



## A Life On The Ground, by Parker Palmer

QUESTION: ...Â the idea of having â€œa life on the groundâ€•. Can you expand on what that means to you?

That brings back a really important moment in my journey with depression, and in my life journey. I was seeing this therapist about my depression, and he listened to me for quite a long time. And finally, after the seventh or eighth meeting, he said, â€œIf I could mirror something back to you, Parker, it seems to me that you are imagining depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush youâ€•. â€œWhich is indeed how it felt. But he said, â€œWould it be possible for you to image depression as the hand of a friend trying to press you down to the ground on which itâ€™s safe to stand?â€• He was a very wise man and a good therapist. He didnâ€™t give me a lecture; he just sort of planted that image with me. And I think he trusted that I could work with it, which I did. And we talked about it more in the subsequent weeks and months.

What I came to understand is this: I had been living â€œat altitudeâ€™, and I remember trying to identify the ways in which I had been doing that. I was living at altitude because of my ego, which wanted to be at the top of the tower. I was living at altitude because of my intellect, which wanted to think its way through everything, and you canâ€™t think your way out of depression. I was living at altitude because of my high ethic, which wasnâ€™t coming from inside of me; it was just a bag full of â€œoughtsâ€™ that were inherited from God knows where. And I was living at altitude because of some misunderstandings I had about spirituality being sort of a Superman â€œup, up and awayâ€• kind of thing.

Well, thatâ€™s a lot of altitude that Iâ€™ve just named. I was probably in the stratosphere at that point, where the oxygen is very thin. Itâ€™s not fit for human life. But the big point is that if you live â€œat altitudeâ€™ and you trip and fall, as we all do on a pretty regular basis, you have a long, long way to fall, and you might kill yourself.

Depression can sometimes be imagined, especially depressions that end in suicide, as falling a long, long way down. But if the spiritual quest is to get your feet on the ground, and the intellectual quest is to use your mind on the ground, and the ethical quest is to find those values that come up through your own root system, and you really keep working with your ego, to keep it from making you into a gas balloon, and youâ€™liveâ€™ on the ground, then you can fall down ten times a day

and not kill yourself. You can get up, dust yourself off and proceed.  
And that image stayed with me in a really, really helpful way.

Years ago I studied the work of Paul Tillich, the great theologian, when I was in my 20s at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and was too young to understand what he was talking about. For Tillich, the image of God was “the ground of our being”™. I think I understand now why those are important words. It’s groundedness that I think we’re all seeking; solid ground under our feet.

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