

A Different Kind of Self-Help

Night Vision

By Mariana Alessandri
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By ANDREW STARK

WHENEVER LIFE deals us a blow—we lose a loved one, we get sick, we fail at an important endeavor—sad-

ness or distress are entirely appropriate responses. They come under the umbrella of what Freud called “ordinary unhappiness”; there’s nothing clinical about them and we don’t need to contact the psychiatrist. When, however, our unhappiness grows wildly disproportionate even to minor blips—we become depressed for weeks if a blind date ghosts us, we feel on the verge of tears at the sight of a dying moth—then we might need therapy, whether chemical or conversational. We may well be painfully aware that such moods seem inexplicable. That’s why Andrew Solomon called the memoir of his own depression “The Noonday Demon.” He could see the light that surrounded his darkness—he knew that his life was in fact going well—but he just couldn’t get to it.

In “Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves Through Dark Moods,” the philosopher Mariana Alessandri offers a very different understanding of clinical mood disorders, one that at first seems like bad news but ultimately proves comforting, even uplifting. Far from being disproportionate reactions to life’s curve balls, Ms. Alessandri argues, dark moods are entirely appropriate responses to the human condition. Our date’s ghosting reminds us that love is always insecure. The dying moth warns us that life is fragile. If such events send us into a funk, well, that’s perfectly understandable.

No less important, Ms. Alessandri says, popular therapeutic bromides mask this reality, pelting us with positivity, “one perky pebble at a time.” We might think that the “light” of therapy helps dispel the distorting darkness of melancholy. But often it’s the darkness of melancholy that reveals truths to which the light of therapy blinds us. Whatever the form of treatment—a revival of ancient Epicureanism or modern “positive psychology,” smiley-face self-help books or healing visualizations—the result is to make those afflicted by mood disorders feel “bad about feeling bad.”

Ms. Alessandri is careful not to oppose all therapeutic intervention. As she acknowl-

edges, “medicine has helped millions of people.” It’s just that the realities we face mean that no medicine will be powerful enough to “turn off” all of our pain. Instead we need to learn “to see in the dark.” Dark moods have their own value. They “give us access to connection, compassion, love, creativity, justice, motivation, and self-knowledge.” We shouldn’t be so desperate to get out of them.

the path she chose, in which she wrote books that helped others in their struggles, was one of comparable industriousness and productivity.

Ms. Alessandri relates these stories with insight and sensitivity. In doing so she makes a persuasive case against the superficiality of “don’t worry, be happy” peppiness. Even so, her governing imagery of darkness versus light misses something important.

own misery, especially since depression, anxiety and grief can descend simultaneously, blurring into one another and sharing similar symptoms.

Nor is light necessarily the best metaphor for what happiness therapists are trying to provide. When people are in a gray fog, what they are longing for—so they will often say—is not light but color. This too makes a difference. We perceive light as

monochromatic, while color comes in a variety of shades. And so do positive moods, from the hot “orange” of joyful exuberance, as the psychologist Marvin Levine describes it, to the cool “purple” of relaxed tranquility. Even in the excitement we feel as we close in on a goal, we often long for the relaxation we will experience once we succeed. As soon as we are able to relax, we miss the excitement we once had. While we are quite capable of complete misery, as Ms. Alessandri herself notes, complete contentment is difficult to attain.

Ms. Alessandri criticizes happiness therapists for trying to “suppress, deny, and reject” unhappiness. But many are attempting, not always successfully, something else: getting us to value, prolong and savor whatever happiness we can achieve without itching for more. The Epicureans recommended that we restrict our desires to food, drink, music, nature, and spending time with family and friends. Such easily accessible pleasures,

they reasoned, suffice to bring us the entire range of happy feelings, from exuberance to tranquility. We don’t need anything further. Modern positive psychologists, in the same vein, advise us to pursue goals that are lofty but not too lofty: challenging enough to keep us excited yet sufficiently within reach to keep us relaxed. Such mid-range activities, they argue, stave off both the depression we risk when our accomplishments seem too mundane and the anxiety we feel when our pursuits seem too daunting.

If we could learn to be more satisfied with what might be called “ordinary happiness,” then maybe we would suffer less depression and anxiety. That, at any rate, is the presumption of much therapy, ancient and modern. Ms. Alessandri certainly does us a service in calling attention to the value of dark moods. We do need better night vision. But we need better color vision too.

Mr. Stark is the author of “The Consolations of Mortality.”



NIGHTHAWK 'Automat' (1927) by Edward Hopper.

Ms. Alessandri makes her argument through a series of biographical sketches. The Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), who lost his 6-year old son to meningitis, used his own suffering to cultivate a deep, life-long compassion for the vulnerability of others. When C.S. Lewis’s wife Joy Davidman died, his grief enabled him to reach new understandings of God, love and memory. As for the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, he came to see his constant anxiety as a fully appropriate reaction to human freedom. If we are responsible for our own choices, Kierkegaard reasoned, then how can we ever avoid the daily worry that we are making the wrong call? It goes with the existential territory.

And then there is the Mexican-American scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004), who was made to feel shiftless and lazy by family and friends for abandoning her destined life as a farm worker. Treating her consequent depression as a portal to self-knowledge, she gradually realized that

In the grip of mood disorders, many of us are apt to liken the experience not so much to darkness as to grayness. The writer Barbara Ehrenreich, for example, saw her own depression as a “gray fog.” This makes a difference. It might be possible, over time,

Dark moods can have profound effects—to the good—by aiding in self-knowledge and revealing hidden truths. There’s no need to feel bad about feeling bad.

to learn to see in darkness. But it’s not possible, even over time, to learn to see in fog. Yes, bouts with melancholy enabled the figures Ms. Alessandri discusses to perceive truths that they might otherwise never have gleaned. But that’s not necessarily a common experience. For many, all they can see is their

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