind me. If it was painful to listen to the accusing echoes of failure in the past, it was just as disturbing to look ahead at the endless climb, pushing the rock further up the hill.

My life was bondage to an unrelenting internal yardstick. Nothing I ever did, nothing I was or tried to become, measured up.

I hated myself.

People would preach about joy and freedom. About living freely in the moment. It just didn't compute. My life was bondage to an unrelenting internal yardstick. Nothing I ever did, nothing I was or tried to become, measured up to my perfectionistic standards. I couldn't win. To sum it up simply:

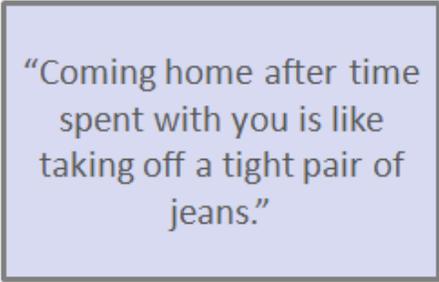
>> I hated myself.

This went on for decades – all while graduating from a top university, studying for the ministry, building a business career, loving one woman, welcoming five boys into the world with her, teaching, mentoring, embracing new technology...driven, not by an assured sense of love and well-being, but by the discordant notes of an internal chorus that only knew one minor-key refrain:

>> ***You suck.***

In fact, this unhealthy inward focus went back even further, into childhood and adolescence – the seeds of self-loathing were planted early, and continually led me to strive to become someone I wasn't – because whatever I was, was unacceptable. I couldn't measure up to any standard. My confidence level was zero.

One gal I dated in high school said something that never left me, an amusing phrase that remains instructive even to this day. She said, *"Coming home after time spent with you is like taking off a tight pair of jeans."* Self-hatred, for me, led to an uptight intensity. A drive fueled by dissatisfaction, darkened by endless introspection. Not the most "relaxed-fit" pair of denims in the drawer!



"Coming home after time spent with you is like taking off a tight pair of jeans."

Sometimes, I could lean against the rock, look away from the clouds, get out of my own head, and be a lot of fun. My best times were outward-focused, when activities and productivity trumped introspection. But the dark mental and emotional cycles would always return. There was no escape from the tyranny, only brief reprieves.

I didn't know any other normal. So I coped. Most people around me had no idea (Mom did, however – her gentle proddings over the years finally got through my thick skull).

Surrounded by friends and family, succeeding by all outward measures, I was miserable and lonely – trying to run from that which I was, by ceaselessly striving toward unattainable ideals of what I "should" be. You can only run on that kind of tainted fuel for so long.

I made it all the way into my 40's before hitting the wall.

2. Looking Back

I did not come from a dysfunctional family. I was one of four boys, in a family that remained intact and stable throughout our childhood. We never moved, we didn't experience any major upheavals, we were neither rich nor poor. Nor did I suffer any unusual trauma in childhood ("unusual," of course, is a relative term in a house full of boys...).

What I do remember, however, is a sense of feeling insecure as a child. You find out as a parent (I now have 5 boys) that kids come out the womb "wired" a certain way. My wiring tended toward melancholy and introspection. I was conscientious, sensitive, and thought-full. Could have had a great future as a monk!

I would find out later that there was some family history of depression, on both sides. In our youth, that wasn't a topic of dinner conversation, nor did it need to be; besides, we were far more interested in catching frogs or building snow ramps.

A New Englander through and through, I absorbed the lessons of stubborn independence and self-reliance. In many respects, those are immensely valuable qualities.

My way of dealing with such feelings was to internalize, not express, them – so those experiences fed into a growing self-loathing.

However, when it's time to ask for help – maybe not so much.

I always felt behind the curve in my physical maturation, but I was reasonably smart and did well in school. I preferred books to people, wearing out my library card in the science fiction section. As I moved into middle and high school, I began to have a gnawing sense of inferiority. I felt like I never measured up. I did not, as some do, have the oppressive experience of overly-demanding parents making me feel like an underachiever. I just happened to over-develop my own self-critical faculties.

Kids, of course, can be cruel, and there were painful episodes during those years that left me inwardly enraged. My way of dealing with such feelings was to

internalize, not express, them – so those experiences fed into a growing self-loathing.

Out of that seedbed grew the thought-patterns that would, like Marley's chains in the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, surround me and drag me down.

