



God found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.

(Deuteronomy 32:10)



Deric Bouts, Elijah and the angel.

to live in this world

you must be able
to do three things
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Mary Oliver, In Blackwater Woods

ACEDIA

"The simplest acts demand a herculean effort, the pleasure I normally take in people and the world itself is lost to me. I can be with people I love, and know that I love them, but feel nothing at all. I am observing my life more than living it.

I recognize in all of this the siege of what the desert monks termed the 'noonday demon'. It suggests that whatever I'm doing, indeed my entire life of 'doings', is not only meaningless but utterly useless. This plunge into the chill waters of pure realism is incapacitating, and the demon likes me this way. ...It mocks the rituals, routines, and work that normally fill my day; why do them, why do anything at all, it says, in the face of so vast an emptiness. ...The exhaustion that I'm convinced lies behind most suicides finds its seed in acedia; the rhythms of daily life, and of the universe itself, the everyday glory of sunrise and sunset and all the 'present moments' in between seem a disgusting repetition that stretches on for ever."

So Kathleen Norris introduces* the old and almost forgotten word 'acedia' or listlessness, 'not caring'.

She continues. Acedia...afflicts us in mid-life when it seems impossible to care about so many things that used to matter. Do I have to care, if it means having to acknowledge the contradictions and dissonances by which I survive? Indifference is more appealing.



She comments that Dante ties anger, which entails caring too much about the wrong things, to acedia, which is caring too little about the right ones. To someone in the grip of acedia, the beauty of sunlight, and of life itself, can only reinforce a bitter ingratitude...

It is important to stress that the spiritual experience (acedia) and the medical condition (depression) are different. Therapy for the latter and the traditional monastic 'rules' of community, stability and prayer for the former.

See Kathleen Norris's Noonday Demon or the Acedia chapter in Cloister Walk*.

REFLECTION. Some questions acedia asks are:

- ❖ Why bother? Why care?
- ❖ Can I allow myself to love and enjoy (my) life?
- ❖ Are there pre-conditions I have put on my experience of joy?
- ❖ Are grace and love indeed stronger than despair and dejection?
- ❖ If acedia has been your experience what has helped?

For Norris it's been spiritual direction and walking or praying the psalms, making bread and accepting family responsibilities.

