Centre for Mental Health: Writer in Residence programme

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1. Banished: The roots of loneliness in mental health

Introduction

I used to think that the most challenging part of having mental health difficulties was the loneliness. I have a diagnosis of bipolar, and in my personal experience it was the sense of being remote, cut off and disconnected from others that made the worst of times unbearable. On the flip side, it has been moments of connection and shared humanity with others that have unfailingly brought me hope.

For example, I remember once being in a cavernous branch of Tesco Extra, my mind swirling into an existential vortex as I attempted to navigate the vegetable aisle. I dropped an onion on the floor. A woman handed it back to me. For a second, somehow, it was the most profound and powerful onion on the planet.

I'm not unusual in finding the isolation of mental health difficulties a struggle. People have very different experiences of mental ill-health, an array of interpretations of what these experiences mean, and an even wider panoply of strategies for dealing with them. But loneliness is a binding thread which (somewhat ironically) brings all these very human experiences together. It's typically seen as a benign, non-political issue, which is to do with people not having enough friends or loved ones in their lives; or not enough intimacy in the relationships they do have.

Helping people find new ways of coming together and a sense of connection to others is the mission of the organisation I founded, Mental Health Collective. We've developed a number of programmes since we were founded in 2018, and have learnt a lot from each of them. Our #KindnessByPost project, for example, has enabled over ten thousand people across the UK to send and receive random acts of kindness – sharing small gestures of connection and hope, and sparking gorgeous pockets of poignant joy.

But I've come to the view that tackling loneliness in mental health requires more than just practical interventions to bring people together. It also requires an examination of *why* people feel lonely when they are dealing with mental health difficulties.

It's not because we have lost our onions. And it's not necessarily because we don't have enough people in our lives. Through a series of pieces to be shared through this writing residency, I will argue that our experiences of loneliness in mental health are infused by the historical, economic and cultural context that we find ourselves in. I'll explore different dimensions of these galumphing forces; and sketch my observations of how we can transcend them.

In this first piece, I will pose that loneliness is a symptom of wider dynamics of discrimination and exile, which people with mental health difficulties have been caught up in – but which aren't really *about us*.

A note on method

I'm a social anthropologist by background. I studied my undergraduate degree, masters and PhD at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, between 1999 and 2009. My doctoral dissertation focused on power and knowledge, and was supervised by Prof. Dame Marilyn Strathern – who is kind of like David Bowie plus Jackson Pollock plus Miss Marple, in academic form.

Social Anthropology is focused on understanding human societies and culture: on the particular contexts which make our lives specific and unique, and also the universal themes that emerge in human societies time and again. Our principal methodology is participant observation, where an anthropologist embeds themselves within a social group for an extended period, actively joins in and lives alongside the people there, makes observations and writes notes about what happens. The anthropologist then returns from 'the field' and write up their notes in an iterative process – going back and forth between their fieldwork data and academic theory. They produce a rich, detailed description of the social context, called an ethnography. Ethnographies include material that appears extraneous to the point being made, but which fleshes out a fuller picture through which new, surprising things can later be seen.

I have found an ethnographic training to be a very useful toolkit for navigating the challenging psychic territory that those of us with a bipolar diagnosis travel through. For me and my bipolar brethren, there are periods where life potters along in a way you might call 'normal'; but there are also periods when we ride the lightning; fly close to the sun; fall into the freezing bleakness of depression or get trapped in the rattling cage of anxiety. I treat these periods of bipolarity as if they were visits to 'the field' and have been taking notes on my experiences since 2006. I find that by deliberately taking an observing stance, I can take the edge off the intensity of these periods. Writing down

notes to read later also functions as a pledge to myself – a promise that this too shall pass, as the saying goes.

The process of returning to what you might call ‘normal’ also offers an opportunity to integrate and make sense of my experiences. I don’t always write up the notes as a formal ethnography, but I always crystallise them in some sort of way. I develop hypotheses to offer up against empirical evidence and theory, and refine through feedback from others. In this way, cycles of bipolarity function as a natural iterative method for developing ideas.

