

MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

Ndop!: *Three times in his life, depression led author Andrew Solomon to the brink of suicide. In Senegal, a town full of strangers, two chickens, and a ram showed him the way back.*

Tony Kahn:

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. Russian has, I believe, something like twelve different words for "sadness" and "misery." There's *grust'*, there's *pechal'*, there's *toska*. Tagalog, which is spoken in the Philippines, has at least ten different words, they tell me, for the one thing that we choose to call "love." They discriminate between loving your wife, loving your job, loving your dog, and loving ice cream. We don't. Well, Andrew Solomon, today's storyteller, is a man who likes to travel, to hear new languages, and to understand things better. And the thing that he was trying to understand was depression, his own depression. At least three times in his life, Andrew Solomon has had a depression so dark and so deep with a landscape so scary that it's led him to the brink of suicide.

[Drumming]

Andrew Solomon:

I felt like I couldn't get up; I couldn't do anything, and I felt as though I couldn't get joy out of anything.

Tony Kahn:

It was in Senegal, in western Africa, that he found some hope. Now, Senegal is a country where there is no word for depression. They don't see it as something that happens in your mind or in isolation. They see it as a series of symptoms that affect your body and that call forth the entire community so that they can help you feel better. And the way they do that is through a ceremony called an "*ndop*." We begin with an old woman in Senegal who became his guide.

Andrew Solomon:

Well, she said, "You know, you don't look that terrific yourself." And I said, "Oh really?" and she started feeling the shape of the back of my head. She said, "You get headaches sometimes." And I said, "Yes." She said, "Yes," she said. "And you have a heaviness in your spirit sometimes." And I said, "Well yes, sometimes I do." She said, "Well I've never done this for a foreigner before, but if you want I can perform an *ndop* for you." And I thought, "Well, I've come a long way so I might as well go through with it," and so I said, "Yes, okay, that would be fantastic."

And so over the next five days, we put together the supplies that we'd been instructed to acquire - a clay pot, a threshing basket, two white chickens, a ram, straw mats. And

at that point the drummers began to drum, and the people of the village began to gather, and there was a little makeshift wedding bed set up, and I was told to get into this bed with the ram, and the people formed concentric circles around us. The sun was beating down and I was lying there, and I'd been told that it would be very bad luck if the ram broke away. So I had to hold the ram very tightly. And as they danced around, they threw pieces of cloth over us. We were lying there kind of smothering underneath all of this cloth in the sun. And the singing got louder and louder, and the dancing got faster and the drumming got more ecstatic, and then as it reached a high point, somebody pulled back all of the cloth. I was yanked to my feet. The throat of the ram was slit, as were the throats of the two chickens. The blood was all drained into a basin, and I was covered from head to foot in the blood of the freshly slaughtered ram and these chickens.

In the afternoon, there was someone digging holes in the dark quiet area where we were. Cakes were made with honey and millet and put into the holes; pieces of the slaughtered ram were put into the holes. And then the women gathered around me, and they cleaned the blood off of me by filling their mouths with water and then spitting the water very hard like a shower jet. And when it was washed away I put on a fresh loincloth, and we went to these holes that we had dug, and I was told to recite a few particular sentences. And I was very interested by the primary thing I said, which was, "Spirits, I consign you to the earth and I ask you to stay here and to leave me in peace to conduct the business of my own life. I promise that I will never forget you."

And so then the holes were eventually filled up. And at that point, the drummers began to play again; everyone came back into the square, and there was a lot of dancing, [festive singing and music] and there was the feeling that all of these people very much wanted my depression to go away. There was this whole community of people gathered around me. I mean, I started out feeling very trepidatious and very uncertain and by the end I felt this sort of glowing, fresh energy. And, and when they'd finished the ritual, the women took a little piece of the ram and said, "Tomorrow morning, find a beggar who is not blind or lame and give these things to him, and that will complete the ritual." And they gave me a bottle of water, which had been -- had various things dipped into it, which was supposed to be kept in case I ever had a recurrence and needed it. And I, I have it upstairs in a bottle of water.

[Festive music fades, replaced by soft string music]

Tony Kahn:

I'm here in the studio with Gary Mott. Quite a trip, quite a journey.

Gary Mott:

Laying down with a ram. And then having its throat slit. That's got to be a cure for something. [laughs]

Tony Kahn:

[Laughing] Sure wasn't a cure for the ram's depression, or it wasn't one that you'd want to have repeated.

Gary Mott:

And then being washed, purified, by water from the village women. What a vivid image!

Tony Kahn:

Yeah.

Gary Mott:

I just want to do it just to do it.

Tony Kahn:

[Laughs] Well, I don't wish the depression on you ever.

Gary Mott:

So many people that I know suffer from depression and are medicated for it. But I was struck by the power of community [Tony murmurs in agreement] in this story. You know, depression I see as something very isolating and they're alone in their struggle.

Tony Kahn:

There was one moment that felt like a real deep wisdom, and that was in the ceremony afterwards when he, he pays back the demons of his depression and he buries them, but he says, "And I will never forget you." And it's almost like there's respect that you're rendering onto your own pain. God knows that in a clinical depression the pain can be so intense, you need the relief from that. Yet at the same time, it's owning another part of yourself, too, with respect. And that, that really moved me.

[Music]

We as always want to express our gratitude to the folks that bring us to you. They have been supporting us pretty much since we were a podcast - Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H dot com. Check them out.

Gary Mott:

And we have a website as well, <wgbh.org/morningstories>. And please send us an email. We love getting it at <morningstories@wgbh.org>.

Tony Kahn:

Mostly we love getting you, so see you next Friday. Catch you then. Bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by Susan MacLeod

Liz's notes:

Wow! I've just heard this story for the second time, and there is so much to think about in it. I wonder if anyone has done any academic studies of the *ndop* process. It seems to me that the people who practice it are ahead of many thinkers in the industrialized world, who still divorce mind and body problems. Andrew's parting words to the "demons" of his depression really moved me, too. I hope those "demons" have stayed away from him, too.