

Unpoetic Polemics Penned by a Poetic Prober

This book is a reflection in a mirror, a message in a bottle,
“faith, hope and love,” history; photos without pictures,
an offer of a kiss, or a handshake.

Possibly, it is for a child
that has not been born.

**Dedicated to
Rose Megan Holme (R.I.P.)**

Edition 4.01

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Introduction

This book holds all my prose. My verse totals 593 poems, and along with this current volume, they form my “EVERYTHING” book.

Stories, essays, and other nonfictions follow. One of them is central to the World view this book describes. It’s called “I am”, and it also forms part of a syncretic book including story, poetry, and pictures, which provide a brief autobiography and great credence, to that central tenet.

In 1997 I had an earlier attempt at autobiography writing: a roman à clef. My strength with the English language was weaker, nevertheless, I’m told some sections are compelling, not least my account of a Moroccan holiday. Richness is apparent throughout this book, if at times by implication. For example, in the next example -

I’m an advanced amateur pianist. I once wrote some words about piano teaching to help to qualify me in that field. The point though, is that I didn’t begin piano at all until I was 21. This section is motivational. I insist that earlier labels the World places on, are not fixed, because we can change direction in various ways. Believing so is the route to motivation and therefore work.

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What is truth?

Whilst writing something about my complete oeuvre of poetry, I answered the obvious question, “Why I wrote poetry?” Part of my summary said -

“The work is currently done, though I hope in time I'll both learn and share much more about life (of course.) Maybe I will get to learn a totally new form of communication, beyond succinct words? Perhaps it will offer the greatest propensity for clarity, diversity in its reception, and maximum size of that reception. I do not think I am describing music. I do not think it implies a god. It requires discovery, and open-mindedness helps to facilitate that.”

The reason words are necessarily not it (indeed words of wisdom so to speak), is because they get understood or not. If you understand them, you had already learned that part of life, and you gain nothing other than validation. And if you do not understand them, you gain nothing again!

Therefore, faced with such logic, my non-fiction book, “I am”, published in 2020, makes clear the point that words of wisdom, can only strengthen pre-existing similar lessons. Just like Hermann Hesse said, (and I often like to share) “wisdom cannot be imparted...” However, common thought patterns arrived at in isolation, by multiple, and *independent*

thinkers, become increasingly valid. That is because they can make valuable words still more valuable and popular, hence more attractive to people. At that point, people outside of having had a realisation, or direct life experience, might begin to accept things at face value that were initially unclear.

Naturally, this is where faith and trust enter, whose ramifications could occupy a whole book to themselves. However, rather than having had a direct life experience, if we accept certain ideas may be valuable, and allow either them or their potential, to form part of our mindset, because we have primed our brain to such thoughts and/or possibilities, then we might begin to automatically look for evidence of their reality. It is almost like the psychological mechanism of “confirmation bias.” For example, a badly depressed person might be convinced they are despicable, when they are not. However, even the most unconnected things in their mind, will dictate they are awful, and their previous pre-depressed mental attitude, is unhelpfully blind.

Independent discovery, that further validates and strengthens any valuable age-old wisdoms, should be shared. A strengthening by validation of what appears useful, is a good thing.

Jesus taught in two ways: firstly, through his own acted out life attitudes and behaviours, and secondly by telling parables. The parables were based on words, requiring interpretations. They were less immediate than any

spontaneous outcomes triggered by his unwavering character traits. Unsurprisingly then, Jesus' parables were mostly short, simple, picturesque stories. Once heard, even the longer and more detailed "parable of the Lost Son" (Luke 15:11-32), was/is memorable and could be recalled with some accuracy for the benefit of others.

Pure, or instrumental music, speaks to some people, and such that if voices are involved, they should have no meaning as such. When such music gives the listener chills, a shiver, a sadness, or joy, etc., they feel they have made a connection to a perceived truth of living, and/or life: i.e., reality. Taken further, even in visual art where I lack tangible feelings, there is excitement. For example, I heard a fine artist suggest outdoor painting, or *en plein air* work, can cause an adrenaline release. It was hard to accept that somewhat sedentary daubing and brushing of paint on a canvas, can initiated the "fight or flight" mechanism; however, it further illustrates how people equate the production of feelings with a truth or an actuality.

Carole King said, "only love is real," going on to add that, "everything else is illusion." The feeling that some people attribute to love, is truth, and ironically, Jesus described the greatest love of all in this verse, "greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13 KJV) Surely that terminates your feelings, in particular your love and your reality? The sacrifice of your life: the highest love; is perhaps a paradoxical anti-feeling?

Interestingly, people switch their perceived life affirming feelings off, when they are in times and places of extremes, for example, being trapped in countries with very harsh regimes, or being in active warzones, or much more smaller scale situations such as modern-day slavery, and perhaps the smallest nightmare scenario of all, that of being trapped in an abusive and violent domestic relationship setting, which so many are.

Furthermore, significantly, you realise by considering the experiences of people with serious mental illnesses (SMIs), for example the delusional and exaggerating effects of severe mood disorders such as bipolar disorder, and psychotic depression, that both are part of a mood continuum from wellness to unwellness, but also, that we are all amidst this spectrum. We change positions on it, and whether one has an SMI diagnosis or even a milder issue, all such thoughts above should make us question the veracity of what our feelings suggest, and that our logical and intellectual sides should be given more credit, but do we have the courage for that, especially when some people say to us [take the easy option and] follow your instincts!?

Arts are experienced differently between each individual person. Their colourful randomness precludes the crystallisation of any universal truth. At least not in any objective measure, but conversely, by taking a scientific truth like “acceleration due to gravity”; whether you are an apple, a

boulder, a log, a person, or in fact anything that is not like a feather, then Galileo's demonstration in the late 1500s, must be called a unifying truth.

The mathematical fact that two plus two equals four, can be proven (if a number system is accepted), just like the visual reality of the effects of gravity. However, both these rules, and similar ones, whether they are physically and/or mathematically based, are not what you would expect a sage, a guru, an elder, an avatar, a prophet, a messiah, a psychic, a mystic, a tarot reader, or perhaps a tribal chief, to reveal. The fact is, people offer no such thing as truths, because even when a person has strived towards individuality, and therefore reacted against the pull of group memberships, the mental make-up of everyone is different. Whilst people might have many strong similarities, or overlaps, our brains are not binary in nature: galaxies of on and off switches. We cannot download one and upload another, in the manner depicted in the science fiction film, "Total Recall", starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Truth is the opposite of everything that makes up the world of feelings. Many people look for truth outside of the world. Or they call it nature, because we think nature "is what it is" and it does not plot scheme and calculate. We dislike the cold and cruel intellect. We might insist that a god exists, and that god is outside of this horrible and confusing world. He/she/it is supernatural. But isn't the opposite case just as

reasonable to support: the non-theist one? After all, endless killings occur through the clashes between people of different theist beliefs.

My “I am” book suggests we should avoid forming identities at all, or realistically, keep them to a minimum. In fact, the conclusion of that kind of a tack, might be what some call nihilism (in full or perhaps to a lesser part.) Furthermore, we are so mentally complex, mostly unrelated to each other, and alone, except when joined by sexual intercourse, that more than anything, we should accept a mathematical scrutiny, if one is applicable, the laws of physics, and a chemical constitution.

The last descriptor allows an amazing truth. We know atoms can be split, but in less dramatic ways, changes of the heavier carbon isotope, carbon 14, enables the dating of organic matter. Carbon 14 gradually becomes carbon 12 by radioactive decay, and because both isotopes have a regular, initial relative abundance in nature, then taking a sample and discovering the ratio of the amount of decaying C14 atoms to non-decaying C12 ones; and by knowing C14’s half-life, we can calculate the age of our actual, present-day carbon sample. Of course, this description outlines the method we call “carbon dating.”

Mass, matter, and stored energies remain constant, even when atoms break down, and larger ones both patently, and infamously become atoms of totally different elements (c.f.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki, 1945); they only change or convert. The first law of thermodynamics, or in its equivalent form as the law of conservation of energy, says

“The total energy of an isolated system remains constant; it is said to be conserved over time.”

That seems strong, and I think you can say it is truth. Significantly then, the tiny span of years of our consciousness, and sufferings, whilst our energy has been “morphing”, when placed alongside endless time, or infinity, makes us even, equate to nothing.

Thus, our atoms are endless energy, even tangible ones that people might hug. They give out exothermically derived heat, whilst our breath steams up a cold window. Even the increasing potential energy we create when we climb a tower, to perhaps verify Galileo, without having any objects to drop but ourselves, is fact, that we never escape energy.

Energy is everything. Again, it is the truth!

Life101

Introduction

My life began when I reached 45. Below are some ideas born of my observations, and not through the texts of other writers. These ideas helped me to overcome my poor mental health, which robbed me of most of my twenties, and many of the following years. I offer what may be trifles, a curiosity, or even an annoyance? But it's a possible salvation of some sort: it may offer *chance*?

Thinking and embracing

Ideas arrive. Some are huge, such as whole religions with their dogmas. The mystery of Roman Catholicism's transubstantiation exists only by faithful acceptance. Scientific ideas can rest easier with us because we trust physical, electrical, and for example, chemical measuring devices. However, I have personally and profitably "embraced" ideas beyond a thought alone stage, such that they became useful assumptions that are part of my "social model."

Becoming us

I think the first stage in becoming “us” is realising that no two people are alike. All our paths differ. Some people find commonality through religion, family membership, sporting participation, having a political agreement, or whatever, and whether it is logical or not. People like to feel a part of something. Activities and groups cause personal overlaps that might suggest the categorisation “normal:” that huge assumption.

At the risk of patronising you, there is no “normal.” However, through personal observations, I think some people spend their whole lives proclaiming normality. In them I see passive aggression, political correctness, and accommodation matched to a lack of assertiveness. Our lives my begin by recognising that every person is engaged in a mission of being unique, and that it is a difficult struggle, and that difference ironically brings us all together.

Alternative paths

Instead of realising our uniqueness, some people identify: “I am a parent,” “I am a teacher,” “I am a Buddhist,” etc., rather than just “I am,” or perhaps “I am me.” The danger is that sometimes identities need rebuilding. I say everything is religion, as in the levelling Eucharist. The important universal

bond is the one that is made upon realising, that we are not bonded at all: the “I am.”

Derailments #1 - “anxiety is the root of paranoia”

In our youths we often socialise within comfort zones, for example, with our favourite friends. Unsurprisingly, upon our eventual emergence into the world, we can crash through having a lack of social confidence. Consequent attempts to fit in by “rounding” ourselves, are likely to be stressful processes; particularly if we harbour the notion that others are aware of our pain. Considering that idea, especially when antagonists are regularly in our lives, such as the case that work colleagues present to us, then distress can manifest as persecutory thoughts. Maybe habitual thinking stems from the repetitive firing of certain neurons in our brains. Logically, repetition can reinforce, and suspicions may become paranoia. This paranoid form of derailment takes us away from ourselves. It may be followed by a slow personal reconstruction marked by depression, isolation, and defeatist moments, fed by the enormity of restarting your whole life over again.

Derailments #2 - “early models”

The child who was brought up to believe that the world is a safe place will probably do so, until presented with conflicting

evidence, and vice-versa. In adulthood, a former “problem” child, or a bully, is likely to project their waywardness on others. If that continues, the world may seem dangerous. We only have our own “model.” Other people’s modes of thinking are elusive in part or in whole. Even when we think we know people, we do not fully. I have heard of couples divorcing after 25 years of marriage. For that reason, I think we are all alone. I say, “embrace your aloneness,” as a tack to begin the onset of personhood.

Derailments #3 - “pride”

Central to all religions is humility. Pride grates. Some would say that pride leads to all other evils. The Christian essence translates across faiths. It is that humble equality in the Lord’s Supper, the basis of the Eucharist, a leveller. However, metaphors, fiction, rumours, and assertions, hide its simple essence and thus lead to mysteriousness. By leaving religious groups and following a more isolated life, then freedom, or the path of humility, to “I am”, opens, and it blossoms in the form of assertiveness, uniqueness, and common sense.

Consequences

“Mature” and “street-wise” people might see our false-self systems, especially for example if they are in sales; and in that

pursuit, their hints may prove sensitive, and highlight flaws and vulnerabilities, consciously or otherwise. People who fear silences, or are uncomfortable with them, can often feel trapped by other's monologues. Sometimes, a customer's initial enthusiasm might jeopardise their later U-turn. For us to simply say "no", we are helped by assuming that certain social norms or assumptions are understood.

Adulthood across cultures

Cultural differences influence adulthood. The more socially sophisticated the country, the harder the transition to adulthood is. For example, I believe that the path is easier in the Philippines than in the UK, because religion is treated more serious there, and freedoms are therefore less. Maybe good health and a lack of sophistication is perfection. In some perceived extreme places, such as the Amazon Rainforest or the Sahara Desert, perfectly adapted groups thrive. They use their wits to live off nature's offerings. Amongst such groups, rites of passage are uncomplicated and often predefined.

What is forward?

Is it a place? A state? A result? Is it where heterosexual couples have two point five children, and go on holidays to Florida's Disney World? By defaults and increasing age, more foreign

holidays are assumed. Warmth and dryness in winter, is attractive, preferably not overly though. If mum and dad are career minded, a child minder is paid to parent their children during work times. By getting used to their professional masks and disguises, they lose practice in having public selves. Habits become unconscious characteristics. Naturally, insufficient recompense comes in the form of salaries, for what some say amounts to selling out or selling souls. Perhaps in slow countries they would have been sucked into a happy slowness instead, with industry being eminently avoidable? I ask myself, “what is my essence?”

A few final thoughts

Without decisions, we stagnate. I say, “take a chance because everything is HYPE.” Ultimately, we are alone. Our individual models of how society works are unique. It’s our personal rule book of behaviour. Artistic people might produce unusual books, and extreme nonconformity can readily lead towards mental ill health in more rigid societies.

Governments and religions favour droids. To a lesser extent, clubs, and societies like conformists. When matching personalities accept one-another’s sexes, beliefs, perceived social statuses, colour and health, etc., then the statistics and probabilities; I think, indicate a good balancing. Such couples

might have the potential to be good parents and ought to take the *chance*.

After developed-world eyes have read this, by pretending they are third world ones, would everything they had read here still stand up?

Conclusions

Until we realise that life has unequivocally started, it may not have done so. Decisions should be made wholeheartedly. We should revel in our uniqueness and dispel ideas of normality, such as the ones held by those who utter; “you’re not normal.” We do find comfort from ideas such as those “I am ...” this or that identities, even though they may not be permanent. On starting our working lives, we might say, “I am a support worker,” for example. Redundancy would negate that. The start of careers can be stressful. For some, paranoia might stem from anxiety and a feeling of being trapped, perhaps through not fitting in. Childhood behaviour can have a lasting effect, even influencing our lives decades later. If we project negative characteristic onto people, then the world has got to become more dangerous, and scary. It is anyone’s guess how others think. Religions might offer the humility solution. Totally hiding away is difficult, mainly because money facilitates trade. Most people stay in their home countries and cultures. Wherever we are, the most important things, like food, water,

and shelter, etc., can become somewhat taken for granted due to the lust for unneeded distractions, but we've got to say procreation can be seen as the sine qua non of maintaining life. In the simplest societies, people without electricity, or other even more important basics, are much clearer about their vital necessities. "Progress", especially western, promotes blinding ignorance and the adoption of the old saying, "I'm alright, Jack."

My three words

Introduction

This unique work is based on my image-free poem, “My three words,” which I wrote in a Costa coffee whilst waiting to head off for the final appointment out of a fruitful group of psychology sessions. It was on an early morning of a summer day in 2014. The title, and simple concept of this writing, came to me in the busy traffic as I drove from home to the city centre. Whilst the poem needs no explanation, it is good that the work ends positively, when each “poetic” statement is expanded upon.

My three words

I could cry.

We’re all alone.

It’s not fair.

Embrace your aloneness.

Gimme a break.

Why’d she die?

Opportunists are odious.
I want connection.

Everyone is hurt.
Religions are lies.

Dogs are love.
Everything turns around.

16/7/14

“I could cry”
“The nature of tears”

Some think crying is a weakness, especially if it's within males. And earlier generations seemed more ashamed to cry than the more recent “New Men” who wear “perfume” and fight fewer wars, for example, but life is still hard. Personally, I think you can show strength by crying: you stand out from others, breaking from conventions. It's likely you've suffered a lot if you reach a state where you can spontaneously breakdown in tears, for an unknown reason to others, but you have not given up! Thirdly, you are admitting to yourself that something is wrong. So many people null those feelings with drink, drugs, food, and other escapes, rather than accepting there is a problem. The things that make me cry the most are acts of kindness and public openness.

There is so little kindness outside of the family. People have their own lives, and predominately “look after their own.” When acts of kindness are made, they are often not sufficiently reciprocated. People need incentives. There is no such thing as pure charity, even Mother Teresa probably felt some satisfaction from what she did.

“And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31 KJV) I try to do this, for example, without judging I give to beggars. I always tip, and I try my best to share words at every opportunity. One day somebody will make me cry from kindness.

I once embarrassed myself by going along to a Chinese church without a handkerchief. A group of young adults were being baptised. They had a water tank to receive full emersion, and beforehand, each one told their brief story about their previous life, but in Chinese. I understood none of the words and all the emotion. I cried for every one of those young people.

“We’re all alone”

“Art is the closest thing to honest religion”

In my opinion, time spent in isolation is perhaps the single most enlightening thing anyone can do. Monks opt for it by choice, even seeking solitude in the wilds of the Himalayas. And some parents with financial means and the attitude, might

send their children to boarding schools, for a presumed chance of character building.

Aloneness helps us to realise that the world is made up of ourselves and everyone else, i.e., everyone else is a homogeneous collection of mostly confused people all seeking enlightenment. Everyone's reality is different and equally valid. Even those who haven't grasped that, are still "on the path." An advancement is achievable when you realise that the "normal" many people strive for, is madness, and that your own madness is as crazy as anyone else's. Furthermore, the accuracy of that statement is irrelevant, as you just decide to believe it, whilst knowing little of what others think anyway!

People try to avoid the fact that we are all alone by joining churches, or otherwise getting involved in religion. However, a bigger lie than sex is the Eucharist. Eating a wafer, suggesting that it is the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, seems psychotic. It strikes me that the most successful people are often those who are most alone. By thinking of great people in all spheres of life, don't they present to us from a subtle distance, and mostly treat everyone with equal validation. Neediness does not foster success.

So, to explain the subtitle, we might avoid aloneness by deluding ourselves with commonality, however, the only common denominator is madness, and in my opinion, the closest approximation to a togetherness of minds, is found in the sincerest expressions of art.

“It’s not fair”

“A patently obvious truth”

Everybody has experienced injustice. It is hard to avoid disappointments. The subtitle says it all. I want to touch on my root injustice, to give an example and share. Millions and millions of people have suffered worse fates, especially in the third world.

I had little parenting, because my parents separated, and I only stayed with my mother one day a week at a crucial time in my early years: eight onwards. My father was a workaholic, and did not remarry till I reached eighteen, so I was void of a mother figure in my life, and pretty much a father too. It took me decades to learn to love myself, and I made many costly life mistakes. I’m saying no more about “it’s not fair.”

“Embrace your aloneness”

“Acceptance is the answer and only conclusion”

This essay is both practical and informative. It is my opinion, that once we have realised we are alone, we must accept it. Without that empowering step of acceptance, you risk living in depression and inadequacy. In fact, aloneness is a massive strength that is there to empower you, if only you might see it. I cannot say much more about these three words. It’s wisdom really, and as Hermann Hesse said:

“Wisdom cannot be imparted. Wisdom that a wise man attempts to impart always sounds like foolishness to someone else ... Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.”

I prefer not to suggest I am wise. I think that’s unwise to do so. It is almost like suggesting one is humble. If I could offer some advice though, it is that you find time to be alone, for at least some of your time.

“Gimme a break”

“Gi’s a job. I can do that”

This section is also going to be short because it risks moaning a bit. Given that we did not fit the “normal” formula and did not become a sheep like character, who became exploited by less than sincere corrupt visionaries, the chances are we were rejected from conventionality. The longer that rift occurs, the further we are entrenched in the wilderness, and the more we need to rely on ourselves and embracing our aloneness.

If we do not realise early on that our time is limited, it might pass us by, and our success in life increasingly could need more than an average action. It may need something more uniquely defined beyond a CV or qualifications. Perhaps our

personality and powers of communication will lead us to getting “a break.”

“Why’d she die?”

“A rhetorical question”

How can you answer a question like that? People die. I used to be a practising Catholic. When I talk about the Eucharist I speak from direct experience. Among other lies propagated in the church, is that we will meet in spirit form in Heaven. We are carbon. Carbon is God. We are all a part of it, and along with other elements, in fact we are recycled in mother-nature. We are together all right, but in a more scientific way. If you want to give it a title, it is pantheism. It is teetering on atheism. It is almost a “hippy” version of it. I could say it was my late wife’s time to recycle, and that was why she died. Her carbon was due to be breathed by trees at the crematorium. They are the same trees that I hope will breathe my carbon. That is my heaven. One day if the executor of a will dictates, I might be part of a conifer, and a beech, and a maple tree, and more, and in the same area. That same greenery could pass my oxygen molecules to higher species, and then who knows, I may become atoms and molecules of a good man or woman, someone who is kind and embraces their aloneness for a good cause.

“Opportunists are odious”

“It really is a dog-eat-dog world”

Having said “gimme a break” above, I would like to suggest one of the reasons why such appeals are made. In my experience my third set of three words: “It’s not fair,” are apparent in work environments, where there might be the kind of person who puts themselves forward, regardless of the consequences it may have on fellow colleagues. In workplaces where management is weak, a form of anarchy exists, and a free-for-all pushes the weaker people towards redundancy. That is nature, through “the law of the jungle.” There are so many clichés. Another one is “if you can’t beat them join them.” Atmospheres of distrust and hostility are fostered by the fact that we cannot know one another: we are all alone. Sadly, people tap into the prevailing wisdom or custom that they assume everyone else subscribes to. Society is rotten. Religion is an escape offering certain dogmas that level people, but true advancement lies in honest acceptance of the isolated nature of the individual, and the recognition of the lies that would attempt to manipulate our good individual nature. You should ask yourself, where do these attitudes stem from? Naturally, in a capitalism system the only answer is from the top, followed by percolation through the market. People needn’t treat their fellows cruelly, but yes: “it’s not fair.” It would be comforting to think that the downtrodden get their

reward in Heaven, but unless you believe in supernatural type aspects, there is no reward and there is no Heaven. Another cliché is “life’s a bitch.” It is truly too hackneyed for creative writing, but it is also accurate for most of us. People need to have resolve in their principles and be genuinely themselves, regardless of sheep seduced by popular ideas of a normality. “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”: repeated from Luke’s gospel.

“I want connection”

**“Mankind is a social species, despite the paradox
‘we’re all alone’ ”**

A drive exists in most people to seek comradeship and company. It is my assertion that because we can never fully know one another we are always behind barriers. People tend to disregard them and get on with life. It requires trust. Another way of looking at the statement “I want connection” is “I want trust.” Sadly, a high number of marriages end in divorce. What was initially seen as a connection, in terms of a shared trust, breaks down. “[Love] always trusts ...” 1 Corinthians (13:7) (I don’t make excuses for my occasional Bible reference, by the way, there is a lot of great wisdom in it.) As pure love or pure charity, as I mentioned earlier, does not, in my opinion, exist, due to the perversion of our minds, it follows that perfect trust doesn’t either and that connections are tenuous. Everyone

is different and can trust or connect in varying capacities. Those who are least trusting have a greater clarity, and the most trusting people tend towards blissful ignorance. It's about degree. Total connection will aid the most delusion, whilst total isolation can offer total truth.

