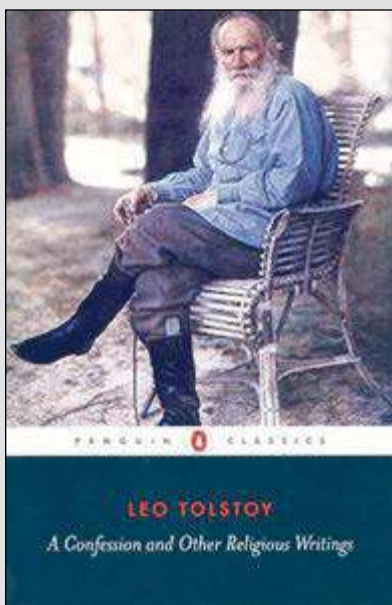


One Man's Journey Out of Depression Through Tolstoy's *A Confession*

by William S. Bost, III



As Leo Tolstoy approached age 50, he was depressed, suicidal, and disappointed with his life, even though he was arguably Russia's most famous and admired citizen. He already has published *War and Peace* (1865–68) and *Anna Karenina* (1874–76), but he rejected literary success, saying the latter novel was “an abomination that no longer exists for me.”¹ His work, *A Confession*, is an essay on his definition of the problem within himself and his search for a solution. *A Confession* (1879–82) is important in the discussion of mental health for three reasons. First, for those without a mental health or depression problem or for those who are concerned about a person with such a problem, *A Confession* provides a spot-on description of the feelings experienced by many depressed people. For those with a mental health problem, Tolstoy's book lets us know that we are not alone. In addition, Tolstoy puts in eloquent words the thoughts that are rattling around our heads. And, third, after discussing in-depth his efforts to overcome depression and “soul-sickness,” Tolstoy provides his solution to those who are affected.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born in Russia in 1828. He married Sonya Andreyevna Behrs when he was 34 and she was 18, and they had 13 children. He ran his vast estate on the Volga Steppes south of Moscow, improved the condition of the Russian peasants, and wrote the books of realist fiction for which he became so famous—*War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Tolstoy was an early believer in the moral force of nonviolent protest and “championed the oppressed by persuasively undermining the entire social, religious and political structure on which the lives of the well-to-do rested; his influence was enormous, both at home and abroad,” according to Jane Kentish in the commentary of her translation of *A Confession* (see pp. 8–9). Along the way, he encountered a lot of opposition. The government began to censor his writings, and in 1901 after his active support for persecuted religious sects, he was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church. It is said that from then on, there were two powers in Russia—Czar Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy. He died in 1910 at a small railway station on his way to a monastery. This journey is the subject of the 2010 film, “The Last Station.”

Tolstoy's Description of Depression

Tolstoy wrote *A Confession* at the age of 51. He was among the wealthiest, the most famous, and most beloved men in Russia. And he was miserable. He describes his condition as follows:

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink and sleep and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking and sleeping; but there was no life in me because I had no desires whose gratification I would have deemed it reasonable to fulfil. If I wanted something I knew in advance that whether or not I satisfied my desire nothing would come of it.

If a magician had come and offered to grant my wishes I would not have known what to say. If in my intoxicated moments I still had the habit of desire, rather than real desire, in my sober moments I knew that it was a delusion and that I wanted nothing. I did not even wish to know the truth because I had guessed what it was. The truth was that life is meaningless.

It was as if I had carried on living and walking until I reached a precipice from which I could see clearly that there was nothing ahead of me other than destruction. But it was impossible to stop, and impossible to turn back or close my eyes in order not to see that there was nothing ahead other than deception of life and of happiness, and the reality of suffering and death: of complete annihilation.

Life had grown hateful to me, and some insuperable force was leading me to seek deliverance from it by whatever means. I could not say that I wanted to kill myself. The force beckoning me away from life was a more powerful, complete and overall desire. It was a force similar to my striving after life, only it was going in the other direction. I fought as hard as I could against life. The thought of suicide now came to me as naturally as thoughts of improving my life had previously come to me. This idea was so attractive to me that I had to use cunning against myself in order to avoid carrying it out too hastily. I did not want to rush, simply because I wanted to make every effort to unravel the matter. I told myself that if I could not unravel the matter now, I still had time to do so. And it was at this time that I, a fortunate man, removed a rope from my room where I undressed every night alone, lest I hang myself from the beam between the cupboards; and I gave up taking a rifle with me on hunting trips so as not to be tempted to end my life in such an all too easy fashion. I myself did not know what I wanted. I was afraid of life and strove against it, yet I still hoped for something from it.

