

God's gift of Sanity¹

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A mundane ministry

So, how does one cope with working in mental-health, isn't it both depressing and risky? Actually it takes very little in the way of coping skills, certainly if, like me, one is merely an *advocate* and not a nurse or care-worker. Despite their undoubted merits, films, such as *One Flew over the Cuckoos' Nest* and the opening scenes of *Amadeus*, give a fanciful picture of what an average acute mental health unit is really like. Upon entering, one is most unlikely to see anything remotely dramatic; just people sitting around looking tired and bored. Even patients from prison are still far more likely to harm themselves than anyone else. Rather than supposing that people with the Mental Health label are especially freaky, weak, or generally lacking in intelligence, I simply look for common-ground and shared experience.

Whose Life is it, anyway?

There are many mysteries to our existence, but one of the greatest is how our lives are both on loan and yet uniquely ours. In giving our lives to Christ so we hope and believe, our being is not merely surrendered to the futility of death; but, *in our Redeemer*, becomes more truly our own. Everything is on loan in a material existence, and sanity is no exception. At any time, anyone of us may suffer from clinical depression; develop psychosis (more likely before 30 or if using street drugs) or experience some form of dementia (seldom before 60). We think that we are *naturally* and rightfully sane in much the same sense in which we insist that we are naturally accomplished lovers or drivers. Although few of us would presume that we can play the French Horn, some faculties are taken as indefectible. Should anyone question our sanity (or driving), even discretely, we usually sustain a narcissistic injury, our interrogator may even experience a physical one!

Built on Rock or Sand?

So, firstly, how sane are we? Every night we see and talk to people who are not actually present with us. To call this 'dreaming,' makes it sound unremarkable, to label it 'psychosis' makes it sound 'gothick ' but whatever the name, it is equally delusional. Everyone is "mad" in their dreams (the German word for dreaming even provides our term trauma) We accept this behaviour, not on the basis of its logic, but upon its universality.² The fact that sanity is suspended whilst sleeping was something well recognised within the Christian liturgy, many evening invocations were offered for protection from dreams, and altered consciousness, especially of the un-chaste and tormenting varieties.

Changing our fundamental view of sanity might balance that medical tendency to multiply labels. Sanity, reason, objectivity and humour can be exercised, we can learn to construct rational, objective arguments. Yet we must also learn that even the best reasoning, of the best of us, is frail. This is not an invitation to scepticism or to a debased 'romantic' disparagement of reason. Our memories frequently fail us. Yet to say that reasoning and memory are fallible is merely a commonplace, there are simply no substitutes. Although they cannot be perfected, they must be exercised. How evident is sanity in society today? Answers depend upon the last set of statistics before us. Mental health problems may be increasing, but (it is argued) so too the corresponding trend to pathologize what once would have been left unclassified. If people today appear less sane

1 Revised form of my presentation at Exeter University on 3rd March 2008: a personal interpretation, not Traditional Anglican Church teaching, nor POhWER policy (the advocacy agency for which I work) nor that of Viewpoint (under whose auspices I have also contributed to this topic).

2 Even when *conscious* we may routinely experience 'voices.' Listening to the car radio recently the voice of James Jolly on the Third Programme was 'drowned out' (as the traffic situation worsened) by 'conversations' cautioning me. Neither supernatural nor psychotic, the effect was still palpable.

than we think they used to be, to what extent does non-belief contribute? Are we less well *prepared* for adversity than we might have been years ago, when religion schooled us to take blows on the chin? By adversity, I mean, not just when the kitchen blows up, but our experiences of emptiness and worthlessness; when (apparently) we have little to show for life except pain or disappointment. Both past and present, however, may be equally at fault for making assumptions about stability. Rather than accounted as a spiritual gift, sanity was standard-issue, - as we say, '*normal*' - much as we presume that all babies are beautiful, even though actual experience contradicts such bland generalisations. Such assumptions about the *gulf* between sanity and insanity still seem relatively unchallenged and unchanged, despite our heightened awareness of e.g. the impact of stress/bereavement upon each one of us. Sanity is undoubtedly a controversial term, as is 'normal' (the latter originally a mathematical term?) Sanity should be understood to differ from 'normal.' It is both tangible and intangible - like its near name-sake sanctity - few, if any, have it in full. In fact, what is perfect sanity actually like, has anyone ever witnessed it? Celibacy has been described as the most unnatural of all sexual perversions, perhaps sanity is the most unnatural of all psychological conditions? (Unnatural, that is, to a *fallen* existence). Imperfect as sanity is, mercifully, it is not actually inconceivable, nor wholly unattainable.

