

2923 34th St, N.W.
Washington, D.C.
20008

SLA

2 January, 1988

Dear Mr. Styron,

I am writing to you to thank you for your empathetic and insightful article on depression. (N.Y. Times A.17, 12/19/88) Shortly, I will face the first anniversary of my only brother's suicide at the age of 36. Your extraordinary article has helped me acknowledge his overwhelming pain and desperate need for relief. You have also helped me cope with my own sense of abandonment by him; I understand now his suffering as I ~~never~~^{never} did. as you reflected on Primo Levi's need for proper care, so have I with respect to my brother. You aptly remarked that antidepressants

me "unreliable". In my brother's case, that proved too true. Therapy, albeit of unknown quality, also was unhelpful. Struggling to make some good come of this, I established a fund in his memory at the Affective Disorders Clinic at the University of Louisville School of Medicine. It is a selfish attempt at solace through which others may get hope & help.

I sense in your article the ~~sense~~ of loss you suffer knowing the life led by the suicide victim & anticipating future achievements which will never be. I am sorry for us all that such special people suffer such torment so alone and so misunderstood.

Thank you for enlightening us about this awesome disease which strikes indiscriminately, swiftly and devastates its host.

Sincerely,
Shelley Longmire



Gene Kieffer
Wallacks Point
Stamford 06902

December 19, 1988

Mr. William Styron
c/o The Op-Ed Page
The New York Times
229 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

Dear Mr. Styron,

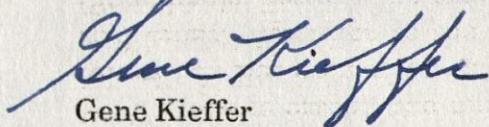
As one who has also suffered a long and debilitating bout of depression, I read your article on Primo Levi with great interest. It is a beautiful piece, and I am sending a copy to a friend who has felt the same pain of depression, as did my father and his father before him.

To a large extent, the manic depressive state, like genius and schizophrenia, is inherited. But even when that is accepted and understood, we still do not know the real cause. According to the author of *Kundalini, the Evolutionary Energy in Man* (Shambhala, Boston), the explanation lies in a malignant Kundalini. The book can be found in most book stores, but if you are interested, I would be happy to send a copy.

Kundalini, a Sanskrit word meaning coiled, like a spring or a serpent having the potential to expand, was known in very ancient times as Vak, the goddess of speech. It was held that every man and women of talent or genius was born with a partially or fully awakened Kundalini. This meant that the evolutionary energy, usually dormant, was flowing. I am certain that if you read the book--it is by Gopi Krishna, a Kashmiri philosopher who died in 1984--you would immediately recognize yourself in many of its pages. A month ago, the State University of New York Press published another book on the same subject, entitled *Kundalini: The Energy of the Depths*, by Dr. Lilian Silburn, head of a prestigious scientific institute in Paris. However, hers is a scholarly treatise virtually inaccessible to the layman.

After a half century of research, Joseph Campbell came to the conclusion that the knowledge of Kundalini, called the Serpent Power, was by far the most ancient science of all, and that it was known worldwide. He found evidence of it in the Indus Valley, in China, Sumeria, Egypt, and among the Maya, Aztecs, Hopi and the Celts.

With all best wishes,
Yours sincerely,



Gene Kieffer

The New York Times

2 FANEUIL HALL MARKETPLACE
BOSTON, MASS. 02109

ANTHONY LEWIS

December 19, 1988

Dear Bill:

Your piece was courageous; that hardly needs saying. It was also profoundly moving, and instructive. I have had family and friends try to describe the pain, but never with remotely such evocative power.

I, too, had wondered about Primo Levi. You did him a great service. Thank you.

Best regards -

Touf

UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER
Department of Economics

Stanley L. Engerman
Professor of Economics and History

December 19, 1988

Dear Mr. Styron-

As an individual who spent 2 months in hospitals and a total of 24 weeks in 3 depressions in 1984 and 1985 I just want to say that I was quite deeply touched by your piece in the Times today. It presented all the feelings and emotions of the experience as I remember but cannot adequately describe them. I hope that you have been as successful as I have been in avoiding recurrence.

