

## **Of fictitious characters and roaring tigers – or a testimony of overcoming depression**

I know quite a few people who suffer from depression – and many of them take antidepressants or are otherwise in treatment. Until recently, I could never precisely figure out what depression is. I knew very well how it is to feel depressed; but if people take drugs and go to doctors, there must be a lot more to it than just that, I thought. About a year ago, I described to a friend of mine a phase I went through in my early and mid-twenties. He concluded: "That's depression." I immediately protested, saying that it wasn't anything medical or so. But he insisted: "If you think of suicide all the time, of course that's depression." And so I realized that I may have gone through the very same thing that some of my friends try to tackle with drugs and doctors. The really amazing fact about it is that, for me, it's over. It's definitely gone.

Looking back, the first time my motivation to live started to deteriorate was when I was a teenager. I became increasingly unhappy with the world around me and spent most of my time alone in my room, not doing anything but inventing stories. I loathed it when anyone came to intrude on my world (like e.g. my mother saying that dinner is ready). I saw myself in visions of future fame and glory that formed a stark contrast to the reality of dull and mediocre everyday life. It was during this time that I invented a character who would later rise to some significance. He was always jolly, in a nice way barking mad, and nothing could ever affect his omnipresent optimism and good humour. I gave this creation of mine, who was so much unlike myself, the name Charlie Blackfield.

After leaving school, my mind was completely absorbed by a supposedly important post in a peace organisation. I was a member of what translates as a national executive committee. It sounds grand and terribly important, but, honestly, the local groups of this organisation showed no signs of being anywhere affected when the committee's membership went down from six to two and, following my resignation, finally to one (who then wasn't re-elected at the next conference). Nevertheless, I was not merely committed, but took my position there extremely serious. I became a complete workaholic, and to give you an idea of it, here's a summary of what I did within the four weeks from 31 October to 27 November 1992 (in this succession), during the time this peace organisation celebrated their centenary: give a talk about the organisation's history near Stuttgart, attend a national executive committee meeting in Berlin, attend a Centenary celebration in Stuttgart and a Centenary weekend in Baerenthal/France, give a brief radio interview in Bensheim, facilitate a public meeting of my local peace group in Heidelberg, attend the main Centenary event in Berlin (which was an organisational disaster which I had to help sorting out), fly via London to Tokyo and then travel on to Nagoya as overseas delegate of the Japan Peace Conference, which included holding a 15-minute speech before a symposium and being part of a human chain around a US base in Kariya, finally return via Tokyo and London to Heidelberg, and, 36 hours after my arrival, give a presentation at university, having turned into a normal student again (NB. this national executive committee membership was only a voluntary post).

I was not only a workaholic. I was also deeply affected by everything that happened in this organisation. Every argument that anyone would have with someone else,

would gnaw on my soul and torment me for hours, when I was back at home. Once I switched off the lights to go to bed, my thoughts would shift to my own misery and loneliness. The visions of glory were replaced by visions of suicide (or, more often, by a combination of both). I never actually attempted suicide, but I thought about it every day for several years and was more than once very close to an attempt.

My resignation from the said committee was an interesting event. After an hour's silent contemplation, I wrote a letter of resignation between midnight and two o'clock. I left it on my desk and went to bed. My sleep was unusually sound, and, even more unusual for me, I was perfectly awake at half eight the next morning, without any drowsiness. I immediately thought of the letter and felt that a huge burden had come off me. For the first time for ages, I was really happy. There's never been a decision in my life that felt so right.

Resigning from a committee is an easy thing to do. Much more difficult was it to do anything against what I just called 'loneliness' that still plagued me each night, and often during the day as well. It was eating up more and more of my energy, and the hours I had once spent on inventing stories, I now spent lying on my bed, feeling miserable and pitying myself. The thoughts about suicide became increasingly concrete and more dangerous. Occasionally, when my desperate mood became particularly extreme, a little voice inside myself said to me: "Come on, this is ridiculous! You're not really feeling this bad. You're just pretending – and what for?" – Over time, this voice became fainter, as the hopes associated with the few initiatives it had inspired weren't fulfilled.

It was at the age of 24 that I began to understand what was going on. I still didn't call it depression nor thought of it as any form of mental issue. But I understood that this habit of feeling miserable and pitying myself was something I had to fight off, lest it would kill me.

With hardly any energy left, there wasn't much hope of tackling this 'thing'. Hoping to find a clue, I did a lot of self-analysis, and one day, I thought about all those many stories I had once invented. I had created hundreds of characters, but there was only one among them who had crept up, in various incarnations, time and again, throughout the various phases of my daydream adventures: Charlie Blackfield. So what was so special about this guy? – He was always happy, had no fear and an outlook on the future that can be described as careless optimism; in other words: completely different from myself. And he was nowhere near as serious as I was – not about the world, not about anything he did, not even about himself. 'How nice it would be if I could be like him', I thought. – But hang on. He didn't really exist. Or, to be more precise, he only existed in my own mind. He was a mere creation of my imagination.

A sudden flash of inspiration followed: If Charlie Blackfield is my own creation, then surely there must be something inside myself that is like him. And this 'something' can be my weapon against my depression.

I soon started to ask 'What would Charlie Blackfield do?' instead of the desperate 'Oh, what should I do? I don't have a clue.' – Sure enough, the answers came, and slowly, but gradually, I changed. Depression wasn't allowed anymore – knowing that

Charlie Blackfield would never waste his time by being depressed. Whenever this miserable feeling came up again, I would try to sweep it away by occupying myself with something that would make me happier.

Another weapon against my depression was reason. If you look at it strictly rationally, depression simply doesn't make any sense – especially not, when it comes from a feeling of loneliness. Surely, if I'm feeling lonely, the best thing to do is to get out and meet people – and to do so without looking like the most miserable creature on earth.

My diary contains some sort of war declaration against the "wall", as I called it then, for the 5 June 1994, saying that it would be a battle of complete destruction: either this "wall" or I had to die. Four days later, I claimed victory. But, of course, the battle had merely begun, and it would take me rather another four years before it was really won. Nevertheless, something very significant had happened during those few days. I had begun to look at the positive things about myself rather than looking at all my misery. To my astonishment, I found quite a lot. And so, I started to do something that I've never done before: to love myself. With this love came such a strong will to live that the positive forces within myself – faith, hope, love, optimism, happiness, joy, and so on – were soon gathered for a fierce counterattack on all the negative forces – pessimism, hopelessness, frustration, loneliness and, most of all, depression. As I had promised myself, I did not give any quarter: depression was eventually not only overthrown, but entirely destroyed. Translating the military talk back into a more peaceful language, it meant that I gradually managed to replace the habit of being depressed by the new habit of thinking positive. And I developed such an alertness towards any feeling of depression that even today, my mind is instinctively ringing an alarm, whenever I encounter depression in someone else (which makes it sometimes difficult for me to relate to people who are still in the middle of this "darkness of the soul").

It was around 1998/99 that the last remainders of this destructive force vanished within myself. However, recently, after having spent too much time on my own, I felt, once again, lonely. It took me a while before I recognized my old enemy. When I did, I didn't fight it off. For I noticed that the roaring hungry tiger ready to devour me had turned into a tiny little pussycat. I just laughed at it, and it went away.

Klaus Huber