Firmer Foundations?

Were former ages better braced for sorrow and even loneliness? Our compensation-culture appears to focus upon aftermath, blame and damages, and thus ignores pre-emptive coping mechanisms. Our only pervasive pre-emptive strategy appears to be an ever-spiralling legislation to enforce risk-aversion - compulsory sun-block for construction workers and the like. Yet the facts of life are (directly) about risk and (ultimately) about loss. I positively detest sport, what good does it bring?³ Yet once I was startled by the un-hesitating response: "sport teaches us how to lose." Perhaps so? We play - not merely sport, but life itself- to win, yet we have to digest the ultimate inevitability of losing all our winnings, the death-rate still stands at 100%. Humanity has generally tried to resist this fact, seemingly, ever more strenuously. 'Winning,' in both commercial and celebrity senses, is seen in increasingly individualistic terms. Once, continuation of the family line, the family business, or estate - for wealthier sections of society - helped to give stability and purpose to the changes and chances of this mortal life. Investing in home, and in family-posterity, was a counter-offensive against purely *personal* loss.

Contrastingly, nowadays when we attempt to transcend individualism - instead of a rugged realism respecting the transitory nature of existence - we are frequently confronted by the *false-grief* that now masquerades as a caring response to (mostly) high-profile disasters and celebrity deaths. This false-grief⁴ (no apology for the pejorative) seems to be a particularly sinister instance of what Durkheim might have classed as an example of 'effervescence.' It might function as an outlet for our personal, long-standing distress and rage at an existence that is forever revolving around attachment and loss. Mourning the 'innocent,' within a mob, brings escapist and cathartic benefits. The fact that a thought or thing moves us very deeply, however, does not mean that engaging in it is a *legitimate* 'spiritual exercise.' A key Christian approach is vigilance and self-examination - "this impulse that possesses me, is it from God, is it part bad/ part good, from where does it come?"

3 Critical appraisals of the ideological and political *origins* of 'sporting' practices are required - e.g. the Olympic-flame relay, devised by Nazi, Carl Diem. Diem went on to bully youths into surrendering their lives in a last-ditch defence of the Berlin Olympic stadium as the allies advanced, but he survived to become an 'academic' who lectured in the 'Philosophy of Sport.'

4 The most outlandish example of false-grief, to date, - surely - was reported as "Chicken gives birth to urban myth," The Times, Tuesday, October 25, 2005, p. 24. Liverpool residents had been laying flowers, toys and cards by a wall in Anfield where the foetus (of a chicken) had been found, in the belief that it was human. Despite a local paper confirming that it had come from a chicken the people refused to be deflected from their 'grief-fix.'

Are we venting and suppressing our emotions equally inappropriately? It is not, surely, that suppression as such (of either sentiments or symptoms) is bad in itself. If, for example, we 'fancy' someone (or several people) in the work-place (when they feel otherwise), suppression becomes a social and economic necessity. Managing this without drugs might increase one's sense of responsibility - "experience is what you get when you don't get what you want" -whereas drug-assisted social restraint decreases self-esteem. Either way, we may fail to take sufficient satisfaction from self-control and see it merely as stunting and dejecting. For everything there is a season, there is a fitting time (*kaipos*) for exuberant self-expression, likewise for suppression and even a time to be crazy (if only whilst sleeping).