“Everyone is hurt”

“If anything, hurt is the thing that bonds people most”

These three words exist for balance. The poem is based somewhat on the writer's experience and this statement acknowledges that everyone has problems at times. Balance is a key concept of all aspects of life. Obsessions, for example, can lead to poor mental health and narrow-mindedness. Yin and Yang, night and day, positive and negative, black and white, true and false, sweet and sour, etc.; the one requires the other. There is truth in the cliché “variety is the spice of life.” Hurt can take many forms. One of the commonest forms of hurt which is learned in childhood is disappointment. We don't get our own way. When it is a matter of the heart it can be devastating. We are best being trained to weather disappointments early in life. When we're older they can be more painful and significant.

People react differently to hurts, for example, disappointment can depress, enrage, frustrate, or tire us, and it is likely that a

total absence of hurt is unheard of. Ironically, pain resulting from separations, generates empathy. Empathy gained through feeling pain can strongly bond us, but paradoxically, the cause of the pain might separate us. Is mankind a damaged collection, somehow less broken among the broken?

“Religions are lies”

“The only religion is self-realisation”

“I want connection.” “We can’t know one another.” One form of connection is to state you think the same way as another person or group of people. Religion is like a comfort blanket. Sex is a micro religion between “two” people. People think all sorts of different, complex things that can’t be expressed well. Models such as Catholicism provide a package through which a mutual acceptance of dishonesty can lessen aloneness. Truth does not exist in religions, but some wisdom does. However, it is illogical to think that one billion people can share the same life model, when we all have unique experiences. It is uniqueness, of course, that points to “we’re all alone” again, which itself is true togetherness.

“Dogs are love”

“A man’s best friend is his dog”

“Dogs are love” is not the full picture. If we accept that pure love does not exist in “man,” due to the perversion of the mind,

then what about in nature? Trees do not think or ask for anything, yet without them we will likely suffocate, having previously taken greenery for granted. Dogs are extremely forgiving, and that gives credence to the sentiment of the subtitle above. Perhaps nature and all living beings are one big love, or God.

“He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 John 4:8 KJV)

Is nature a good model, like so called pantheism? Maybe we are together scientifically in the form of the carbon-cycle. When we die, our remains are slowly consumed by “Mother-Nature.” In the case of cremations, our carbon dioxide might enter photosynthesis very soon. It is a difficult model, as it is void of emotions, and man is patently an emotional being. However, the more we realise that we are all alone, the more pantheism might make sense, as a label to help us understand life. We are carbon. We are all part of a cycle. Isn't that togetherness?

“Everything turns around”

“Starting with ‘I could cry,’ we end with that possibility too, but there is chance”

Most things cycle, and perhaps time never started and will never end. Away from the abstract, things begin and have the potential to follow a course taking them back to the start in some way. Pain does not last forever, and take isolation for example, a person who craves company will adapt if company is impossible. The brain tries to minimise pain. One expects the brain and in fact the whole central nervous system, of life prisoners, must adapt to such long incarcerations. Many examples of suffering might be subjugated by acceptance. This adaptation has the effect of making people who “embrace their aloneness,” become set, or formed. Acceptance is a defence mechanism of the brain. It can involve any amount of humiliation, that can be strengthening. Acceptance might be one of the hardest yet easiest routes to self-realisation, especially when humiliation is not welcome, though humiliation avoids us trying techniques such as extended periods of meditation. Either way, when we are ourselves, we are perfectly alone in the world, but perfectly free. The world is as much ours as “fate”, or chance in fact, is going to allow it to be.

Stress & the Extroverted Introvert

I think stress is the basis of psychiatric illness. Depression, mania, anxiety and/or paranoia are likely outcomes. Excluding mania's false confidence, these reactions lead to isolation and introversion, because being around others whilst we are depressed, anxious or paranoid, aggravates those conditions. Guilt and self-loathing, stemming from depression, can be highlighted by any surrounding mentally well people. Failure to integrate raises anxiety, even leading to anxiety about being anxious. Group memberships, for example in social, religious, or work contexts, can feed paranoia. Efforts to read people's minds when we are unwell, in my opinion, are the singular most futile and debilitating habits we can have. Ultimately, we assume people are thinking bad things, so our anxieties worsen: logically. Mentally well people do not waste energy in such a pointless manner. The answer has a root found in part in Christ's words. In one interpretation Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within." I interpret this as, happiness cannot be found in the world, but rather, it is found within ourselves. When we become us and we identify with nothing other than ourselves, i.e., the "I am" or "I am me," then we are shielded by honesty and protected from attack. Despite our uniqueness, we have equality with those similarly self-realised people who embrace "I am" as well. They are detached from false assumptions, memberships, titles, social rankings,

pecking orders and dependencies, etc., and are thus able to compete with only themselves, in the long run.

When I was a teenager, I heard a young lady with learning disabilities say the most profound thing on television. Even four decades later, I still remember that she said, “I’m Gaynor. I’m me.” In those last two words particularly, she said almost all we need to know: “I’m me.” I suggest my “I am” phrase offers the same sentiment, because both forms empathise the internal rather than the external. Perhaps such pairs of words are amongst the strongest and most effective in this language. They offer great value in the most succinct way possible, and are certainly worthy of consideration, or even meditation, for such practitioners?

No - A shortcut to assertiveness

Introduction

“No” is a powerful word. No wonder it can be hard to say it. Conversely, “yes”, as the easier option, can cause untold misery and damage when it is mishandled. Essentially, the fleeting ease of saying the latter, is sometimes gambled against its potential for causing pain and/or damage. However, our increasing age and experience, helps us to avoid saying “yes” when we had meant “no”, because the past dictates gambling may not be wise.

I respectfully suggest you start saying “no”, even when it is difficult, because it is your right, and the feelings that might be stopping you from doing so, are not of your making. Reasons for ignoring or questioning such feelings follow. Just because they make you feel unreasonable now, does not mean you should keep trusting those feelings. The more you view choice as a right, the easier expressing your choice will become, and therefore the more assertive you might be.

An important lesson

Before elaborating, it is not always sensible to say “no”. For example, if your boss requests that you do a broadly reasonable task within your scope, then you would not want to

refuse it, without being confident that your resignation and survival, would be significantly worse to your boss, than their granting of your concession and career continuity.

The military is a different matter again. Military training centres around dogged adherence to orders, in a rank hierarchy. Understandably, in intense warzones, the consideration of commands is not workable, but only slavish obedience is relevant.

In St Matthew's Gospel (5:37) of the KJV, the Bible records Jesus as having said, "but let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

* * *

If making choices between "yes" and "no" were only intellectual, and without consequences to others, they would be much easier to make. The point is that feelings are often involved. The rest of this essay examines a few common related feelings, and why you might favour logic over them.

* * *

Part of state schooling involved being given a command and then being obliging. A nurturing, private school aspect, was not possible in comprehensive schools. When the

competitive nature of exams, tests, and sports, etc., get added, a capitalistic foundation was complete. I had only one teacher whose scope was broader. She would regularly find a small reason to put the entire class into detention. It would usually be over a minor transgression of one person. After school we would queue, whilst waiting for this teacher to never arrive. Most pupils showed up to waste ten or fifteen minutes of their lives. After which they felt they could risk heading home, late.

Childhood experiences can strongly affect our choice making abilities. By growing up in a loving home it is more likely that we will have self-worth. In that case, when we are faced with dilemmas, we are less likely to make choices based on perceived increases in an external self-worth, or what other people think about us. We can be more objective and less concerned with people pleasing.

Our view of ourselves must be accurate: neither too low nor too high. Humility means realising an accuracy of self, with a correspondingly suitable behaviour. It is never about being walked on, or always turning the other cheek. There have never been any perfect humans, and self-respect is not a sin. The opinion of others holds virtually no validity at all, especially since it can be in a constant flux. Therefore, our own self-opinion is the most important one, after our partner's, and a small selection from our family, friends, and colleagues.

* * *

So, some of those feelings that hinder us from being objective, whilst we are engaged in these binary choices, include anxiety, guilt, and shame. By taking each in turn without a special order, their influences are covered below.

Anxiety is often seen as the cost borne by living in the future. In our case, it is the worry of what an acceptance of friction will mean, and where we will go. Avoidance is easier, and wiser people point blank never make it a default. Had we not gone to those school detentions, perhaps a tack of individual case consideration may have begun, rather than a military like acceptance of non-consideration. Our truer self-representation would have surely blossomed in other ways too.

Presenting a persona at odds with reality is risky. When we are one opposite half of a decision, and face to face, and the other half is directly or indirectly threatening to reveal our “sham”, spiralling anxieties can end any hope of a favourable result for us, because more than anything, we want to feel better or more comfortable.

* * *

Guilt might arise when past conditioning is triggered after transgressing an ancient rule; but is that logical behaviour? For example, just because children were drilled to do as they were told, is it reasonable that they never get to deviate decades later? Figuratively skipping that detention, should be

considered. There will *be* bogus detention metaphors, until the lesson is learned. In fact, the expression “you can run but you can’t hide”, may be relevant. Sadly, our mental health is relevant: whilst not too hard a lesson for most, there are those who will view this as immensely complex and possibly even a menacing mind-game.

* * *

Shame can take the form of a clash with something current, but also as a subconscious experience from the past, and outside of the scope of this essay. To illustrate it, a modern trend is for people to be quite mindlessly fixated with kindness. A younger person’s mantra is to hail, “be kind.” Bizarrely, this facilitates controlling mechanisms, and could have been introduced through totally opposite sources to what its “nice” adherents would assume. If we adopt kindness our choices diminish. We attempt to make people feel ashamed, through highlighting that an assumed universal truth has been, or is being, transgressed, and we attempt therefore, to hold the upper hand in that way. It only works if the attitude is mutual. And it is a rather rich and western democratic one at best. However, it is more of a fad, and demonstrates how unnecessary pressures can exist, or potentially develop later, and make the vulnerable even worse off through further exploitative, or coercive mechanisms.

* * *

My final remark is this:

“realise first and foremost that you have the right of having choices.”

Furthermore, by projecting that idea onto others, as we automatically do to a lesser or greater degree, you should head towards the assumption, that this notion approaches a universality. What should follow from that, is that people become less like barriers, and more reasonable, but also, vitally, you’ll know the difference. This is straightforward and logical.

Negative egotism

(Some thoughts penned for a school assembly)

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” As infants this phrase is common, but as we get older words can hurt. The purpose of today’s assembly is to look at some of the ways words hurt, how we have let ourselves become vulnerable to them, and how we can re-address matters.

We are all familiar with the concept of pride. We are proud of our countries, football teams, families, dad’s car, etc. But we are also proud of more selfish things such as our exam results, our musical abilities, our appearance, and our status, however insignificant these things are compared to the significance of humanity. Everyone has excessive pride. If you are religious, whether you are a Muslim, Sheik, Christian or Jew, etc., you will know that God loughs pride. It is the deadliest of Christianity’s seven deadly sins, and the one which (according to C.S. Lewis) all the other six stem from. Pride causes man to fight man, or woman to fight woman, and nations to fight nations. Atheists needn’t switch off because what follows does not even approximate sermonising.

Egotism then, from the title of today’s assembly, is like the personal version of pride. Egotism, or ego, is built up over the years by letting success go to our head, especially given

that people do not like seeing a perceived greater display of it in others, particular competitors.

Thus, there is always somebody with more of it than yourself and clashes will be likely. Blows to the ego take the form of humiliations. Look at older people who have been through life's ups and downs, do they tend towards conceit or humility? Ask yourself if they are conceited or humble? They are more likely to be behaving on account of wisdom more than anything else. The chances are, they have gravitated towards humility since being cockier younger people. Of course, there are many exceptions, and some people go through an entire life without displaying either false confidence or indeed false humility.

How do words hurt? You may have a girlfriend tell you she doesn't love you anymore, or she doesn't want to go out with you anymore. You might be told you are boring. It might not be what people say, it might be what they do not say - you may always be picked last for the team (the default). By honest evaluation, you would not fall foul of the comments or lack of them in the first place. "I only wanted my girlfriend for her body". "I only ever talk about myself". "And to be honest, I'm a pretty lousy rugby player and always ended up as full back anyway". I call this "negative egotism." It is not about running yourself down, it's to do with being honest with yourself. When somebody implies you are not this inflated person you

think you are, and it hurts, it's because they are invalidating you. Ego thrives on regular validation.

Often is the case that those with a realistic view of themselves, have less conflicts, and better chances when they enter the world of work. Up until starting a job we often tend to only mix with families and friends. This is not a balanced scenario, because in workplaces we must also deal with people who are just colleagues, with some having the potential of being downright enemies. This is when our character comes out: our sense of self perhaps: how we react. People hate to see false displays. To prepare ourselves for work it is best to mingle with as many strangers as possible in colleges and universities, to join clubs, and take part in sports, moulding ourselves into a true representation of who we really are.

So, today's message is to deflate the ego, but do not forget to remind yourself of your genuine positive aspects. If you think you have none, ask yourself, am I caring, sensitive, loyal, trustworthy, and so on? What are your virtues? For some of us it is inflation that is necessary, but always remain true to yourself.

A selection of relevant quotes:

Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself at all.

~William Temple

Swallow your pride occasionally, it's non-fattening!

~Author Unknown

It is well to remember that the entire population of the universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others.

~Andrew J. Holmes, *Wisdom in Small Doses*

What kills a skunk is the publicity it gives itself.

~Abraham Lincoln

Humility is to make a right estimate of oneself.

~Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Too many people overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are.

~Malcolm S. Forbes

None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.

~Benjamin Whichcote

People that put themselves above others will fall longer and harder.

~Gina Lindley

A man may do an immense deal of good, if he does not care who gets the credit for it.

~Father Strickland, 1863 (*Thanks, Garson O'Toole!*)

Modesty is the gentle art of enhancing your charm by pretending not to be aware of it.

~Oliver Herford

Faith

My sharing of thirteen King James Bible verses to follow, says nothing about my religious beliefs. I was brought up with Christianity as the religion of my family, community, and peers. However, I assume its core aspect: humility, overlaps considerably with all religions, but I don't accept or feel a need for supernatural suggestions.

Chapter thirteen of St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is often read during weddings. Within it, Paul was concerned with there being too many (early) Christians in Corinth who had got carried away with the so called "gifts of the holy spirit." These attributes included healing, prophecy, the gift of tongues, the gift of interpreting tongues, and more. People were laying on hands to heal illnesses, speaking in random unique languages, which by chance got deciphered by a physically present member of their brethren; and then others would simply prophesise, or tell how it is going to be. However, what was increasingly absent, was Jesus' main tenet: love. Without nonsense, this chapter attempts to get the Christians of Corinth back on track, by describing love through its barest tangible aspects.

On that note, the Greek language has no direct conversion for the English word "love." That's because several words in Greek all mean love, but in varying senses of it; for example, there is one for romantic love, one for affection, and

amongst a few others, there is one for selfless love. Selfless love is the one Paul chose in his 1 Cor 13, and in Greek it is called “agape,” with the English word “charity” being closest to it. Nevertheless, some Bible translations, like the New International Version, literally use the word “love” in this context. As the NIV is in copyright, I don’t quote from it.

Thus, “faith, hope and love” and “faith, hope and charity” get interchanged. The first two verses warned people about being overzealous with these “gifts,” and that they risked forgetting the basic Christian message. Even today, Christians talk in tongues, and prophesise, etc., but it is more a feature of Pentecostal churches. In fact, it is recorded in Acts of the Apostles, that on the Day of Pentecost, these gifts were originally bestowed by the Holy Spirit. They are scarcely apparent at all in the Roman Catholic church. In my experience of Catholicism, the average Catholic would not assume themselves to be worthy of receiving any such gifts.

1 Corinthians chapter 13 (KJV)

01: Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become *as* sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

02: And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so

that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

03: And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

04: Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

05: Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

06: Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

07: Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

08: Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.

09: For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10: But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11: When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12: For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13: And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity.

I have my own interpretations for the English versions of verses 10, 11 and 12, but without reading the direct Greek, I will not share them.

* * *

With this background put forward, I want to suggest that faith is universal. I think we add to one shared body of it, or we take away from it. Sometimes we add. Sometimes we take away, and we are not islands. My book, “I am”, suggests we are all equal by becoming individuals, and that should result in a “mankind” (or “personkind” if you prefer), albeit in a somewhat utopian manner. Its subtitle, “conforming by nonconformity,” adds great clarity to the book’s inner contents...

If our faith is damaged by anyone, our faith in mankind is damaged, because logically, a tiny but finite amount of faith, is lost in every other person on the planet, when this happens. I think love’s multifaceted nature makes it nebulous. And although Paul explained love well, you could add more aspects

to his definition, some of which may be woolly, for example feelings that do not lend to literal descriptions. In fact, St John said “God is love”, in the verse 1 John 4:8. I do not see a parallel with faith because of this. Faith can boil down to trusting people, or not trusting people. Faith in God must literally mean faith in love. If that is assumed, then neither faith nor love make much sense. It is just not helpful, and we are left with only the “hope,” from our “faith, hope and charity” trio.

I witnessed a deterioration of mankind during the coronavirus pandemic; specifically in the UK, on most days, the virtues of patience, tolerance and honesty got noticeably eroded. St Paul’s version of love was tested.

Faith is famously mentioned in the final verse of this chapter, i.e., verse 13. In the current difficult times when faith appears to be dwindling, all Paul’s virtues describing love, began disappearing. It can be painful to slowly lose your faith, or more to the point, to have it removed from you. Paradoxically, just throwing it away could be easier, but maybe this is where the hope of verse 13 enters. You do not want to throw the towel in, you want to believe there is good in the world. The ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic must have put many in such dilemmas. People ask Jesus to save them. Whilst they may join a congregation of people with similar hopes, and on the surface, those likeminded people might help tip the balance of good vs evil in their lives; but one might ask is it real? What happens if you ask a member of your

new brethren, “would you please lend me one hundred pounds. I will return it to you next Sunday?” That’s interesting. Unless they were particularly rich, they would need to trust you. They would need to have faith in you.

That goes back to the government, who should sort it out, because whose problem is it but theirs? Money is unfairly distributed both nationally and internationally. And whilst it is good to love those close to you, a way to love strangers, is to freely give them, your time, labour, and money.

Faces that follow us forever

This last essay suggests society pushes us (to a degree), such that through a subconscious mechanism, we mould ourselves appropriately. The world wants to pigeon-hole us to make life easier for the world. That's the reason the expression, "first impressions count," is so widely known and understood. The more we experience and interact with life, the more we are influenced by it.

Immature people are simplistically more likely to think, that people who appear nice-natured are in fact nice. Similarly, they will prejudge "hard-faced" people, by gravitating to the assumption that all such people, including the misunderstood ones, are mean and aggressive.

Society can be described as the random people we meet. It is the vast group of people who we are not closely related to, i.e., the group other than our friends, family, or even professional/work allies. Its automatic and/or visual judgements, are practically unavoidable, and they're more prominent when their subjects have had no chance to engage in dialog.

But you'd imagine, "faces that follow us forever," loses relevance in the context of older people, because in our old age, biology has calmed the sex drive, and retirement calmed much that may once have been competition. We care less, and have less energy, about societal attitudes anyway. Conversely,

the young are likely to unconsciously balance both societal assumptions (conveyed through other's words, body language and actions) and their own individuality. In the complex web of an economy, or other macro structures, this ideally means a balance is reached between comfortable levels of compliance, and practical, necessary depths of involvement.

In essence, this broad and complex multiple human dynamic, is as close to a tangible definition of fate that we have; such that there may be a plan in place. I personally had a thorough tutoring in science, both at school and university, and that has probably made it harder for me to subscribe to supernatural thoughts. Having said that, human behaviour is never only black and white, or true or false, that's what makes statistics so vital. Through them we weigh the relative importance of majorities and minorities.

* * *

As a boy, I was always aware of how all the other children at our comprehensive school got on, or didn't get on, especially in social ways. For example, it was clear that being comical was advantageous; but with or without humour, some people survived well, and often, those survivors were simply good looking. Naturally therefore, attractive comedians built an early life foundation of popularity. But some made it through school quite easily, without looks or charm. They were

life's one-offs. However, unattractive looks with a corresponding dullness of demeanour, must be a personal hurdle that anyone might consider trying to overcome.

School bullies were a different case. Whilst they were unpopular, they still attracted much attention, but in a different way, and people aimed to be indifferent towards them, or better still invisible.

* * *

A lot of money can be made by exploiting gullible youngsters, because looks, etc., hugely influence them. If a critical mass can be reached in a youth group, in terms of fashions and trends for example, like the more recent explosion of buying and wearing pre-destroyed denim clothes; then a national, or sometimes international extend, may be reached. Adults typically avoid such fashions and get labelled “untrendy.” Their disinterest is easily dismissed, because “what would adults know?”

Altering body parts can seem extreme too, for example, breast augmentation and reduction, buttock enlargement, and that of the lips. Whilst those are more on the female side, men more so than women weight train for muscle enlargement, particular by getting fixated about their torsos, and so called “six packs.” A few decades ago, this trend was less widespread. Perhaps TV shows like “Love Island,” have partly

changed matters. One imagines such gym work is to increase perceived chances of sexual intercourse, without the motive necessarily being a totally conscious one. After all, it seems obvious that changing one's bodily appearance with tattoos, is now a sheepish default that people seem to have no choice over. Much of this final essay points to the influence of sex and its pursuit, which can vary from a lackadaisical approach, to obsession, but the latter is more common than the former.

Nature sets young people's sex drives on the high side. (Yes, it needn't diminish with age!) The sexual imperative leads us to want to lose our virginity for its own sake. It is such a preoccupation for the young, that sex in or out of relationships, is very important. Multiple experiences amongst so called "bad boys," and any equivalents they may have across all sexes and/or genders, often become those individual's defining characteristic.

* * *

In summary, if we are not mindful of our environment, our environment might mould us to suit itself, not in an intelligent manner, but rather in a more empirical one. On the other hand, some people who are very mindful of how the world views them, and how it views others, might use that information to their advantage. They may simply be in sales, but more menacingly, they could be confidence tricksters, who

lead us into ways by which they can ultimately take advantage of us.

A tack many adopt, whether it was planned or not, is to give nothing away. They use the poker game tactic of expressionlessness. That's Okay for infallible people, but if they make a foolish mistake, then a continued lack of facial reaction triggers anger in others, because it is easily perceived to be great arrogance. Conversely, if a facial reaction is shown after an unwavering lack of such for that person, then at best, it looks out of character and embarrassing.

* * *

We put so much store in our own and other people's appearances (with sex being an undeniable aspect.) If we forget our visual presentation, whilst not meaning to be scruffy, etc., and at the same time we project that notion upon others (which we surely do anyway as we age), then a stronger front to the world can be achieved, and less mental energy might be wasted. We can devote more of ourselves to the acquisition of skills, not least, conversation; and we can develop an overriding personality, rather than just an image!

Ultimate deception

Emerging from having little or no confidence at all, about a decade ago, I realised for the first time, that I'd lived through exploitation. If I had been aware earlier, like anyone else, I probably would have reacted, I suppose, but ignorance surely prevails, especially when these situations do not involve people targeting the strong and wise, to profit from a manipulation, when the weak are an option.

Broadly speaking, the classical trap is to fool someone that a bad position is a good one. By offering regular short-term gains, and clouding the fact that the inevitable, unforeseen, long-term loss is not worth them enduring, you manipulate or play or exploit them. National Lottery Scratch Cards do precisely this, so did my fifteen years older late wife. Clare made basics easy, after I gave her my monthly domestic share. We were never short of money. Even the mortgage was settled. So, I got to buy unnecessary toys: extraneous music keyboards, telescopes, a radio-controlled Sherman Tank; whatever: things I didn't need that sort of kept me happy.

