

Chaos and Grace

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In 1970, when I was about 16 or 17 and in my third year of high school, our entire school was taken on a day trip to the Whitby Psychiatric Hospital.

We were not told where we were going or why. All we knew was that we had the day off. It was one of those days in Ontario, filled with the light green of early spring and the promise of a summer to come. The buses dropped us off in front of what appeared to be a gymnasium and we were instructed to enter. Inside was an auditorium which had obviously seen better days and which had that peculiar smell which I would later come to learn accompanies most health care institutions. I can't remember what was said by our hosts since, as teenagers, our attention was completely focused upon our immediate coterie of friends. It wasn't until we were taken on a tour of the rest of the facility that we began to move a little beyond ourselves.

We were taken first to a workshop where some patients were busily engaged in making various objects which held no interest for us. What struck us most was the distinct feeling that we had now entered a completely different world of social discourse. We did not gawk, they did. We did not speak, they did. And they did so with an abandon that unnerved us. We were not in control here, they were. And what they wanted most was to devour us; to drink us up the way very young children drink up the world. It was their honesty that struck us; not the sort of honesty teenagers lay pretense to, but the sort of naked honesty that only those who have completely stopped caring have. They were not unhappy in any obvious way, but neither were they happy. They were simply what they were and here upon them had descended a group of juvenile apes for their amusement. This honesty frightened us and we couldn't wait to get out of there.

Next they took us by a number of small, neatly kept cottages, within which, we were told, were housed the most dangerous patients; those who dare not be let out for fear of what they might do. What they looked like and what they had done to deserve this imprisonment was left to our imaginations.

Next came the saddest part of the tour; the sadness of a shared ward where people wandered about aimlessly in that half-space between light and dark. This perhaps was the most frightening place of all because this was the place where boredom reigned; where the past and future remained the same.

And then it became clear this is what our teachers meant to show us; they meant to show us the half-life we would inherit if we continued our evil ways of drugs and rock'n'roll and rejection of authority; where we would all end up if we didn't smarten up and do the right thing and give up our highs and obsessive devotion to one another.

But the odd thing is that I don't think any of us came away from this thinking that we would end our evil ways. The most important lesson we came away with that day was that if we, too, were to become mentally ill we would be punished for it. Because that is what we saw; that the mentally ill were not treated with care and compassion and a sense that they could not help themselves, but instead were treated as if they had committed an offence against the rest of us.

It did not help. It did not enlighten us. We were teenagers and all a little mad anyway. We weren't afraid of going crazy; we were afraid we were already crazy. And showing us this place was a little like being shown the instruments of torture by our inquisitors. In spite of whatever official story might be told regarding the purpose of our visit and in spite of what was no doubt the best standard of care provided by caregivers with the best of intentions, it was clear that our teachers thought that the real purpose of this visit was to show us that mental illness was a crime.

But we knew that something else was more true; that, as Nietzsche once put it, "One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star." (Thus Spake Zarathustra, Prologue, Section 5). And it occurs to me today that many of the core issues in psychiatric ethics still stem from our attempt to value that chaos within while avoiding the temptation to punish ourselves for it; that the core question concerning the ethical treatment of psychiatric patients is whether we have correctly distinguished between the chaos which may produce a dancing star and the chaos which produces little more than a life-consuming black hole.

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