Yours truly,
Stanley Engerman

RAY GORDON

3 EAST TENTH ST.

NEW YORK, 10003

212-473-4395

19 December 1988

Dear Bill,

Your piece in the Times was beautiful. The points you make are extremely well taken. I love to see you respond to the pundits who plumb the surface and write authoritatively!

You may have put your finger on it when you suggest that Levi may have had problems aside from Auschwitz. At the time of his death, I talked with Nina Schneider of the Vineyard, who was his sister-in-law and came to a similar conclusion. It seems Levi did indeed have severe personal problems, not the least of which was his mother, I seem to recall, whom he supported.

We're at the Vineyard from 21 December to 2 January. If by any chance you are there, let's "left a cuppa...." Meanwhile, much satisfaction and good work in the new year.

Can I buy you lunch or whatever in New York?

Best to you + Rose,

Ray

Not a word from Fuchs, by the way. What about you?

of

quite

ings and

hope

Laura J. Cohen, MA, RN
49 Old Bridge Drive
Howell, NJ 07731
(201) 363-7395

December 19, 1988

William Styron
C/O NY Times
229 West 43rd St.
New York, NY 10036

Dear Mr. Styron,

I have enjoyed reading your work in the past but none of it was as personally meaningful as your recent op-ed piece on Primo Levi's depression and suicide. I am a doctoral student in nursing, a wife and mother. My own mother was finally effectively treated for major depression after two suicide attempts. Her mother ended her life addicted to barbiturates in a futile effort to control her depression symptoms. I am currently finishing a frustrating year of psychotherapy and unsuccessful drug therapy in trying to deal with my own depression.

My dissertation is a qualitative study of therapeutic reading. When I am able to concentrate enough to work, I am interviewing people who have used reading to help them deal with a difficult life situation. Several participants in my study have been able to get relief from depression symptoms through reading. Your writing helped me in ways similar to what they have told me. I shook with emotion at reading your words but it was comforting to hear my own feelings and experiences echoed so eloquently. Hearing from someone who has been there and survived gives me hope that I can do the same.

Thank you for your courage in sharing your experience with me and others. Pain shared is pain diminished. I hope that your depression never resurfaces.

Sincerely,



175 WATER STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10038-4981

December 19, 1988

Dear Mr Styron,

I wanted you to know how touched I was by your Op-Ed piece on depression in today's Times. My wife had a serious bout with depression last year, and she experienced the same pain and anguish which you described so well.

Your explanation of what occurs during a depression was far superior to anything offered by my wife's doctors, and I am grateful to you for sharing with me your thoughts on this illness.

Very truly yours,

Jed Ruthizer

317B Heritage Village
Southbury, Conn.
December 19, 1988

Dear Bill Styron:

Your searching essay in today's Times about Primo Levi's suicide will probably launch a small avalanche of letters upon you.

Kazin, and other self-righteous company, as you pointed out, could hardly have entered into the tortured consciousness of the depression victim. Only one like you who, thank the fates, has come through that agonbite, could find words like: "my days were pervaded by a gray drizzle of unrelenting horror." "In depression, a kind of biochemical meltdown, it is the brain as well as the mind that becomes ill - as ill as any other besieged organ." "The smallest commonplace of domestic life, so amiable to the healthy mind, lacerates like a blade."

Yes, anyone who has tasted the despair of this ordeal will say, that writer has been there. This is not the theorizing of some academic thumbing through texts. It is from one who has come straight out of the pit.

I particularly felt heartened by the fact that your remembrance of that gray drizzle did not dissociate you from your primary purpose - to honor and respect Primo Levi's writing and condition and, a more difficult task, promote fuller understanding of how to deal with this malady.

