

Article for Rite Lines. Broken Rites AGM : From powerlessness to strength, a personal reflection

The events that happen to us shape us- we are each unique. For this talk I hope to share insights, what has helped me, and perhaps bring new perspectives. Many of my thoughts are not original, and to this end I have included a lot of quotations gathered over the years as I sought to make sense of my own journey (not yet completed) towards ultimate recovery.

“Fate is what happens to you, destiny is what you do with it” words of Clare Balding to an amputee from the 7.7 bombing.

As we all know there are stages of grief, and a while ago (from memory about 4 years after my marriage break-down 20 years ago) I wrote an article for Rite Lines which I entitled “Out of intensive care”. Using a medical analogy I described the crisis in stages. Firstly like being admitted to intensive care on life-support, then moving to a general ward, on to outpatient treatment and finally to discharge. These are some of the quotations that have meant a lot to me, collected in notebooks over the weeks and months. The first piece, a poem that I wrote- just published in a small fund-raising anthology for St. Christopher’s Hospice, S.E. London where I worked as a physiotherapist- is actually the most recent, and is intentionally ambiguous, portraying the exquisite pain of loss in its broadest sense.

Intensive Care.

To care as if a child. by Jenny Taylor.

Still. Frozen in grief.

The pew is hard and cold.

Just a few remain; obedient to their tasks after the noise and chatter.

Moving around the space in quiet commitment.

Such pain.

A tear reluctantly falls on the broken spectrum of sunlight cast from the stained glass window above.

A kind concerned face and a smile—but the right words elude him.

The minutes pass. How to pray?

A light touch of a hand disturbs. “I’m so sorry; maybe in time----”

All their faces anxious, minds in disarray, recoiling from the knowledge and oppression of anguish.

Silent. Feeling lost and so alone.

“Shove up. I just want to sit with you ‘til you stop crying and feel better.”

A tousled curly head, a shy grin, innocent bright eyes.

Warmth floods in.

Compassion refined and purified.

In simplicity distilled.

“Compassion is the spontaneous response of love; pity- the involuntary reflex of fear” Anon.

Main Ward:

Experiences I described in my talk were both personal, and most poignantly, spiritual; a feeling of clinging to the wreckage, and an uncomfortable ‘centre of attention’ syndrome.

"Angry, betrayed, lonely, exasperated----- and above all humiliated" Hilary Clinton.

Psychologists describe 3 pillars of security: cultural beliefs, self-esteem, and attachment, and there are complications in clergy marriage breakdowns! :

When a person feels that they have God on their side when making radical decisions, no one else has a chance. (Radio 4)

Working out my anguish, I grappled with guilt, and retrospectively searched for 'red flags' or warning signs. This was a time of much introspection as I struggled to come to terms with any part I had played in this catastrophe playing out in our family.

"The spreading ripples on the water are not your responsibility, or yours to worry about if you didn't jump into the pond" a surprisingly perceptive comment from a young man I knew.

"Promiscuity is so often a mark of dislocation, of boredom, alienation and despair" Susan Howatch

"Home is where you go when you're fed up with being nice to people". Anon.

So what helped in my spiritual life? For me it was (and still is) the words of *"Dear Lord and Father"* that I really identified with. This is a moving hymn by Hubert Parry, who was a disappointment to his father as he'd lost his faith in the trappings of the Anglican Church. He chose the words from a possible Quaker text, as he continued to feel the spark of God in 'the still, small voice of calm'.

'Within our darkest night you kindle the fire that never dies away'. Taize. A prayer I recited every night before sleep.

Outpatient:

A time for beginning to find a new identity, and striving to bring meaning to life by integrating events.

"To portray clergy as being good without effort is to diminish them" Susan Howatch

"There's a fault line which runs through the C of E: that clergy tend to be very happy in their early years, and then there's a sort of sickness that 'destroyeth in the noonday'. If you get through that you have quite a happy old age and retirement". Robert Runcie.

Time too to understand and maybe even identify with the other perspective; to begin to be compassionate for the sake of inner peace and psychological health?

"Love is blind. When faults or misdeeds are not confronted and love and acceptance is total, it only serves to increase the anguish in the heart of the one who is nursing a guilty secret. "

Psychologist on R. 4

and times of making sense of puzzling exchanges?

In psychotherapy, there are 2 questions that tend to interconnect: 'Why are you accusing me?' and 'Are you hiding something?' Anon.