All this was happening to me at a time when I was surrounded on all sides by what is considered complete happiness: I was not yet fifty, I had a kind, loving and beloved wife, lovely children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding with no effort on my part. I was respected by relatives and friends far more than ever before. I was praised by strangers and could consider myself a celebrity without deceiving myself. Moreover I was not unhealthy in mind or body, but on the contrary enjoyed a strength of mind and body such as I had rarely witnessed in my contemporaries. Physically I could keep up with the peasants tilling the fields; mentally I could work for eight or ten hours at a stretch without suffering any ill effects from the effort. And in these circumstances I found myself at the point where I could no longer go on living and, since I feared death, I had to deceive myself in order to refrain from suicide.²

What Was the Source of Tolstoy's Depression?

Tolstoy was perplexed by his unhappiness and emptiness. He reflected on his path through his life. In that reflection, he found that he had focused on those things that his peers focused upon. He had been guided by a quest for perfection and a sense of competition. As Tolstoy says,

Now, looking back at that time, I can clearly see that the only real faith I had, apart from the animal instincts motivating my life, was a belief in perfection. But what this perfection consisted of, and what its aim was, were unclear to me. I tried to perfect myself intellectually and studied everything I came upon in life. I tried to perfect my will, setting myself rules I tried to follow. I perfected myself physically, practising all kinds of exercises in order to develop my strength and dexterity, and I cultivated endurance and patience by undergoing all kinds of hardship. All this I regarded as perfection. The beginning of it all was, of course, moral perfection, but this was soon replaced by a belief in general perfection, that is a desire to be better not in my own eyes or before God but in the eyes of other people. And very soon this determination to be better than others became a wish to be more powerful than others: more famous, more important, wealthier.³

This path through life brought him to a point at which he could not find a way forward. As he said,

My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I had learnt from experience. It is this: what will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?

Expressed another way the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?⁴

How Does This Apply Now to Us?

Many people reach a point in their life in which they no longer feel passion for living. Like Tolstoy, even if they are at the top of the social and educational ladder, they feel empty, exhausted, and with a complete lack of desire and purpose. The emptiness and pain manifests itself in poor work habits and even poorer relationships with family and others. Ineffective coping mechanisms lead to aberrant behavior, substance abuse, clinical depression, and, more often than we like to admit, suicide. And how could we describe more perfectly than Tolstoy the competitive drive for personal perfection that propels many of us to success and accomplishment.

What Did Tolstoy Do About It?

“But perhaps I have overlooked something, or failed to understand something?” Tolstoy asks. “It cannot be that this state of despair [referring to Tolstoy's condition] is common to all men!”⁵

And so he set out to find the answer. He observed those around him closely to determine whether and how they dealt with the problem. He also did some research, asking experts in the physical sciences, philosophy, and religion about their opinions.

What Did Tolstoy Observe Regarding How Others Deal with the Problem?

Tolstoy identified four different approaches among his peers to the problem, that is, in a few words, the inability to find meaning in life. The first approach was ignorance which “consists of failing to recognize, or understand, that life is evil and absurd,”⁶ that life is meaningless. Tolstoy believed that people of this sort simply have not thought and do not think about their purpose or the meaning of life. Tolstoy concluded there was little to learn from these people; as Tolstoy says, “we can never cease knowing what we know.”⁷

The second approach is epicureanism. It consists, while being aware of meaninglessness, in making use of the advantages one has to enjoy the immediate and material pleasures of life. As in Tolstoy’s time,

This second method of escape sustains the majority of people of our circle. The conditions in which they find themselves dictate that they have a greater share of the good things in life than the bad; their moral torpor allows them to forget that all the privileges of their position are accidental and that not everyone can have a thousand wives and palaces as Solomon did; that for every man with a thousand wives there are a thousand men without wives, and that for every palace there are a thousand men who built it by the sweat of their brow, and that the same chance that has made you Solomon today might make you Solomon’s slave tomorrow. The inertia of these people’s imagination enables them to forget why it was Buddha was granted no peace: the inevitability of illness, old age and death, which can, if not today then tomorrow, destroy all these pleasures.⁸

These people did not inspire Tolstoy as he could not artificially dull his imagination to eliminate the concept of meaninglessness.

The third approach that Tolstoy observed was one of “strength and energy:” suicide. Tolstoy believed that those who truly understood the meaninglessness “act accordingly and instantly bring an end to this stupid joke, using any available means: a noose round the neck, water, a stab in the heart, a train on a railway line.”⁹ Tolstoy thought that this was the worthiest means of escaping his misery, but he could not do it.