Fears, anxiety, and my laziness, enabled this, and Clare knew. When she died the truth emerged. You could rightly say I emerged; not immediately, but not so slowly either. All those short-term gains were seen in a different light, and the long-term loss had an actual cast iron, and tangible, reality now. It

was my own maturation, and that in fact, equated directly to being my life. Effectively, and irretrievably, I'd lost some life.

* * *

During those years with Clare, I certainly could have needed some confidence to freely reply with either “yes” or “no”. But talking generally, and jumping to our present day, in the so-called developed UK, it feels like social dynamics have changed considerably, this century. Of course, Coronavirus has played a part, but things changed way before the pandemic, because simple binary choices are requiring way too much working out at the boundaries. Arguments and back talk are even coming from salespeople to their potential customers these days!

Regardless of whether there is a presentation of agreeableness, or a clear show of its opposite; given that people's behaviours, attitudes, and actions; change depending on context, it is clear so many are fickle, perhaps with egocentric thinking at the root. Therefore, everyone's assertiveness has different criteria. Shouldn't we perhaps pursue balance, and short of perfection of course: a compromise? In fact, the trio “balance, respect and love” might be the Holy Grail.

* * *

I did achieve self-confidence. In other words, I made a new foundation. Importantly, it was not the cause of my new confidence. Rather, it was a partner that evolved side-by-side with it. If it had been the cause, I would have figuratively bottled it up, rented a market-stall, and sold it. Well in a sense I have. I built a website and share my words in books, but to some degree, they're a gnosis.

You would assume, that John Bowlby, in his book "A Secure Base", described both the draw backs of not being lucky enough to have been gifted such a start in life, and the freedoms such a start must present. Without that foundation in life, you might have gravely serious problems. I think Jesus alludes to this when he describes those two figurative houses. One got built on sand, and the other got built on rock, and we know what happened. This is a perennial issue.

Over time my own "base" crystalised further. Perversely, it became clearer, that that base was simply "me." I had become me. How boring, especially when applying a minute amount of logic to the situation, such that you realise, "it", this "base," my "oneness," had all been there from birth. So deliberate, conscious, constructs of mine, might have been dubious and misleading. I should have accepted simplicity from day one.

Flicking through my books can reveal earlier acknowledgements that so called bases are never perfectly reliable. I remember suggesting we are threatened lifelong. If

we don't have thoughts, we might be safe in a sense, but equally, without a history of thinking, we might have progressed very little anyway, and only vaguely mirror the potential we ought to have. It is not unusual for people right up to one hundred years of age, to receive baptism. This involves a gigantic paradigm shift, and it might also suggest a century was lived in a less than correct way, or a mental attitude that could have been better, might have existed for a terribly long time indeed. If taken with adequate seriousness, by the rather late newcomer, it is a close shave indeed, given their seniority of age. It's not that uncommon though. References are a Google search away, and they reveal that this quite beautiful thing, is happening within various Christian denominations: the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of England, are but two, with not everyone needing to be exactly 100. That's not the point per se. Therefore, some are within units of that figure, and others, perhaps not online, are baptised at seventy or eighty? I think a couple of few special cases at exactly one hundred, might have generated public interest at some point; especially online.

* * *

Despite our monumental efforts, alongside the loss of all group aspects of life, such as: occupational, social, family, sexual, clubs, financial; and religious with a question mark (?),

exploitation, or the prevention from us being us, can rob our best years, permanently, so we never get them back. If that isn't cruel enough, many around us are oblivious to it. All they know, is about being steered along a figurative narrow path, whether it is a one religious or secular one, toward a figurative narrow gate. It certainly generates less anxiety for them; maybe that's where a lack of understanding stems from; and if we are to believe artists are struggling types, we might not expect many on such narrow routeways will be cutting ears off, whether symbolically, in sympathy or madness.

* * *

Frustratingly, the recent generation all seem confident for no apparent reason, even though a herding instinct belies that, because one person's wearing of ripped jeans, or a fashioning of hair into a bun, or getting the obligatory tattoos, means they all do. Perhaps the jury is still out regarding the Millennials? However, that figurative bottling up I talked about, might have benefitted this group. I don't know. I didn't parent any.

* * *

In my opinion, my own or anyone else's forthrightness, annoys a type, who I think would secretly prefer more

assertiveness themselves, switching it on and off effectively. I imagine an overlap with the Millennials group, and inner frustrations due to conflicts of their own interests, because of widespread attitudes like "be kind", leading to fuzzy boundaries and confusion.

My feeling is that situations make people want others to change rather than have themselves change their own personality; because it is easier, but also; they deny other people are being reasonably and healthily assertive. Given a sliding scale between aggressiveness and assertion, they nudge people as much as they logically can manage, towards aggression. It's quite easy. Denial makes it easier. In support of assertiveness, private psychiatric hospitals, routinely run midweek classes for their inpatients that include assertiveness training. With confidence building and for example anxiety management, these are bread and butter mental health topics.

However, younger people, perhaps those in their twenties and thirties, can find mental pathways to criticise you for your lack of kindness. It may stem from an assertiveness that is not far enough towards passivity or the agreeableness on that scale I mentioned. They want a world full of wimps.

I was once told I was not being kind by the friend of a piano examiner. I'd been failed by two marks for a professional diploma. Finding the examiner on Twitter, I reminded her, and educated her followers and friends too. Then I was told again I was not being kind, but somewhat

incredulously, it came with an apology for saying so to me. I was about fifty years of age at the time, and not in that cultural group, but I was very bemused. The news was dealing with Teresa May at the time. Not long before Boris Johnson was made prime minister. So, I replied, “it’s not kind for Teresa May at the moment either, but what can you do?”

* * *

Personally: up until the age of 45, no-one helped me. Life was my problem. I was not parented as such. My comprehensive schoolteachers were nonvocational and/or weary, and the wider government/system didn’t care too. My employers exploited me, without any nurturing, for the least remuneration possible. My partners used me. My friends left me. Groups were unavailable to me, due to lack of confidence and/or psychosis. Religions, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, were mixed. There was some spiritual gain. By that I mean something other than human. Of course, all churches are full of wanting people, and in fact, a couple I always sat just beyond, with responsible lay positions, turned out one day, outside of church, to demonstrate the most reprehensible, baffling, and insensitive snub towards me, when I was quite low and needy, shortly after Clare died.

* * *

What is “help?” There’s help, and there are sticky plasters. In life, the greatest help you can give anyone, is to give them life. What a simple answer, yes? Anything that leads someone to become themselves, and to no longer be vulnerable, as if life had managed to start again, and they’d got a “sort-of” John Bowlby “Secure Base”, is a great help.

I haven’t even read that book, but like you perhaps, I have a good idea what’s in it, just like having an old fashion camera’s photo negative told me much about the eventual picture. Incidentally, I should have read Susan Jeffers’ “Feel the fear and do it anyway”, and I don’t need to read that now too. Okay, there is a pattern, isn’t there? I’m not a great reader. We can gain from books, but only through first gaining some faith, trust, and understanding. You might like to read some of my other books?

* * *

Many groups and individuals have lot of diverse reasons, for not wanting You, to be Yourself. It is difficult to know the nature of our true selves, when we are not in that state, when we have not reached it. Things start to click when we get there. And some people help you grow, or they hold you back. Sometimes you are intentionally held back.

Sometimes people just don't think. How often are people seen as no more than cogs in capitalist machinery by other people. You need to find someone you trust. St John said, "God is love." Of course, St Paul said, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love."

Navigate the nonsense. Build a gradually increasing habit of challenging "bullshit." In this state of not-us-ness (if you like), Herman Hesse's, "Wisdom cannot be imparted...", and the common or garden, "you can't put an old head on young shoulders", is linked.

When you become you, and understand how you have got to where you are now, and things are clicking, and you also understand from way back, how each cause, led to its corresponding effect, and perhaps some things you leave "buried"; so, at this point, do you have forgiveness? Are you angry? Are you over the moon? Do you become a Born-Again Christian? Or are intelligence and logic stronger than that? Do you therefore, decide that God is something to do with self-knowledge? Perhaps knowing "him" is heavenly, whereas, not having that self-knowledge, which we've discussed, is a state preferred for you by some people; perhaps that is Hell; because some say Hell is on Earth. Maybe you shed some tears; not may though. Pull up your big girl britches and get on with it...

Manic depressive self-realisation

What is manic depression?

Manic depression is the old name and same condition we now refer to as bipolar disorder type 1. In turn, it is the label psychiatrist give to those whose moods are so extreme, that they can experience the most debilitating lows, and at their high ends, ruinous enhancements of their personal confidence, with inevitably questionable judgements. These extremes are of course depression and mania; hence “manic depression”. Incidentally, doctors call the ostensibly central and normal position between these two poles, euthymia.

Bipolar disorder type 2 is a separate illness in which the manias are not as dramatic, in fact they are described by the word hypomania, or “below mania”. A third bipolar experience is labelled as cyclothymia. In cyclothymia, both poles occur but in milder manifestations, albeit much more frequently. That increase in mood presentations can create a very separate problem, especially when you bear in mind that bipolar disorders type 1 and 2, receive a “rapid cycling” qualifier, when only four episodes present in one year.

Why would manic depression and self-realisation be linked?

Manic depression can have endless consequences, many are serious and occupational, social, financial, legal, and familial, ones, etc. Having extremes of mood between depression down to psychotic levels, and manias with equal strengths but opposite natures, is a bit like having a multiple personality disorder, and disorders of mood can even look like schizophrenia, for example if delusions are present. The difference being that schizophrenia usually causes bizarre delusions, whilst those stemming from mood disorders tend to have mood congruency. It ought to be self-evident and even logical, that people with severe mood disorders can be very confused about their self-image, or plainly, who they fundamentally are. That will continue until their conditions achieve a greater stability, and if not, clarity and the useful realisation of sense, within mental threads, is likely to be elusive.

Psychiatric labels can initially help, because they offer an identity of a kind, but it should not be permanent. Instead, self-realisation: the goal of unique individuality, is the ultimate target, and whilst that should be a truth for every one of us, severe mental ill health brings it firmly, perhaps rather

consciously, onto or into suffers agendas. Also, very importantly, once the genie is out, it's out for good.

What is self-realisation?

Self-realisation is a state in which we understand where we are in our lives, how we got there, or the reason we got there. For most people, that last part is usually quite random, but happiness can follow if the caveats of accepting ourselves, our lives, and our environments, are assimilated through knowledge of both our own outgoing consequences, and how the world feeds back to us.

What are the blocks to self-realisation?

They are either worldly ones such as outer desires, and/or attachments, or perhaps what some religions might call sin, and whilst not a traditional example of that, some might cite bad karma. Undeniably deadlier though, are the endless ramifications of excesses of ego or inflations of pride. They're the key sources of stumbles.

Why would manic depression get in the way?

Manic depression could get in the way because many suffers deny the onsets of their highs, which might then progress to

overly evident social confidences, but creative enhancements, too.

Manic depressives have unstable dopamine reward chemical systems. Dopamine is a key neurotransmitter for them. Activities that encourage dopamine production, include drinking alcohol, taking street drugs, taking sexual chances, and engaging in general risk taking. These are typical manic behaviours.

To reach a self-realisation, manic depression can provide strong depths in terms of promoting thoughts and realisations, or paradigm shifts in fact; but the irony, is that it's eminently able to jeopardise the lot. Stability, therefore, especially of dopamine, must be sought.

What about other mental health problems?

Psychosis is essentially a formal word for madness, and the other traditional madness after manic depression, is schizophrenia. However, unipolar mood disorders, principally depression (because mania alone can occur), can in extremes, also reach psychosis. Any extreme mental disturbance, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, for example, if left totally unchecked without medication, could also be a cause for one's complete lack of insight. Psychiatric illnesses are labels. They are groups holding unique individuals. In common amongst

psychotic people though, is damage to their relationships and occupational worlds; with financial, social, domestic, and practical consequences, etc.

Such profound life disturbances ought to prompt introspection; or greater introspection, as this needn't stem from mental health issues. A hypothetical physical disabling, of a highly sporting or artistic person, could force real soul-searching, and identity loss. Loss of work, and for many, status, is often an unfair social ostracisation. We witnessed it on social media platforms, too. Donald Trump doubtless survived his enforced Twitter account closure, especially in mental health terms; but that seemed unlikely for the 21-year-old Instagram influencer, Jessy Taylor. It felt like murder, she said, and she was nothing without her followers. She added on YouTube, that the "9 to 5" was not "her".

Is mental ill-health intrinsically at odds with self-realisation?

This depends on your viewpoint. If you agree with Emil Kraepelin's description of two specific psychoses, detailed in his book "Manic depressive insanity and paranoia", then that specificity is more of a got it or not stance, with about 1% of the population, affected. On the other hand, some people think everyone is a bit crazy, not least because set boundaries are very fuzzy where people are involved.

Evidence does suggest that schizophrenia has a strong genetical basis, especially through studies of identical twins, then there's R.D. Laing's antipsychiatry which suggested psychosis is a reaction a sensitive person might rightly and understandably have, by trying to live and cope in a sick society. That's progressively understandable.

In answer to this, and whether madness is rooted in schizophrenia, manic depression, or any other psychosis, it is a less than unequivocal no, but when mental ill health is directly bound to and a product of out-and-out capitalism, it is much harder for sufferers to make fundamental sense.

What about religion?

Based on Christianity, two main views are the early Christian's Gnostic one, in which a gnosis, or a secret knowledge, meant God could be known directly, and within us, like a divine spark. Secondly, traditional Christianity promotes mysteries and miracles, for example, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the Trinity. They suggest all of these can be accepted by faith alone. The bit between our ignorance of self, and us having a full personal revelation, is empty. It's a binary system. No wonder a significant section of the early Christian church suggested faith was the way, as it only took the choice to believe. They made Gnosticism heretical, but even today, Herman Hesse's more contemporary suggestion that "wisdom

cannot be imparted”, continues a gnostic-like narrative. Therefore, traditionalists of any supernaturally based religion, might necessarily hold self-realisation away from themselves, whilst accepting a figurative comfort blanket of some sort. Maybe it’s denial. To discover ourselves, life needs living head on, and the more real-life data or experiences we can and do collect, the stronger the chances are of finding essential threads.

How do we know we have reached self-realisation?

We know we’ve reached self-realisation, largely because the world says so. People’s validations received both directly or indirectly, increase in frequency, whilst our own micro and macro decision making, makes more sense. In turn, this makes us more firmly self-assured, and our personal honesty follows a somewhat exponential strength curve. Put simply, something clicks, whilst for every unique individual, it’s different. Much of this knowledge represents how we understand the world and how most of the people in it think and behave. If it was about isolation, then practical and thoroughly genuine self-realisation must fail, because few human beings are not drawn to social and familial life.

The question of meds

This is a difficult, very fundamental question. Are we saying, “am I still me if I take medication?” Psychotropic medications that may have a bearing on personality, are not the only behaviour changing tablets. Drugs for physical illnesses like diabetes, for example, can certainly lead to these changes, by their use or withdrawal. As with psychiatric medication, the goal is to make us cope better; but “are we the mind, or are we the body?” Are we both, and where does the split lie? Do the things we consume define us? Can eating meat affect our behaviour, and by contrast, its nonconsumption, too, when we bear in mind that vegetarianism and veganism, are still minority choices?

Can food be compared to drugs? Is food a drug? Everything in excess will affect the body, other than perhaps pure water and air? Two simple effecting and/or affecting compounds that people overuse, are common salt (NaCl) and ethanol. We must at least scrutinise these potentially damaging and common substances, if all others get shunned, like antidepressants, antipsychotics, anxiolytics, and mood stabilisers, etc. In fact, it stokes the entire psychiatry debate to reject pharmaceuticals. The Church of Scientology is firmly at one extreme, whilst eminent members and fellows of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, occupy the opposite one.

Can manic depression facilitate self-realisation?

Put briefly, manic depression causes such gigantic messes of lives, particularly through its deeper lows and craziest highs, that if it's not treated as early and effectively as possible, the existential problems and multifaceted destructions it produces, will easily force a path of consideration of every minute life aspect, and in a way healthier people needn't touch on. Hypomanic episodes can often offer insightful periods within the experience that is manic depression, but the extremes can certainly spark motivations, and be reasons for aiming at a self-realisation. That expression, or the process it suggests, can become an awareness of many manic depressives. They might easily view it as a "common or garden" survival necessity. However, the attainment of self-realisation makes clear retrospectively, that no matter what the path had been, it was an individual one, and it was followed with little or even no option. Of course, anyone can be on such a path, regardless of their life circumstances, such as their personal health particulars; bearing in mind that everything requires motivation, otherwise our actions are harder to trigger than see through. Emotions, rather than thoughts and/or ideas, are change initiators, and they are not lacking in people with mood disorders, or serious psychiatric conditions like borderline personality disorder?

With respect to self-realisation, can people without mental health problems learn from those who have them?

Unfortunately, there are no precise formulas to selfhood that others can share. Some expound endless meditation. Others prescribe faith. Ironically, the latter involves group memberships, and therefore diluted individualism. As mentioned earlier; Gnosticism vs traditional Christianity returns to mind. Perversely, it can be hard to tell when someone **is** self-realised. Assumptions abound about people not being. Even poor Pope Francis, after striking a woman's hand whilst he was out and about on New Year's Day 2020, had to later apologise: the chief, bodily representative of Jesus' on Earth is not perfect.

Concluding words

It is easy to drift through life whilst ignoring opportunities. One can just take the firmer guarantees that our perceived comforts may offer, and essentially settle for a status quo. However, there must always be a conceptual flipside because anyone's existence is complex, sufficiently so to have multiple expressions. Granted, realities like geography can be quite set, for example, the locales we are economical and emotionally tied to, which in turn have unchangeable natural terrains and perhaps lingering manmade landscapes, or cityscapes, with

physical climates that are down to weather systems. We may have been influenced by religious indoctrination, from our parents, who experienced the same process through their own parents. Class is something else, often linked to family trees; a structure which was just alluded to, and part of even the most intelligent and progressive societies.

These aspects help to form a deepening groove of predictability and comfort, that is simply and happily deepened, and for many is basically life.

It's sadly like the proverbial sheep's clothing, in a field of the similar clothed. All along, the corresponding wolves were committing murders, but so slowly, they were missed. You might call each crime "a death by a thousand cuts". They're literally orchestrated by making brains passive, promoting that comfort, through stifling good habits of healthy and conscious thinking. The latter might result in ideas, then choice making.

To repeat; without motivation, there's no drive to choose anything, and act on those choices. Manic depression has the power to be revelatory in a life, but it can destroy a life, too. For example, it has been suggested, that within all manic depressives diagnosed and undiagnosed, one in five will not just attempt suicide, but will successfully complete it. It is a gravely serious problem, so with such high stakes, self-

realisation is a powerful ally, and blind life navigation for manic depressives is unsafe. Introspection is vital, even if it's just stumbled upon.

Extreme mental illness makes self-realisation more prevalent in groups of manic depressives, as opposed to population groups picked at random. In fact, that ought to agree with the average person's common sense?

Piano man - The roman à clef

Chapter One - Les Adieux

Thomas shut the door of his university campus room for the last time. The student life was almost over. Armed with third class honours in chemistry, it was time to face the world. Some considered a third to be cool, better than a lower second even. A lower second could imply that work had been done, but the effort was in vain. A third to many was the mark of a gregarious socialite. For Thomas, however, that wasn't the case. For him it marked precious little work, with only five of a term's fifty-five lectures attended one term, along with too much inebriation, often linked to a negative discipleship with two college celebrities.

On the walk from his campus room to the college car park, Thomas came across the small group of people he was still able to call his friends. They were sat on the grass near the boules area, drinking and chatting, enjoying the end of summer term sunshine and respite. Thomas felt honoured and somewhat touched, though he needn't have. He hadn't given people a time for his departure, so it may have been through coincidence that the group consisted of all his friends, no more, no less.

Amongst the group was Peter, Thomas' best "friend" and guru of the finer elements of life: faraway places, fine English language, and impeccable manners. Frank was there,

the epitome of Irish charm. A social guru, friendship with Frank was implicitly a good thing, he defined college society. Terrence was present. He was naive, open, non-threatening and he took an interest in others. Friendship with Terrence didn't imply the same status because he was everyone's friend. Mike was an exception, though, he was a good friend of Terrence, and present amongst the group, too. He and Thomas once shared the same girlfriend, Eva. Finally, there were two lovely girls, Frank's bubbly girlfriend Daphne and Clare whom Thomas probably loved. Clara was good as gold, beautiful and a 2CV car owner, Clare had shared a room with Daphne in the first year. During his initial euphoria of starting university, Thomas had befriended them both. Daphne was the brunette version of the dizzy blonde with a degree in place of the peroxide bottle.

Most of the group said a simple adieu. "All the best", said Mike, which was tactful considering the story of the threesome. "Look after yourself", Daphne suggested. Peter said nothing. Frank with his social wisdom rescued the moment from banality with a very welcome snip of humour, "Look after that chin.", he said. Thomas had scuffed his chin a few days earlier, whilst extremely drunk. If that wasn't bad enough, the image was captured for all eternity in the final year group photo. It would hang appropriately in the bar. When the brief laughter died down, Thomas made an opportune exit. Peter followed.

If the truth be known Peter was Thomas' only real friend. He had carried on visiting Thomas during the third year, when amidst all their work, most others had seemingly lost interest. Normally he would just call for a coffee and a game of "Nethack", on Thomas' computer. Nevertheless, Thomas always looked forward to the visits, usually after dinner time. Thomas had got the game with the intention of luring Peter. He knew Peter was addicted to that type of game and that he had no computer of his own.

Peter and Thomas never really spoke much to one another, they were almost like an old couple in that respect. For they had already told one another all that could be told earlier on. They were both hedonists and maintained a commonality of alcohol, hashish, tobacco, music, and computer games. Of course, Peter would add women to the list, in fact it wouldn't be going too far to say, he thought of himself as a gift to the opposite sex. Thomas liked women, naturally and especially Clare, but his lack of success made it better for him to behave indifferently. He didn't want to appear a failure.

Thomas felt special because Peter's loyalty was made evident as they both walked to his car. "Take care Thomas, see you later", said Peter before waving as Thomas drove away. He didn't stay until Thomas drove out of sight, which Thomas felt mildly rejected by. However, Peter was an evolving man and had put what he considered childish ways behind him.

Driving home in his beloved 1965 MG Midget sports

car, Thomas' mind was uncannily blank. How could three years of his life end on such a relatively low note. There were no demands to keep in touch, no kisses, only Peter followed him to the car park, in fact a measure of apathy was evident. He had no answers. For now, his emptiness was partly filled with the almost musical note of his car exhaust, piercing through the sound of a tape, that Peter and himself had listened to a hundred times before.

There was much that Thomas needed to both learn and unlearn. He couldn't teach himself. He didn't know life's syllabus. Moreover, he didn't even realise he needed to learn. He was at the mercy of others now, some of whom would be less tolerant of society's stragglers than others.

The friends he was leaving behind had completely different backgrounds to Thomas. They had private education; they were well read and more cultured than Thomas. Thomas was an ordinary person with a comprehensive school background. He was one of the few fortunate enough in his school to have made it to university. In fact, he had impressed the university in his interview, and they communicated this to his headmaster. Thomas had shown scientific reasoning, little thanks to his education, thought he.

Thomas felt so different to his friends, that, had it not been for his contact with a small-time dope dealer, he might not have attracted some of the friendships at all. Now Thomas had to learn to be happy with who he really was and to cast the

spell of his friends away. He was able to feel like these people whilst with them, but it was a feeling that he couldn't maintain when he was alone. He needed them, to be the person he wanted to be.