3. Looking Up

It's not possible to fully understand my brand of depression without reckoning with a streak of personal idealism. As I grew into adulthood, and began more serious life and career pursuits, I had a tendency to see what was there, and imagine what *should* be. There was a restless seeking of *better* – which is a positive trait I hope I never lose.

Much of my entrepreneurial business focus is driven by this restless idealism.

However, when you tend toward a more melancholy and introspective disposition, guess what that idealistic – even perfectionistic – streak leads to? Bingo! If you embrace high standards and principles, and you look within and find plenty that doesn't measure up...it can become a non-stop self-flagellation fest!

When you tend toward a more melancholy and introspective disposition, guess what a perfectionistic streak leads to? Bingo!

When I met my future wife one summer in Lake Placid, we bowed our heads together and prayed that God would build between us the purest love there could be between a brother and sister in Christ. Neither of us was seeking a romantic entanglement –we were just idealistic kids wanting to see what a truly holy friendship could become. As it turned out, it became a wonderful marriage (now 30+ years).

However, in a prescient moment, one of the older couples who knew us and saw us growing closer said something to this effect: “They’ll do great...as long as they don’t get depressed together.”

People outside of ourselves see things more clearly than we do, don't they?

4. The Wall

The energy of youth can compensate (temporarily) for a lot of internal junk. After marrying, we moved to Nashville, TN, worked in restaurants, and, ever the idealist, I began to pursue the possibility of being in the ministry. To compress a long story into a very short compass of words, the mental agility was there, the gifts to teach and lead and counsel were there – but I was spiritually immature and, unbeknownst to me or anyone else, chronically depressed. I hit Wall #1 in my mid-twenties and left a graduate ministerial program to, essentially, start over in a totally different direction. When I'd look in the mirror and ask myself, "Are you really pastor material?" the answer back was, of course, a resounding "No".

I didn't measure up.

We worked. We saved. I began a career in sales and marketing. We started having kids. We bought a house. We were active in church. On the outside, we were making it. And the busier life got, the better off I was, because it gave me less time alone to think. I was actually succeeding in my business endeavors, learning my strengths and applying my analytical abilities to constantly "make it better."

Busyness was a wonderful form of denial.

Busyness was a wonderful form of denial. Except that beneath all the trappings of normalcy and even success, I was still dragging chains of self-loathing. I never measured up. I felt like the world's biggest hypocrite and failure, even if others thought the opposite. And year after year, the burden of pushing that rock uphill wore me down. I was in the ring with an opponent that, after 40+ rounds, was still pounding me to the canvas.

I was living two lives. And the internal wasn't matching up with external.

It got to where I could barely cope any longer.

5. Coping

Every person is different, every case of depression is different, each path to recovery will be different. My experience is not normative for anyone else. However, for the sake of the men out there, and those that love them, I'll describe the coping mechanisms that became part of my life. Maybe it will shed some light for others.

- ***"It's my battle."*** For a lot of us guys, it's all about independence, strength, and working through our own issues – alone. There is a shame attached to some inability to conquer, some form of weakness – especially if it involves mental illness. This can be a huge barrier to cross. I refused, for years, to consider that I needed external help. I was the Avis guy – just *Try Harder*.
- ***"This, too, shall pass."*** Sometimes, yes. But if your brain chemistry is on the fritz, guess what? This, too, shall NOT pass. Everyone has down days. But if you're living down 24/7, that's a whole other issue. If the oil in your car engine is low, continuing to drive it that way doesn't lead to a better-performing engine.
- ***"This is normal."*** The most pernicious of the thought patterns that kept me in bondage. No, miserable self-hatred and unending feelings of worthlessness are not normal. Feeling trapped inside your own head is not healthy. Thoughts of suicide being an acceptable alternative are not helpful. If this is your normal, then man up, admit you have a problem on your hands (no, the sky won't fall by admitting need...), and get some help.
- ***"Do not enter."*** Respect is huge for men. Self-respect, and the respect of others. To let someone else into the inner sanctum where ugliness resides is to risk the loss of face, the illusion of control. It's easier to shut everyone out. The problem is – nothing gets better by slamming the door. It just builds up, like water behind a dam. Until it bursts.

What's the common thread here? *Denial*. Add a cup of unrealistic self-reliance to the mix, and you've got a recipe for disaster. But it's a preventable disaster.

