

Psychodrama of an illness

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Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change, how astonishing when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed – when we think of this and infinitely more, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battles and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Virginia Woolf (1948)

The truth of Virginia Woolf's words was brought home to me in a very personal way as a result of my own recent experience of severe illness and even though it was for me a time of considerable suffering, when viewed from a psychodramatic perspective I can see how my illness gave me the opportunity for much personal growth and many of my long term familiar roles, both professional and personal, were transformed.

Before September 2015, I had enjoyed what could only be described as an exceptionally healthy life until I was forced by a severe and unexplained loss of weight, increasing debilitation and chronic pains in my stomach to cease work as a Chiropractor. Fortunately, my regular locum informed me that he was available to fill in for me so I was able to bow to the inevitable and take time off. Strangely, that last day as I drove out from my clinic where I had worked continuously for thirty-five years, I had the thought that I might never be back!

The consultation with my G.P. two days later was the beginning of several months of a seemingly endless round of medical tests – CT scans, MRI's, a colonoscopy and gastroscopy, an ultrasound and numerous blood tests – all of which showed no abnormality. In the meantime, my condition continued to worsen and given my generally haggard and emaciated appearance and the location of extreme pain in my upper abdominal region radiating intensely into my back, my doctors strongly suspected cancer.

My grandmother had died of pancreatic cancer at a similar age and as a health practitioner I was only too aware that a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is most often a sentence of an early death and a very painful one at that. Despite the fact that all the tests failed to confirm that diagnosis, in

the absence of any other explanation my mind became filled with visions of a horrible death and not surprisingly I became very anxious and fearful about the future.

In his landmark book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins (1979) remarked that, "Illness is always an interaction between the body and mind. It can begin in the body and affect the mind, or it can begin in the mind and affect the body" (p. 64). So it was, that the effects of the illness gradually spread to many other parts of my body. My ears felt clogged, my voice grew hoarse and my vision became blurry and I felt generally tender and sensitive to any pressure.

As my condition worsened, I was barely able to eat one small meal a day due to my extreme stomach pain and an almost total lack of appetite so before long my weight hit a low of fifty kilograms down from an already slim seventy. My ribs were visible from twenty metres, my hips and pelvis stuck out like a starving prisoner of war and my buttocks were just loose folds of skin. In short, I looked like I was starving to death.

To sit down I required a large soft pillow and at night and during most of the day I lay on a thick sheep skin to be at all comfortable and to avoid pressure sores. Even so, as a result of my general discomfort, I tended to wake every hour or so at night and required sleeping tablets to get any sleep at all. During the wakeful night especially, I became very anxious which caused me to feel very constricted in my breathing and I spent many hours pacing up and down trying to get my breath and feeling a sense of suffocation. Mercifully, regular small doses of valium helped to settle me sufficiently until eventually, exhausted, I fell asleep again for a while.

As if my physical ailments weren't enough to try me, I was also plagued with ongoing worry about all my many long term loyal clients who depended on my regular care. Frequently at work I was told, "You know that you can never retire Phillip!" and I would inwardly reply, "You want to bet!" Nevertheless, I felt such a strong and binding responsibility for their care that I honestly wondered how I would ever do it. In my debilitated state images of my clients passed through my mind and I suffered the pangs of guilt and like some heroin addict in withdrawal it took many months until I felt freed from my responsibility addiction.

Because of my weakened and painful state, there was very little I could do to pass the time and I was mostly restricted to lying on the couch all

day with repeatedly reheated wheatbags and hot water bottles the most effective remedy for my stomach and back pains. More effective and with less side effects than all the prescription pain killers.

I tried to read but my weak arms quickly grew tired from holding up the book and my fuzzy vision and even fuzzier mind made reading futile anyway. My only distraction was a small number of CDs of a particular type – gentle and soothing with positive uplifting lyrics. Similarly, most television and movies on DVD were too disturbing or sad and the news in particular seemed even more horrendous than ever.

Over time the ongoing physical and mental stress and anxiety I was experiencing took its toll on my mental equilibrium. With little else to occupy me I became obsessed with the idea that spiders were invading the house and one of my only regular activities was my daily spider hunt. Initially I was quite considerate and freed them into the garden but as time went on I became Attila the spider killer and bashed them to death without a second thought!

Alone at night in the darkness of my room I started to have auditory hallucinations and bizarre imaginings. I sometimes heard someone wheezing loudly across the room and was horrified to realize that it was my own breathing. As I was drifting off to sleep I would be jolted awake feeling the presence of some entity shouting aggressively in my face a question like, “So what comes next?!” At other times, half asleep, there came the sudden sound of one extremely loud musical chord as if played on an unseen piano right beside me.