It wasn't just these friends that Thomas was leaving, it was his only brother as well. He loved his brother. One of the main reasons that had led Thomas to apply to this university, was that his brother Matthew lived nearby in the small city. Matthew had stayed in the area after graduating, the same year Thomas had started in fact. Matthew had recently suggested that Thomas stayed behind also. Thomas had made an excuse not to. It had hurt him to say no to his brother, his brother's feelings were very important to him, but he didn't want to share his brother's lifestyle. But he wasn't sure what he wanted, and the path of least resistance lead him home to mother. He had been used to canteen cooking and cleaning ladies. Looking after himself would be too much too soon. And life had been so structured for him, timetabled by others since he was four. Making decisions wasn't easy. It probably hadn't helped that his father was such a decisive man and had made many decisions for him in the past.

The journey home was about 2 hours long. Thomas wanted it to last forever, for when he arrived home, he was no longer a student and a pledge he had made three years ago to Frank and to himself, had been broken. Back then he had said, "no way will I live at home when I finish university".

Everybody else seemed to talk of either more study or going to London. London was such a magnet, so much so that it was almost unusual if you didn't let it draw you in. The magnetic personalities of both Terrence and Daphne faced the correct pole because they were headed for sales jobs in the south. Clare had almost fulfilled her stereotype by enrolling for teacher training. She'd be saving whales next. Peter had another year to go due to the completely over the top partying of his failed and rerun first year. And practically anyone else you spoke to was either studying further or going to London. This made Thomas feel both inferior for not braving the big city and left out.

Whilst still at university, Thomas had learned to identify with an image of a person in flux who could potentially take himself anywhere. So little did he know or allow himself to accept about himself, that he once turned up to a Voluntary Services Overseas meeting, with the view of taking his computer skills, to some technology vacuum in Africa or the like. Africa! He couldn't even face London or more to the point the place he'd just spent the last three years.

Lack of independence bothered Thomas. He was forced to face up to the fact that most others seemed to have no such lack. For instance, his brother had not bothered with spending holidays at home when he was a student. His first day of university was in effect the day he left home. As for Frank, Frank had been on a government sponsorship and was soon

going to begin life as an officer in the Royal Marine Commandos. Independence to him was a prerequisite for the job and he would be trained to gain much more. He would learn an independence only bettered in the animal kingdom. As for Peter, he had attended boarding school in Scotland. It was a school renowned for character building. He also attended various other boarding schools in other parts of the world with a relocation for each one.

So, Thomas was feeling somewhat alone now, and he could no longer pretend he was like the others. He needed to start thinking and hadn't got much practise. Indeed, he'd been drifting. He could process abstract puzzles in science, but he knew nothing about people and common sense. The holiday he had arranged during his last Easter break, was a good example of his lack of the latter, and his personal knowledge of himself.

Chapter Two – Of Foreign Land and Places (Part 1)

Before Thomas and Peter had met, Thomas wasn't particularly interested in foreign travel. He had been abroad just the once, that was with a school party to Germany. It wasn't a trip so much as an excuse to be together with friends with a wallet of cash. Thomas wasted no time in exploring his temporary independence. His first opportunity was straight after getting off the coach and on to the Hull/Rotterdam ferry.

Quite early in the morning, Thomas' friends decided to buy some lager. Thomas was quite surprised to find them drinking, he wasn't a drinker himself. He liked having the chance to drink wine at Christmas but never any beer. Thomas' father never drank beer either and quite frankly, Thomas wasn't sure whether he would like it. Nevertheless, he bought a couple of cans and struggled with them.

At this age, Thomas was always trying to fit in, so he'd often carry out pranks or partake in things just to gain notice. He was also a curious 'cat', liking experimentation. Thomas had started smoking at the age of eleven. He'd tried 'stubs' from his father's car at first, but on starting high school he was mixing with people his own age that weren't scared of buying packs from shops. Thomas had even tried sniffing petrol on four or five occasions. Luckily, he had sense enough not to dissolve his brain any more than that, despite liking the pleasant buzzing and the warm sensation it gave.

His friends were happy after their two or three cans on the ferry. Not Thomas, this was a chance to be viewed as "a good laugh". So, with whiskey in mind Thomas headed back to the drinks counter, a trip he repeated four times in total. Like someone possessed, he bought one miniature bottle of Famous Grouse on every trip. There was no end to it within his own will. It was surprising he got served. He was only fourteen years of age and was almost walking into tables on the third trip. He was successfully walking into tables on his fourth trip. Number five never came about because the last bottle robbed him of his ability to walk, thus thankfully exorcising his demons.

Eventually, Thomas was found by his friends. He had found his way out of the cabins and was lying huddled on the floor, precariously close to the railings of the starboard edge of the vessel. Down below, icy cold waves banged menacingly against the hull. This was nowhere for a drunk to be, but he had probably gravitated to the sharply refreshing sea air. With concern, his friends picked him up, trying not to slip in the watery vomit around him and they carried him to the washroom.

By now a group of older boys had found out what had happened. They too came in the washroom, along with a couple of onlookers. The older boys immediately assumed responsibility. They were only sixteen themselves. They thought they could sober Thomas up by slapping him about his

face and punching him in the stomach to make him vomit. No doubt they had watched too many Westerns, all they were missing was a jug to fling a single sobering shock of water from. As they slapped and punched, Thomas murmured, "the face, not the stomach, the face". He was anaesthetised everywhere but his stomach. They took no notice of his request. However, he kept appealing and occasionally, with difficulty, tried to bring up a tiny bit of "flem", of which non was likely to be alcohol.

Thomas was a sorry sight and what's more it wasn't even midday. So, with Thomas barely conscious and port in sight, the boys decided they would have to try to smuggle him off the boat and onto the coach. Thankfully for Thomas, the boy's plan didn't work, and consequently he got the hospital treatment he needed. Thomas was dangerously intoxicated. He blacked out shortly after leaving the washroom and only came round when he had been treated in hospital. Dressed in pyjamas and with foreign sounding people walking around, Thomas thought back to the ferry, then he wondered what country he was in, then turned to a voice behind him. "I see you've recovered from your stupidity", said the voice. It was one of his teachers, Mr Williams, or Slaphead as the boys called him. "Where are we?", said Thomas sheepishly. "We're in Belgium. We'll meet up with the coach by taxi. Come on then.", said Slaphead, with surprisingly little anger. And off they went.

Thomas spent the remainder of the journey resting. In the evening, when they arrived at the hotel, he went straight to bed to sleep off his remaining grogginess. The next day, Thomas felt fine, and the rest of the holiday was great. Thomas had become a real character. It had been a huge "ice breaker" for him. Everybody affectionately called him "Alcy Joe". He had never received as much attention as this in his life.

Some weeks after Thomas arrived back home, his father said plainly, "The bill from the Belgian hospital came today". That was his one and only comment on the matter; ever. His father didn't speak to him much generally, or for that matter did anybody else in the household. In fact, when his father picked him up from the coach back at home, he said literally nothing. Thomas felt guilty and ashamed. Thomas was not going to tell his mother, so when she asked how the holiday was, he just said he enjoyed it. Then she asked him why he was hiding it. Of course, someone had told her. It was then that Thomas discovered how serious it was. Had he managed that fifth visit to the counter, it may have been fatal. He wasn't simply drunk he was poisoned.

Peter completely changed Thomas's attitude towards foreign travel. He made it seem like a badge you could wear, something that made you more sophisticated. In Peter's case, he was born in Australia of English parents and as such had dual nationality, which Thomas viewed as a "badge" in itself. Both parents had met on the plane to Australia. There had been

a skills shortage in teaching, they were teachers. Peter's father particularly, was a fine English language teacher, both abroad and at home. So, Australia was for Peter, the start of an international adventure. His father took them to Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Scotland, and other places. Incidentally, Peter had three brothers. Thomas viewed Peter as a "man of the world", a global gypsy. He on the other hand had spent all his life in the same parochial setting. Thomas wanted some of this perceived sophistication.

Peter recounted many exotic memories to Thomas, but his most cherished were of Papua New Guinea, where he had lived in his teens. PNG was simply paradise, totally unspoiled and with fascinating natives, and breath-taking scenery. There were even parts of PNG, that were unexplored even as late as the mid 1900's, and practises such as cannibalism had still existed there. Peter's family home in England was full of interesting artefacts from lots of countries, but the frightening tribal masks and spears from PNG certainly stood out the most.

Peter also talked about ex-patriot lifestyle and how in Pakistan they had servants. He told a funny story of how his father was waiting to go out, but the man servant hadn't ironed his trouser. In his anger Peter's father threw the trousers at his servant and shouted at him to iron them. Communication was very difficult, the servants had only basic English. Several minutes past and Peter's father was getting more and more anxious. Then hands clasped in a prayer position and with a

beaming smile, in walked the servant wearing his father's trousers. "Thank you, thank you Sir. Thank you", said the servant, assuming that the earlier anger had been directed at the trousers and what Peter's father had said had been to offer the wretched slacks away. Peter laughed. His father almost did. Thomas was used to his father having a cleaning lady, but she was no servant. Thomas didn't know servants still existed. Another difference that was new to Thomas, was the game Bridge and its apparent importance as a social focus. All of Peters family played, though mainly his parents. Embassies where often good venues for games and equally good places to meet other Brits. The game seemed to be an essential feature of the ex-patriot lifestyle.

Thomas was utterly seduced by Peter and his stories. He too wanted stories and the badge of travel. Having heard Peters exotic stories during the first year of university, Thomas was primed and ready for travel, though somewhere different. Quite by surprise Frank suggested that they go to America in the summer. Being far to ordinary for Thomas and too expensive for Peter, the suggestion was immediately dropped. Sometimes it seemed Thomas knew his own mind well. A few days later Frank was talking about going to a kibbutz. There they had no need for money, thus pleasing Peter and Israel was in a troubled and interesting region, pleasing Thomas. Sheer genius, they all agreed to it.

It was Thomas' first exotic holiday. Frank arranged it all, including the meetings with the kibbutz representatives in the UK and the flights. They were assigned Nahal Oz kibbutz, just alongside the edge of the Gaza strip. That certainly pleased Thomas: he'd heard about Gaza.

There was one more member of the party, not yet named. Stuart an Australian, son of a millionaire and friend of Peters from Papua New Guinea. Stuart was like many other twenty something Australians, he was on "walkabout". He knew Peter was in an English university, so he made it a stop off. Stuart didn't have an overall plan for his travelling and Israel sounded as good as anywhere, so he decided to go too. Besides the lads were going. Stuart had to set off earlier though because his flight was arranged separately. His first week was on a different kibbutz, one near the Lebanese border.

So, with Stuart already in the region, Peter, Frank, and Thomas set off for Tel Aviv. Thomas thought this was a fantastic adventure. He had heard the names of all these places on the news, though not really knowing much about them. Nevertheless, he thought this was a place he would be able to talk about, it would make him better travelled and a bit more like Peter. Considering Thomas's background, this was very unusual. Most of the people he knew went to Spain, the Canaries or Austria perhaps. His destination was different though, here they checked the airport for bombs every 15 minutes, soldiers with firearms walk the streets in some areas

and amidst tensions people come thousands of miles on pilgrimage. Hardly Austria or the like Thomas thought.

Thomas had never flown before travelling to Israel, he was naturally quite excited about the taking off and landing. What a contrast in temperature and humidity when they did land. They certainly knew straight away that they were somewhere very different. Wasting no time at Ben Gurion airport they hired a taxi to take them to Tel Aviv where they waited at the beach for a new day to start.

At about six o'clock in the morning, they were surprised by a haggard looking elderly couple, who dressed in loose fitting swimming costumes, walked right out into the Mediterranean Sea, and stood at waist depth splashing about. It was a strange sight because they weren't swimming or doing much of anything, nothing compared to the next sight though. A large, middle aged and barefooted woman, wearing a tatty dress came walking toward them. She crouched down within talking distance, lifted her dress to reveal an absence of underwear and excreted on the pavement right there in front of them. Thomas smiled, he had a story already, what else was to come. Frank looked disgusted. Peter laughed.

Bit by bit the city came alive, and the group went to look for accommodation. They found somewhere cheap, got changed for a swim and went straight back to the beach. When just the three of them were together with no Stuart, Thomas always found himself left out. Especially if they were walking,

when Thomas always ended up tagged behind. Here they were about to swim, something they'd never done together. It soon became apparent that Frank and Peter were the better swimmers and naturally, they swam off without Thomas. It shouldn't have bothered him, instead he too tried to be a good swimmer and to go a good distance from the shore. Apparently, his lesson from the Rotterdam ferry was hardly at the forefront of his mind; his copycat behaviour caused trouble again, potentially grave trouble. Thomas's left leg stiffened completely with cramp. Luckily Thomas was a logical person and this time he didn't panic, instead he headed back to shore with one leg. Then disaster: the other leg stiffened too! He paused for a moment, thinking, perhaps the bottom was close? Then ducked under as far as he dared to, but he reached no bottom. He looked over to Frank and Peter, they were at least 80 yards away and further out than he was even. They wouldn't hear if he shouted, there was too much background noise, besides, it might tire him out to try. His only hope was the opposite, keep the wind in his lungs to float. He could feel a weak current possibly taking him out but knew he could keep afloat. He would have to hope that his arms could paddle harder than the current. Thomas was lucky, again. He was very lucky. If he'd have lost his head, he would have drowned through panic.

After a day spent in Tel Aviv the group travelled by coach to the kibbutz. They were joined later by Stuart. Life on

the kibbutz in the first few days was quite simply, "the life". The weather was marvellous, the people lived simply, the surroundings beautiful and they had a lovely swimming pool. The food was all salad and cold stuff, but that and the accommodation were all free, at least till the day that work started, when you paid in sweat. There was the choice of working in the small 'nuts and bolts factory' or spending all day loading trucks with melons, from the thousands of acres of artificially irrigated melon fields, in the Negev desert.

Thomas never questioned his own decisions in those days, and he choose to be the one that worked alone in the factory, rather than with the more social "melon, chain gang". Thomas already felt a bit left out and he choose to be left out on his own rather than the immensely more painful experience of being left out in company.

Working alone he managed to gain another interesting story, because he crashed the forklift truck into a heavy-duty band saw. Unfortunately, the onsite engineer was a genius. He made new parts for it in hours. Thomas had no more than an extended lunch break on the strength of it.

Everyone but Thomas bought a crate of beer one day. He still wasn't really a great drinker. despite it being unbelievable cheap. The quality was a different issue. One night Peter and Frank were making sheep noises. They wouldn't stop it despite being asked. Thomas wanted to sleep, he demanded that they shut up. He smashed an empty bottle.

"Ba Ba", they continued. "Do you want me to smash another", he implored. "Ba Ba", their reply. He smashed one after the other, some full, some empty, until they shut up. There was silence, Thomas stood amidst a floor totally covered with broken glass, his heart beating fast. Peter called him a freak. He was happy though that he'd shut them up though, and then they slept.

If they had been hinting that Thomas was a sheep, they were right. He followed them, they were his idols. Before them, his brother had been his idol. He went to his brother's university. He listened to all his brother's music and bought the same albums. Thomas couldn't see it at the time though. He smashed the bottles because Frank and Peter seemed to be sharing some game which he wasn't a part of, and it was stopping him from sleeping.

The next day Thomas wrote a poem about a character called Joe. He was Joe and the poem described not being understood. It began quite cornily with "This is the story of a man named Joe" and it didn't get much better. It was Thomas' very first attempt at poetry. He had an inkling that something within him was wrong, but he didn't know quite what it was, or wasn't ready to confront it. However, he knew he felt a little "outside" and he was certainly the odd one out in the group.

Fed up with the kibbutz life of working, followed by sitting around with little to do, after little more than two weeks Thomas planned to leave. Until you had been on the kibbutz

for several months the Israelis didn't bother too much with you and the best recreation, the pool, was little use when the sun had gone down after work. So rather than spend any longer eating like a rabbit and cutting nut after nut, Thomas announced he was heading for Cairo.

There was one thing left to do before going to Cairo. Thomas insisted that they all walked into Gaza, which was quite infamous of course. If Thomas entered Gaza, he would be one step further to being the interesting traveller that Peter was. It was about a three mile walk from the kibbutz and via one long and dusty road all the way. Melons and the like were planted alongside the road in huge fields. Israel was a pioneer in the process of desalinating sea water and bringing it inland. The Negev desert should by rights be a normal sandy desert, but near Nahal Oz it's green.

Progress was slow walking in such high temperatures but eventually they reached the check point. "Where are you going", inquired the soldier with an M16 rifle in his hands. "Gaza", Frank said. "Do you know somebody was knifed here this morning", the reply. "No" said Frank indifferently. "Go ahead if you like", said the Soldier. Then he motioned backwards out of the path. Thomas was apprehensive. He wasn't worried though because the others, particularly Frank, was with him.

The roads were sandy, the cars old and dull looking. You certainly had the feeling you had crossed a divide, people

looked different, less westernised in dress and there was a obvious drop in living standards. Here and there where groups of Israeli soldiers. The friends just kept walking in a straight line. They were aiming for the 'Med' because there was a shipwreck to be seen there. Eventually a teenage boy came up to them. He spoke to Thomas, probably because Thomas looked the smallest and most vulnerable. "Do you know you're in Gaza", he said with an intimidating smile on his face. Thomas said "Yes", though actually, he didn't know where they'd reached. "Some one was killed here this morning", the boy replied, still smiling. Thomas said "Oh" and the boy briskly walked away smiling over his shoulder.

They carried on a bit further, past uneven buildings, down bumpy dry roads, then Frank decided they were going back. Perhaps that was sensible, they stood out, in fact, they might have been the only westerner in the whole of Gaza! Thomas was disappointed that they hadn't been all the way to the beach, but two people had spoken to them and both had mentioned the killing. They could still say they'd been to Gaza. Off they went, though with some sense of escape now.

On the way back some soldiers called to the friends, they ignored them. The soldiers were hiding from the sun a good stone's throw from the road, they called again. The friends ignored them again and kept walking. They had no reason to account to soldiers and didn't want to give any Palestinians reasons to be upset. One of the soldiers stood up and called

again. Thomas was nervous but they all kept moving down the road. Thankfully the soldier sat down again and left them.

For Thomas this part of the holiday was over. There was no more interest till on his own he arrived in Jerusalem. It was from there he was able to travel to Cairo. The fee was 50 US dollars and that bought him a return coach journey and three nights' accommodation in a reasonably good hotel. Thomas hadn't got a great deal of money, but he had to go, so he booked for the next day. In the meantime, he visited Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, and he walked all over Jerusalem. To save some money he had bread and cucumber for his evening meal, which he bought at a discount on a market as it was closing. It wasn't that he was broke, but having spent 50 dollars for his trip, he would have little money when he returned from Cairo. There was at least a week left till his flight, which would have to be spent in Israel. All would be well if the others were still on the kibbutz. He wasn't supposed to go back on the kibbutz, but he could hide away there if he needed to, or perhaps one of the others could lend him some money. Either way his trip tomorrow was a gamble.

To save a bit more money Thomas spent the night rough in Jerusalem. He found a hotel doorway that was set back about 20 yards from the road and obscured by a wall. Thomas wore every piece of clothing he had on him that night but was still too cold to sleep. It was bitter, this was nothing like the early

morning experience of getting off the plane at Ben Gurion airport.

Despite being just up the road from where the coach was to pick him up Thomas overslept. He ran to the coach, hair in a mess, still half asleep and with his rucksack falling apart. The day before at Jaffa Gate the zip which held the whole thing together broke. Luckily, he fixed it with some string from the bazaar. He jumped on the coach, gave his name, and found a nice warm and comfy seat. He was headed for yet another contrast, another culture.

The journey through the Sinai was incredible. Tanks and half-track vehicles still told the tale of tensions past. Tents elsewhere in the desert were the only sight for perhaps thirty or forty miles. What on earth were people doing out here? Thomas saw a caravan way over towards the horizon. He thought, haven't these people heard of coaches? Where were they going that a coach wouldn't stop. What secrets had the desert got hidden way? This was already totally different to Israel, and they hadn't travelled very far. As a European, Thomas was fascinated.

The coach arrived in Cairo practically at bedtime. Of course, Thomas wasn't going to go straight to bed. Before doing anything though, people had to pair up to fill the rooms. The fifty dollars didn't cover the cost for a single room. Thomas was worried. Did this mean he had to befriend somebody? Would he be obliged to sight see with that

somebody the next day? Would it be rude not to? Thomas wasn't sure.

People began chatting to one another, Thomas thought that he had better say something soon or he might end up with somebody he didn't even like the looks of. "Would you like to share?", said Thomas to someone stood nearby who didn't seem to be taking any initiative. "Ok", said Daniel. That was all there was to it. They chatted briefly on the way up to the room and Daniel disappeared. Thank goodness for that thought Thomas. He was no better now at making friends than he had been at the time he was thinking about university.

Thomas was alone in a hotel room in Cairo. He had no Frank to dictate what was going to happen. He felt somewhat grown up in a way, and responsible, because he was in charge of the adventure. There was no way he was going to sleep, without first having a look outside, so off he went for a walk.

The hotel was near the main square in Cairo and throughout the night, soldiers in attractive uniforms performed sentry duty on every street corner. Some seemed more like they were performing a balancing act with their rifle butt and their sleepy head. Vertical sleep! that was novel.

Rats were darting about from various openings and corners and like the airport in Israel, the night was very warm. Dare Thomas walk out of sight of the hotel? and more to the point the sentries? Perhaps that was a bad idea. Maybe the riflemen were there for good reason. They certainly didn't

seem to be controlling vermin. He should be patient. Tomorrow would soon come, and Thomas could do what he wanted. He retired to a comfortable well-made bed. Compared to the kibbutz and his bed constructed of Beer crates, this was real luxury.

Not being the earliest of risers Thomas woke to find his roommate was absent. That at least cleared some of his early worries away. He wondered where to go. Clearly, he must make the obligatory trip to the Pyramids. Where should he go first though. In a sense he had already won a badge, what was left to him was partly just going through the motions. He could do with Frank with him now for get up and go. Anyway, he set off on foot to the nearby Egyptian museum and did the rounds there. Then the Cairo tower, which looked tempting, and what a magnificent view from the top! Next stop Giza and the pyramids.

The bus didn't go out into the desert as Thomas expected. All the pictures of the pyramids had been deceptive. If the camera angle had been changed, they would have caught the edge of town. Nevertheless, they were quite a sight. You might say large, pyramidal, stone and somewhat eroded.

There was the option of walking round the pyramids or travelling by either horse or camel. Thomas was approached by a man with a couple of horses. He offered Thomas a ride. After some haggling, Thomas knocked the price down from 25 Egyptian pounds, to five. The police notice boards not that far

away, suggested that Thomas was still being quite generous. However, he was worried about money otherwise he would have given more.

During the horse ride the man started to ask if Thomas wanted to go into desert and have "good time". Even when pressed, the only explanation of "good time" that he would offer was "Good time" said with a stress that almost expanded the two words into, "What's the matter, don't you understand English? Read my lips: GOOD TIME". Thomas had seen how in Cairo it was common for men to hold each other's hands. What this man may take for granted might not be Thomas' idea of a good time, in the sand dunes, on horseback or anywhere else for that matter. Well, he didn't go into the desert. The man didn't give in, he invited Thomas for dinner instead, in his house. Thomas settled for an after the ride cup of tea, then thanked him very much.

Back at the hotel Thomas was anxious to get back to Israel and to secure his accommodation before his flight home. He had another day paid for in Cairo, but he arranged to cut his stay short by a day. Worried that he might oversleep and miss the early morning coach to Jerusalem Thomas tried to keep awake. Whilst walking round the hotel he bumped into the night porter and got talking to him. The night porter and Thomas spoke at length about each other's lives. Thomas hadn't held such a long conversation with somebody for as long as he could remember. He forgot to tell the night porter

why he was staying up. When he did, in the early hours, he was immediately asked to get some sleep and to allow the night porter to wake him. Thomas trusted him and the next day was safely on his way back to the kibbutz.