In my case, I could no longer cover up the fact that I was miserable inside and not getting any better. Every effort I made was futile. But even when you're an adult, you can always rely on Mom. She'd been dropping hints along the way, hints that I wasn't ready to hear up until then, about depression.

Beating my head against the wall clearly wasn't working. What's to lose?

Beating my head against the wall clearly wasn't working. What's to lose?

6. The Clouds Lift

It's a remarkable thing to wake up happy. I well remember the first time having the experience as an adult – because I was 45 when it occurred.

It was two mornings after starting to take an anti-depressant. Those things aren't supposed to have much effect for a few weeks according to normal expectations, but my brain must have truly been a biochemical disaster area, because after two days on a start-up dose (1/2 the lowest normal dose), I woke up an entirely different person.

Was this Steve 2.0, or
some cruel joke?

Happy. At peace. A sense of well-being. *For no reason!*

I remember getting out of bed, and flashing back to the experience I'd have as a child (New Englanders and other cold-weather people will understand!) when I'd tentatively slide my foot onto an ice-covered pond in wintertime. Will it hold? Will I break through and get soaked? Very slowly, one foot in front of the other – until you're sure that the ice layer is thick enough for skating.

Each day, I'd wake up, happy yet tentative, uncertain that this ice would hold. Was this Steve 2.0, or some cruel joke? Was that dark cloud actually lifting? Yet, each day, as I put on my skates and ventured out, the ice held. I wasn't doing Olympic-style triple axels, but I was moving across the ice and not falling. And, for the first time in my perception, it was sunny out.

The dark, self-accusing negativity began to lose its grip. Those things that I yearned for – a sense of love, acceptance, well-being – showed up at the door once the biochemical lock was broken.

That was 7 years ago.

Just before that day, walking in my backyard, I had reached the breaking point. I couldn't keep this futile struggle up. My doctor was pretty ironic when I went in and inquired if, perhaps, there might be an organic issue here. He said something to this effect: "Well, your brain is an organ, you know. You couldn't think yourself out of kidney failure, could you?"

Huh.

Is there any shame in using a crutch if you have a broken leg? Yet we men don't like to admit that we might need a crutch for something hidden away in our minds.

Not all depressions are chronic – some are brought on by severe circumstances – and not all respond the same way to specific treatments. But whatever medicine, or counseling, or accountability, or other form of help you need to get across the bridge – you need to act.

I thank God continually for that little crutch of a pill that gave me my life back. And so do my wife and kids! A man living with a sense of failure and futility loses the wellspring of strength needed to be an effective and loving leader in the home.

You want your mind, and your home, to be a safe place. First, you may have to find your own safety zone.

7. Safety Zone

The biggest initial need for someone under the grip of depression is a safety zone – a person with whom the depressed person can confide without feeling judged, exposed, ridiculed, or misunderstood. That may be a professional, or that may (initially) be a spouse or a friend or a family member.

Professional help is often easier to seek once the depressed individual is able to confide their deepest feelings and fears to someone and feel safe. It helps immeasurably to understand that chronic depression is a disease – there is no shame in catching the flu, no threat to one’s reputation in having Lyme disease. Doctors and therapies and medicines are there for a reason – to fix what ails us (whether it’s in our skin, our blood, our lungs, or our brains).

Find your safety zone:

- A. Family member
- B. Friend
- C. Spiritual guide
- D. Professional counselor
- E. All of the above

I have a friend who has a big scar on his bald head. He needed medical intervention in his brain to save his life. He’ll joke about it, just as I sometimes joke about needing my happy pill each day. I’m very glad he’s alive, and (I think) he feels the same about me. Someone outside of ourselves had to see the problem and provide the fix.

Be aware that often, the depressed person whom you love cannot see clearly at all. It’s like walking around with dark glasses in a dimly-lit room. The denial is sometimes quite subconscious. A darkened world becomes normal. It is very tempting to want to shake a depressed person by the shoulders and yell, “Just snap out of it, will you?” That’s about as useful as slapping me across the face and saying, “Just see clearly, will you?” I’m actually quite nearsighted, and I *cannot* see clearly until the right glasses are prescribed and worn.

Is it risky to put away the coping mechanisms and say, “I have a problem”? It seems like it when you’re still under the dark clouds. That’s why you need a safe place. What’s risky is living under dark clouds and hoping they’ll just go away.