The fourth way to address the meaninglessness Tolstoy felt is that of weakness consisting “of clinging to a life that is evil and futile, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it.”¹⁰ Tolstoy found himself in that category.

Tolstoy’s four categories apply equally today to wealthy and well-educated Americans. There are those who do not think of, or have not yet thought of, the issue; those who engage in the pleasurable activities of life in spite of their knowledge of the problem; those who end their lives; and those, like me, who wait. For something.

What Did the Physical Sciences Have To Offer?

Tolstoy, like many educated people, began his search with the premise that the answer must lie in science. He divided science into two categories: physical science and philosophy. Neither offered a satisfactory answer to his question.

With respect to physical sciences, he found that they did a superb job of describing the process by which we live and by which events occur in the known universe. In other words, physical sciences were occupied with the answers to the questions of “How?,” “What?,” or “When?” Tolstoy’s problem, however, was a question of “Why?” Physical science simply did not bother with this issue.

As Tolstoy puts it —

If we turn to those branches of knowledge that attempt to provide solutions to the questions of life, to physiology, psychology, biology and sociology, we encounter a startling poverty of thought, extreme lack of clarity and a completely unjustified pretension to resolve questions beyond their scope, together with continual contradiction between one thinker and another (or even with their own selves). If we turn to the branches of knowledge that are not concerned with resolving life's questions, but which answer their own specialized, scientific questions, we may be enraptured by the power of the human intellect, but we know in advance that they will provide no answers to the questions of life. These branches ignore the question. They say, 'As for what you are and why you live, we have no answers and do not involve ourselves with it. On the other hand, if you need to know about the laws governing light, or about chemical combinations, or about the laws governing the development of organisms; or if you need to know about the laws governing physical bodies and their forms, and the relationship between their size and quantity; or if you need to know about the laws governing your own mind, then we have clear, precise and irrefutable answers to all this.'¹¹

How About the Abstract, Philosophical Sciences?

Philosophy, art, and other abstract sciences also offered no answers to Tolstoy. These sciences acknowledged the problem and acknowledged the existence of an essence of life. But, philosophy, in all of its forms, could not answer the question of our purpose generally or our purpose individually.

As Tolstoy says,

[Philosophy] clearly poses the question: who am I? And: what is the universe? Why do I exist and why does the universe exist? And since it has existed this science has always given the same answer. Whether the philosopher calls the essence of life that is within me and within everything an idea, or a substance, a spirit or a will, he is saying the same thing: that I exist and that I am this essence. But how and why he does not know, and if he is a precise thinker he does not answer. I ask, 'Why does this essence exist? What comes of the fact that it is and will be?' And philosophy not only fails to answer but can only ask the same thing itself. And if it is a true philosophy, its whole task lies precisely in posing this question clearly. And if it holds firmly to its purpose then it can have no other answer to the question of what I am and what the universe is than: 'All and nothing.' And to the question of why the universe exists and why I exist, then: 'I do not know.'¹²

Tolstoy infers in *A Confession* that his despair deepened when he finally accepted that science and philosophy offered him no answers to the most important question of his existence. He, like many of us, proceeded through life with the idea that the answers to the questions that puzzle or affect us will be made available to us. We learn science and math and English in school, we learn to make a living, and we learn to raise a family. Many of us have access to the knowledge that we need and want when we need and want it. Often science advances at exactly the pace we need to satisfy our growing individual and collective curiosity.

This sense of confidence that knowledge will be made available remains when we first begin to ask "Why?" As the question becomes more important, and the answer becomes more elusive and maybe even unknowable, despair and anxiety set in.

What About Religion?

Tolstoy was most disappointed by the answers that organized religion provided to his predicament and a significant portion of *A Confession* discusses its shortcomings. But faith is a different story...¹³

What Was Tolstoy's Solution?

Two of Tolstoy's findings affected me greatly. The first was that Tolstoy was struck by the fact that "the poor, simple, uneducated folk," "the labouring people," "knew the meaning of life and death, endured suffering and hardship," and yet found "tremendous happiness in life."¹⁴ For them, uncertainty, discomfort, and boring toil are parts of life that those who find contentment accept without question.