He was lucky, nobody had left the kibbutz. Now he had to hide out in the one roomed dwelling all day, for two or three days. He would be asked to leave if he was seen taking advantage of the place without working, but he got away with it, even though it was dull. If it hadn't been for his wishfully thinking in bringing some university text books, he'd have been bored out of his mind. Nevertheless, he did scrape by financially, then headed home alone; not without a final story. Travelling alone he must have looked troublesome, or perhaps it was his darkened skin and moustache, but for whatever reason, he was strip searched down to his underpants at Ben Gurion airport. They didn't seem to be looking for drugs because they scanned him using a metal detector.

The next summer both Frank and Peter headed for America. Both Frank's girlfriend Daphne and Clare arranged to meet them there. Stuart was with Thomas at Thomas' mother's house. Thomas got to show off his Australian friend to some of his old friends back home. Everybody liked Stuart, he was so at ease with people, very friendly. He even got to train with the b team of the local Rugby league football club. He had just turned up, chatted with them and they had agreed. Stuart made friends easily. Thomas' mother was no exception.

Stuart got into the habit of jokingly calling her "crazy women". It was quite an affectionate title, but he used it once too often one day and Thomas erupted. He didn't like Stuart's social ease to extend too far into his own home. He was boss there and Stuart was a guest.

That summer changed everything. Life at university with Frank and Thomas was even more a case of "two's company three's a crowd". They had become two battling egos, blatantly. People tolerated them, but really there was no option. When they weren't going through their ego routines, they were very charming. Peter had had a physical relationship with Clare in the US. The first time he told Thomas, Thomas literally didn't believe it. He truly didn't allow the information to enter his head. The next time it came out, a few days later, he had to face it. "Well, I told you before", said Peter. "I know, I just didn't believe it", Thomas accepted. Not only was Thomas now jealous of his very best friend, but he was also potentially a gooseberry to two couples, who comprised his four best friends. He felt extremely left out. Stuart was nowhere to be seen either. He had gone to work in London and in not much time that led to him getting a much younger, Glaswegian girl pregnant.

The US holiday of Frank and Peter in 1988, just before the final university year, marked the destruction of what was an already slowly deteriorating social life for Thomas. His final year in university was dire, with just Peter's loyalty

preventing Thomas falling into total obscurity. When Peter could afford him time to be loyal of course. When Peter was with anyone other than Thomas alone Peter changed, he became arrogant. Thomas however knew him better, he knew the older Peter that hadn't lost his virginity, the event that created a snowballing effect to Peters ego.

There was to be one more foreign holiday, that is if you ignore the Engineering Society trip to Amsterdam, made by Frank, Peter and Thomas and all for the sake of just four hours of time. The other holiday, with the customary troubles was Thomas' visit to Morocco made after he had left university.

Chapter Three - Of Foreign Land and Places (Part 2)

Cairo captured Thomas's imagination and left him wanting to explore more of Northern Africa. He had read the Lonely Planet book about Africa and even fancied the week-long truck journey across the Sahara. It was a journey beginning in southern Morocco and ending in Mali. The primary reason of course, being to notch up Timbuktu in his travel repertoire. He wasn't thinking, he found people difficult and that would literally trap him with the same group 24 hours a day for a whole week; twice. Besides, the cost put it out of the question. Morocco, the first stage, was a different matter. Could he find a travelling partner though? It was close to the Easter holidays in his third and final year at university. He knew Frank had other commitments, so he asked Peter, who both disappointingly and annoyingly turned him down. He'd have agreed if Frank had been asking, thought Thomas. Rather than miss out on his holiday, and to some degree, to show he wasn't reliant on Peter, he would ask someone at home in the Easter holiday.

Thomas had a group of friends who lived near his old hometown. He visited them during the holidays for some uncomplicated company. That invariably meant sitting around smoking hashish, or alternatively they went out drinking. Thomas was usually quiet, but one night in a pub, during his final, student Easter holiday, he was enthusing about foreign

travel. Using his knowledge from the Lonely Planet book, and determination to make a point to Frank and Peter, he talked his friend Michael, into joining him to go to Morocco. That could aid Thomas a lot because Michael had been there before and liked the country. Moreover, for a moment, Michael's eye gave away thoughts of enterprise, which Thomas naively didn't register, but John did, saying "look at him scheming". He alluded to the possibilities presented by buy hashish at source, indeed farm price. It was just a transitory thought though.

The trip was going to mean four weeks together, and hardly ever out of each other's pockets. Truthfully, they didn't have much in common. Thomas rarely analysed his motives. He didn't ask himself why it bothered him that he should show Frank and Peter that he had other friends. During an earlier holiday Peter had met these friends, afterwards, on more than one occasion Thomas had asked Peter what he thought of them. Another motive for the trip was the familiar, "I want to be like Peter" desire.

Michael had quite good knowledge of Morocco, south-west Spain, and Gibraltar. He had even spent some time working in the Spanish region near Gibraltar. Thomas had read about Moroccan hustlers in his Lonely Planet book. He had smiled when he read pestering in Morocco was worse than in Tunisia. It excited him. To him, it gave Morocco more credibility as a destination. and he felt he could afford to be unconcerned, because with Michael's experience and indeed

Michael himself, he felt he would be safe. Michael was at least six feet tall, and he often looked quite "hard", an appeared outwardly capable of being strong and reactive.

Thomas had just a couple of weeks at home before they were off. Their return flight gave them four weeks away. They hadn't got a travel plan as such, except to take the flight to Malaga in Spain, travel to Algeciras at the south-western most point of Spain and to cross the Straits of Gibraltar to Tangiers. The rest apart from getting back to Malaga, was going to be made up as they went long.

Following his unremarkable exit from university, Thomas had just two weeks at home before they were off. He hadn't really thawed out of from his numbness caused by university, even after a few days back home. He was aware that he wasn't in a holiday mood and felt a little worried as to whether it would spoil the holiday. His enthusiasm he had when he arranged the trip had been transitory.

Stood waiting in the airport, Michael was trying hard to make conversation, "I wonder if we'll meet up with any girls", he said wishfully. "Yeah", Thomas said with seemingly little interest. Thomas's was difficult, he was feeling emotionally flat. What's more, poor Michael had just played one of his jokes and it feel on death ears. Thomas was looking for things to say, but he had nothing but cannabis smoking in common with Michael and he couldn't "chit chat" whilst feeling the way he did.

Thomas had not been able to talk at length, or laugh and joke, since as long ago as the start of his second year of university. At that time Thomas had retreated into a shell and socialised much less. He had taken up computer programming again. He studied 'C' programming and the 'Unix' operating system. This wasn't the first time he'd lost himself in computers. He abandoned the friends he had visited Germany with, in favour of computers. It was about a year after that school trip. Girls had become the main interest, amongst the fifteen years old friends, but not Thomas. Besides, he didn't have the confidence. At least he knew where he stood with a computer, it wouldn't reject him. So, computers became his obsession.

It was no coincidence, that after Eva left him: both his girlfriend and a member of the "menage á trois", he gave up going out again. Eva herself used to say she was a wicked woman. Peter had tried to steer her away from Thomas because he could see signs of upset. It was in vain though, as Thomas's ears heard only what they wanted to do.

Thomas had been emotionally upset in the past. His parents divorced, but his mother left the family to marry a workman his father had hired to extend the house. Thomas was eight at that time and was seriously affected. The house stayed almost totally quiet thereafter. His brother spent all his time alone in his bedroom, and his father was an obsessive workaholic. Thomas had a tiny amount of attention from his

70 years old great aunt. She had come to help domestically, mainly through cooking, but mostly had little energy.

What was Michael going to do for a whole four weeks with a companion who was so lacking in conversation, humour and general spirit. He enjoyed smoking hashish, there was certainly plenty of that to fall back on.

After a refreshing trip across 'The Straits', with cool sea air and a playful dolphin escort, they arrived in another world: North Africa. It was at such times, that the journey brought them both together. Good job they hadn't opted for a beach holiday, especially after the question in the airport.

Michael knew the hassle they could expect in Tangiers well. Their plan was simple, get out of there quickly. With that in mind they headed straight for the coach park, via taxi. With the utmost cheek, a Moroccan even got in the taxi with them. He had been walking alongside them up the street, incessantly talking and smiling. He was unnaturally ugly, and his motive was obvious. Eventually, the crunch came: they'd reached the coach park. Thomas took his backpack off, and as he did so, he received unwanted help from their friend, who immediately demanded a reward for his help. Thomas said "no"; lots of times, and he headed to get on the coach. Their friend followed him, right to the back of the coach. He continued to demand money, Thomas continued to say "no." Then he said "no" once too often, because he was poked in the teeth. By this point the coach was waiting to go. Thomas smiled and gave out some

cash equivalent to pennies. It was met with a barrage of insults pouring forth from the hurrying hustler, off to trouble whoever else he could next prey: "your mother is a whore", and those kind of laughable cliches!

The coach was going to Tetouan, where another trial would face them. However, the journey was quiet, but being the only two Europeans on the packed coach, Thomas learned how it felt to be foreign. At around 9 o'clock at night they reached Tetouan bus/coach station. It needed to be seen to be believed, because everyone there looked nothing short of like a character from an Indiana Jones style, Hollywood blockbuster movie. There was no need for makeup and special effects: every crooked feature, disfigurement, or disability you could imagine was evident. Thomas wanted to take some pictures, but he daren't do so here. It would be a theft because these were not actors. This was the real thing. Besides, it would place him outside of this human carnival and he wanted to feel within it.

Thomas caught the eye of a young man who had been gazing at him. His eyes seemed to give away his whole soul, no apparent thoughts seemed to mask him. Sat with his left shoulder raised, and his right side tilted downward towards his knee, a slow and exaggerated movement ensued. He edged a fat joint slowly to his lips. Within seconds his face disappeared in dense smoke, as his left hand traced a wide and slow path back downwards. Thomas looked back at the smoker's eyes.

His lids were half shut, there wasn't the slightest movement. This man was publicly, utterly obliterated, without cares or shame.

There was a man in the other direction who Thomas felt very uneasy about. He looked villainous. His eyes caught Thomas, and this time they betrayed thinking. Thomas looked away, and daren't look back at him, it was enough to indicate an invitation. Anybody might want an excuse to meet two rich European backpackers.

Perhaps word had got out about Michael and Thomas, for whatever reason, they had barely got outside of the building before a gang of Moroccans approached them. There were four of them in total and they were slightly younger than the travellers. They asked if the pair needed a hotel. By this time, darkness had come over the city: one of the most infamous trouble spots in Morocco, and yes, patently they did want a bed for the night. "Why do you ask", said Michael. "My friend, I show you good Hotel", said the single well-dressed Moroccan, while the pair continued to walk. The Moroccans followed. "My brother runs a hotel, very good, close. I take you, come.", he asserted. "It's ok, we'll find one, thanks anyway", said Thomas. Several more such exchanges took place before Thomas and Michael finally arrived at a hotel. Unfortunately, the four Moroccans were still tagging along. Michael arranged a room, then to the travellers' mutual shock, the Moroccans chatted in Arabic to the manager. Perhaps they were trying to

convince him that they'd been responsible for the foreigners being there. What's more though, the Moroccans followed the travellers to their room and entered it.

Thomas was anxious, even though the Moroccans were talking about the pair as friends, and their presumed leader said to Thomas, "you like brother to me". All Thomas had done to deserve such an honour was to swap his pen knife for a leather purse. However, having become bosom buddies, they couldn't leave without selling hashish. Thomas had been dreading a moment like this. He was a fool for not realising this outcome they were two young male backpackers in Morocco, it invites hashish dealers. And here they were, in a corner with four Moroccans that weren't going to go away. If they bought some hashish, they would be carrying it for the entire trip. More to the point, how could they trust these young men? What if they informed on the pair? They knew their room number and hotel, Thomas anxiously thought.

Thomas estimated that the hashish on offer was about an ounce and a half in weight. It would cost one hundred and fifty pounds at home, but it was being offered for about a tenth of that price here. Thomas wasn't happy. It certainly wasn't the cost, because he would have gladly given them the money just to get them out of the room. It was the size of the lump and how long they would end up carrying it with themselves, but he eventually gave way to buying half of it. The Moroccans left and Thomas looked for somewhere to stash it.

Thomas had first smoked hashish just before going to university. He used to be very keen about it. Prior to being into dope he was a computer games geek. Hashish got him out and about among new people, including Michael and a whole circle of others. It was easy for one smoker to get to know another, you both liked getting stoned, and didn't need more in common than that, at a typical get-together.

At roughly the end of the second year at university, Thomas was feeling symptoms of anxiety and uncomfortable panic, by inhaling the smallest amount of hashish smoke. These feelings always appeared, even if weeks of abstinence had passed, and he never confided in anybody regarding them. The reason being he was ashamed. He'd had a severe panic attack just before he started university. It was caused by magic mushrooms, and since then, hashish panics felt the same, as any panic probably would, but he related the two. That had been a little bit illogical, because he had enjoyed a lot of problem free hashish smoking, in between having his major mushrooms panic, and one by hashish alone. Nevertheless, he made the connection between those two feelings, and it made him ashamed that his mushroom experience had caused a perceived lasting damage.

Before stashing the gear Michael rolled a very generous joint. Thomas felt he had to share it, because he still wasn't ready to admit that a bad mushroom experience, had as he thought, damaged himself. He could just fill his mouth and

blow out, but that might look a bit obvious at times, and he therefore inhaled too. At the latter moments, he always and immediately felt uneasy.

Thomas didn't find saying 'no' to people easy. He punished himself because he was bothered too much with what people thought. The next day was a typical example of how this could lead to things getting out of hand. Wanting to get out of Tetouan as soon as possible, the pair of travellers went back to Tetouan coach station with a view to travelling to Chefchaouen.

Getting a ticket for the coach was anarchic. The ticket window was mobbed with people elbowing each other out of the way, but Michael did an admirable job of assuring the pair's passage.

The journey to Chefchaouen was beautiful. Chefchaouen is in the Rif mountains, which happens to be the main cannabis producing area in Morocco. Michael had been there before and liked it. When it came in sight it was like an oasis in the middle of nowhere. They had passed very little else except scenery since leaving Tetouan.

Chefchaouen is an idyllically simple town, traditionally whitewashed, somewhat cave like even, and the brick houses featured rather sky-like blue doors. They climb up the landscape between two mountains, Jebel Meggou and Jebel Tisouka. Everywhere is spotlessly clean. It looks idyllic.

As soon as they got off the coach, they needed to find accommodation. Somewhat disappointingly for Thomas, it found them, because before they knew it, they had another set of slightly unwanted friends, although these ones seemed better than the last ones, and kept saying they wouldn't trouble the pair. Chefchaouen did have a much better reputation than Tangier and Tetouan too.

Thomas and Michael were sat around a table with three slightly older Moroccan men. They were in a small guest house from which the travellers had hired a room for the night. The Moroccans were chatting quite amicably, and Thomas was enjoying their conversation. They did mention hashish, but Michael was wise enough to say they didn't want any, whilst ensuring he didn't cite that they already had some. That had been his thoughtful advice to Thomas.

One of the Moroccans rolled a joint. It was past to Thomas, he assumed it was a social one and worried what Michael would have thought if he didn't draw on it, which he did. Presumably, it was from specially selected crop, because it hammered Thomas, then he foolishly took another draw and passed it on. Thomas was feeling anxious and what came next sent him spiralling. As soon as Thomas passed on, the amicable chatting did a Jekyll to Hyde of pressured sales talk. They had sampled, they had to buy.

Thomas was feeling really panic stricken, Michael was just calmly saying "no", but Thomas couldn't see a way out of

it, and he was expecting to have to buy more drugs, or maybe they would need to get a different hotel? Although irrational, he augmented his panic by thinking they could be reported for drug use. All sorts of worrying thoughts entered his head, and he suddenly stood up. On straightening out, his legs gave way as he passed out.

When Thomas came round, he looked at the group. The pressured atmosphere had at least temporarily gone. It seemed compassion could be an international virtue after all. Michael looked very concerned and asked with a frown if Thomas was alright. Thomas was no longer downright panicking and because it had happened before, at home, he wasn't personally shocked, but his head was very woozy, and he was of course stoned.

One of the Moroccans took Thomas to a sink and told him to put his head over it. He calmly poured handfuls of water over Thomas's head, one after the other, in a rhythmic succession. The effect was profound, with each beat Thomas's head seemed to calm down a tiny bit more. Afterwards he was much better, with just the pleasant effects of the smoke remaining.

There was some more, but milder pestering, from the Moroccan dealers later that day, but that was about the last of it. The next day they left nuisances and trouble behind them as they embarked on the rest of their tour of Morocco. This included a small fishing village almost in walking distance

from Agadir, called Taghazoute, and major cities like Fes, Casablanca, Rabat, and Marrakesh. The latter, with its 'Djemaa el-Fna', was a complete fascination, and in 1989, it was still relatively unspoiled, after earlier travellers had been following the Beetle's, and other such influencers examples.

Michael and Thomas didn't make the best of companions, but they found a level: what Thomas lacking personally, through his depressed mood, Morocco helped to make up for.

Thomas absolutely stopped smoking hashish after this holiday, and probably had an underlying anxiety quite constantly, which cannabis exasperated. Anxiety was a feature of his life that became common, and it became difficult to draw a line between anxiety, and how he broadly was: his personality.

After the holiday, Thomas found it was difficult to visit Michael, because he was very embarrassed. He'd been a poor travelling companion. After just two last visits, he cut himself off from Michael, but consequently all that circle of friends. Frankly, drug friends are more like acquaintances. The only other friends or acquaintances he was left with, without really digging up the past, were those that he'd shared an interest in computers with, the ones he nurtured when he was fifteen, after the previous group began pursuing girlfriends.

Chapter 4 - The Hunt

Having just come back from his long holiday, Thomas felt that he could no longer be idle. He'd had his treat, now he ought to knuckle down. He also had a feeling that he wasn't a part of things, like life was moving along without him. Evenings felt best because he was like anybody else then in terms of not having to be at work. During the day just a simple thing like entering a shop had taken on a new significance. The staff were no longer simply shopkeepers, they had jobs. Further pressure came in the form of Ian. Ian was Thomas's mother's second husband. She had married Ian when Thomas was eight and the couple moved to the place all three now lived. Thomas didn't leave his original home until his father remarried and moved out of the area. This was when he left for university. He had no idea that his father was going to either move or remarry, in fact it was communicated to him after the event in a short letter. Ian was fed up with working and he wanted the world to know it. Most nights when he came in through the back door, he would mutter something or appeal to his long dead mother. Eventually this began to make Thomas feel guilty for not having a job himself.

In some respects, all this pressure was unfair, because despite Thomas' increasing age, his lack of having ever had a fulltime job, his marketable skills with computers, and the get a job attitude of society in general, he did not feel ready to

work. He wasn't lazy, though he didn't find it easy to start a task. Rather, he feared people. But how could he avoid them? Thomas also lacked ambition. He had no self-confidence, his holiday in Morocco and final university year had sapped him of what was left. Consequently, he hadn't thought of what opportunities existed. All he had going for himself was computer programming, and he wasn't particularly interested in that anymore. The only reason he got involved with computers in the first place was because it was a key to his older brother's insular world of technology in an already dead household.

Thomas didn't understand the human elements of work such as politics and personalities. He had never thought the word politics would be used in anything but a governmental context. Thomas thought that being a shoemaker meant making shoe's all day long, period. To be a computer programmer was to program, no more. Since he knew he wasn't going to be something exotic like a forensic scientist, the working life seemed tedious. He never had understood what his father did and why his father never complained. His father was the boss of a factory. As for wealth, where did it get his father? He didn't hear him laugh and have any fun. Thomas couldn't tell if he was happy or not. Besides, he didn't need much money because his mother didn't charge him for his keep. Nevertheless, he would have to get a job as a computer

programmer, even if he wasn't keen, his father was pushing him.

Thomas longed to be like others, anyone other than himself. To be able to talk naturally without it being such a "big deal". He wanted a close friend. He wanted a life. At the core of things Thomas was simply not a happy person. He needed an inner change before anything outside was going to happen. Happiness was something that Thomas had gradually lost at university, and it had been an insidious process. He accepted that life was grey. When he drank, he felt better, though he wasn't consciously drinking for that reason. He wasn't drinking socially either because he drank alone. Thomas' drinking was unhealthy.

Thomas felt that everybody but himself wanted him to get a job, despite his worries about people and his unhappiness. And work seemed increasingly on the agenda. It had probably been there all along in truth. However, until now Thomas hadn't been attuned to it. Greetings had become pressured also. Rather than saying "Hello", people could almost manage "Hello how's the job hunting going?", in the same breath. It was like job hunting was an illness, because only illnesses, or perhaps childbirth, receive the same degree of interest. How long could Thomas keep saying "alright", without time itself invalidating him.

His university friends hadn't helped. They had been his world for three years, in Thomas' case, impressionable years.

They had looked down on almost everybody, usually reducing people to "knobs". Thomas no longer had their "friendship" to implicitly raise him from such a title. Frank was now an officer. If that wasn't enough, he had graduated with first class honours. Peter had shared a boarding school with Royalty. That and his speech made Thomas' parochial schooling and area seem, well, parochial.

Despite his feelings, Thomas looked through the local paper every Tuesday, he did a moderate sized mail shot, he even went for an interview two hours' drive away, to a city where he knew nobody. At least he could pretend that he was trying if anybody asked the dreaded question. With that interview he could also pretend that he was comfortable with living miles away from his mother. Thomas had quite a few interviews, perhaps fifteen or twenty. He sat IQ tests. He even had a personality interview once. The charming female interviewer asked him "What is your greatest accomplishment". Thomas was baffled, he was going for a job as a 'C' programmer, the answer must be related. With no more than two words and a single letter, Thomas ruined all hopes of the job. He had given as his answer, "Learning 'C' programming". He ought to have first said something like, "surviving my self-destructive, anything to please personality for over 20 years".

Eventually there it was, a job with Thomas's name on it. It was a programming post in the pharmacy department of the

local university. His chemistry degree was a suitable qualification, and his computing experience was directly relevant, but in Thomas' interest, it was a university and universities were less pressured. Really, the post held the title “programming assistant”, which put him off a bit. He wanted to avoid people altogether.

Before his interview with the pharmacy department, he had had an interview with a fruit machine company which resulted in a job offer. Thomas was waiting for the outcome of the pharmacy interview and hoping he would be saved from being a fruit machine programmer. He ended up with both jobs on offer and he took the job as programming assistant at the pharmacy department of his local university.

Chapter 5 - The Cell

With just ignorance on his side, Thomas set off for his first day of work. The job had the unusual title of "Programming Assistant". Programming was generally an exclusive occupation. Unless assistance in programming had to be given, this title indicted that other work may be called for. As far as Thomas was concerned thought, he was just a programmer and besides nothing else had been mentioned in the interview. On arrival he met one of the two men who had interviewed him, it was his academic boss, a gentleman called Doctor Roger Green. Incidentally, the other interviewer had been the head of the technicians of which Thomas was now one. In the interview he had said nothing but hello, goodbye and "we'll contact you soon".

On day one, Roger showed Thomas around the department and talked a bit about what he would like to have done and how things might develop. Roger was clearly the one who was in control. Fortunately, Thomas felt comfortable with Roger, he seemed to be from the same mold as himself, sincere, gentle, and well mannered. Next Thomas had to meet the person he was an assistant to. He didn't want to be assistant to anybody, especially when assist implies a closer form of relationship than that of boss to employee. He'd rather this person was another boss if anything. Roger said, "you'll be alright with Bill". This didn't particularly help matters, as it

almost labelled Bill as somebody whom trouble wouldn't stem from. Thomas felt compelled to like him. Roger's jobs and the plans he had discussed didn't involve Bill. Perhaps with Bill's job, carrying an assistant was a token thing, rather than something which would be actually realised, thought Thomas.

