



WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY 2011

Cliff of Falls by Fr Daniel O'Leary

Many people fear for their minds. Fragile and vulnerable, they suffer silently. They learn how to live with insensitive people in a coarse world. They learn to think carefully. They know that eternal vigilance is the key to a precarious harmony. They realise that the cost of negative thinking is too high.

This awareness is not easy to maintain. We cannot lock ourselves into a safe mind-set, building tents of bliss, like Peter wished, on a secure Mount Tabor. It is not a lasting place, the city of wine and roses. A careless forgetfulness can be like a hidden trapdoor sending us hurtling down into dark places. And it is a long way back.

Those of us who are sensitive to such variations and moods envy people with tougher minds. They seem impervious to the subtleties of seasons, of memories and of anxieties. Their emotional lives seem more robust, more matter-of-fact and more focussed on a natural kind of rhythm. They get the job done, they go out with their friends at the week-end, they laugh a lot, they love their children, they may say a few prayers and they get on with their lives.

Our peace can leave us in the turn of a thought, in a stray wisp of reverie. It is when some deeply sensitive, well-protected part of our psyche is suddenly disturbed, that our controlled equilibrium is sharply disoriented. When this happens, all the prayerful strategies we ever learned offer cold comfort. We feel helpless in the pull and drag of a downward spiral. And once the boundaries are breached, the invading demons storm in. Trapped in that airless vacuum is not a pleasant place to be.

I remember times when my spirit stalled, when the joy went out of my days and nights, bringing with it all kinds of silent fears – of an incipient depression, of sinking into that black lake forever. Reassurances that this may be a visitation of the saintly 'dark night of the soul' bring scant consolation.

I meet so many heroic people who, against all the odds, manage to keep going. The bishop who has lost his faith, the disillusioned priest who mechanically perseveres in caring for his people, the abandoned mother, shorn of her dreams, who still gets up in the morning to do what must be done for the family, the lonely old woman in the retirement home who daily sits near the saving window and faintly waves at laughing children going home from school. Their hearts are breaking, their hopes are gone – yet something within them resists those final, fateful steps into despair or even ultimate annihilation.

Autumn falls hard on older people. We sense more poignantly the echoes of eternity that steal into our souls, and disturb them. These melancholy moments are tinged with loss, moist with 'the tears of things'. They stir, within us, inexpressible intimations of mortality, of another home. Across the world of cultures November rituals grapple with the shadow of this ultimate mystery.

As the days darken our minds too can lose their light. With the advent of winter many people notice a shift in the patterns of their thinking. Over decades of experience they have become aware of the unpredictability of their inner peace, their very sanity. Their struggle is often a sad and silent one. Whether that inner hell is episodic or constant, is there an antidote for it, a life-line to safely earth it?

What happens, I think, during these unsettling experiences, is that we lose heart, we cannot raise ourselves to another perspective. A severe fear surfaces. There is something we are denying. Our horizons become too narrow, too closed. In that smaller space we lose a saving vision, we become mentally and spiritually claustrophobic – and then we panic. Hacking it out piecemeal in our heads, argument by argument, brings no lasting peace. Some stronger medicine is needed for the soul if it is ever to break through into another way of settled being.

The paradoxical ways of God are at work here. Perhaps it is only at this very point of panic, this closed moment of mental misery, that the miracle can happen. Whatever faith means, whatever trust means, maybe they can only make sense, in that awful darkness, that helpless sense of loss, that painful helplessness. And we each have our own stories about such redemption.

It is true that in the normal course of our days, and in the usual run of our lives, we manage to survive the ambiguous vicissitudes of our minds and hearts. Our friends encourage us, the angels draw closer, our prayers are answered, and our steady patterns of thinking and emotions return.

But there are times when a more total embracing of the darkness that currently stretches our souls is called for; a more ultimate surrender of control over our lives; a more intense gathering of all our resources for a riskier leap of faith than we ever made before. At the beginning of this dying year, the theme of my January Tablet piece for 2008 was the preparation for that demanding surrender.

This is not a noble, brave and proud surrender. More a blind and desperate kind of trust. 'In the desert of the heart let the healing fountain start.' It is then that we begin to sense that point vierge when, while it is still dark, the birds sing out their welcome, just before the first rays of dawn renew the earth. It is that moment of promised clarity that brings a grounded definition to the shifting sands of our mind.

It is only when we surrender into the hands of God that the fog clears and the nature of the dis-ease, the blockage within us, reveals itself. Depending on our life's choices, our age, our temperament, it will be different for all of us. What was emerging for me, this autumn, was the fact that it was the fear of my own death that confused the holy compass of my life, that distorted the gyro of my mind.

For many of us this common but subtle condition of the human psyche is the underlying source of our loss of balanced thinking and contentment. Fear of death is a subtle thing. It darkens our days. It hangs over us threateningly - but not always consciously. It is the ghost in the wings of our life's stage, the ghost that reminds us of our own unpredictable exit from this world's drama. It is the ghost that everyone must meet before a healthy sanity returns.

Once the fear of the final curtain is identified, encountered and accepted, (and all of that does not happen in a day) a wonderful space is exposed, and a new energy focuses our attention on present reality. All other concerns become manageable. The bigger picture brings the necessary perspective. Our sick minds recover in a more reliable light. Now we can really live again, get down to the work of serving and saving our world, of reaching the destiny for which we were created.

Even Jesus, deeply apprehensive before his impending death, had to unscramble his confusion, needing the clarity of his transfiguration before he set foot on the fateful road to a final Jerusalem. In the best traditions of Advent Collects we will soon be reminded that the dark, closed mind is transformed by 'the vision of wisdom', openness and light. What's left of life may yet be the best of it.

In *The Lightest Touch* David Whyte writes,

In the silence that follows
a great line
you can feel Lazarus
deep inside
even the most deathly afraid
part of you
lift up his hands and walk toward the light.

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