Clearly, I was going quite mad and my partner Francesca was deeply concerned and driven almost to distraction herself by my bizarre behaviour. She was relieved when my GP prescribed anti-anxiety medication which did succeed in bringing down my anxiety to more tolerable levels. Nevertheless, due to such a long period of ongoing stress, I began to feel that my conception of who I was and what use I was to anyone was disintegrating and I was alternately despairing and enraged about the cruel fate I was suffering. How unfair that this should happen to me after all the help and care I had provided to so many for so many years! To think it would all end like this just when I was looking forward to working towards fulfilling my long-held dream of practising as a psychodramatist!

In many ways, the situation was not helped by the fact that during those long months I had very limited company and almost no outside contact since I would only permit my immediate family to visit as I

couldn't stand anyone else seeing me in such a diminished and confused state. My one constant companion was Francesca, who had previously worked as a nurse and who undertook the task of caring for me day and night. The strain on her was undoubtedly immense and yet she possessed that truly remarkable ability of so many nurses that she gave me the sense that she saw me as my normal self despite my ranting and raving and treated me in such a matter of fact, although very caring, manner that I could forget for a time that I looked like someone who was on death's door.

My four children, three girls and a boy, aged from twenty-three to forty, all long since living out of home were my only other visitors and took turns to do a day shift looking after me, keeping me company to give Francesca a much-needed break. It also afforded me a great and much needed opportunity. My father was a long-term sufferer of manic depression and since my mother had long since given up listening to his never ending melancholy monologues, from the time I was about twelve years old he unreservedly poured them out on me. As a naturally caring and empathetic child I responded with patient sympathy but over time that took its toll on me and I became quite nervy and anxious myself. Many are the psychodramas I had to work through to overcome that inheritance!

As a result, when I became a parent myself I vowed that I would never reveal to my children my own struggles with anxiety and depression in case I would pass on to them the inter-generational damage I had been subjected to. However, my state of abject debilitation and mental distress could now no longer be hidden from them and during the many long days I shared honestly and openly with each one of them our own hopes and challenges in our lives as well as a frank retelling of our family history. Their main response was to say they felt better knowing how I was feeling and what I needed from them otherwise they felt helpless not knowing what was really happening to me and how they could help.

Gradually, I learned at long last how to receive instead of always giving care.

Another great source of comfort I clung to as strongly as a drowning man clings onto his life preserver was the array of photographs of loved ones I placed on the bookshelf overlooking me by my bed. There were Francesca, my children, my mother and father, my spiritual teacher Swami Compassion, my psychodrama mentors Max and Chris, all smiling down upon me sending me their love.

I also pinned on my wall a verse from the Bible where Jesus said:

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled. Neither let it be afraid. John 14:27

Reciting that to myself like a mantra or prayer had an amazingly soothing and calming effect on me.

Also, words from Max Clayton's beautiful poem *Light* gave me cause for hope:

There is always a bit of light. Stay with this light, just with that little bit. Don't look for a bigger one, stay with what you've got. It'll grow.

On hearing of my illness and my deep fears, my good friend David who has worked in palliative care sent me a very wise letter that resonated deeply within me. He said, "I know you think you are dying. And you might die. Or perhaps there is just a part of you that has to die that is no longer needed by you and you will live more fully without it."

A few close friends as well as my brothers and sisters kept up occasional phone contact with me and took the courageous step of sharing the darkness of my experience with me and offered me vitally needed love and support. I also truly felt the unspoken radiation of so many other caring souls thinking of me and praying for me. I am so grateful to all of them.

Perhaps because of all that outpouring of love and support for me and perhaps also through having been brought so low that I had reached the absolute bedrock of my being, one day something remarkable occurred. As I was dragging my feet along the corridor to the bathroom, hunched over and just feeling so old and worn out, for some inexplicable reason I felt a flow of positive energy suddenly pass into me from above and a new spark of resolve and energy rose up in me. I straightened up, lightened my step, clenched my fists and assumed the fighting pose of a boxer as the following words came to me like a holy mantra of determination:

I will survive! I will live to love and love to live. I am the champ!

I immediately wrote that mantra out in large letters on a sheet of paper and stuck it on my bedroom wall where I could see it and read it every day and draw energy from it. About that time another miraculous healing began to occur. As I sat with my children during their day shifts with me, I started to really see in their eyes as they looked at me the deep love they had for me combined with a desperate fear of losing me. Their

love radiated to me a healing warmth that raised my flagging spirit and their fear filled me with a steely determination to survive, in order, if humanly possible, not to inflict such a lasting pain of loss upon them.

In those precious tender moments, I believe I received the greatest healing medicine of all.

It may well not be completely coincidental that around that time the medical profession, belatedly like the cavalry charging over the hill when the fight was almost lost, came up with a diagnosis. The astute suggestion by my friend who is a veterinarian that I request a faecal sample be taken led to the conclusion that I was suffering from a severe long standing parasitic infection in my intestines which was badly damaging the lining and causing malabsorption syndrome.