Your description leapt so vividly off the page that it jolted me back to the Spring of '46 when, after returning from the South Pacific as editor of Yank magazine in Manila, I found myself back in Manhattan alone, rootless, and beginning to feel that gray drizzle. A former sidekick turned up after a time and persuaded me to go to Los Angeles with him where he had been offered a job as photographer for The Californian, a magazine, and where I, too, was taken on as a departments editor. The new environment did not help. The grey drizzle intensified. Even though I went through the necessary motions of conducting interviews, writing up feature stories, and editing, the commonplaces of remarks made by colleagues and ordinary social exchanges more and more began to "lacerate like a blade."

One sleepless night I found myself staring at a slowly revolving

2.

thick black circle on the wall. The circle began to gyrate with increasing speed, and as I stared I could hear a voice inside it saying, "You have nothing to live for. Your life is empty. It's a waste. Your life is empty; it's a waste."

I tried to fight off this terrible intelligence, (I had not read The Death of Ivan Ilych at that time) but no matter what argument I dredged up desperately to counter what the voice was saying, the revolving circle and the voice became more powerful and, finally, overwhelming. By dawn's light I had become convinced that the only way out was suicide. All that was left was the decision how best to do it.

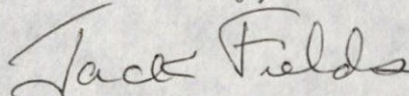
That I am here now in Heritage Village to write to you about this is one of those quirks that you will understand. Some of us do come out of it, and not necessarily through a "cure."

The phenomenon of depression deserves fuller understanding. I believe that psychological reasons, as you suggest, are central to the equation. Primo Levi's experiences in Auschwitz, your own past, and mine undoubtedly provide keys to what unlocked the depressions we experienced.

Whether capable hospital attention might have offered the vital cushion of time to save ^e Levi will remain conjectural. Only someone capable of breaking through the victim's tortured consciousness sufficiently to make a strong enough connection might possibly have arrested the destructive drive. Who can say?

Thanks for the essay. I'm on the verge of giving my students at Mattatuck a final exam in literature. Our readings, which included Oedipus Rex, The Death of Ivan Ilych, short stories and a number of plays focused on consciousness, heightened human awareness. Your have sharpened mine. I hope that I'll have done the same for at least some of my students.

Sincerely,



Jack Fields

2600 East Olive Street
Shrewport, Wisconsin 53211

19 December 1988

Dear Mr. Styron,

I had a friend, dead now, who saw an analyst for many years. She was well, neurosis-free, she thought, and she believed the analyst responsible for the cure.

As she aged, all her old fears and anxieties returned. Shortly before she died, of natural cause, she told me she thought, perhaps, that all these things must

inevitably come back home, if only
one lives long enough.

So I had imagined, until I read
your wonderful piece in The Times,
that Primo Levi had lived that long
and, like my friend, had met his
horrors coming around again. The
man and his writing were so important,
it troubled me greatly to think
he'd found that he couldn't deal
again with the horror of his early
life.


This is a long way to thank you

for the Series piece. You have caused
me to understand his sad and terrible
death in a different way.

Very truly yours,
Joan Clark

Re: Primo Levi.

MRS. WILLIAM W. SCHWARZ
30 EAST 72 STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021 USA


FORWARD

December 19, 1988

Dear Mr. Styron:

This letter is not for publication, only to share a few thoughts with you.

Our Aunt, Stefanie Drueker, a "survivor" committed suicide in the '60 ties. Her memories weighed too profoundly on her life.

She was born and educated in Vienna. She saw some terrible incidents at the University in Vienna. She moved with her husband and son to Paris where she was taken by the French Police to Drancy.

A man in a family she had helped was one of the guards. She was waiting in the line to be "selected" when he brushed up against her and whispered, "all you can do is say you are pregnant." She did. A Priest took the women, about 50, who were pregnant to an old house in the suburbs of Paris. Three months later he returned from an errand, agitated, and told them "you have one hour before the Germans come."