As the psychic tide goes in and out, the sharper edges of my ideas get worn off. And with time, they become beach pebbles that can be comfortably held.

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In this piece I’d like to offer you a beach pebble I’ve been working on, which sets loneliness in mental health in the context of the Enlightenment.

It first struck me one morning in 2019 when I was out for a run, attempting to shake off a sleepless night. The idea hit me so hard and felt so overwhelmingly ‘big’ that I immediately vomited in a bush.

I’m told that this is an unusual reaction to thinking about history. Apparently, readers are more likely to be bemused as to why an 17th and 18th Century intellectual movement is relevant to contemporary mental health than they are to be stunned into a full-body spasm of revelation.

But there is something vertiginous about stepping back from the usual frame we use for mental health. Typically, we view mental health as to do with the difficulties of individuals: personal problems – that in your *own* head – and which are about ‘you’. It is considered progressive to step back and view mental health difficulties in the context of family dynamics and close relationships. It’s considered innovative to view mental health in the context of communities and services; and radical to explore it in terms of societal inequalities and structural injustice.

Stepping back over two hundred years, then, into the seemingly unrelated world of 17th Century and 18th Century intellectuals involves a somewhat audacious disruption to the conventional ways we look at mental health. It problematises the solidity of the ground we call ‘normal’ today. This means that ‘going back to normal’ after a period of illness is no longer an option in the same way. If this is more than just an intellectual exercise for you – that is, if you have skin in the game – then this is unsettling. Spoiler alert: Everything works out okay in the end!

A brief summary of the Enlightenment

You might know something about the Enlightenment already. Perhaps you've heard of some of its keystone thinkers such as Condorcet, Diderot, Hume, Kant, Lock, Montesquieu, Paine, Rousseau and Voltaire – or even read their work.

For those seeking a detailed look at this epoch-defining period, there are some great big books available[1]. Here I offer a heavily abridged summary.

The Age of Enlightenment emerged amongst intellectuals in Western Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is a different kettle of fish than a 'state of enlightenment' which you might have come across in Buddhist or other spiritual teachings.

The Enlightenment isn't frequently referenced in public debate these days, but the assumptions and foundations of this movement have been deeply absorbed into our ways of thinking, our institutions and structures of government. Arguably, Enlightenment thought has become so interwoven into the fabric of modern Western society that it has become difficult to isolate and scrutinize its various threads.

The Enlightenment was known as 'the Age of Reason'[2]. At its heart was the image of shining a light to overcome darkness – and the light being shone was logic, rationality and knowledge. The universal ability of human beings to *reason* was held up as the thing that separates us from the animals, that makes our species special and which defines humanity itself. Reason was the engine of human progress, and it drove a set of methods, technologies and opportunities that human beings could use to thrive in the world.

Following Todorov[3], we can identify six core themes which drew this complex and multi-stranded project together:

1. Autonomy

A key Enlightenment principle was autonomy: the idea that individuals should think for themselves rather than have ideas imposed on them by external authorities. This also held that laws, rules and norms should be decided by the people who will be affected by them.

In the 17th Century, this principle was a major challenge to the position of the church, which held enormous power over the structures of society at the time. Up until this point, people submitted to the authority of the church on the basis that instructions

[1] I recommend Tzvetan Todorov's *In Defence of the Enlightenment* (2006) for a pithy overview. For more depth, dive into Jonathan Israel's epic trilogy: *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man* (2006); *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (2009), Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights 1750-1790 (2011)
[2] *The Age of Reason* was also the title of a book by Thomas Paine, published 1794-1807.
[3] Todorov, T (2006) *In Defence of the Enlightenment*

from church figures were unmediated directives from God. With the rise of the Enlightenment, religion was separated from the realm of the state and repositioned as a private matter. Faith was confined to the conscience of individuals and its grip on taken-for-granted truth was loosened. As each sector of society became secular, the power of the church was weakened.