Resignation - Christian and otherwise

So, religion schooled us to withstand adversity, not with relaxation techniques and the like, but by confronting suffering, supplemented with explanations as to its purposes. Buddhists taught their followers how to come to terms with the passing nature of existence, without which we lack fundamental insight. If we have e.g. a china cup the inescapable fact of its existence is that it will break, if not next year then in the next 100 or 10,000 years. Philosophers of Antiquity also addressed these subjects. Commenting upon the 'love of life' some observed the hidden irony of "*mortals* who love life." Such love was ultimately doomed to be unrequited. A stoic called Chrysippus held that love of life is an unreasonable desire (*Fragmenta moralia* 397). Jews, and later Christians, personalised the problem by recognising that the Holy One gave judgement on our actions in life. Thus the harmful effects of sin were depicted in terms resembling those now reserved for environmental pollution or smoking. Impersonal decay became re-stated as personal separation from the knowledge of God.⁵ The result of sin was suffering -in this world and beyond. Julian of Norwich observes that we recognise sin by the pain that is caused by it. Not only does the avoidance of -what was classified as sin - often contribute to a calmer way of life, but the struggle against temptation (itself an excellent exercise in drug-free 'suppression') better braced people for life's traumas and reinforced a sense of responsibility towards others. Moreover, the connexion between sin and suffering instilled a degree of resignation in a positive sense.

Promoting *traditional*⁶ faith primarily as therapy, or inoculation, is obviously false. The collateral effects⁷ of faith extend to material benefits precisely because we are not immaterial beings. Grace cascades down, just as mental distress creeps down into our bodies in the forms of impaired immune system, deliberate self-harm or other physical out-workings. Although faith can bestow material benefits, one does not follow Christ for free loaves and fishes. Seeking consistent and quantifiable material benefits from a spiritual discipline dooms us to disappointment; it is not a 'life-style' in any consumerist sense; as Job's trials and Christ's Crucifixion make abundantly clear. Most paradoxical of all, the sufferings of others may become the grounds for hope to us.

5 Not only was sin seen, further, as a rejection of the person of God Himself, but His help (grace) was seen as indispensable in repairing its consequences and for avoidance thereafter.

6 'Traditional' is the operative word, as many forms of Christianity, and other faiths, have been 'genetically modified' to emphasise a 'feel-good factor.' My own inclination, by contrast, is that the Gospel has to be bad news before it can become good news.

7 We need to define what we mean by 'benefits.' Christianity not only promises healing but a personalised Cross. For those schooled primarily by success-culture the Cross is not on the agenda.

The instructive potential of Imperfection

Dissatisfaction is an essential constituent of life, even dysfunctional episodes, within this frail/*fallen* human spectrum, are part of life's ebb and flow. In Latin theology we are (or were) accustomed to speak of a *fallen world*,⁸ so one cannot wonder at fallen responses. Mental illness may be a sort of 'litmus test' of society itself. Service users; are the new 'canaries' who give warning of the (mental) toxicity of our environment.⁹ Mental illness troubles some of us precisely because these variant mental states seem to highlight the ever-present, un-resolved tensions, futilities and nonsensicalities in all human existence. These, in turn, point to human non-existence, from which all these fears emanate - the fear of death itself. Even if we grudgingly accept that we all have to die, we baulk at the teaching of some Scripture passages that we *deserve* to die. Perhaps there is less intrinsically disturbing about mental illness, than in its extrinsic indications of our collective frailty?

We pay a heavy price for our aspirational, success-driven culture with its (so-called) positive thinking. If life were as thrilling as some maintain we would scarcely need to make *any effort* to view it positively. The only affirmation that we need make about life is that it is the gift of God and that - rather than 'sacred' - it is God's 'copyright'. The commercial sub-cultures behind motivational "new-speak" have no interest in frailty, other than to make money from it. Beyond that use, damaged people are the disturbing heretics within modern consumerism.

Faith is not fatalism. To pray for healing is a positive command, because thereby God is glorified in the restoration of His own creation. Christian healing was once so central to this nation's life that our monarchs were expected to perform it, of whom Queen Anne was the last.¹⁰ Some believers, however, fantasise, with extravagant claims of recovery: "Jesus fixed it for me!" There are horrendous instances of bogus exorcisms and attributions of demonic activity. Churches need to learn from such excesses. Although medical models and methods remain controversial - in this field above all others — how is God honoured by disparaging *all* medical methods in every single case? Obviously the least intrusive principle of medication must always apply, but suppression of symptoms is often the lesser of two evils. Pastors who cannot exercise humility and sobriety by recognising the integrity of other professions are no more keeping the faith than those who totally surrender their legitimate healing ministry to the secular institutions.