Bill seemed to be working on some teaching packages. He was using a high-level design tool. Thomas thought it looked boring. As he used the industry standard 'C' programming language, and he didn't want involvement in some obscure package. In appearance Bill was nothing like Roger. He was dressed in tight jeans and a T-shirt. Roger wore a check suit, shirt and tie. Bill's tan added to his casual look. His hair was moderately long and to be frank, he gave an overall impression to Thomas of someone who didn't want to grow up. Being fresh from university, Thomas attached an unrealistic value to his academic ability, and he looked down on Bill because he didn't look or seem to be academic. Then horror; Roger left Thomas alone with Bill. For almost his entire life Thomas had been able to avoid people he didn't want to be with. When that hadn't been the case, like at high school in the changing rooms and morning tutor group, he had often felt insecure. University was just like an extension of the school yard culture with its many little cliques. You didn't put yourself in situations with people from other social groups unless you joined clubs and societies. Thomas joined no such groups. Thomas' conversational skills were terrible and here he

was thrown into an ad-libbing situation with somebody whom he didn't relate to but was supposed to begin to form an unwanted relationship with. He didn't know what he could talk about. It didn't occur to him to pretend to be interested in Bill. Besides, he was too worked up to be able to try. Luckily Bill did quite a bit of the talking and they set off to meet the other technicians.

Everybody seemed to have separate rooms or areas, it was a very closed layout. Bill was soon talking about Jason, the person who previously had the job. Later in the job, this became a recurring theme, to the point that Thomas thought Bill was dropping hints. Perhaps the hint was, "why can't you be like Jason". Jason was a bit reckless and occasionally came to work with a hangover. Perhaps the hint was "try and loosen up"? Perhaps Bill talked about Jason because he was beginning to struggle to find things to say. Thomas thought everything had a deep meaning if he didn't understand why it was said. When Thomas himself spoke he usually volunteered nothing and when he did speak it was often a question, some more stupid than others. He didn't want to be totally quiet, but sometimes his strange questions would throw out confusing mixed messages, and Bill probably thought he was strange too! There was only so many questions Thomas could ask and not many were aimed at getting to know Bill. This was not a great start. They reached the library. Thomas saw an escape and asked if he could go and look round. Bill politely said "yes".

Why would Thomas have a sudden urge for books? So, he left Thomas, ousted by a library. Thomas felt relief as soon as he was left alone. He found an escape this time, but he realised that such chance escapes were not always going to be there.

For the rest of the day, Thomas familiarised himself with his computer equipment and had another meeting with Roger in which he was given his first job, that was to fix a multiple-choice marking program. All would have been well but for one spanner in the works, the tea breaks. At mid-morning and mid-afternoon, nearly everybody gathered in the common room for a rest and a chat.

Right from the start Thomas disliked the common room. He had nothing to say to anyone, and nearby Bill and others were hardly ever quiet, which made his silence feel even more awkward. He was able to smoke in the common room and this helped to make him look a little more occupied and content. Though ironically you could say the prop was killing him. Early on it had provided a tiny bit to talk about and he was occasionally able to offer cigarettes to other people. He needed to be careful though, because sometimes he led himself into lame conversations about things like cigarette brands and he'd wished he'd never spoken. The conversation would go on too long and he could start to feel trapped. Thinking that others in the vicinity could sense the pretense of his involvement, in a conversation he didn't want to be in, he would start to panic. He would panic further because of the fear the person he was

talking to might see his discomfort, perhaps by a frown. So, Thomas would have to monitor his body language also. Thomas could head towards passing out on some such occasions. Unfortunately, out of Thomas' tiny number of subjects, he ranked computers alongside cigarette brands, because it made him feel dull. He was ok in private, talking about computers, but not in the common room. Thomas was very sensitive. Thomas was always relieved to get out of the common room and back to the relative safety of his computer. Just being around people, even without talking, was an effort. He would still be monitoring his body language and watching others. Had he known how he was going to react to being in the common room, he could have avoided going there in the first place. He could have had coffee where the students had theirs. Unfortunately, he soon made the common room effectively a habit and like any habit, it needed a reason to be broken. It would take the courage of making a statement to stop going. After a few weeks of working in the department, Thomas' withdrawn behaviour and practically non-existent conversation, was creating awkward looks from Bill. Thomas always managed to say hello despite being pathologically quiet. By now Thomas was feeling the discomfort of entering the common room physically. His heart rate and breathing were affected, and his chest became tingly. Worse than that were the occasions that Bill came to visit Thomas in his small computer room. There would be just the two of them and no

escape. Thomas might give a very concise description of what he had worked on, then he would be all out of conversation. He didn't really believe Bill was interested, he still viewed Bill as just an aging rocker. He probably had been interested though. Thomas would be practically praying inside that Bill would go because Bill too would by now have nothing much to say. The silence crippled Thomas with panic, "Was he doing this on purpose?", he would think. He wondered if Bill knew how he felt inside. He couldn't tell Bill in case it was what Bill was trying to do to him. Then he might do it even more. Never let a bully know you're scared. He just hoped things would go away. Meanwhile Bill would have a sort of nice guy expression on his face, which Thomas began to interpret as "there's nothing wrong with me". Thomas daredn't trust him though. Thomas' aloofness could be taken by some to be rude. But Bill did look patient, and he didn't frown. It was little use though, because Thomas' feelings weren't going to change that fast, and it was those he listened to.

One day, with hands shaking, still in the routine, Thomas grudgingly headed to the common room. He sat as always in Bill's vicinity. He had never sat elsewhere because he felt he couldn't weather the worries of a public display of rejection of Bill. Somebody commented that one of the other members of staff was unusually quiet today. Bill jumped straight for the opportunity to mention Thomas. "Never mind Jean, what about Thomas". "What?", someone said. "Thomas, he's the quiet

one", said Bill again with some degree of exasperation. Thomas looked at his lap; anywhere in fact apart from someone's face.

Thomas was more than just surprised at Bills comment in the common room, he was also angry, embarrassed, humiliated and made more nervous. He didn't think logically and rationally about it but just felt that Bill had spoken out to upset him or make a fool of him. Pam, who was quiet herself, and on the other side of Thomas, said "He's a quiet soul". Her defense made him feel a little better and he shyly smiled at her.

Bill's patience had probably broken, because he used an opportunity to involve others in trying to get Thomas to talk. After all Bill and Thomas were supposed to have a working relationship. Some weeks earlier Bill had even invited Thomas to visit his home recording studio. Thomas had mentioned that had bought a piano and started to learn to play classical music. Thomas didn't realise it, but by buying a piano, he had started a ten year long journey of recovery. Thomas was a quiet soul but more like someone who had been derailed for a very long time and now miles off life's track.

Thomas wasn't going to go in the common room after that, he had his excuse now. Although he did carry on going for a while, so as not to perform a knee-jerk reaction. Thomas just exchanged his shy smiles for Bills slightly more awkward efforts. He still sat near to Bill and as always said nothing.

Then after a while he just quit going, he didn't really feel like he fitted in the room.

For a time, Thomas saw practically nobody all day long, he just immersed himself in his computer programming work, some of which was quite interesting. Then one day a man by the name of George started appearing daily to download programs off the computer network. George was unashamedly a computer geek. He was a middle aged and totally nuts about computers. It was very hard to get George to talk about anything at all but computers. With Thomas being quite technical, George would forever be asking him stupid question, trying to start pointless arguments, and basically wanting to engage him in geeky conversation. George had piercing eyes and he hardly every looked away. He was, however, unthreatening. George's mind was too obsessive about computers to think about Thomas' peculiarities.

George soon introduced Thomas to an alternative "brewing up" room, but without exception, the subject of conversation had to be computers. Although George was often a terrible bore, he was easy to talk to and when there was quiet Thomas didn't need to panic. Sometimes George talked about interesting aspects of computers but often he would look for arguments about trivial matters. George was one of those late twentieth century victims, the computer addict. At least Thomas was no longer a loner in the department though. In fact, there were also a couple of other, more casual friends for

him, two foreign PhD students who took their breaks in the same room. Perhaps it had something to do with them being foreign, but they too were easier for Thomas to be around.

Thomas made one other friend whilst working at the university. It was a strange friendship that highlighted how alone Thomas was beginning to feel. Thomas wasn't desperate, in that he wasn't actively trying to find friends, more like he was gaining kinship with other loners. He had been going to public houses in the dinner hour. One day he found a rather hidden away pub. It was right behind the university's generous library. Either side of it were car parks, almost as if it was the sole surviving building of a general demolition of the area. That gave it character even from the outside. It was not unlike the pub that Thomas' brother drank in. Thomas was bound to feel at home in it. A real drinkers pub it lacked fruit machines and jukeboxes. Occasionally though there was live Irish music, the real thing, nothing plastic allowed. Thomas' new haunt was called the Ducie Arms.

Another George, an extremely quiet man with dark grey hair and a small build ran the Ducie. Once Thomas had been just a few times, George would pour Thomas' favourite drink without being asked. Thomas drank Guinness, "One forty please", George would say with an expressionless face. It was as though he only knew three words. Every half hour or so George would walk to the front door, look outside then shortly return. This was very strange because outside there was no

traffic, the pub was alone on a tiny side street. The side street came off a fairly quiet minor road, and there was nothing but car parks and the back of the library surrounding. It was dead outside yet George, almost like a clock, regularly went out. It all added to the character of the pub thought Thomas.

Thomas used to manage two or sometimes three pints in his lunch hour. He didn't go every day, but regularly. He felt comfortable there, it was quiet, no one bothered him. It literally got him through the day. Then one day something different happened. Thomas was sat in the small alcove at the opposite side of the bar to the entrance. He was minding his own business, waiting for George to go to the door, when man of middle age, with smart clothes and a happy expression walked up to the bar. "Pint of Guinness please George", said the man. Despite being acknowledged by name George gave nothing away in his expression. He was dignified in a way, he needn't try to be friendly, he needn't try to be anything, he was the real McCoy, George. The drinkers seemed to respected George, he at least treated everybody equally and he never looked surly, he didn't give much away at all. "One forty please", said George, with the same inflection as Thomas had received. Then to Thomas's surprise, the drinker moved into "his" alcove. There were plenty other places where he could have sat. There were three other small rooms in total and the pub was nearly empty. Thomas thought either he must be a regular and always sat in the Alcove or that he was indeed a bit intrusive.

No longer alone in the alcove, with the pub quiet and George probably counting time ready for his next trip to the door, Thomas was pretending not to feel the presence of the other drinker. He wasn't overly concerned, however, just as choosing to ignore an empty bus seat, to go and sit with a stranger, could be construed as an invasion, Thomas felt invaded. There was no pressure for him to speak because he hadn't been introduced. But wait, why was he thinking anything, he was just having a quiet pint. Then for some reason the other drinker spoke, it was a little over familiar of him but perhaps it was typical of the pub's culture. "Oh well, beats sitting in the office", he said cheerily. "Yes. Where do you work?", said Thomas. In the same moment came a flood of thoughts, he tried to understand why the drinker had engaged him in conversation.

The drinker was called Steve, he was about twenty years old than Thomas. He too was a programmer for the university, though he was based in the administration section where he had been almost all his working life. They chatted a little about what they did in their jobs and basically clicked quiet well. Thomas hoped to see Steve again and he headed back to his room, "the cell". Thomas' room was about 8 feet by 14 feet with the bottom section was occupied by a large molecular graphics machine, a Silicon Graphics workstation. On the other short wall there were two PCs connected to the network and on one of the long walls in between an old micro and

another PC. Occasionally somebody used the graphics computer, but considering it cost quarter of a million pounds it wasn't used enough. Thomas chatted a little to one such person, Jim, who spoke about nothing but proteins. There was a curtain which could be used to divide the graphics end of the room from the less sophisticated end. Only one person used this curtain, on her rare visits to the room. Thomas felt it was extremely rude. He could have been alone all day, and this person would come in without even saying hello, then shut themselves off from Thomas. He considered it ignorant, and it was. It wasn't the only thing Thomas had to tolerate on account of the machine. The temperature in the room would be unbearable without air conditioning. The graphics machine had to be left on all day and being a box of electronics the size of a fridge, it generated quite a lot of heat. All day long Thomas had to listen to the various buzzes and hums of computers and air conditioning.

In his electronic environment Thomas fostered a love hate relationship with George. Without reaching extremes of those emotions, he would value the sense that he had a friend, but on the other hand he sometimes found George terribly tedious in conversation. On balance though, George's short but occasionally very regular visits were welcomed. George didn't make Thomas feel inadequate, but he wasn't a particular useful yardstick. The reason George would visit, was to download software; any software, cookery programs, Modula 2

compilers, games, whatever. Thomas just thought he was a hoarder, he had met similar people in his teens, when everybody used to share, or not, computer games. It turned out that George was building up a public domain software library to try and make some money. George was so strange that it took two or three months before Thomas thought George's many downloads weren't for personal use.

Meanwhile, Thomas left his cell every dinner hour, still headed for the Ducie. He always hoped that Steve would be there as Steve showed so much interest in him and was kind. Steve had been talking often about Mexico and Mexican lifestyle. He had often said "MaÒana", for instances if Thomas mentioned things he had to do and "Bueno Guinness" with great expression. He always spoke Mexican with a depth of expression. Steve was tired in many ways, tired of his job, tired of English society and tired of pretending. Steve had been to Mexico with a young male friend, he'd talked about his friend. Thomas was truly very straight forward and hadn't drawn the conclusion that Steve was a homosexual. Though it would have put a different perspective on their first meeting.

One day after work both Steve and Thomas went to the Ducie instead of going home. They reached quite a drunken state and Steve told Thomas that his friend was more than just that. Thomas, naive to the absolute end and thinking in terms of special friends, blood brothers, whatever, asked, "What do you mean?". Steve made the relationship clear with his reply.

"He's my lover". Lover sounded romantic, Thomas couldn't understand, he just sincerely accepted that it was a very special relationship. It was clearly a big thing to Steve, he longed to travel back to Mexico. He wanted to live there with his lover, Manjana! Out of the headache of the English style of life.

It also came out that Steve was still married but lived separately in some flat. He had two children and one of them was causing trouble at school. Thomas took the opportunity to share some of his past. His mother left when he was eight and at the same time Thomas had to start a new school. Thomas was an angry young boy and got in many fights. On one occasion he was so fuelled with adrenaline, that he was frenzied in his fight, he barely had a foot on the ground as all four limbs flew in rapid rhythmic succession at his opponent. That fight was stopped by a teacher and both Thomas and his un-provoking sparring partner, who was considerable bigger than Thomas, had to spend the next month worth of playtimes in the school entrance hall. Thomas had been there several times before. He was used to being segregated. He also had to sit in the corner of the classroom on his own. Eventually the teachers suggested that Thomas saw a professional regarding his behavioural problems. Attempts were made to solve the problem outside of school instead.

Having told his story about his own childhood problems and listened to Steve he considered Steve to be a good friend. It was certainly a far cry from fending off George's attempts to

begin arguments aimed at proving Atari ST computers are better than IBM PC's. Time answered that question eventually! Steve continued to talk more openly to Thomas, and likewise. For example, Thomas traded words about his loneliness, for Steve's about Mexico and his lover.

Roger must have been concerned about Thomas, or simply feeling charitable because one day after Thomas had been working there for about 6 months, he came to Thomas with a letter. The letter said that Roger had been invited to come over to Australia to spend some time looking at computer assisted learning software and discussing possibilities for a joint venture to design some more. Great Thomas though; and? Then Roger started talking about how many times he'd been abroad, including Australia and that he was not really that bothered about going. He asked Thomas would he like to go. That was probably were he was supposed to drop his jawbone, point with both hands to his chest, starry eyed and question, "me?". Instead, he struggled as best as he could to sounding keen, "errm, yeah, thanks", said Thomas. Of course, Thomas didn't want to go, how would he cope all alone as a foreign guest. Perhaps Roger was trying to cheer him up. Thomas was beginning to loss his sense of identity. How could he enjoy a trip anywhere? Nevertheless, in a few weeks the grants had been organised, Thomas would be flying in the coming summer, quite a few months away. Thomas hadn't told anybody in the department about the trip, he was worried that

they would be jealous. The trip was a time bomb, he should have said no, only he'd felt that it was too big a prize to turn down without people questioning why.

George was no longer turning up in the 'Cell' as often. Time towards the trip was ticking away. Bill was rarely calling on Thomas also. Thomas had been worried about something Bill had said on these rare visits. Not uncommonly he had been talking about Jason, but then he mentioned one of the other interviewees who had been in Thomas's group. This man had had three previous jobs and left each one because of personality clashes. Thomas though Bill was trying to say he was the same. This was a time of waiting. Something had to break. Thomas' isolation was beginning to make him feel agitated. Occasionally, he got into such a state, that he was leaving work a little too early. He was already taking generous tea breaks and cigarette breaks. Another ploy of his to get him out of his cell was taking a trip to the library. Thomas found comfort in visiting the music section. He would look at scores and wonder ambitiously if he would ever be able to play them.

Roger had spoken to Thomas about Bill and "the personality thing". Thomas hadn't admitted to there being a personality problem, but apparently Bill was taking Thomas' aloofness personally now and had said something. Bill's earlier comment about the interviewee seemed to be a hint after all. Thomas knew that the problem was how he felt inside, he didn't know the answer. Thomas didn't know it, but he had

developed a depressive illness. He told Roger that he didn't like working alone, but then he turned down the chance to work with the secretaries. He was the victim of a paradox. Those that he did like being with he ought to have been more careful about, for example his old dope smoking friends. Thomas couldn't seem to win, but he wanted to see if he'd fit in if the people all changed. He decided to start looking for another job. However, if Bill was right, what then? What happens to these people who have personality clash after personality clash?

Chapter 6 - The Lion's Den

One day, fed up and lonely, in his 'cell', Thomas decided to ring a local recruitment agency. They were specialist in computer recruitment and sounded very positive. They asked if Thomas would visit them for a chat. This left him feeling quite optimistic as he set off, during a dinner hour, with a copy of his CV.

Thomas didn't see the agents as being businesspeople, who as in American cartoon images, would look at him with dollar sign covered eyes. He mostly trusted them. On arrival, he was impressed by the classy look of the building: the marble in the entrance way, the large double doors, the new and clean looking brickwork, and not only that, but it was also in a prime area of the city. Even the shiny brass door handle made an impression on Thomas. Up until now, polishing brass had seemed to him like a pointless fuss. To the contrary, this brass was saying, "you're stood before the right door".

Thomas pressed a buzzer and announced his arrival though an intercom. Soon he was sat drinking coffee and waiting for Philip, the man he had spoken with earlier. There was just Thomas and a busy typist in the reception area. Well almost, because to the right of the receptionist was a caged bird, a miniature type, probably a finch but certainly no budgerigar. Thomas found it hard to view the bird as a pet. As an ornament the bird gave the rest of the office a false,

veneered appearance. Much like the perfectly applied make-up of the receptionist girl.

Thomas wanted to look at the girl closer. With his head bowed slightly down, Thomas ran his hand slowly through his hair. It was a sort of smoke screen, hiding his intended gaze and it gave him an excuse to suddenly move if she looked up. Thomas liked to look at people, particularly their facial expressions. Body language and mannerisms were of the utmost interest and importance to him. He was constantly processing body language; quite consciously. He used it as feedback whenever he spoke to somebody. For that reason, it was hard for Thomas to talk in a group. Even if his eyes could have been aware of everyone's body language, it would probably have been overwhelming for his brain. So, this was one of the reasons that Thomas doesn't speak out in groups.

Having looked at the receptionist, Thomas quietly finished off his coffee. A smartly dressed man approached. "Thomas", he stated confidently. It sounded like the positive voice of Philip he had heard earlier. Thomas said "yes" and stood up. "Hi, I'm Philip, thanks for coming Thomas. Do people call you Tom or Thomas?", said Philip. Thomas answered as they headed off for an office, with Philip talking all the way. Philip seemed to act forward to Thomas, but he was very well mannered and not at all offensive.

They sat down at opposite sides of a large empty desk. Thomas sat tense and upright with a somewhat serious looking

frown above his intense eyes. "Phil" was sprawled out in his plush leather seat on the boss's side. "Okay; did you bring your CV Thomas?", Phil enthusiastically asked. "Yes", said Thomas, carefully drawing it out from his inside pocket and passing it over. "Right; Good man", Phil said. Thomas was feeling less than a "man", which made his comment seem condescending. After a few moments of reading, Phil reiterated some of the earlier telephone conversation and then announced, "Yeah. It's a little short Thomas". "But I thought CVs were supposed to be short", came his reply. Thomas had read a book about CVs that his mother had pushed on him. This was a mystery, two presumably expert sources, were in contradiction. He would just have to trust Phil, after all, he had been given much encouragement by him earlier in the day. Phil said, "Not in computing. We need as much as we can put down".

Phil began to ask Thomas to describe all the work he had done during the last 12 months, much of which he had already heard on the phone earlier. Thomas didn't realise this, but the list was admirable, and why otherwise would Phil want every drop? As fast as Thomas could talk about the different computer aid learning packages and teaching aids he had written, Phil scribbled down the words. Phil barely stopped or even questioned as Thomas listed: the multiple choice marking software, which had been converted to work on a network of BBC micros or stand alone on a PC; his fully configurable

NMR teaching package; the graphical, optical isomerism teaching software; the NHS prescriptions drawing program, that was used to train pharmacists to spot errors; Thomas's favourite, his molecule drawing program that in turn generated statements for you, in any language you set it for, to draw the same molecules in your own program; a simple molecular graphics viewing program, wrote as an experiment with Jim. Molecules could be rotated, etc., and viewed as a solid mass. The data format was a hierarchy of ones and zeros defining smaller and smaller cubes. It allowed drug/protein interactions to be tested using binary logic. Jim was what you call "a rocket scientist", he wasn't mentioned though on that program; and finally, a couple of less interesting programs that just presented information without interaction. In the previous 12 months, Thomas had been prolific, and Phil wanted to sell that.

Having gathered all his information, Phil told Thomas that they would get to work straight away and if he hadn't heard from them within a couple of weeks, then to phone them. However, they had one or two places in mind already, but especially one that favoured academics, whose contact had a chemistry rather than a computer degree, just like Thomas. However, there was one slight worry remaining. Phil was concerned about Thomas's general demeanour. He suggested Thomas tried to relax a little, and he even gave him some suggestions. Whilst not being patronising, he shared how Thomas might achieve a looser look. Thomas listened, though

it was easier said than done, beside his current unease, due to the huge empty desk, the finch, the slight over familiarity, etc., was probably going to be nothing compared to an interview. It was a lack of sincerity Thomas was reacting to, he wanted openness, he wanted to be able to trust. Thomas didn't realise it, but he was entering the big wide world and with no guarantees of what lay ahead. Having flopped his shoulders up and down and tried to stop frowning, Thomas stood up, shook Phil's hand and was led to the door. It was time to go back to the cell.

Thomas felt somewhat happier after seeing the agent. He had received some hope. But he also felt a little awkward because he may need to tell Roger that he was resigning. Roger had plans but more importantly he had kindly passed on his own opportunity to travel to Australia for Thomas' value. There turned out to be more than enough time to cancel the Australian trip because within the next two weeks, Thomas had an interview with a scientific software house. A few days later an offer was made, which Thomas accepted.