The authority of heritage was also undermined: Enlightenment thinking held that human beings should live their lives according to where they wanted to go in the future, rather than how things had been in the past. Previously, rules and traditions had often been considered unchangeable because jettisoning them would be to disrespect our ancestors. Enlightenment values held that it was in the gift of contemporary people to determine the rules that governed them, and that they shouldn't be beholden to structures inherited from the dead.

2. Freedom of expression

The Enlightenment championed the view that knowledge and the tools of reason should be free and accessible to all. No authority, no matter how prestigious, was to be immune from criticism. These principles set the scene for modern journalism, scholarship and democracy. New universities were opened and science, technology and education blossomed. Freedom of opinion and freedom of expression became accepted as core values – to be defended even when the opinions being expressed were disagreeable or offensive. In public life, nothing was 'sacred' in the sense that it was untouchable.

It would be a mischaracterization to say that Enlightenment leaders believed reason was all that matters. Logic was the way of getting things done, but moral values and desires underpinned what you might choose to do in the first place. Thinkers such as David Hume argued: "reason is, and should only be a slave to the passions"[4].

However, Enlightenment thinkers did argue for the separation and a balance of powers. Theology and politics must always be held separately from each other, and people should interrogate one another's ideas as separate, independent individuals. The scrutiny of light flowing from every direction would protect us from abuses of any single locus of power.

3. The separation of powers

This separation of powers was never sharper than in the dichotomy between the 'sphere of will', which aspires to do good; and the 'sphere of knowledge', which focuses on truth. In this formulation, wise governments must not oppose the growth and spread of knowledge. They should not give themselves a role in creating or arbitrating what truth is.

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[4] Hume D, (1739) *Treatise on Human Nature.* T 2.3.3 p. 415

By the same token, science should not overreach its own mandate by assuming that 'the good' will always derive from 'the truth' – i.e. that all possible technological advances should be pursued, no matter what their consequences.

Equally, Moralists (who believe that the most important thing is what's morally right) should not be allowed to turn facts into malleable materials. Those who believe that 'the good' should prevail over 'the truth' should be confronted. Those with the moral high ground should not be allowed to stifle academic scrutiny when it doesn't suit them.

4. The pursuit of happiness

The Enlightenment placed human beings at its centre. The "pursuit of happiness" was coined in a 1690 essay by Locke, enshrined in the US Declaration of Independence and eventually memorialized in a film starring Will Smith, the Fresh Prince of Bel Air himself.

In another blow to the church's stature, pursuing happiness replaced pursuing spiritual salvation as the overriding mission for human beings on this earth[5]. In this new frame, it was not selfish to search for luxury and comfort, friendship and affection – which would previously have been seen in a religious context as shameful, heathen indulgences. It was unnecessary to sacrifice pleasure for the love of the God. You could be a good human being without dedicating yourself solely to Jesus, but simply by loving other human beings.

This was a model which placed human relationships in the centre – asking us to live collectively rather than regarding our true self as a spiritual quest lying within us. The Enlightenment asked us to bring scrutiny and a critical spirit to our human relationships and to efforts to better ourselves, whilst also cooperating, enjoying each other's company and building things together.

With the status of humanity lifted up in this way, Enlightenment thinkers held that all human beings, by their very nature, have inalienable rights. The right to life; freedom from torture – "the rights of man"[6]. For the first time, these human rights were asserted as universal and equal before the law, and to be identified across societies everywhere (with women, all different ethnicities, the marginalized and vulnerable included). The notion of 'humanity' itself became more nuanced, with the recognition that different cultures and historical periods have their own contexts where things are done differently, but where there are also recognizable things that all humans beings share. Before it was popularized in modern times by the late Jo Cox MP, the notion that "we have more in common than that which divides us" had an Enlightenment root.

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[5] Locke, J (1690) "Two Treatises on Government".
[6] Paine, T (1791) *The Rights of Man*

5. Exchange across sovereign boundaries

Whilst you can see the ingredients of Enlightenment thinking in a whole array of cultural and historical contexts, it was no accident that they emerged as a body of work in Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. The very nature of Europe – many different countries, proximate to each other, with distinct sovereign identities as well as an intermeshed web of trading relationships – provided the seeds for this pluralist project.