"We live our lives forward and understand them backwards" R.Holloway (from his excellent book "Leaving Alexandria. A memoir of faith and doubt")

This was spiritually a very challenging time, trying to re-create some sort of church worship, establishing a circle of friends both new and old, exploring new paths, present realities and future possibilities.

"I feel religious in an empty church and an atheist in a full one." Craig Brown, journalist and author.

"Church worship is acutely hypocritical, as we stand at the foot of the cross under God. This is why it's so acutely uncomfortable" Rowan Williams.

This last wonderful quotation –spoken to us by Rowan Williams, when with so much compassion he answered our anonymously submitted questions at the B.R 25th Anniversary AGM- continues to give me much to ponder. Showing typical theological complexity (!), I have absolute faith that its deep meaning will come clear in time!

Discharge:

This was a time of post-traumatic growth: moving from survivor to thriver, on through hopefulness to ultimate growth.

"Out of powerlessness comes strength, as without power we are vulnerable. Vulnerability makes us accessible. Being accessible brings us the power to help and heal others." M.S. a personal friend

"Grief is the price we pay for love" HM the Queen, after the death of Diana.

"Those who try to put their lives back together exactly as they were remain fractured and vulnerable. But those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living". Psychologist Prof. Stephen Joseph.

*"If you can change something there's no point worrying about it----
If you can't then there's no point worrying about it" Anon.*

"Realising no one cares, they also stop caring; which is ultimately what saves them" Giles Hattersley on how celebrities cope after break-up.

"Blame is simply a form of denial. Acting the victim is never about powerlessness. It is control dressed up in pretty clothes" Sally Brampton, agony aunt in the Sunday Times.

"Resilient people are energised by stress, not paralysed by anxiety. Research has been conducted into car accidents. The driver tends to recover quicker than the victim. The driver will demonstrate more 'mastery'" Anon. Literally he is in the driving seat in an accident situation?

A poem by Wendy Cope:

*"I can't forgive you. Even if I could
You wouldn't pardon me for seeing through you.
And yet I cannot cure myself of love
For what I thought you were before I knew you."*

"Forgiving another stops them renting space in your head" Anon.

Looking back and seeing the good things:

" You can't judge a marriage by the way it dies and discount all the pleasure and joy it brought you. I don't want to rubbish the past to survive the present. It is not the way I wanted our story to end, but I've come to realise you just have to find an alternative ending that works." Marion Mc Gilvary

"Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burnt" Anon.

"Resentment is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die" Anon.

"When you embark on revenge, it is necessary to dig two graves." Chinese proverb.

"Letting go is not getting rid of; letting go is letting be-----" Anon

Disintermediation: "Sitting in a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a car park makes you a car" Anon.

and looking forward....

"There's no such distance as far away as yesterday" Robert Nathan, American novelist and poet.

"There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in" Leonard Cohen, singer and songwriter

And perhaps most significant and important for me; humour has been an unexpected feature, and above all, a vital ally in recovery. It has proved to be the most wonderful 'glue' not only to bond a broken heart but to provide a strong, sturdy and reliable bridge between me and those around me. It has a cathartic effect as underlying tragedy seems to often be a foundation for outrageous humour!

Wendy Cope again:

*"The day he moved out was terrible.
That evening she went through hell.
His absence wasn't a problem
But the corkscrew had gone as well"*

As I embarked on retirement I came across this useful checklist in a magazine:

*A full and happy life requires that 3 basic needs are met:
We have positive emotions about our past, present and future.
We use our best qualities and abilities.
We do so in the service of something bigger than ourselves. Anon.*

I was acutely aware that adjustment was challenging:

*"Being employed is like being loved; you know someone is thinking about you the whole time"
Thornton Wilder.*

All is not lost. (advice on bereavement by Colin Murray-Parkes; maybe there is a message here for us too?) :

“There is no anaesthetic for grief. Goodness is not gone from the world because one person has died. Meaning has not gone from life because one who meant so much is no longer present. The loss of one trusted person does not undermine trust in all those who remain”

“It would be nice to have someone to do nothing with” A divorced family friend

A final poem, helpful in the early days to bring hope, now reflects reality (on good days at least!) It echoes the writing of the metaphysical poet George Herbert’s ‘Love Bade me Welcome’; that I remember studying at school! :

Love after love: Derek Walcott

*The time will come when with elation
You will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other’s welcome.
And say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was yourself.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart.
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*

Finally:

*“Time is not a healer
The patient is no longer here” TS Eliot Four Quartets.*

Pray God we will all get there.

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