Thomas' one month notice was spent documenting his many programs. During which time, four people commented on his move. The head technician, who it seemed only spoke to people who were either coming or going, had said, they couldn't have matched Thomas's new salary. Bill had asked why Thomas hadn't waited till after the Australia trip, his facial expression showing puzzlement. Thomas said he wasn't

bothered. Years later he considered it a missed opportunity and a shame. Roger had called him a "stupid boy". Thomas had contradicted him with, "I don't think so", an answer based purely on monetary terms. Besides, it wasn't stupidity, Thomas genuinely thought his anxieties could be left behind in the university. Of course, the problem was within and would move with him. Thomas needed to learn the hard way, because he didn't trust what others said when his life was involved. Finally, a comment made by the tea lady in the common room was significant. She had sympathised with Thomas about leaving, saying he hadn't liked it there. She could certainly have been excused for drawing that conclusion. But then she had said, "Look after number one". Thomas had been struggling very much with understanding how people ticked, so from a mature, impartial, and down to earth women, such as the tea lady, he had thought this must have been an important piece of passing wisdom, and unfortunately passed it on himself one day, but to the disgust of its recipient.

Chapter 7 - The Only Way Is Down

Thomas had already met three of his new colleagues during his interview. Dr Tim Horton had opened the interview. He was both the software manager, and the chemist Phil recalled at the recruitment agency. Tim was lively and seemed friendly. A project leader called James had been second to interview Thomas. James looked bright. Perhaps the stroking of his beard had added to this image, or maybe it was his round rimmed glasses. He was like some of Thomas' brother's friends, gentle, hippy like. Quite some time later, and strangely, Thomas asked James if he'd ever been a hippy. A little puzzled, he replied "no." Nevertheless, he did sport a beard, was gentle and occasionally wore sandals. But even more to the point, just as 2CV driving Clare had become a teacher, James' alleged stereotype matched his vehicle perfectly also. He drove a VW Camper van. Finally, there was Mike, he was impersonal: an intense looking wiz-kid, only interested in Thomas' technical ability, but Thomas felt on secure ground with him.

On day one, Thomas discovered he wasn't the only new employee. He was one of two new programmers. Naturally Thomas was nervous, but not being alone, the pressure to speak was somewhat diluted. Tim introduced them both to the rest of the staff and provided some wit to make up for the

absence of conversation that followed. It allowed him to survive the introductions unscathed.

Thomas' seat was in a corner of the open plan office, near the exit. People would walk past the front of his desk to head to the front offices, or to go to the coffee machine. Facing him at the other side of the clearway was James, his back to the wall also. To the right of Thomas sat Steve and to his left Dave.

Thomas found Steve very difficult to relate to. He had certainly not met anybody like him before. In appearance, Steve was red faced, fair haired and considerably overweight. He spoke with a lip smacking, self-satisfaction, which seemed to contradict the sighs that he breathed out around three or four times a day. Thomas judged Steve to be about 22 years old. It later turned out he was in fact about 32. He spoke in a manner of someone much older, even like a staid fifty-year-old. Nevertheless, he was quite friendly. Steve lived with just his mother and was in some ways the personification of a fear of Thomas'. That fear being to never flee the nest like a perpetual mother's boy.

Dave was a couple of years older than Thomas and easier to relate to than Steve, because he seemed like a typical graduate. Whereas Steve had gained his degree as an older, mature student, and hadn't been part of mainstream student life.

Overall, the people were younger than those in his last place of employment, so Thomas felt he needed to form relationships more than ever now. Or more to the point he needed peer approval and validation. After all, he left university with little regarding friendships. He had had a less than ideal holiday. Bill had told Roger there was a personality clash. More worryingly, Bill had told a story about an interviewee who had left three previous jobs on account of clashes. Thomas didn't want to be headed down that route, the prospect was worrying.

The biggest handicap that Thomas had to forming new relationships, was in the way he viewed himself, which was simply out of line with the way practically everybody else viewed him. Thomas was still identifying with having a connection with the bright, no-nonsense Frank, and the travelled and classical Peter. He even thought his looks might help make him stand out, and in such a generally quiet office why shouldn't they? The rest of the staff *looked* kind of dull to him. What was he expecting?

Thomas had loosely held on to friends at university whilst being very quiet. He thought perhaps other people would make the effort. However, varying degrees of loyalty had kept his university friends, without which he'd probably have had none.

Thomas became the quiet person he now was after losing his university girlfriend, Eva, when she dismembered

the menage á trois. Perhaps the experience had awakened feelings of rejection already within him. His mother had left when he was eight. To begin with he was popular at university, 'a good laugh', and he had no worries about finding words to say.

Having been introduced to everybody it was time for Thomas to start work. It was a gentle introduction. He was to look at a software library and familiarise himself with all the routines. It was the peak processing library. That was to be Thomas' share of a large chromatography data system, CDS. 'Peak processing' calculated the size of peaks in a chromatograph. These peaks may represent concentrations of medical drugs and therefore needed to be precise. Thomas felt the job was a particularly important and responsible one. Though all the code had already been written by Tim. Unfortunately, the code turned out to have many bugs, the essence of which all stemmed from the assumptions that were made about the shape of small peaks. Tim called Thomas 'Peak Processing Man' and rather humorously went on to say, "You can wear your underpants on the outside of your trousers if you like. It made Thomas smile, he liked Tim.

With Dave and Steve either side of him, Thomas began finding his way through the 'PP' code. He was continuously conscious of his own presence whilst he worked. So much so that when Tim walked past to go to the coffee machine Thomas would change his expression to one of perplexity or

concentration or some other form of mental activity. Tim would say 'Thomas looking perplexed' or whatever. Thomas would then smile at him or say "Oh not really" or something similar. He valued the perceived friendly comments from his boss and kept making looks. He felt compelled to do so. By looking deep in thought it covered up for him not having much to say. Meanwhile, every now and again Thomas would be 'piggy in the middle' in one of Dave and Steve's exchanges. Thomas would have to stop working and listen with an occasional nod. He had little to add himself but didn't want to be rude by continuing working. His over sensitivity may have been transparent.

The other new programmer was a smoker and being a little quiet like Thomas, he was a possible friend for cigarette breaks. It wasn't to be though, as he left in just a couple of days, leaving Thomas to smoke alone. Thomas was permanently on edge, both the smoking breaks and going to the toilet became his only chance to deal with his anxiety. But especially in the toilets where he had to go for deep breathing. Everywhere else he feared people. Even going to the coffee machine was worrying in case he met somebody there and had to find something to say whilst waiting for a drink. Thomas felt naked. He was neither thick skinned nor masked. He was at the mercy of others but didn't understand people. At his last job he felt isolated but avoided people. Here he had plenty of people around and wanted space.

Thomas soon completed his first programming assignment, and both Tim and the Technical Director, Kevin, showed their favour. Thomas had shown he was both quick and bright when it came to computer programming. Considering that Thomas had a chemistry degree and Dave a computing degree, that might have been a source of grudge. At this point though it wasn't. Thomas was extremely quiet, so much so, that after a couple of months with the company, Dave asked him quite simply if he was a happy man. Thomas said, "Yes, I'm alright". Dave said, "That's good to hear".

Thomas was anything but alright, he was seriously wearing out his nerves with fear and anxiety. He was already in a down mood prior to joining the company, in fact from as long back as the start of his second year in university when after Eva had left him. He could still remember becoming withdrawn and especially the moment that Stuart the Australian told him he had lost the art of conversation. Thomas had another problem, because he had no social life and was steadily developing a dependence on alcohol.

Thomas' situation was too big for him to face, so he lived in denial and pretend mode. Like a fish surrounded by sharks. Thomas' colleagues had the power to harm him with knowledge. He felt they knew him better than he knew himself.

Dave started to become a little petty. For instance, there was a desk behind him which was empty. Thomas used to put his coat on it. Then when Thomas left the room, the coat would

be moved away. Apparently, the empty desk belonged to Dave. That was one of the first clearly unfriendly gestures Dave made. Thomas didn't know how to react to such pathetic territoriality. In a different context, and later, Dave made clearer his territorial attitude by describing the office as a collection of empires, each person guarding their own. Steve added, "It's true, we're not paranoid." It worried Thomas to think people thought that way. Dave went on to say, that without a workstation you were considered a "grunt". Steve, Dave, and Thomas all had less expensive PCs rather than workstations. There was an obvious flaw in this assertion, that being, that the software manager, Tim Horton also had a PC. Nevertheless, Thomas didn't like being thought of as a grunt, he had his pride

Thomas' pride got chipped away at by Steve. Steve also lived at home with his mother he didn't seem to do anything in work and Thomas started to get a strange idea about him. Thomas began to think he'd been seated where he was because Steve was employed to humiliate people. Thomas also lived at home, which he'd vowed never to do, and Steve was going to make him accept that he was a mummy's boy. The humiliation would result in destruction of personality and Thomas would end up like a totally subservient robot, or at least that's what he was thinking. In this state he wouldn't have the confidence to get a job elsewhere, he'd be trapped.

Changes were made to the CDS which made Thomas' testing impossible to carry out on his PC. Being a straightforward person, Thomas simply asked if he could use redundant workstations from other empires and shyly began to spread himself around the office, the older people seemed more approachable here and there. Most people other than Steve and Dave didn't talk in the office so the protocol away from grunts corner suited Thomas.

The problem changes were to a section of the program called 'CFS' or 'Chromatography file system. During a slightly slack period Thomas suggested that he may modify 'CFS' so he could go back to where he was before. Dave told Thomas he was 'digging his own grave'. Somewhat fed up with Dave's attitude by now Thomas went straight to Tim and asked him, in public even, what might be behind such a comment. Tim told him it was because Dave should have done the same job and by doing that work, work Dave was avoiding was made more viable. Thomas was more comfortable after hearing that. Not knowing could bother Thomas more than the knowing itself. Thomas could obsessively try to find answers to things, gradually checking theories with events over time. He had an unusual memory of often insignificant words and actions. It could involve immense mental effort.

Having cleared up that mystery, Thomas headed back for his seat. As soon as he sat down Dave leaned over and said, "Now you've climbed in the grave and are tipping the soil all

over your head.” Thomas was not terribly worried about that statement, he interpreted it as, "You've upset me". However, Thomas didn't realise that Dave's upset could affect him.

Thomas finished the conversion of CFS in just over a week. It worked but had limitations due to problems with the infamously short MS-DOS filename lengths. However, it enabled Thomas' test harness to work again, whilst it didn't catapult Dave's ignored project back on track. It also proved Thomas had the technical nerve to risk embarrassment. He jumped into unknown code and got a quick result. Thomas had a lot of confidence in his programming skills. Dave probably realised that and felt ill of it. Around about this time Dave said to Thomas quite pointedly, "people talk". The implication was that Thomas was not a person, rather, more like a robot. If Dave couldn't compete technically, he would do so personally. Like a terrier, Dave never let go from that day onwards.

After using his new CFS code for a while Thomas decided that the test harness arrangement, which was just a workaround, was too complicated and he would simply ask for a workstation. Tim agreed, Thomas had to wait for one to come vacant, though not long as there appeared to be a slow but steady stream of people leaving the company. This didn't suggest the obvious to Thomas.

The next in the line of departures was Jeremy. Jeremy was headed for a life of contract programming, the life that everybody seemed to talk about. He was a nice man really, but

in a sort of transparent way. When Thomas joined the company, he was the only other one apart from Steve and Dave that talked to him. He had asked a couple of times whether Thomas wanted to join him and some others for badminton. Thomas made excuses. Jeremy offered alternative dates. Thomas made excuses. He was clearly playing the role of self-appointed works social officer, a role that wasn't without point scoring. Thomas liked to establish a rapport before going out with people in an evening. An evening with strangers could be exceptionally stressful.

Once when Thomas was borrowing a workstation near Jeremy, Jeremy had a moan about the other programmer who had left after two days. He said how unprofessional it was to mess a company about like that. James who was sat nearby proposed action. Thomas was frustrated. What is the matter with these people, why can't they be real he thought. This word, professional, had cropped up quite a few times. Thomas thought it meant getting paid for your work as opposed to having an amateur status. Dave had used the word so often that Thomas thought he was hinting something. Thomas was a rookie and didn't understand the attitude of his colleagues and the full meaning of this term. However, he did have the sense that the line between professionalism and bullshit, could be fine. In his frustration Thomas defended the quitter. Thomas remembered what the tea lady had said to him when he left the university, that was surely sound wisdom. He said, "I suppose

in the end you've got to look after number one". Thomas' experience was verifying the statement, but it went down like a ton of bricks. Conversation stopped with incredulous looks from Jeremy.

Another term which Thomas didn't understand was 'yes man'. He went to work and was paid for doing what was asked of him. If he didn't like the job, he was free to find another. But saying no to something was surely downright awkwardness. Or was it failure of management that people could say no. Either way Thomas felt it was unfair when Dave implied that Thomas was a yes man. Dave said one day, "This company wants yes men". Poor Thomas felt like he was in a foreign land.

The day Jeremy left, there was a collection in which Thomas didn't get chance to contribute. During the lunch hour everybody went to the pub, except Thomas, who went home as usual. He was still learning to play the piano, and he travelled the 15 minutes journey home every lunch hour to get a half hour's practise. Besides, he found socialising in pubs very difficult, the chance of there being an awkward silence was high. When Thomas and a few others had returned to the office, Tim came up to Thomas and asked him had he been to the pub. Thomas said he'd been home to practise the piano. Tim looked astonished. He then asked a few questions about Thomas' piano and walked away. Thomas felt touched that interest had been shown in him.

Eventually, everybody was back from the pub, and it was speech time. Usually Tim would speak, but for Jeremy, Kevin who ranked higher, came out of his office. They might well have sung "For he's a jolly good fellow", because at least it was more concise. Of course, mention was made of Jeremy's charitable efforts towards bringing people together outside of work. Thomas felt a little awkward at that point, but he felt decidedly victimised moments later. Just before presenting Jeremy with his present, Kevin said, "at least one person didn't contribute to the leaving present". "Who was *IT*", announced one of the sales support staff in a light and comical manner. Thomas was defiant and eyeballed Kevin. Though it was surely him, he wouldn't act as if was.

With Jeremy's departure Thomas was able to take over his workstation. This presented him with a dilemma, did he move the workstation back to Steve and Dave and risk snide comments, or did he simply leave it where it was, away from grunt corner. He left it. Dave looked over at him and smiled, Thomas smiled back. He was pleased with his new empire and assumed that Dave was acknowledging his move up also. But it wasn't long before Kevin came over and said, "have you seen the snarls?".

Work just carried on as normal. Thomas' anxiety levels were lower where he sat now. The people around him were a little older, more mature than Steve and Dave, they just got on with their work. When Thomas had been in his old seat, his

first bi-annual review had mentioned, "manages to work despite distractions". After a few days, Steve came to visit him, he said how he didn't see much of him now. Steve was being friendly, and Thomas appreciated it.

Work was more comfortable now. Thomas didn't have Tim walking past him commenting on his looks, or Dave telling him he was digging his own grave, or conversations to play piggy in the middle in. He sat amongst a group who just quietly got on with their work and then went home. He no longer needed to go to the toilets for deep breathing and was quite content. However, it wasn't going to last forever because the company had secured one of the new office blocks which were being built nearby. In the meantime, Kath had befriended Thomas, she was one of the girls from support. Kath said how much better 'PP' was since Thomas had arrived. Thomas still thought the algorithm was hopeless but at least it didn't crash so often. He quite naturally didn't get too settled in his new environment. Being pessimistic he just enjoyed it as it lasted. It wasn't going to be for many months with the company relocating.

Meanwhile, Kath invited Thomas out on a social, and he agreed. He knew Kath was married, but naively, he didn't expect she would bring her husband with her. They met in a pub in Kath's town and Thomas arrived early and already had three or four pints of beer beforehand. Thomas had never had a chance to really talk with an ally from work. When Kath and

her husband arrived, Thomas played it by ear, Kath was doing most of the talking, she told Thomas that Steve was the company joke. She repeated how she was impressed with Thomas' bug fixing. Then not knowing what to talk about, but feeling it was of some profound relevance, Thomas told Kath about how his mother had left when he was eight. The night passed fast with many cigarettes and drink up to the point that Thomas was slurring his words. He then drove home, it wasn't the first time he'd driven drunk, and it wasn't to be the last, yet.

With a friendship more firmly established in Kath, the next day Thomas drove to her house with a worry on his mind. There was an older programmer who never spoke to anybody, and it was concerning him. Maybe that is how you end up in this line of work, Thomas was already headed in that direction. Who will marry you if you don't talk. He needed some answers and asked Kath if the programmer was OK. She assured Thomas with an expression of surprise that there was nothing wrong with the programmer. Thomas was reassured and left.

Thomas continued to be friendly with Kath until one day it changed overnight. Kath moved from support into sales. Sales and software engineering were for some reason unknown to Thomas, incompatible. He needn't have stopped talking to Kath but in an immature way he followed the vibes about the situation and broke off. Presumably he thought, sales have a habit of selling software that hasn't yet been written and trying

to bypass the software manager for completion dates, or some other best avoided thing.

So, Thomas had no ally again and the move to the new office was on him. What would it be like? Moving, or the setting up of the offices, was to be done seamlessly over the weekend by volunteers. Thomas left it to chance as to where he would end up sitting. He didn't want to have to stand his ground when it came to building a new empire. So, he arrived at work on the Monday to find out that he'd been situated in the corner with Dave and Steve again. Also, both Dave and Steve had window seats giving them control over significantly, ventilation and a car park view, but that beat the last office which had no windows. Worryingly for Thomas, he was sat practically facing a young woman, though she was quiet and nonthreatening. Her name was Julie, she had a master's degree it emerged. Her machine was a workstation and as such her and Thomas marked the boundary of the new grunt corner.

Thomas had little to do and took every opportunity to go out and smoke, but he couldn't be seen to be doing it too often. He would rapidly draw from his cigarettes and be back in the office in no time at all, having not relaxed any. Each day was much like the next for the most part. Perceived attacks occurred, then one day after weeks, Julie invited Thomas out on a lunch hour for a game of badminton, at the local sports centre. Thomas didn't know if this meant she must fancy him, or she just wanted to form a better relationship, since they're

in the corner of each other's eyes all day long five days a week. They went, and Thomas acted the goat, by playing terribly, which Julie found humorous. It didn't get them talking though, and they didn't play again. Furthermore, Julie didn't stay with the company for much longer, leaving to find a job in sales somewhere.

With a vacancy created, Tim managed to persuade the general manager to let him have two more software engineers. Naturally, one sat in front of Thomas, a smoker with a PhD, and the other sat elsewhere. Thomas got on OK with the smoker. But this didn't happen before everyone was called to a meeting and it was simply stated that it had failed miserably. What? Thomas never found out.

One day when just Thomas and James, the project leader, occupied the grunt corner, James said to Thomas "he's a company liability." After what Kath had said about Steve being the company joke, Thomas assumed that James was talking about Steve. But it was another vague reference.

Another higher calibre member of the software engineering department announced he was leaving. He'd had the secondary role of looking after the unix server, and left managing itself, Dave soon stood in and moved from the corner to spend time doing disk housekeeping, etc. Unix has processes known as "zombies", which are basically dead and need removing so they don't use up any resources. Dave cleverly visited the corner and used them as a metaphor for

Thomas and perhaps James, as he spoke to Steve. Thomas was beginning to despise Dave. On another occasion he used his new position to annoy Thomas in a different way. The main distribution directory of the software had a file in it called credits.txt. Thomas was curious and looked at it, it contained the names of everybody he knew, and many besides, but his was missing. Furiously, he confronted Dave and told him to delete the file. Dave asked him, what was the matter with him. Thomas was heading towards having a breakdown. He was very stressed. Dave didn't exactly delete the file. He made a copy under a different name and then deleted it. Thomas was annoyed but pleased that he'd tried to stand up for himself.

Thomas was sick of the company. He had a couple of run ins with someone else. Steve had got talking to Thomas about guns, Thomas' uncle had a farm and Thomas occasionally went shooting on it. Steve had a .357 revolver. Gordon, another software engineer who sat nearby in the new office interrupted one such conversation. "What do you shoot" he inquired. Thomas knew where this was leading, so he said "pigeons". Gordon thought he had Thomas, and he said, "what do you do with them?". Thomas didn't eat them, in fact he'd only ever shot about three. He said, "I throw them in a brook." Astonished, Gordon turned to the nearest person, saying "did you hear that?". They laughed.

A student had joined the grunt corner. James still had a beard, but for whatever reason, Steve and the Student grew

one. Thomas was beginning to get strange ideas as he thought it was a hint for himself to grow one and he did. Further, there had been talk banded about, around working in Libya were James once worked. Thomas took that as a hint to work in Libya, somewhere he could catch up emotionally whilst still working.

It was summer and there weren't enough fans in the office, having had one run in with Gordon, Thomas was ready for another and turned the fan to point at himself. When Thomas returned from having a cigarette the fan was pointing towards Gordon. Thomas said, "do you mind not turning the fan round Gordon." Thomas didn't really give a damn but he liked to make a point. Gordon saw the funny side.

With Thomas' new stepping out behaviour he decided to go to the pub one lunch hour. As usual he didn't say very much, smoking cigarette after cigarette. On the way back to the office he was in a car, with Gordon driving and Dave in the passenger seat. Dave and Gordon started talking about someone referring to them in the third person. Thomas felt acute anxiety and tried to build up the courage to find out who they were talking about. "He's ruined his career, he's a yes man", Thomas challenged them, "so I'm fucked". Dave smiled, as did Gordon, then he asked, "what are you going to do?". Thomas was silent and depressed, Gordon said "don't worry! I can feel the waves of depression from here." It was the beginning of the end.

The smoker that sat in front of Thomas had got a new job in Amsterdam and the place was vacant, but before leaving he'd hinted to Thomas that the company had a plan for Thomas. Thomas was out of the loop. A reshuffle occurred but just before, Thomas was sat with Tim and Dave and CFS reared its ugly head. Dave said, "get Thomas to do it." Having been called a yes man on more than one occasion directly or by a hint, with great difficulty, Thomas stamped his foot down forcibly, saying NO. Tim was astonished by Thomas again and Dave said nothing. However, Thomas was given CFS to do, so the next day he resigned, and as he hadn't got another job to go to, he worked his one month notice for the money. Dave said to Thomas, "I've been cruel." Thomas, like his father, was forgiving, so he replied, "no you haven't."

Chapter 8 – Help On The Horizon

Having quit his job, the upside was that Thomas had more time for the piano. His bed also figured, and his mother would tip the mattress up to eject him as the problem worsened. The piano was the only positive thing in his life at this point, he was beginning to suffer from increasingly bizarre ideas, much of which centred round his old company, but it related to his local neighbourhood, too.

No one expected someone like Thomas to resign. It was “said” in one of the third person references, “he can’t make a decision.” James had a friend, another PhD. He made a lot of money out of environmental monitoring of workplaces etc. After Thomas resigned, he met up with James because they shared a musical interest. Thomas felt OK with James. James’ friend was there, Thomas thought James was suggesting that Thomas sue his old company because the lack of air conditioning was causing depersonalisation. He’d read a book about anxiety, and it mentioned hyperventilation and depersonalisation, which lead Thomas to think the environment was creating robots out of people, except those that were sat by windows. It was very confused, Thomas was making connections with everything, and then some more. Someone had once said Tim was mad for taking on Thomas because he may quit then figure it all out, Thomas thought. Thomas didn’t focus on the successful quitters. He thought

everything was aimed at making him a slave to look after the CDS.

All the third person references had got one stage worse for Thomas, he also didn't know if people meant the opposite of what they said now. People's lack of straight conversation, and his state of mind, had left him mentally very vulnerable. He felt low and despicable, his mother didn't like the beard, which Thomas had decided showed the world, that he himself knew he was underdeveloped emotionally. In fact, a friend of an old childhood friend he visited, had said, "why doesn't he grow a beard?". As usual though, Thomas didn't know who "he" was.

One day Thomas was walking in the village. A young couple with a pram were in front of him. The male spoke, then they crossed the road. Thomas sank, he was convinced they were trying to avoid him because he didn't have a beard and was therefore some sort of antisocial person that they didn't want to have anywhere near the baby.