After centuries of bloody wars, Britain and the rest of Europe had a strong incentive to develop better ways of relating to each other, and to beat a path towards a better life. The Reformation of the 16th Century teed up the shift against the church, and was heavily influenced in the UK by Henry VIII's marital shenanigans. These political, economic, theological, personal and cultural interests animated the curiosity of Enlightenment intellectuals. Forged in exchanges across distinct and sovereign borders, ideas were carved out and stress-tested by individuals and institutions whose boundaries were clear. British thinkers played an important role alongside intellectuals from numerous other countries. Enlightenment thinking then spread throughout the world and became Europe's most prestigious creation. It forged the nature of the continent in modern times.

6. Faith in progress

The Enlightenment found faith in the potential for humans to improve themselves, improve their societies, and improve the world.

Defenders of the Enlightenment, such as Todorov[7], argue that this wasn't so much a faith in 'progress' per se, but more a faith in learning. Rousseau, for example, recognised that the strengths and weaknesses of humanity were always intertwined, and that progress on one front would inevitably be paid for with regression in another. Modern Enlightenment thinkers point to events like the atrocities of the Second World War as demonstrations that humankind doesn't always 'progress' in a linear way – but that we if we study our failures we can draw out the learning points.

These caveats notwithstanding, at the core of Enlightenment thinking was belief in "the perfectability of man"[8]. In this view, we can stretch towards perfection on earth. This happens through our ability to learn. As humans, we know how to *look* at ourselves, and we know how to *look* at others. By shining a light on one another and on ourselves, we propel humanity towards a future of our own making.

This has been widely translated as a conviction that learning will lead us to a brighter future. It is, in this way, an outlook of hope.

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[7] Todorov (2006) *In Defence of the Enlightenment.* Atlantic Books, London.
[8] Passmore, J (2000) *The Perfectability of Man* Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

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So, that, in helicopter view, was the Enlightenment. Now I want to look at how the values of this period have influenced modern cultural dynamics.

Scapegoating and purification

Culture is fluid. It's always in a state of motion and, just like a liquid, when you push a movement of culture in a particular direction there is a displacement elsewhere. Establishing a new cultural epoch creates an in-group who share and embody its norms and values. It also, like the hydraulics of a lock, siphons off an out-group of people who represent the contrary norms and values. Pushing the out-group away serves to shore up the boundaries of the in-group.

The focus of social commentators is often drawn to the qualities of the out-group – the ways that they are "different" from the norm. But I would argue these dynamics are actually driven by the insecurities of the in-group. The out-group is banished because the in-group fears the truth they represent about the contingency of culture – its malleable and fluid nature.

In the ancient Jewish rite of Yom Kippur, a goat symbolically takes on the sins of others before being cast out into the wilderness – a sacrifice which brings about the in-group's atonement. In everyday social life, scapegoats are burdened with whichever parts of the in-group run counter to the norms and values that now define their membership. They are banished to the wilderness in order to *purify* the mainstream culture that remains.

It is foolish to examine the scapegoat to understand why they are cast out. We can only do this by examining the in-group's shame.

I contend that each of the six Enlightenment principles have, to a greater or lesser extent, turned people with mental health difficulties into scapegoats. It is this historically contextual phenomenon – rather than any essential quality of people with mental health difficulties themselves – that is the source of our loneliness.

The banishment of non-reason

I'll explore this phenomenon across a series of pieces in this residency, but I want to briefly note its most dominant element: the way that, by placing 'reason' as its central value, Enlightenment thinking pushed the parts of human experience that are concerned with 'non-reason' into cultural exile.