Apparently about twelve months previously when I was swimming in a flooded river in northern New South Wales where such parasites are endemic, I had swallowed contaminated water and after an initial bout of diarrhoea, the amoeba had insidiously burrowed into my gut and slowly over time caused the damage. Because such infections are virtually unknown in Melbourne, no-one, except the vet, considered that as a possible diagnosis. Just shows the value of a thorough case history.

So, with appropriate strong medication, repeated on several occasions, eventually the infection cleared up. I then required many months of rehabilitation, including sound nutrition and a graduated gym and swim program, to restore my depleted body to health. I also engaged in a series of consultations with a psychologist to assist me to unravel my recent and more long term fears and anxieties as well as to add to the good work I had already done through psychodrama to understand my over-developed role as a long-suffering servant of others, a role I acquired so early supporting my father. I was already fully aware of it in theory, I had just not been able to take the bold step to relinquish my strong sense of responsibility for my clients.

Fate and my body had certainly come up with the solution to that dilemma and Atlas, at long last, shrugged. The words of Martin Luther King rang in my ears like the Freedom bell: "Free, free, thank God almighty, free at last!"

As my recovery progressed, I became quite aware that my illness, as painful and disturbing as it had been, was in fact a gift of freedom and a fresh start to the next interesting phase in my life.

Like Persephone returning from her long sojourn in the Underworld, I walked out into my garden, full of a deep appreciation of all the life around me – the plants and flowers, the birds, the sunshine and the clouds. Everything appeared more beautiful than ever before. I felt a great love for all creatures and my fellow man and woman and had a great feeling of compassion and acceptance of all.

I recalled the words from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

*O happy living things no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware.*

More than that, I had the distinct feeling of having been looked after through my long and difficult journey and delivered at last to a safe shore. Delivered by what I can't say. Perhaps by that most mysterious force that has been called Grace. My father once said to me when I named my third daughter Grace, "That is the most beautiful word in the English language." And it says something of the durable spirit of the man, after all the suffering life served up to him, that he could still believe that.

In many ways, I related strongly to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who returns from a Life-in-Death struggle with a renewed love for all creatures and since my recovery I have had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on my remarkable journey and what that process signifies in my life.

Over the years, I have already come to regard my life as a kind of spiritual journey, a gradual evolution of the self, so it is natural for me to regard my illness and recovery in Christian mystic terms as a mortification of the flesh in order to enhance a deeper expression of the spirit.

Also, from the viewpoint of the Yogic mystic path that I have been strongly drawn to, my illness appears to have taken the form of a Shaivite initiation, where the Shiva force, described as creative destruction, tears apart the initiate's identification with the individual self and attachment to the physical form in order to liberate the soul to higher knowledge and a greater sense of being at one with all life.

In Jungian terms, the process can be seen as an allegorical hero's journey into the underworld passing through a death-like experience that challenges the fixed notions of self in order to facilitate rebirth of a more individuated self.

In perhaps more orthodox neuropsychological understanding, it was initially noted by psychologist William Sargant (1959) in *Battle For the Mind*, based on earlier work with dogs by Pavlov and by observing shell shocked veterans of World War Two, that persistent severe stress can ultimately lead to what he called “a terminal phase of temporary emotional collapse or stupor” (p. 33) or at other times called “protective inhibition” (p. 33). This in turn gave rise to a form of mental collapse which has sometimes been described as “wiping the cortical slate clean” that provides the opportunity for new patterns to be implanted in the brain.

More recent studies in in neurophysiology and the concept of neuroplasticity reinforces this notion that there is vast potential for the formation of new neural patterns in the brain and it appears to me that stressful events such as illness can provide an opportunity for significant personal transformation. From a psychodramatic point of view, this can result, as I believe in my own case, in decreasing the influence of old restricting roles and giving rise to new more progressive ones.

Nevertheless, on reflection, as time goes by and the initial freshness of my remarkable journey inevitably fades to some degree and the ways of the world draw me back into the fold, what have I actually gained? Did I come back as “the Wise One” bearing the pearl of wisdom? Did I really return lastingly with anything I didn’t have before I was ill? The answer I believe in many ways is no. It’s just that I have come back with much less of the negative interference, the inner conflict and self-doubt that restricted me from expressing what I experience and believe.

I feel significantly freed from a long-held fear of criticism and being misunderstood and more confident and strong in being myself and speaking my truth. And that’ll do me!

Norman Cousins (1979) in *Anatomy of an Illness* remarks, “William James said that human beings tend to live too far within self-imposed limits. It is possible that these limits will recede when we respect more fully the natural drive of the human mind and body toward perfectability and regeneration.” (p. 54)

And he further states, “I have learned never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate – even when the prospects seem most wretched. The life-force may be the least understood force on earth.” (p. 54)

References

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