Victimhood or Victory?

In stark contrast to today's success-culture, for some 40 years we have encountered an opposite tendency to "do" theology by focussing upon disadvantaged minorities. As a counter-offensive to theological complacency and smugness this stance has some value, but at the risk of creating a cult of 'secular martyrdom'. Where is meaning in impaired mental health (or impaired anything else)? The answer is obvious: God is most manifest in wholeness, in *sanity* that is dedicated to Him. His gift to us becomes our gift to Him. Although God is in *everything* - with Austin Farrer - we insist, "there is more theology to be dug out of a saint than a sandpit." God's acts appear *initially* in

8 The doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin are more specifically North African and classically expressed in St. Augustine of Hippo's works. Eastern Christianity's view on Original Sin is not expressed in terms of total incapacity or depravity.

9 An idea expressed by Dr. Chris Manning at *Viewpoint* launch on 28th October, 2005. In coal mining, canaries were once used to detect toxic gases. If a canary died, the miner made an exit as quickly as possible. We should also note that curious category of saints in the Russian Orthodox tradition - *The Fool for Christ* - whose primary purpose appears to be a humble pricking of pomposity and self-satisfaction. The way that this was achieved, without the concomitant appearance of self-righteousness, was seemingly to embrace (not necessarily mimic, but actually embrace in some sense) the characteristics of psychotic behaviour. They might often disrupt worship by e.g. throwing nuts at the singers.

10 Pre-C.19 copies of The Book of Common Prayer, containing this rite, though rare, may still be found.

apparently disordered situations, in ways not accessible in states of wellbeing. A friend of mine wrote of praying about the distress occasioned by both her state of mind and its diagnosis:

"...God needs a bucket and a mop
To wipe away my tears..."¹¹

The uncomfortable truth is that we seem to need a measure of adversity for spiritual advancement, but we still look for resolution and vindication in well-being, health that is offered to God. In fact, what suffering has to teach us is probably more the truth about ourselves than a truth about God. As the philosopher-theologian Gadamer expressed it:

"What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but the knowledge of the limitations of humanity, of the absoluteness of the barrier which separates him from the divine. Understanding is, then, an exploration of the dimensions of human finitude."¹²

As, so often, when we cannot get over distress, let us pray for the grace and the strength to *get through it*. Not all suffering ennobles, sometimes it "just is." Moreover, as Dr. Pusey observed, "all suffering is not the Cross." A devotion to alienation and distress, affirmed by a sort of cult of 'soggy-compassion,' is no substitute for atoning sacrifice; nor is it any earthly use. It is no help to a drowning person to drown in solidarity with him. Nevertheless, we thrust those training for the ministry onto hospital wards to sink or swim, requiring them to compose essays on "Where God is in terminal illness," or whatever. Answer: He is in hope, recovery, and redemption, of course. Our Redeemer gives not only fortitude but ultimate hope,

"He died our ransom to be
He reigns to be our great reward."

Conclusion

Mental illness is significant not just because anyone of us could develop it in some form; more pertinently its *spiritual significance* lies in its challenge to our common impulse to construct purposeful 'narratives' of earthly existence. What price, then, all our philosophising and theologising down the ages? Quite! Theologising that is merely a human construction is worse than useless. We must be attuned and attentive to God's voice calling to us through the din of the battlefield of life. Even the most elaborate theological expositions, fundamentally, should be drawing us back-to-basics. The complexity of a theological argument is not a substitute for turning to God but, rather, a specialised (and mercifully un-common) means to enable us to listen to His message. We should not, therefore, 'shoot' a particular class of messenger. The message from mentally ill messengers may not make much surface sense, but its deeper meaning is that we are utterly dependent upon the mind of the Maker for all thought and reason. We must, therefore, seek sanity. Were sanity systematically promoted on the lines which I have suggested - with the frank acknowledgement of its provisional nature - then we should *all* gain greater insight throughout our lives. What, however, should be the substance of our insight? We should recognise that the human condition is not only frail by reason of its mortality but, ultimately, frail by reason of its reasoning.

11 *Echoes from the Battlefields*, (ed. Heather Killingray), Anchor Books, 1999, p.3.

12 Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, 1975, p.320.