If our ability to reason is the thing that distinguishes human beings from animals, then the parts of ourselves that can't be traced to a palpable place of logic can have no belonging within human society. If reason makes us human, then by implication non-reason makes us non-human. What are we then? Those who cannot be reasoned with

are rendered Alien. They are Other. The 'unwell' are outside the 'well'. To continue my metaphor of culture as liquid, the well is a boundaried pool of water that a community drinks from, and the unwell cannot share it. Without a connection to logic, our connection to mainstream society is lost.

In contemporary British culture, mental health difficulties are wholly entangled with non-reason. We use the word "madness" interchangeably to talk either about mental illness or about wild, chaotic and illogical behaviour. Being unable to cope with our own thoughts is called "madness", but we would also use this term to call out a stupid or reckless decision. Psychosis – the mental health condition in which reason is farthest away – is the mental illness that is feared most.

But there is nothing natural, inevitable or immovable about this. Cross-culturally and historically, human beings have had a wide variety of relationships to non-reason. It hasn't always been banished into exile: it has also been embraced as a source of mystery, faith, numinosity and humour. The banishment of non-reason happened as the Enlightenment advanced. It is socially contingent.

Whether or not we pathologise fluctuations in our wellbeing can be determined by how 'reasonable' our feelings are found to be. Grief after a bereavement often manifests in ways that might otherwise be categorised as depression. But the context of the bereavement renders our emotional turmoil understandable. When difficult feelings have a 'good reason' – that is to say, a logic which is intelligible to others – then they are less likely to be seen as symptoms of a disorder. Indeed, they are *ordered*, because they follow an order of logic that others can track and replicate in their own minds. Reasonable feelings are accepted as part of the waft and weft of universal human experience. They weave us more closely within society itself – a human being who can be dealt with.

When I'm outside the 'well' myself, it is well-intentioned empathy that pricks my eyes the most: when you describe how you are feeling and someone says, "that's understandable". On one level, I thirst desperately for this. When someone says that they understand – that is, that they can follow the reasoning that has led me to a place of distress – it's like they are marking out the logical trail that can lead me back home. Retrace your footsteps. Find your way back to the well.

But on another level, I know in my bones that being "understandable" is a chimera. That there is a purer and more essential quality to human beings – and to life itself – that goes beyond reason. That reason is, in the grand scheme of things, a parochial value that has been lifted up to magnificent heights through the Enlightenment movement and its legacy, but which bears no more permanence than a rising or falling tide. That layers of iterative learning and reflection can tend towards truth, as a curve tends towards infinity – but they will never truly arrive there. That if we are seeking understanding in order to connect to each other we might get close, but we will never actually touch.

Through this residency, I will explore some new ways of connecting with each other. Some of these are actually old ways – tales as old as time – which bring us around in a circle rather than upwards to endlessly perfectable "progress". I'll write up some notes from my psychological fieldtrips, to consider how the banishment of mental illness reflects the shame and shadow of mainstream twenty-first century British culture – rather than things that are wrong with those who are "unwell" themselves. And I'll describe the Contemporary Renaissance – a movement which has sprung up as the dam constructed around Enlightenment values has started to break.

For me, the Contemporary Renaissance represents the ways that bipolarity can be an asset, rather than a burden, for those of us with a bipolar diagnosis. In an age of political polarisation, my contention is that these assets can be shared more widely – to benefit not only those of us who manage bipolar but society more broadly. This is an attempt to find a larger sense of humanity, where we bring curiosity and imagination to the challenges of polarised extremes, rather than a relentless exposure to bright lights. Paradoxically, it is by allowing non-reason to come back in from the cold that we can be moved, together, towards a deeper sense of meaning.

Epilogue

A few months ago I made a difficult decision and had little cry in the car about it. My daughters, aged 5 and 8, were in the back seat.

"Why are you crying, Mummy?" they asked.

I gave them a broad-brush reason which they didn't understand.

They scrabbled around in the footwells and found a pink plastic hair comb, a broken branch from a pine tree, and a toilet roll which they had decorated like Betty from Hey Duggee.

They deposited the comb, branch and toilet roll in my lap. "Here you go, Mummy", they said.

For a second, somehow, these three objects were the most profound and powerful things on the planet.