My Aunt escaped to the South of France where for a 10 franc (\$2) reward she was turned over by the postman to the Germans.

She survived (a strange word) and came to the U.S. Stefie found a position at the Univ. of Neb. in Lincoln, then years later moved on to San Francisco where there is family. After a few years she took her life.

Stefie was kind, humorous, articulate in many languages, generous and alone in her memories - her husband and son disappeared during the war - no trace - like steam lost from a kettle.

I believe Mr. Levi was alone, bereft of all hope, and that is why he left us. You cannot express after seeing what they have seen, the anguish. How do they live with "What happened to my son?"

I don't know and don't pretend to understand. I admire their courage to have tried to touch the spirit of life.

I admire your writing.

yours truly,

Mrs. Carol Schwarz

LOUIS AUCHINCLOSS
14-D IIII PARK AVENUE
NEW YORK, NY 10128
212-996-8803

William Styron
Rocksbury, CT
06783

12/20/88

Dear Bill:

I must thank you for that beautiful letter to the Times about depressions. You did a signal service to humanity, and it could only have been done by a great writer who has himself been through the ringer.

I have been fortunate in my own life never to have suffered from even a mild depression, but my father was continually and my sister is plagued by them. Although I have always been sympathetic, and, aided by my own analysis, have sometimes thought I could understand what they were going through, there was often a little mean underthought of "Why can't they snap out of it?"

Your wonderful language has made vivid to me their hell, as it has made me understand the recent suicide of a brother of a niece-in-law of mine who seemed the most extrovert and happy man you could imagine. After a few weeks of an unprecedented fit of depression he almost ran to his death, mindless of a loving wife, children and scores of devoted friends. Had they been able to induce him to try drugs or even shock, he might have been saved.

Thank you for what you have done, and all my best to you and Rose.

Sincerely,

Louis

Robert J. Goar
226 River Drive
Hadley, Mass. 01035
December 20, 1988

Mr. William Styron
Roxbury,
Connecticut

Dear Mr. Styron,

Thank you very much for your essay on the death of the great Primo Levi, and for the illuminating remarks which you made on the nature of depression. After ^{reading} the facts presented in your essay, I have no doubt that Dr. Levi's death would not have occurred had he received adequate medical care for his attack of severe depression. I mourn the loss of a great writer and a great man, but I could never condemn him, or any Holocaust survivor, for taking his or her life - even though I am a committed Christian. Perhaps my background as a professor of Latin gives me a more compassionate approach to this subject, as I am aware of Roman attitudes toward suicide in

a way that most of my contemporaries are not.

My godson in California is in a state hospital there, because of severe depression. Although I hope that he will never decide to take his life, I and his family accept the fact that he may some day decide in favor of suicide. Against that possibility, I shall save your essay from the "Times," in case it ever becomes necessary to share it with my godson's family.

Thank you again for your wise and humane essay.

I am disappointed to learn that most of those who attended the conference which you mentioned felt that Dr. Levi's death was caused by a lapse in moral strength or courage. That is a sad comment on the state of our understanding of the problem of depression.

Sincerely yours,
Robert J. Fox

P.O. Box 1332
New Canaan 06840
December 21, 1988

Dear Mr. Shyron,

Thank you so much for your essay on Primo Levi's death. You wrote so movingly about the pain of severe depression - I wish you would write more.

It was the first thing I have read which begins to make sense of my eighteen-year old son's illness. He suffers from profound depression and has been hospitalized for ten months following two suicide attempts.

Please write more for those of us who grieve and are helpless.

Sincerely,
Sarah Thacher

NEUROLOGY ASSOCIATES, P.C.
NEUROLOGY AND NEUROBEHAVIOR

Richard M. Restak, M.D.

DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN BOARD OF PSYCHIATRY AND NEUROLOGY

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CLINTON, MARYLAND 20735
868-6200

December 21, 1988

Mr. William Styron
Racum Road
Roxbury, Connecticut 06783

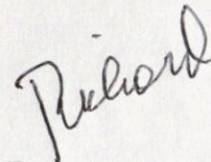
Dear Bill:

Art pointed out to me your excellent Op Ed piece in the Times. It was a courageous, thoughtful and humane effort to help those unfortunates who as a result of their depression are twice wronged: their illness and the "blame the victim" mentality that is so prevalent.

I photocopied the piece and I am giving it out to my patients who suffer from depression.

Best wishes to you and Rose for a pleasant Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Sincerely,



Richard M. Restak, M.D.

VICTOR MOORE MILLS

73 RUCUM ROAD
ROXBURY, CONNECTICUT 06783

21 December, 1988

Dear Mr. Styron:

I am sure that your reflections on depression which appeared in the New York Times two days ago were of great value to many readers whether or not they knew of the suicide of Primo Levi. As for me, your analysis was personally helpful in a way which I felt I should share with you.

In February of 1980 our oldest son, who was just twenty-three at the time, ended his life in a jump from a high-rise building in Palm Beach where he had recently begun his career as an aeronautical engineer.

He was an intelligent, sensitive and attractive young man and the reaction of his friends and acquaintances was incredulity. Two days before his death he had, after five consecutive sleepless nights taken an overdose of non-prescription sedative pills, then driven himself to a hospital and asked for help. After he was pumped out and interviewed by the hospital psychiatric staff he was, at his own insistence, released. In the following two days he told no one about this and sought no further help. His brother with whom he was very close was in college in Maine; his mother and I and his young sister were living in Rome. He had a great aunt nearby in Coral Gables, with whom he had spent Christmas, but he did not contact her either. The first any of us knew of his problem was after his death.

About five years earlier Christopher had gone through a period of intermittent depression, which seemed to have some of the characteristics of despair you refer to. But it did not seem to affect his daily life, his sparkling humor maintained itself and his excellent record in school was sustained. He voluntarily underwent some counselling with the local Unitarian minister who had professional qualifications and was a friend of the family. He discussed his problem also at length with his mother and after some time told her that he thought he had reached the point where he could handle it. This seemed fully borne out by his life at college where he did well academically and enthusiastically became a part of his fraternity. He remained somewhat of a loner however, and was the fraternity brother who put the others to bed when they were drunk rather than the fellow reveler.

For eight years my wife and I have been asking ourselves what we did wrong, (and in my case there was much), as parents. And we have asked how he could have seen the world as so insupportable as to feel compelled to leave it. Even a kind and loving note from him trying to explain this seemed only to make it more puzzling.

Your article has enabled me to look at the matter in a new light. Your analysis of depression as an illness which deprives the mind and personality of the ability to analyze and exercise the normal facilities of judgement seems to apply precisely to the situation of our son. In fact, in his note, his language in describing his feelings conveyed the same sense of being overwhelmed as your own words. This provides a perspective I did not have before.

The fact remains, of course, that we were not on hand to help, nor did we know the need for it. I cannot avoid the responsibility as a father for that. But, from what you say, it is possible that our son's depression might have been too much for him in any case.

Thank you again for your courageous sharing of your own experiences.

Yours sincerely,

Victor M. Mills

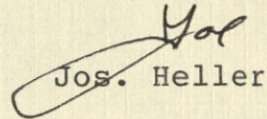
Joseph Heller
68 Skimhampton Road
East Hampton, New York 11937

December 21, 1988

Dear Bill:

Your sensible piece in yesterday's New York Times was as illuminating and persuasive as anything I think I've ever read by anybody on any subject. And presented, of course, as is inevitably and powerfully true of you, with a graceful sensitivity to the potential beauties of our written language that I am not alone in envying.

With continued good wishes,


Jos. Heller

Can imagine suicide as a brave assertion of self-determination.

