

King David found himself trapped in a "desolate pit" and sinking in a "miry bog" (v. 2), and he's definitely not feeling the serotonin! We don't know exactly what happened to David that landed him in such a "pit" of despair. He was a warrior and a leader and sometimes he could make decisions which were indiscreet. In this case, we don't know the source of his anguish. David's stress here may have come down on his head because of his own ill-advised actions, or because of enemies who were plotting his destruction.

What's certain is that far less dire circumstances than David's can bog *us* down in the mud. We can find ourselves in pits of desolation. Perhaps we've lost a job, a spouse has abandoned us, a child has died, a debilitating illness has crossed the threshold of our home; all of these situations can land us knee-deep in mud. And the mud we're in may feel like quicksand. The question is, "How do we get out?"

The easiest way out is to ***blame someone else***. This frees us from having to work it out ourselves. If our mess is someone else's fault, then that someone else had better step up and step in to lend us a hand. Attributing blame may seem like the easy way out, it's not always the right way out: if we avoid dealing with what put us into the pit it will only lead to complications later. Blaming others for our problem just doesn't work.

Another possibility is to ***step outside***. Gayle Boss, in an article called "Natural Medicine," writes, "Of course we try to make sense of things; that's human nature...Logic doesn't usually help much in shoring up our hearts." To restore our hearts, poet Mary Oliver says, "Step out to the shore – or the mountainside or the riverbank or the desert. And pay attention."

Step outside. In other words, to get out of the muck of despair, it's helpful to get into the natural world. Play in the mud. Hike a mountain trail. Paddle on a lake. Snowshoe through the woods. Plant a tree. Plant a garden. Step outside and pay attention.

A third possible way to be delivered from the muck of desolation and despair is to ***shift our position***. On a wilderness sojourn, in the deserts of the southwestern United States, David Douglas missed the entrance to a canyon he hoped to explore. Retracing his steps, he noticed a thin crack in the sandstone. Only by shifting his position and altering his perspective did he perceive that this was indeed the canyon entrance, a canyon so narrow and winding that at points he could see no more than a few feet ahead.

If there appears to be no way out, shift your position. To shift our position is to:

- Attack a problem from a different point of view.
- Let go of some limiting assumptions.
- Embrace certain realities we've previously resisted.
- Acknowledge we were wrong and someone else was right.
- Take an active role in our recovery rather than waiting for something to happen.

The advantage of shifting our position is that we're able to see new possibilities. A shift in position can shift our perspective. The way we've always done things doesn't always work when we are stuck in the mud. We need to look at other possibilities; we need to shift our position to look at other possibilities.

Finally, we can get out of the mire by ***singing praises*** (expressing gratitude). David accomplishes this by singing a "song of praise to our God." Admittedly, it is hard to sing God's praises when we're stuck in the mud and yelling for help! But expressing gratitude to God shifts our focus away from our troubles and back to trust in God. Counting our blessings and trusting God in all things changes our perspective. We recognize at once we are not alone. Our circumstances have not changed, what put us in the muck has not changed, but by trusting God to be present with us in the muck - even when we may not *feel* God's presence – our position is changed, our perspective is changed and we are changed.

The trick is to trust when we may not feel like trusting and to move forward in faith when the way is unclear. It is critical that we remain open and willing to change. Changing tactics, changing our lives, changing our perspectives, changing our *anything* takes courage because it is new and untried. Like anything we do for the first time, anxiety threatens to stop us before we even begin.

Fear can paralyze us from taking that first step to change, to move out of the mire. To gain a new perspective requires extraordinary perseverance and bravery. It's difficult to carry on with fear in our hearts. It's difficult to continue with the normalcy of life. It's hard to believe that anything will ever change.

In moments like these, we should try to make a conscious effort to keep trudging through the muddiness of our days as though we believe things will someday change. This is when

we act as though we believe that someday we will be out of the desolate pit. It's trusting that our lives will not always be mucked up and that one day we will be different. The circumstances may not be different, but we will be changed. Almost without noticing, we will find that the miry bog is behind us. We will find our "feet upon a rock." Amazingly, we will see that our steps are secure and that, indeed, God did hear our cry. So we can, like David, resume our song or sing a new song, a song of praise for our God.

A miry bog can lead to treacherous areas of quicksand, or it can lead eventually to solid ground. We can waste energy on pointing fingers, or we can let go of the blaming and change our perspectives. We can flounder in the foggy desolation, or be still and allow ourselves to be enveloped by the presence of a loving God. We can wallow in the muck, or we can choose to play in the mud.

Choose playing! It will soon be the time of year to think about spring flowers. Take a lesson from the lowly, ugly bulb. Push upward. Push upward. Slog onward. You might not know where you are and you might not know exactly where you are going. But take heart: God does. And spring always comes.

Prayer: O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, and Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us, for, living close to You, we shall see Your hand, Your purpose, Your will through all things. (St. Ignatius of Loyola)

#### Sources:

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- Douglas, David. *Wilderness Sojourn: Notes in the Desert Silence*. HarperCollins, 1989.
- Grant, Bonnie L. "Antidepressant microbes in soil: How dirt makes you happy." gardeningknowhow.com. July 20, 2015. Retrieved July 8, 2016.

# Be Happy By Getting Dirty!

Sunday, January 15, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

**Psalms 40:1-11**

We've all been there. The moment we're ready to turn in our resignation, suffocating under the stress of the job, and it's only Monday. The moment we realize everything our mom said was right. The moment our 2-year-old's vocabulary is limited to the word "No!" The moment the car is making sputtering noises, and the bank account is running on empty. The moment we have to pretend to be happy for someone else. We've all had moments like this, and when they pop up, there is a solution: it's time to play in the mud!

Much has been written about the benefits of communing with nature. When we get outside or when we take a walk on the beach, stroll through the park, tend to our garden we feel better. In a recent article, writer Bonnie L. Grant not only extols the health benefits of the natural world, but, suggests that we start playing in the mud!

Ok, she *sort of* says that. Grant draws on research which shows that there is a natural antidepressant in soil called *mycobacterium vaccae* (va-key), which has an effect on our neurons similar to Prozac. Scientists believe that *mycobacterium vaccae* may stimulate the production of serotonin, which makes the creation of mud pies extremely appealing, because a lack of serotonin can lead to an increase of depression and anxiety.

Avid amateur gardeners have long extolled the therapeutic virtues of getting their hands dirty. They don't mind playing in the dirt. It's what they do. It makes them feel good. They've discovered the happiness of getting dirty; and now, what was just an intuitive feeling is backed up by hard science!

When we feel stuck and mired in the mud and when the way ahead appears murky and unclear, can the answer really be as simple as playing in the mud? Because let's be clear: mucking about in the mud for fun is one thing; getting mired in it is quite another.