My experience has been that people are relieved, encouraged, and happy to know that I'm human, and that I'm getting better. And, I can then try and help others instead of staying locked up and paralyzed in my dark corner.

What if you have a friend or family member that you believe is depressed, and can't seem to talk about it? I can't give professional clinical advice, but I will tell you the kinds of questions that, lovingly asked, helped me start talking.

- *How are you doing? No.....how are you **really** doing?* (in private) Don't settle for the "just fine" brush-off.
- *You look a little bit down. Is there something you'd like to talk about for a few minutes? I'm ready to listen.* Corner the person with an observation, and an offer – otherwise they'll feel like no-one else should be sharing their burden.
- *Is there anything specific I pray for you about, other than the usual same-old?* Said with a smile, it's an invitation to unburden that just might be taken.
- *I'm having some problems. Can I talk to you?* We all do have problems to talk about. Yet the depressed person feels isolated. One of the things that can be very therapeutic for someone under the clouds is helping someone else out – which opens the door for them to also share their burdens.
- *Do you need a hug?* Depending on the relationship, this may or may not be appropriate. However, in the right setting, the simple act of hugging someone who is clearly hurting can begin opening the floodgates.

Get in a safety zone. Be a safety zone. Depression wants to isolate. Don't let it.

8. Spiritual Depression

Not everyone will relate to this section. And here, I'm going to put some stuff out publicly that I've not opened up much about before. The depressed believer.

Spiritual depression is a huge problem. I became a Christian in college. Knowing God is supposed to fix everything, right? Ummm, no. Some burdens are lifted immediately, but others are not. And I discovered that spiritual remedies do not necessarily "fix" biochemical issues.

Being a schizophrenic believer is a rough life. Now, of course, I was not clinically schizophrenic. But the fact is, I was living two lives, not as a hypocrite, but as one whose sincere beliefs and daily experience were not matching up.

I heard all about God's love. About forgiveness in Christ. About the comfort of the Holy Spirit. I read passages from the Bible daily, and devotional readings from great men and women of the past. I studied. I prayed. I tried to live a life that I thought was pleasing to God – and, of course, if I had high standards, how much higher a standard is perfect holiness? What do you get when you mix a depressed perfectionist with the highest of standards? Don't ask.

Spiritual remedies do not necessarily "fix" biochemical issues.

I felt myself to be a miserable failure. Not simply in the sense of being a sinner falling continually short of God's standard (oh, believe me, I had a very good grasp of the doctrine of sin!). But I never seemed to be able to tap into a real, personal sense that I was under grace, loved, accepted. Because the inner voice that dominated my life from somewhere back in childhood all the way forward was harsh and unrelenting. I could hear the good news with my ears and understand it in my mind, but my heart could not process it correctly. Glimmers of light would break in, and be quickly overwhelmed with blankets of darkness and self-loathing.

Not a fun way to live. I was addicted to yardsticks, and couldn't seem to understand unconditional love.

The biographies meant to encourage faith would increase the torment. Truths meant to lift up always became re-interpreted as rulers, with which I would beat myself for not ever making the grade. Sometimes, wonderful truths would break through, and like water to a parched soul, I'd have enough nourishment to go on, all the while feeling immense pressure to keep it together on the outside.

Now, here's the irony – the goodness and the glory of God were all right there! But I was like the blind man whom Jesus healed in two stages – at first, he saw quite dimly – “I see men as if they are trees walking.” Yes, at times God does miraculously heal – but most of the time, we need to put in our contact lenses to fix the myopia, take our antibiotics to kill the infection, set the broken leg and put it into a cast...you get the picture.

It can seem unspiritual to use medical means to address a condition that seems like it may be spiritually rooted – after all, if you're struggling with unbelief, isn't that a sign of defective faith?

In Fatherly patience and kindness, God let me wander in the wilderness before I was willing to consider that a pill might be more valuable than a prayer for this particular condition. Duh.

It can seem unspiritual to use medical means to address a condition that seems like it may be spiritually rooted – after all, if you're struggling with unbelief, isn't that a sign of defective faith?

Maybe. Or maybe it's time for Prozac. Or counseling. Or some combination thereof.

Being ashamed of my inability to overcome what I thought was a spiritually-rooted issue kept me from seeking what I really needed – medicine. There was a cloud between me and God, a cloud in my own mind and heart which now, for the past seven years, has been cleared away.

