

Wisdom for psychiatrists

The value of mental illness

The value of mental illness is not obvious. It is a subtle matter.

To ascribe value to something apparently uniquely destructive, involving frustration and suffering for those nearby as well as those affected, calls for a measure of wisdom.

Work is of value, however, and mental illness provides many with work. At the non-subtle level this provides income; the wherewithal to survive and prosper materially.

At a less unsubtle level there are two forms of satisfaction. The first lies in attempting to do good and occasionally in contributing to the relief of suffering. The second is intellectual, derived from solving problems.

At the most subtle level, the gain is in terms of personal growth.

*

To work mindfully with mental illness is first to become aware of intense human suffering and, secondly, to open one's heart to it, to share it. One cannot help but identify with the suffering of those afflicted, particularly the young. To be aware of suffering in this way is to become aware of one's own compassion, out of which arises the energy as well as the desire to do something to alleviate or remedy what seems to have gone wrong.

The value of mental illness lies in that this is very difficult.

Because of the difficulties, compassion gives rise necessarily to wisdom. One feels for those suffering and wants to help. Ordinary or swift remedies may not be available, and one is forced in each case to apply one's intelligence. This is what wisdom is: using intelligence for the benefit of oneself and others.

In the context of mental illness, wisdom involves being both systematic and thorough in assessment; thus it requires of one to be both painstaking and disciplined. It requires truthfulness in accepting limitations, and therefore courage. It involves developing trusting relationships and genuine co-operation as equals with one's patients, their families and with one's colleagues.

This is not a prescription. It is a kind of reminder, offered for the reader's reflection. With the appli-

cation of wisdom, even apparently insoluble problems disappear.

*

The subtle value of mental illness then lies in paying attention to one's own reaction in the face of human suffering. Little by little one is transformed. This may seem like a miracle.

One finds oneself able to bear more. As one bears more, one knows oneself to be of more use. One is useful not so much by doing but by being, by being oneself. As a result of personal disposition and of training one is knowledgeable, intelligent, thorough, painstaking, compassionate and eventually wise. This gives rise in time to a very deep level of satisfaction, joyful satisfaction, and a humble confidence. This is not arrogance, for one does not deny one's genuine limitations. It is simply the way things are.

Being with others who are suffering, examining and assessing that suffering with them in a painstaking way, sharing one's assessment with colleagues who are willing prosaically, without fuss, to share the burden of that suffering: this is doing a lot.

Even when remedies are elusive, when suffering persists despite one's efforts, it is enough. This is not complacency. It is sterling work, work of the spirit of humanity. It sets an example for the encouragement of others, and in this serves to enrich the community. There are many such subtle benefits arising from mental illness. For some, it is our calling.

LARRY CULLIFORD

*Consultant Psychiatrist
Aldrington House
Hove Community Mental Health Centre
35 New Church Road
Hove BN3 4AG*

*Maturity
Sunshine and shadow
immutably must blend,
And be together
cheek to cheek until the end.*

*Elaine Beth Tregaskis (1902–1993)
(Sister Uppalamuni)*