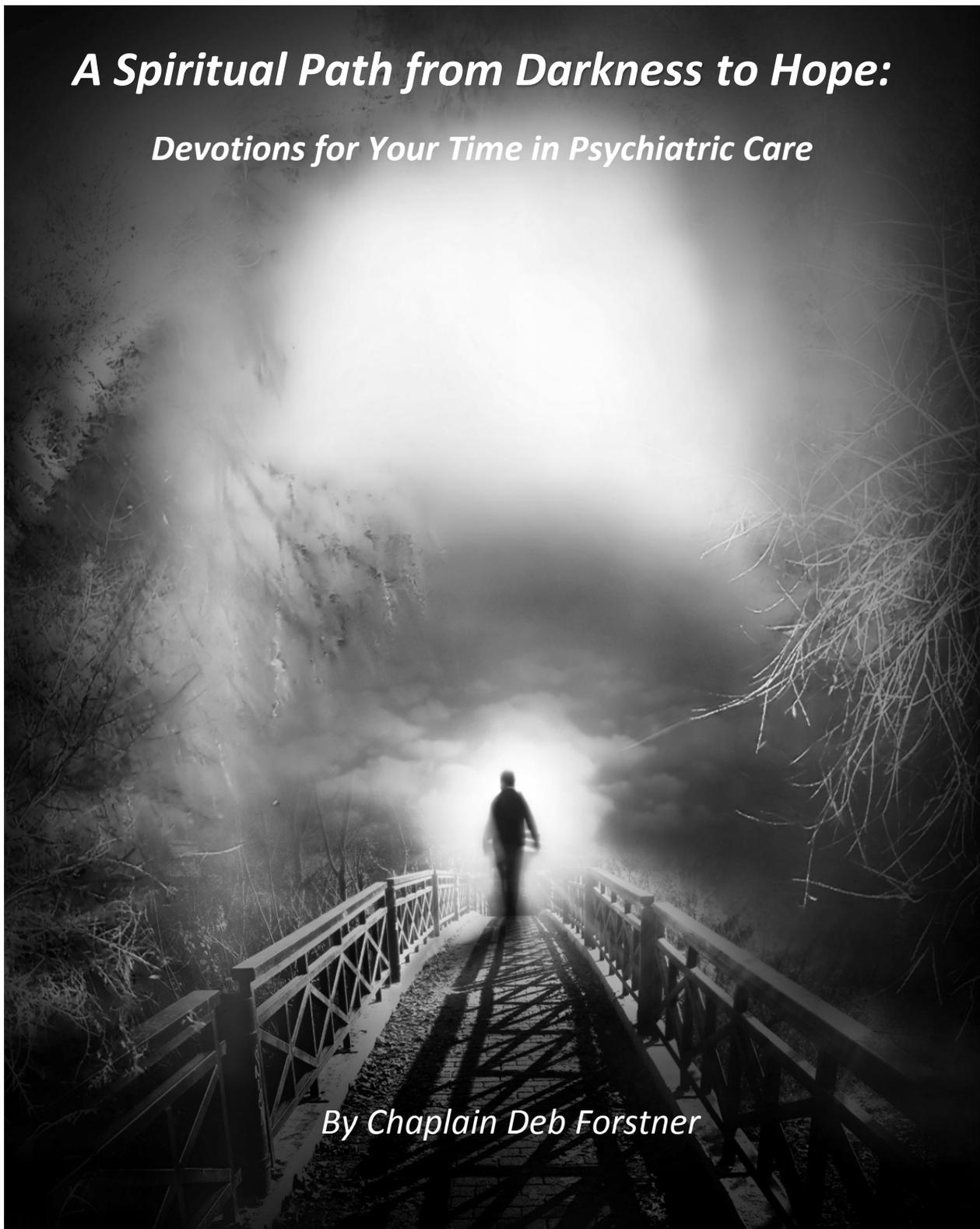


A Spiritual Path from Darkness to Hope:

Devotions for Your Time in Psychiatric Care

By Chaplain Deb Forstner



About the Author

Chaplain Deborah Forstner

M.A. Pastoral Ministry from St. John's School of Theology,
Collegeville, MN

M.S.Ed. School Psychology from UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI

Board Certified Chaplain – National Association of Catholic Chaplains

Contact info: 1121 Mitchell Place, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

daforstner@gmail.com

About this Devotion Book

I minister on the psychiatric unit of a hospital as chaplain. This particular ministry has been an interest area of mine for many years, for both professional and personal reasons. People hospitalized on the unit where I work often have requested spiritual reading materials. Because so many admitted to a hospital due to mental health needs have made suicide attempts or are experiencing strong suicidal ideation, I wanted the devotional to be direct in addressing this and similar concerns. As a result, I wrote this book for 7-days of devotions, with a prayer to say at the time of and after discharge. Besides chaplains, this resource is something pastors could print and bring along when visiting a congregation member in the hospital. Another possibility would be using pages from this book in one-on-one pastoral care work by clergy, Christian therapists, or others. Finally, small group facilitators in a community program for those struggling with mental illness could use the devotional as a basis for a seven session small group.