In contrast to what I saw happening in my own circle, where the whole of life is spent in idleness, amusement and dissatisfaction with life, I saw that these people who laboured hard throughout their entire lives were less dissatisfied with life than the rich. In contrast to the people of our class who resist and curse the privations and sufferings of their lot, these people accept sickness and grief without question or protest, and with a calm and firm conviction that this is how it must be, that it cannot be otherwise and that it is all for the good. Contrary to us, who the more intelligent we are the less we understand the meaning of life and see some kind of malicious joke in the fact that we suffer and die, these people live, suffer and approach death peacefully and, more often than not, joyfully. In contrast to the fact that a peaceful death, a death without horror and despair, is a most rare exception in our circle, a tormented, rebellious and unhappy death is a most rare exception amongst these people. And there are millions and millions of these people who are deprived of all those things, which for the Solomons and I are the only blessings in life, and who nevertheless find tremendous happiness in life. I looked more widely around me. I looked at the lives of the multitudes who have lived in the past and who live today. And of those who understood the meaning of life I saw not two, or three, or ten, but hundreds, thousands and millions. And all of them, endlessly varied in their customs, minds, educations and positions, and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, endured suffering and hardship, lived and died and saw this not as vanity but good.

And I came to love these people. The further I penetrated into the lives of those living and dead about whom I had read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live. I lived like this for about two years and a great change took place within me, for which I had been preparing for a long time and the roots of which had always been in me. What happened was that the life of our class, the rich and learned, became not only distasteful to me, but lost all meaning. All our activities, our discussions, our science and our art struck me as sheer indulgence. I realized that there was no meaning to be found here. It was the activities of the labouring people, those who produce life, that presented itself to me as the only true way. I realized that the meaning provided by this life was truth and I accepted it.¹⁵

A significant part of our dissatisfaction with life is that "we don't like what we do," "work is hard," "my boss doesn't appreciate me," "work is not emotionally fulfilling," "coworkers are difficult to deal with," "I don't make enough money," "the deadlines

are unreasonable,” or any number of a list of common complaints, some true and some trivial. In order to find contentment, we must accept that these unpleasant things, whatever they may be, and struggle through them as a part of life—our life, the one that we are living now. When we accept our hardships as integral to our being, instead of complaining of them like a temporary ache that will go away, then we can live with more peace.

And the second of Tolstoy’s concepts is that once we accept hardship as a part of life, our purpose here is to help others with their toils. By “toils” Tolstoy did not mean intellectual questions about theoretical matters of interest or issues related to the allocation of wealth or where we are going to build the next monument to ourselves or others. “Toils” to him meant matters that directly affect the comfort and well-being of all people:

Indeed, a bird is made in such a way that it can fly, gather food and build a nest, and when I see a bird doing these things I rejoice. Goats, hares and wolves are made in order to eat, multiply and feed their families, and when they do this I feel quite sure that they are happy and that their lives are meaningful. What should a man do? He too must work for his existence, just as the animals do, *but with the difference that he will perish if he does it alone, for he must work for an existence, not just for himself, but for everyone.* And when he does this I feel quite sure that he is happy and that his life has meaning. And what had I been doing for all those thirty years of conscious life? Far from working for an existence for everyone, I had not even done so for myself. I had lived as a parasite and when I asked myself why I lived, I received the answer: for nothing. If the meaning of human existence lies in working to procure it I had spent thirty years attempting, not to procure it, but to destroy it for myself and for others. How then could I get any answer other than that my life is evil and meaningless? Indeed it was evil and meaningless.

The life of the world runs according to someone’s will; our lives and the lives of everything in existence are in someone else’s hands. In order to have any chance of comprehending this will we must first fulfil it by doing what is asked of us. If I do not do what is asked of me I will never understand what it is that is asked of me, and still less what is asked of us all, of the whole world.¹⁶

As a lawyer, as my career advanced, my office become more opulent, my clients became more wealthy, and my cases became bigger and more document-intensive. Along the way, I lost contact with humanity, the great number of people who live out their days in some form of contentment without the ability or the desire to do “important” things. When I lost my contact with them, I lost my opportunity to know what was wanted of me, and I lost my sense of self. My way back to peace, and out of depression and despair, was to reconnect with humanity and to do my part “toiling” together with others. ☒☒☒

Endnotes

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Translated with an Introduction by Jane Kentish, Penguin Books, London, England, 1987, p. 7.

² Chapter 4, pp.30–31.

³ Chapter 1, p. 21.

⁴ Chapter 5, pp.34–35.

⁵ Chapter 5, p. 34.

⁶ Chapter 7, p. 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Chapter 7, pp.45–46.

⁹ Chapter 7, p.46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Chapter 5, p. 36.

¹² Chapter 5, p.38

¹³ See Chapters 1, 9, the first part of 10, and 12–15.

¹⁴ Chapter 10, pp.58–59.

¹⁵ Chapter 10, p.59.

¹⁶ Chapter 11, p.61 (emphasis added).