I am not your pastor or your counselor. And, I'll not seek to give you nice, easy, pat answers. If your wheels are stuck in the mud and guilt is piling up on your head because every step forward involves three stumbles back, I'd just ask you to consider finding a safety zone, and get some help. For crying out loud, we're all

bozos on this bus. You see all that messy humanity there in the Bible? Yeah – that’s us. A pretty screwed-up bunch. Welcome to reality.

I have found that the path to recovery from depression – whether we label it spiritual or otherwise – involves community.

Don’t go it alone.

(If you wish to read in-depth on this topic, the classic volume is [Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure](#) by doctor-turned-pastor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.)

9. The Path of Recovery

It would be nice to say that waving a magic wand will make depression go away. However, ingrained patterns of thought and feeling – especially if fueled by brain chemistry gone awry –take time to unwind. It's OK to be recovering.

While there is often a (real or perceived) stigma about admitting to having certain conditions, what I have found is that people are very receptive, and often relieved, to find a fellow traveler. The silence is what prolongs the disease and fuels its intensity. It's far more risky to go on suffering alone, than to seek help and companionship.

Some medical approaches may have more, or less, effectiveness depending on the individual. It could be that you will have an emotional limp for the rest of your days. Whatever the case, would you please drop the mask and join the rest of us limping our way forward? We need your strength, and your gifts, and your insights, and you're welcome to borrow ours.

Yes, it would be so nice to have it all together. However, if, like me, you can't attain that, then let's settle for reality and humanity.

Please don't rob us by giving up.

We need your strength,
and your gifts, and your
insights, and you're
welcome to borrow ours.

10. Now what?

Depression is an insidious thief – it likes to work undercover, and it wants you alone. It will swirl around your mind like a dark cloud, deplete your energy, blind you to all that is good.

It will tell you to suck it up, and then when you can't do it any longer, it will tell you to give up.

>> DON'T!

[Man up](#) and face your enemy. Bring in your platoon. Call for covering fire. Get somebody in that foxhole with you and put in a fresh magazine of bullets. Declare war! There is no shame in recognizing that you're surrounded by the enemy. It happens. You don't need to be a casualty when reinforcements are near.

Depression will make you a prisoner, or kill you, if it can. It picks off the isolated, the weakened, the weary. The silent.

There are dozens around you suffering in isolation, and dozens of others who are re-taking the ground once occupied by despondency. And there is far too much silence. Let's change that, shall we? Because...

WE'RE NOT ALONE!

Please see the brief listing of Resources on the next page.

Depression will make you a prisoner, or kill you, if it can. It picks off the isolated, the weakened, the weary. The silent.

Resources

[Depression Health Center](#) (WebMD) – links to numerous resources and organizations. WebMD has put up a very helpful video channel called [Depression TV](#) – a good starting point.

[Therese Borchard](#) - unvarnished truth from someone who has lived with severe depression (and bi-polar disease). Read TIME magazine interview of Therese [here](#).

If you are contemplating taking your own life and have nowhere else to turn, start here: <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

If you are a current/former military person dealing with depression due to combat stress and trauma, start here: <http://www.realwarriors.net/>

The Stuff You Put at the End of a Book

This work is ©2011 by Steve Woodruff (stevewoodruff.com). It may be freely distributed by anyone, without charge, intact and in its entirety.

Yes, I'm still recovering. I need a pill, every day. I need a long hug, every day. I need regular doses of encouragement and affirmation to keep the clouds at bay – and sometimes a slap upside the head when I start getting overly introspective. If I'm going to limp my way to heaven, I'd just as soon have some more company. Truth be told, I mourn the lost years, when I operated at 50% capacity. But if others can be kept from drowning beneath the waves, it will make the sacrifice count.

I wish to thank my dear wife, Sandy Woodruff, for staying by my side over many years when my disposition was more dark cloud than bright sky. Everyone knows you're a saint. No-one knows it more I do! I love you.

And Mom – thanks for never giving up.

To my “inner circle” that reviewed this story and provided valuable input and suggestions – you're the best. And you're a great safety zone.

Nothing I have written here is to be construed as professional medical advice. If you suspect you or a loved-one is suffering from depression, please consult a professional. This e-book is meant simply to open the door to awareness, and to remove the sense of stigma for those who are suffering from this disease.