Day 1 -- Hopelessness to a Little Light

Many times people admitted to inpatient psychiatric care have had considerations and perhaps attempts to kill oneself; repeated self-harm, that often results from intense anxiety; or a confused state of mind brought on by the complications of grief or acute phases of mental illness. You may be here because you chose to be, but sometimes people are hospitalized not out of their choice, but because they are on a hold or court order to receive this care. As the author of this 7-day devotion book (which includes a prayer to say at the time of and after your discharge), it is my prayer for you that your time on the psychiatric unit will be a blessing in your life. However, many start their stays with very little hope in their hearts that things are going to get better.

When in the midst of depression or any form of trouble, it can feel like being in the middle of a dark tunnel. Turn back? It is dark on that end. Continue ahead? But it is dark on the other end too. These are times that take a good deal of trust. It may seem hopeless, like the darkness will never end. But if you are on a train going through a tunnel like that, it is best to trust the conductor rather than jump onto the dark rails. Eventually, though you may not know how long it will take, a little bit of light appears. And that light continues to grow as you get closer to the end of the tunnel.

These two Scripture verses from Psalm 34 are for today:

When the people cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of their troubles.

The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.
(Psalm 34:17-18)

You have made a cry for help, and I believe the Lord has heard you. Thank you for being open to spiritual assistance by using this 7-day devotion book.

Day 2 - My Reasons to Live

When feeling suicidal or emotionally overwhelmed, people often hit a point of feeling that there is nothing to live for, that it would be better for everyone if they were dead. Though these thoughts can seem very real at the time, they are not true. They represent distorted and false thinking. During this second devotion book day, I encourage you to fight those faulty thoughts by starting a list of your reasons to stay alive. This list can be looked back at later, or added to in the future, when you are needing to review your reasons to live (also known as your deterrents to suicide; your own personal suicide prevention list). Think about it objectively.

- Who are the people in your life? Did you consider that by continuing to live there will be more friends, possibly more family, in your future?
- Do you have, or do you ever want to have, pets?
- What things do you enjoy, that you would like to do again?
- What are some things you have never tried, but thought that someday you might like to try?
- What places have you been that you would like to return to, and what places have you never been, that you'd like to go to someday?

Scripture Verse for the Day: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Day 3 --Finding Purpose

A large part of spirituality involves looking for meaning and growth in life's events, and through that process, finding a feeling of purpose or direction for living. Your sense of "purpose" can be several things, and will likely change over time, as you mature and circumstances change. There may seem to be little to no purpose to the suffering caused by symptoms of a mental illness. However, as you seek treatment, and as you work with the team to find interventions that help, you may realize that you actually become stronger than before. Through your story, you can be a witness and help for others. You may also experience greater freedom to use and further develop your God given talents and interests.

Finding and bringing to mind what your purpose or purposes are in life can help motivate you to action. Typically, when you find something that gives you a feeling of purpose, it is not such a drudgery (though some of the days will still be difficult and challenging). People with purpose feel that what they do makes a difference. But even the most routine task can be sprinkled with purpose because of the way you do it. In her difficult work with the poorest of the poor in India, Mother Teresa said, "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

In this space, write down some of the things that have given your life meaning and purpose: past, present, and/or some of the things you'd like to do in the future that you believe would be meaningful and purposeful

Scripture Verses for the Day: *You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3).*

We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

Day 4 -- How God can help?

Our anxiety and feelings of isolation can be eased when we freely talk with God about what we need. However, in the midst of difficulties, this can seem impossible. Some people object saying they do not know how to pray, or doubt God's existence on the "other line." Even in those times, there can be comfort found in simple prayers.

Many prayers fall into one of two basic categories, or a combination of these two: "Help" and "Thanks." In times of trouble, there will probably be many more cries for help. "God, help get me through this meeting," "God, help me be safe tonight", or just simply, saying, "Help" aloud or in your mind as you breathe in and breathe out. Quiet time with a simple word such as "Peace" may help to relax your mind, body, and spirit, leading to greater clarity and direction.

Being grateful, or looking for things to be thankful for is a great mental health strategy, and in the Scriptures, it is documented how much Jesus appreciated those he had ministered to who came back to say thank you. In reality, sometimes a person can go through a day and feel that not one good thing happened. Yet, with some effort, you can find some blessings or gifts to take note of and be thankful for. They do not have to be great things, but being thankful for good things, or even the okay things, might help take your focus off the challenging and hard things. You might thank the Creator for nature (the sun is still there even when behind the clouds), something you were able to eat, the gift of music experienced through hearing a favorite song, or being grateful for other aspects of your health. Praying for others is also a very mentally healthy and helpful thing to do.