Your novels have meant a great deal to me, over the years, but I hope you will not think it a denigration of them for me to say that I can't imagine anything you have written doing your readers more good, encouraging + inspiring them, offering them companionship in their suffering, than the Primo Levi essay. You have given people a profound gift. I thank you, on my own behalf, for it + send you my wishes for many years of health, productivity, + joy.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Lacey

Eastern College
Richmond IN 4737
26/XII/88

Dear William Styron:

I have just clipped your article "Why Primo Levi Need Not Have Died" + sent it to a friend who has just recently attempted suicide under conditions which mark hers as a classical depression. ~~As~~ is so often the case, especially with women in this society, she feels to blame for her weakness, unworthy of the concern of others. The depression, too, she blames on herself. I have had a time of mild depression, as did my wife, some years ago, + even the mild kind, where one can function reasonably dependably so no one else notices much beyond a continual sadness, is terrible. What you describe is so much like hell that one

Carney-Hawkins
413 West 50th Street, Apt. # 1F
New York, New York 10019

30 December 1988

William Styron
c/o The New York Times
229 West 43rd Street
New York, New York 10036

Dear Mr Styron:

I read your December 19 Op-Ed column, and then proceeded to read it to anyone I could corner, and finally quoted your eloquent description of depression in the holiday newsletter I will be sending out very late but which attempts to explain why there wasn't one last year and why birthdays, anniversaries, and phone messages have gone unacknowledged.

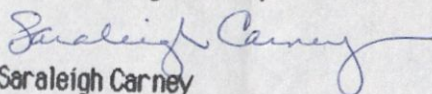
I have been fortunate that in the past medication has given me significant relief. However, beginning more or less with a major career setback, the difficulties escalated. Tricyclics can in some people eventually cause something called "rapid cycling," a speeding up of mood swings. I am a hypomanic-depressive--I don't go out and buy condos, suffer from delusions, or have euphoric highs, but appear to function reasonably normally (albeit often with increased irritability and decreased concentration), which alternates with depression. For about the last three years, I have been on a number of medications including lithium, none of which have worked. It has been a matter of holding on and hoping that the next drug would be the answer, occasionally getting some temporary respite, but nothing sustained, and the last 18 months have been hellish. Nor did the passage of time help. The depression was pervasive and intractable, with the result that I withdrew even more, seldom answering the phone, infrequently answering mail, managing household chores through sheer force of will. Finally in October, I felt at the end of my rope, with the current medication causing double vision and hair loss but little improvement in mood, and not very hopeful that the one more possible drug available would be much more successful.

I agreed to try electroconvulsive therapy, largely because I have two small children, and my concern about the effect on them of my increasingly unresponsive behavior finally outweighed my real fear of hospitals, ECT, and the not inconsiderable stigma attached to hospitalization. After spending three weeks in the hospital in November, with arrangements for daily visits with the kids in the lobby to minimize the trauma of my absence, while I am not tapdancing, I am writing this letter and thus there is cause for hope that more or less normal functioning is going to be a part of my future.

Five days before your article appeared, I went to the theatre, leaving my husband with a 3 year old in the full cry of a tantrum. On my return, I discovered that a child abuse report had been filed, that "a woman was threatening to commit suicide and take her kids with her, and has a history of mental illness," apparently by a neighbor who knew of my history of depression but not of my recent hospitalization. Every aspect of my life has now been investigated. My efforts to deal with my illness did not necessarily weigh in my favor, and while absolutely NOTHING was found and despite the fact that I was five blocks away when the child was yelling her head off, admitting that I suffered from depression has left us in the shadowy area where, while the city isn't threatening to take my kids away, it has made clear its ambivalence about depressed moms.

One of the things that kept me going during this mess was your piece, your courage in going public, and your superb description of the agony that depression is. I KNEW someone understood, could articulate that knowledge, and hopefully has reached some of the folks I have to deal with every day who apparently think I should simply pull myself up by my bootstraps. You have performed a real service, not just for Primo Levi, but for all of us who suffer from not only the disease but from the pervasive lack of understanding of what we confront each and every day.

My profound gratitude,


Sara Leigh Carney