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FAITH

Matters

There's a remarkable story in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd are on their way to Jerusalem when they come across a blind man named Bartimaeus.

"Jesus, Son of David," he cries, "have mercy on me!"

And the people in the crowd reprimand him for interrupting their journey. They have places to go and things to do. They're *busy*.

But then Mark includes a detail that's both subtle and profound. He tells us that Jesus *stood still*.

In the late 1990s, the Parisian sociologist Alain Ehrenberg wrote a book arguing that depression is an ailment of speed. A precise translation of the book's title is *The Fatigue of Becoming Yourself*,

but most English translations render it *The Weariness of the Self*.

Ehrenberg argues that depression became a psychiatric diagnosis in the late modern age when cultural shifts elevated the individual "self" to a state of limitless potential: "I can be anything I want and do anything I put my mind to."

By the late twentieth century, this idea was wedded to the logic of the free market: The limitless self was commodified and subjected to market metrics: We accrue "value" through increased "ratings" like star reviews, blog hits, Facebook likes, and wearable exercise data. We curate our identities until they're no longer fashionable, leading us to re-curate our identities, again and again, attempting to keep up with the frenetic pace (the *speed*) of our attention economy. Inevitably, we fail to keep up, which leads to feelings of worthlessness and alienation. It's exhausting.

That's why Ehrenberg calls it "the fatigue of becoming yourself."

I'm no therapist, but I know depression intimately. And my experience aligns neatly with Ehrenberg's description. When we're always in a state of becoming (an orientation toward the future), we can never be in a state of *being* (an orientation toward the present). We can't be attentive to the actual moment or the grandeur of this marvelous world. Like Bartimaeus, we become blind to everything around us, deadened to the things that beckon our attention. That's what depression feels like.

According to Mark Fisher, "It goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically instantiated, but this says nothing about their causation. If it is true, for instance, that depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin. This requires a social and political explanation."

Ehrenberg provides just such an explanation. And I believe that faith communities can foster environments that address these underlying conditions. We can cultivate spaces where the crowds slow down and halt their crusades into the future — and where we, like Jesus, can stand still and just *be*. Only then, in the stillness, will we receive sight again.



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