Scripture Verses for the Day: *Not only will God give us peace, but He will also strengthen us.* (Isaiah 41:10)

...in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Day 5 -- Do I need to walk this path alone?

Good companionship helps so much in supporting a healthy spiritual life. If you don't yet have this, whether through friendship or family, feel free to pray to ask God for help in finding at least one person with whom you can share your current spiritual journey. This may involve taking a risk and stepping out of your comfort zone. You might attend a church service, or join a group or club. Pray for guidance and ask others (such as a social worker or therapist) for ideas as to good places to try to meet such companion/s. Maybe this person is someone from your past that you previously connected with strongly and positively, but over time, the two of you have lost touch. Maybe you could choose to reach out to that person again.

The definition of a spiritual companion is broad. As examples, it can be a person you like to do things with that bring you joy. Or perhaps it is someone with whom you can read and discuss the Bible or other spiritual writing. A wonderful companionship might involve someone you pray with, or a friend who shares in conversations about life's ups and downs, and then you promise and carry out praying for each other's needs. In general, I wish for you that you have or can find in your life, on an ongoing basis, a person or people with whom you can experience supportive interactions.

Scripture Verses for the Day: *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor; for if they fall, the one will lift up his companion.* (Ecclesiastes 4:9)

Mark (2:3-5) gives a wonderful example of what companions can do for one another: *And four came, bringing to Jesus a paralytic. Being unable to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof where He was. And when they had dug through, they lowered the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven."* (And then the friend was also able to rise and walk.)

Think about the people who may have encouraged you to seek help, and brought you to psychiatric care. You may not have appreciated their action at the time, but IN time, you may see what they did through a different lens.

Day 6 -- Hope and a Bigger Light

Hope is the realization that no matter where you are or what you are going through, there is light at the end of your tunnel. It may be imperceptible at this time, or only as big as a pinprick, but the strength of hope believes that the light is there, and there will be better days, with less emotional pain, ahead.

In Scripture, there are many references to light shining in the darkness, and how light can guide our steps. In fact, in the Gospel of John (8:12), Jesus himself states, "I am the light of the world." In just the previous paragraph to this strong statement of Jesus, people were trying to get him to agree with stoning a woman who had sinned. But Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." All dropped their stones and went home, and while Jesus also did not condemn her, he encouraged her to go forward living a better life. So, there is hope, both in Jesus' mercy and his light, even when we've made what we might consider terrible mistakes.

Use this space (or on the back) to write about things you hope to be forgiven for and/or change about your life. How might you be able to make things right in these situations? How can you move toward the tough task (though it can make your burden lighter) of forgiving others? Remember to include forgiving yourself. There are times we do things we regret that were due to mental illness, or not knowing better at the time.

Scripture Verse for the Day:

*From the ends of the earth, I call to you when my heart is overwhelmed.
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. (PS 61:2)*

Day 7 -- I Believe... These are My Values and Strengths

It is important in life to clarify what you believe in. Your beliefs will not necessarily be set in stone, but will be open to revision and hopefully growth. Scripture speaks directly to the importance of having belief. In James (1:6), we are encouraged to believe and not doubt, "... because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." Yet, it is normal to go through periods of doubt, particularly when stressing over life's issues or grieving a loss.

Faith in a Higher Power can be an anchor during those turbulent, wind tossed times. In the Gospel of John (7:38), Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me , as Scripture has said, 'Rivers of living water will flow from within them.'" And after healings documented in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus often notes that it was the people's faith that saved them.

Along with our beliefs, it is good to clarify what we value, and explore what are strengths are. Values can guide your choices in life. For example, do you value stability, or do you more value adventure? Do you value achievement, or is your priority keeping things simple? What do you value in a relationship? How important is family in your life? How about friends?

When we are at a low point in terms of self esteem, we can feel like we have no areas of strength. But I believe we have all been created with gifts that can bring us joy when used, and that will also benefit others through their use. Please don't sell yourself short. Instead, explore what your strengths might be, and like with any muscle development, take time to give your strengths exercise.

Scripture Verses for the Day: *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:10).*

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. (1 Cor 12:4-5).

Prayer Upon and After Discharge

O God, help me recognize the great value of all the ways you have blessed me . I especially think of all the people I met on the psychiatric unit who are also on their paths to living more whole and happy lives, and all the staff who have showed me care and concern, and have shared their knowledge in my treatment.

On my tough days, may I find comfort in You, my God. Each day, may there be something I look forward to with faith. Help me find meaning in what I do. With each act of kindness that I share, whether it be offering a smile or helping someone, giving time and love to friends and family, or exercising my body, may I realize these are all part of fulfilling your divine purpose for my life.

God, You can see every movement of the human heart. And so, You know and understand times when I might feel overwhelmed, depressed and anxious again. Embrace me in the knowledge that You do not judge me, but only want to comfort and strengthen me. Help me find a community that can be a vehicle of Your support and uplifting, accepting love. Fill my heart with HOPE. Amen.