The neighbour opposite was a milkman. Thomas thought he could do that job and it was arranged one day that the float owner would pick Thomas up and they would deliver. They did, and Thomas was paid five pounds. He hated the man's foul tongue, and both the hours and pay were terrible, so he didn't do it again. However, it featured in Thomas' connection about Libya, in that he thought it was an alternative

to going to Libya. He was getting no better, and it was time to visit his GP.

Thomas' mother went with him. She told the GP he wasn't well. He said one word: "milkman". Why he said milkman, Thomas nor his mother could ever understand? The GP was a little bit strange. One of Thomas' old friends saw him in the waiting room, he was visiting his mother, who worked there. She lived next door to Thomas' mum's house. So, word could have emerged about him, he thought in a paranoid style. Thomas moved forward and stared as if into the GP's soul, for 20 seconds. The intensity of Thomas' stare caused the GP to retract stiffly with his hands firmly on his desk. Thomas eased off and his mother said, "you shouldn't have said milkman." He was referred to a consultant psychiatrist.

In a matter of a few days, Thomas found himself in the offices of a very respectable group of private doctors. He was to see Dr Pamela Trouts FRCPsych. The waiting room was full of people, fifteen perhaps, and only one chair was free. Thomas assumed it was a setup to see if he sat in it. He nearly did, then indecision struck, and he went back to his parents. They didn't have to wait long and soon Thomas was at the opposite end of a very wide desk to an expressionless Pamela who asked Thomas to tell her what had been going on. Thomas tried to explain his old company and the ideas about Libya and third person references, but he got tangled up in his words and

couldn't continue. He thought he'd made a mess of it, but even though Pamela seemed to be writing everything down, she could have been writing anything because it wasn't what Thomas said so much as how flatly he trotted off his monotone that was important. At one point his dad who never showed emotion nearly welled up.

The next time Thomas saw Pamela, it was at the hospital. Thomas was thought to be schizophrenic. Pamela asked him what he thought was wrong with himself. As Thomas had read part of the *Divided Self* by R.D. Laing, he said "schizophrenia", and Pamela replied, "yes, I think so." Thomas smiled, he'd been a psychiatrist, but not only that, surely he wouldn't have to work again, he thought at that time?

Thomas was getting all sorts of ideas. For example, he thought he was an intrinsic rapist, who had yet to strike. He had an underlying shame about masturbation. Once his mother had taken him to see a counsellor about his problems. On the second visit, with great embarrassment for the counsellor, Thomas told him he masturbated. The counsellor told Thomas he was on a spectrum of acceptable behaviour, and he didn't have sex with children or animals so not to worry. He recommended the book *The Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort.

Thomas could reach orgasm without aids, independently, and would therefore, he thought, survive sexually in prison, if he was caught for rape. The lads on the other side of the road, on the other hand, were building up their

chest muscles doing bench presses, in their open doored garage. Thomas thought it was their way of holding in emotional pain rather than releasing it as he could. He got the idea that they were preparing for a stretch. They knew Thomas masturbated, because he didn't do weights, he figured, and they were going to beat Thomas up before he struck as a rapist. Besides, Thomas was being defiant for not wearing a beard to cover his underdeveloped shame.

One night he was convinced they were waiting for him. He told his mother, "they're in the street." She asked who, and he said, "they're going to get me." His mother protested: "there's no body there", and she went to open the curtains. Thomas shouted "no!" and went to an upstairs room to peep out. There was no one there.

His mother's second husband, Derek, went regularly as clockwork to the pub at night at a certain time. Thomas thought that being acceptable to society meant stopping thinking and operating by heart. It was the night of the curtains, and Thomas thought if he had to act like clockwork, he needed cigarettes and alcohol: he sheepishly headed to the off license. He got there a minute late, but it was still open. Thomas decided the shopkeeper knew he was coming, and Thomas had then to decided which were his brands, as he would have to be a man and stick to them. He walked back with his supplies but feared for his life as he turned the corner to his mother's road. He was expecting the weightlifters, but they weren't there.

Thomas thought he had a problem. He couldn't think clearly on the day he was meant to go into hospital. He needed to masturbate. He felt as a rapist, he wouldn't be able to be nonviolent, and able to satisfy his impulses in fantasy. He sat on his bed and his mother held him. She said she'd do anything for him, with what Thomas thought was a look he'd never seen before. A sick thought flashed through his head then he had a bath and was able to masturbate in the bath. He felt his voice dropped in pitch afterwards and he'd had a realisation, that of him becoming a man.

Thomas walked downstairs and noticed his mum had put out a black t-shirt and a white t-shirt. Thomas had a decision to make, he went for the black one, put his shoes on and went out of the front door. Thomas noticed a lot of windows down the street were opened and made the connection, that they were expecting him to shout, "I'm a man." Then Thomas realised black represented bad and white the opposite, and recoiled inside, imploring his mother, why she had put a black shirt out?

Thomas usually had a low voice, but didn't have a girlfriend or didn't do weights, so his status was obvious to everybody, he now realised that. Issues like this were brought up at Thomas' first hospital visit which was on the same day of the black t-shirt wearing. As it happened, the hospital was a prestigious private one, in the same town as his previous company. It was quite local, but despite the journey being

short, it involved some intrepidity because he was going to be staying.

Thomas was shown his room and it was a matter of a few minutes before a nurse arrived. He asked Thomas his name and where he lived, casually, unthreateningly. Other basic questions followed, no pressure. Of course, they already had these details, Thomas thought he was being interrogated though and the thought that the nurse was showing how easily Thomas spilled the beans entered his head. He dried up offering no more and the nurse left. Thomas told his mother he thought the nurse was in fact a police officer and was heading towards a confession from Thomas about his ideas about rape. Thomas' mum was questioned when she left and he was alone in his room with music and a television, but he chose to stare at the ceiling, whilst wondered if there was a camera in the room.

A nurse knocked on Thomas' door and arrived with a yellow liquid and some tablets. Thomas took it and spent more of the day in his room. Night-time came. Thomas had been for dinner, which was fabulous, but he was isolated in his room. He went into the common room where two people at either ends of a moderately large group of people, all looking OK, were talking. There seemed to be some friction. Thomas thought he would join them but had to ask if it was OK for him to do so. He could have just sat down. The night past listening to people talk, Thomas didn't speak. In fact, just before he

went to bed, he had to find a nurse because he couldn't speak, literally. The nurse gave Thomas a drug and it counteracted the side effects of his earlier medicine and loosened his jaw.

Every morning apart from weekends the day started with exercise, gentle but just enough to raise the pulse a bit and the rest of the day was spent either eating or taking part in groups like anxiety management, art therapy or confidence building, etc. Thomas liked the groups where you had to write a note about one of the other group members then read it out. Once or twice, he had nice things said about him. All the time Thomas was under the influence of strong anti-psychotic drugs. There were also ad hoc groups, where a discussion was proposed, but Thomas didn't enter these groups; this time.

Thomas continued to see Pamela at the hospital every few days and his thinking got back to normal. He took a drug called Stelazine which when he left the hospital was administered by his GP as a depot injection, or one similar. Thomas didn't leave the hospital totally, because he still saw Pamela and was an outpatient doing confidence building in the day block.

It became apparent over time that the diagnosis of schizophrenia was wrong and psychotic depression was more accurate. This sounded bad but was good in fact because mood disorders have a more favourable outcome than schizophrenia.

Thomas was OK with that, but his GP was gradually getting fussy about writing sick notes for Thomas' social security benefits, but Thomas didn't feel ready to work. He

was still spending his time on the piano, and around grade five. He longed to reach grade eight and to play more of his beloved Chopin.

Thomas' outpatient treatment ended, or rather his parents' budget had been reached. Pamela asked Thomas had the treatment helped him, the confidence building that was and like his father he blunted just said "no" and Pamela laughed at the irony, he had clearly learned how to say no at least.

Thomas managed to persuade his GP to keep writing sick notes for the period he needed them, and schizophrenia was diluted to psychotic depression and then to affective disorder, otherwise known as a mood disorder of some description. Thomas' mother was worried about Thomas having no social outlet and she rang the local NHS psychiatric hospital Outreach service to arrange for Thomas to see them, she did all she could for her son.

Chapter 9 - Outreach

So Thomas' mother had asked the local hospital to call and told Thomas to expect such a call. Within a couple of days, Thomas as usual, was practising the piano, and the phone rang in the afternoon. It was Del asking, "hi, is that Thomas?", "Yes", said Thomas. "Your mother rang me and said that you might like to come out with us. We go fishing, play ten pin bowls and things like that. Do you like those?" Del's voice was childlike and on the one hand easy to say no to but on the other so unthreatening you wouldn't want to. Thomas said he liked fishing and ten pin bowling, and Del said he'd be in touch when a fishing trip was organised.

On the day of the fishing trip Thomas drove to the old Edwardian hospital in vast grounds and asked for Del at reception. A small man with a beard came down the long corridor to meet Thomas and took him to the social therapy department to wait for the others. There was no pressure to talk, everything was very relaxed, and nothing was assumed about Thomas.

A small group mainly Thomas' age gathered, they looked less privileged than Thomas, they probably didn't have parents that could afford private doctors for instance. They got in a minibus and Del drove them to a river were one of the group, Tommy, caught a chub. Thomas was impressed as he had been a keen fisherman with Derek before "growing out of

the hobby” at university. There was a girl who was just along for the ride, her name was Debbie and she seemed quite bubbly and cheeky. Thomas didn’t take a great deal of notice of her, because his attitude towards woman, excluding Clare, was physical, and he didn’t fancy Debbie.

The next week was by coincidence a trip to the village where Thomas lived, it was a picturesque place in the village centre, and brought visitor from all around. They arrived on the village car park, and Debbie was showing a lot of interest in Thomas. She asked his name, where he lived, all the basic questions, and the cheeky ones she could get away with, whilst not being over familiar. It soon emerged they both played the piano, and Debbie described herself as a singer songwriter. She showed Thomas her card that she’d had made, Thomas was mildly impressed, any musician could impress him as he thought his reading of music was something that you could train an intelligent monkey to do. In other words, it wasn’t an innate gift, but singing was different, because it was so heart felt, and original songs were so creative.

When they got back to the hospital, Debbie was still with Thomas, who agreed to drive her home. She lived in the nearby town from Thomas to the other side of where Thomas used to work. When they arrived at Debbie’s house, Debbie came straight out with it and ask Thomas if he wanted to “go out” with her? Whilst Thomas didn’t fancy Debbie, she wasn’t ugly, and he thought he could have sex with her if he got the

chance, so he agreed. She said, “give us a kiss then:”, and Thomas kissed her cheek, making Debbie smile. She gave Thomas her card, left his Triumph Herald, waved, and smiling, she went inside her parent’s house.

In between visiting the social therapy department, Thomas was spending days practising the piano, and drinking at night. Debbie soon became Thomas’ drinking partner. Debbie often spoke about being hyper, she was a manic depressive and had been caught causing a muck in a bar in London after she had gone AWOL in a high mood. They also talked about the hospital, but music didn’t turn out to be a good topic of conversation as Debbie played boogie and Thomas loved Chopin. However, they liked getting out of their respective parents houses and it lasted quite a few months.

There were some other characters who visited social therapy regularly. Burt, another manic depressive and great at playing the piano by ear, anything you name, he knew them all. He had dancing feet too and at one dance was spinning an attractive nurse all over the dance floor. He had a big personality but was childlike with it and not aware of the charisma he had.

Stuart was a regular type of man, and incidentally, everyone smoked without exception. Stuart was on the tea-bar, also when Thomas first joined, because he chose that role too. Stuart wanted to get a job by learning sign language. Thomas suggested sign language can’t be too hard, otherwise it would

be useless. On the first day of quite a number on the tea bar, Thomas met Rob. Rob had red braces on, half-mast trousers and leaned forward when it was his turn, then karate chopped twice without speaking. Thomas asked, “what do you want?”, so he karate chopped twice again. Stuart told Thomas, “he has tea”. Thomas got a tea and asked for five pence. Rob karate chopped twice. Stuart said, “he has two sugars”. It wasn’t the only time he’d karate chopped, he did it to ask for cigarettes too.

Tony arrived, who was a younger man than Thomas, and complained of shocking voices that didn’t exist, so that he could get sickness benefits. Like Thomas, he got traveling expenses, when they were officially classed as volunteers for manning the tea-bar, etc. Tony was happy and fun to joke with. He helped with Thomas’ mood. Tony and Thomas also helped by taking people horse riding. They’d jog alongside the horse, keeping a hand ready in case the rider started to slip. Thomas took Tony to Alton Towers fun park with Debbie. He also took Tony to his dad’s, whom Tony had not seen for quite a while. Thomas never got petrol money for any of his driving because he felt embarrassed to ask for it, and no offers were ever made. It wasn’t like Thomas had much money though.

Debbie and Thomas went out for the last time, sat as they often were, quietly in a pub like an old couple, Debbie asked Thomas what he was thinking. He was thinking how quiet they were, but said he was thinking nothing. She

obviously didn't want a mindless zombie boyfriend because she said she no longer wanted to see him. Thomas was OK with this, as he bought every drink all the petrol, didn't fancy her and his attempt to have sex with her one night was not allowed. So, they drank up and walked to his old car.

Thomas tried to start the car but after several attempts the battery was flat and Debbie just sat there as Thomas had to push the car and jump in to throw it in to gear. He eventually got it going and Debbie said nothing.

Thomas continued to go to the hospital, but Debbie wasn't there, then one night, after a week or so, Thomas got a phone call from Debbie saying if he wants to go out again, she'd like to. Thomas didn't take her up on it and Debbie started going back to the hospital. Thomas was getting fed up with the hospital though, because he had asked for more voluntary work and was given a few hopeless activities to do with lost causes, like playing chess with a catatonic schizophrenic man. Luckily though for Thomas his mother spotted an advertisement in a local paper. One of the city's universities was looking for people to join its new MSc in Computing course and there was possible funding. With a computing qualification it could be a fresh start for him, so Thomas rang the number.

He spoke to the head of the course Matthew who having heard Thomas background, two jobs and a science degree said he thought he could come on the course and what's more he

thought he could get his fees paid as Thomas is out of work and he could even get him a maintenance grant. The maintenance grant would mean signing off “the sick”, which was mentioned, and Matthew asked permission to talk with Pamela.

Everything went through, and Thomas said goodbye to social therapy, which he had luckily never had to quit, with extra voluntary work dying its natural death this way. Debbie told Thomas he had landed on his feet, but Thomas’ illness could recur, even if you tried for it not to do, so she wasn’t entirely right.

Chapter 10 - The Met

Thomas was a student again, and at least for the next year perhaps, he didn't need to worry about being unemployed due to his new status. He was quite excited and had a plan of not getting too close to anybody to get him through the course. However, on day one Thomas met Julie, another Julie. She was older than Thomas by quite a few years, Thomas thought maybe ten, and very friendly. She had a coffee with Thomas in the canteen and they talked quite easily. Thomas felt more comfortable with Julie than anyone he had ever met outside of his family. She seemed genuinely interested in Thomas.

Thomas and Julie finished their coffees and went to the first class, people were gathering to go in and Thomas hoped Julie was just behind him so they'd end up sitting together in the class, he didn't presume she would sit next to him as they had only just met. But she was and she did. It was one of Thomas' strong subjects, assembly language: a low-level form of computer programming, and in the middle of the class everybody went to register, after which they had a lab session with computers, and it soon became apparent to Julie that Thomas was quite formidable when it came to programming. In fact, it emerged in time to the whole group, that Thomas was the one to aspire to technically.

He began to see Julie regularly on the course, but being a smoker, Thomas had to use the side of the canteen where the

smokers lived, and Julie used the other, so they didn't spend every break together. Nevertheless, Thomas found out with excitement that Julie was a piano teacher. Julie had got on the course to get away from piano, and who should she meet on her first day but Thomas who was mad about the piano. Julie had a degree in biochemistry and a degree in music, both from her home university, the real university down the road rather than the Met which was an old polytechnic.

To begin with Thomas would keep himself to himself in labs but sat with Julie in lessons. Sometimes though, Thomas sat with Arthur, who was a dark-skinned businessman with terribly smelly breath. He latched on to Thomas because he quickly realised he was a very good programmer. In a test sprung on the whole group by as a complete surprise, Thomas scored the highest and only, A+. He was confident he'd got every single question correct. When the sheets were handed back, Arthur asked Thomas what he'd got, allowing him to proudly say A+, to the humiliation of a contender, who'd been the first to leave the room on the test day. Arthur smiled and said, "you can tell who the real programmers are". He also kept talking about working with Thomas, and splitting money 50:50, presumably balancing Arthur's contacts with Thomas' graft. Until there was something concrete though, Thomas wasn't at all excited. However, ideas about working for Arthur, were seen as finite possibilities.

ALCM Piano Teaching Diploma (Partial)

Teaching qualities

The qualities that make a good teacher are patience, enthusiasm, an ability to explain things flexibly, the ability to communicate with all ages, a pleasant but firm manner with children and a non-patronising manner with adults. A good facility at the keyboard is useful though not essential unless aspiring to college level teaching. Some teachers do not demonstrate, the reason being that students mimic what they hear and don't work the music out for themselves. Good sight-reading skills are useful if a demonstration is appropriate and aural skills are very useful when listening to the student play.

Lesson timetables

It would be marvellous if one were able to spend part of the lesson doing aural work, then part doing sight-reading, theory, pieces, scales, etc. Unfortunately, it isn't possible to fit them all into a half hour lesson. If two pieces are being studied, then most of the lesson will be taken up working through each piece with perhaps 5 minutes spare at the end.

The best way to include all these aspect into the lessons is not to view lessons as isolated events but to see them as part of a term and to have a definite goal attached to that term. If

progress is good, then time for other study is free. So, for instance as mentioned under the "Festivals, Exams and Concerts" section, the year can be divided into three main targets, one being for instance a grade exam. If the exam pieces are going well, then a lesson could be spent solely on aural, or whatever.

Rather than use lesson time up sight reading, a group of say six pieces can be given to the student to take home, and just one selected the next week to check that the pieces have been read a few times, and check the student is counting, etc. Scales are worth spending a few minutes on every few lessons because they can quickly be monitored and are a good way to start the lesson as a sort of warm up. Aural needn't take too much lesson time up because tapes with such things as intervals to name, chord types to recognise, etc., can be made and given to the student as homework which they return written answers for. Unfortunately, with theory there are no short cuts and either lessons must be made longer, more frequent or time for pieces must be sacrificed. However, it is hoped that progress is good, and the time can be made.

A golden rule to bear in mind is that practice is done at home. If a student comes to the lesson having not practised then there is a risk that practice will make up the lesson.

Reading

To become a competent reader requires hundreds of hours of browsing through and attempting pieces. By reader and reading I'm talking in the sense of sight reading, i.e., the very first playing of a piece and browsing i.e., going over a piece a few times and roughly being able to get through it. Without a real interest in music and an appetite for new sounds, strength in reading probably won't develop. There are several sets of graded sightreading books on the market, personally I don't favour them. They're ok as tests but in view of the large amount of material which must be read to become proficient, these books lack volume, and besides, if it's skill in reading standard repertoire you want then why not do just that. The music section of the nearest city library is a good place to find sight-reading and or browsing material. Manchester for example holds the entire standard repertoire and much more. Using a library will save the student money and can be a voyage of discovery.

Reading is very closely related to memory. Dots on the paper trigger shapes and patterns that have been encountered before. However, it is often found that a person who is good at memorising is not good at reading. Once the notes are in their head they're not reading, so they don't do so much of it and don't strengthen the links between notes and shapes. Conversely

a poor memoriser has to keep relying on their reading skills and naturally becomes a better reader. Reading can be encouraged as follows. By covering the hands with either newspaper or a wooden strip. The wooden strip needs to go across the full length and leave room for the hands. The theory being that memorisers tend to ignore the music and look at their hands. This device removes the memory triggers that the sight of their hands gives, and it gives them no excuses to ignore the music. By asking that a piece is played from some midpoint rather than the start is useful. Memory often relies on what came before, and memorisers can have trouble when the context is lost and are they forced to read.

These methods can also apply to dull students who are poor readers though not through good memory skills. One of their problems can be an inability to relate right and left on the keyboard with up and down on the staff. For instance, having just played middle C, to erroneously play B below when the next note should have been D above is not just the wrong note, it's the wrong direction. Or for instance in playing what is essentially a mordant, having only just played the opening note of the figure you wouldn't expect an error on the third or closing note which is simply a repeat of the first. This is a sort of memory problem partly. Simple drills and patience are needed to solve the above problems.

Time and rhythm difficulties

One of the easiest ways to land in timing and rhythm difficulties is to not introduce counting right from the start. If you ignore counting at the beginning it sends out the message that counting is of secondary importance, it's not as important as say, playing the right notes. So, it is important to make clear the importance of counting by starting immediately. To which end it is best to get the student to count out loud then you know they are doing it. Some students are shy about this, so it is best to get it over with early on.

A good way to demonstrate rhythm to the student is to ask them to march on the spot to a suitable tune played by the teacher. The same tune is then played again but with poor time keeping and the student ask to try and march to it, which is not an easy task. If the teacher counts out loud to this uneven march, it shows what little use irregular counting is; enter the metronome.

There is more than one method of counting but I teach and use the following. When counting for example four beats in a bar, a steady one, two, three, four is used with an emphasis on the first beat to remind of the rhythmic accent on this note. When beats are subdivided for example a crotchet into quavers, the following system is used -

If beat one were divided in two it is counted "1 and". Divisions into smaller notes use multiple syllable words, e.g., a triplet beat is counted with me-rri-ly, and 4 semis using jab-ber-woc-ky or ta-fa-tef-fi. A quintuplet beat can be counted with the word pa-ra-cet-a-mol. Words can be combined, e.g., a sextuplet is me-rri-ly twice, or it could be "a paracetamol". A septuplet could be "have a paracetamol", etc., etc.

Of course, this assumes we have regular note lengths. When counting two parts together, e.g., triplet quavers in the right hand against quavers in the left you need another system.

The two main rhythms are two against three - '1 2and 3'

The 'and' comes exactly in between the 2 and 3

... and three against four '1 2and 3 to 4'

Here the 'and' and 'to' are not exactly in between the numbers.

This is first learned the long way by dividing the bar into 4 * 3 or 12.

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1 - - 2 - - 3 - - 4 - -
- - - - a - - - t - - -
          n          o
          d

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Of course, this method of dividing the bar into $x*y$ beats works for any cross rhythm but gets ridiculous, and it is simply impractical for rhythms such as 7 against 8, which you basically just have to do, and it requires great independence along with lots of hands separate practice.

Interpretation

Interpretation means deciding on things such as phrase length, structure, tempo, dynamics, ornamentation, articulation, etc. In modern music such as Debussy, Bartok, and Schoenberg, for example, the interpretation is less open to debate because later composers tended to mark the scores more specifically. Conversely, the Urtext editions of J.S. Bach contain barely any performance indications and give the performer a wonderful license for individuality. The piano hadn't been invented in the baroque period and the instruments of the day were not capable of much expression (some harpsichords had devices to provide a loud and soft), hence the lack of dynamics. A good start is to find the main themes and decide how they are to be shaped (e.g., dynamics and touch). It helps to imagine where a singer would have to take breaths, though knowledge of theory, in particular cadences help also. The same ideas should be repeated were ever the themes occur. Question and answer phrase pairs should sound like such, and a change of dynamic can help emphasis this. Much can be learned from listening to

recordings of the great exponents of this type of music, e.g., Andras Schiff, Glenn Gould, Angela Hewitt, Rosalyn Tureck, etc., so, when studying a two-part invention, for instance, opposites like Gould and Schiff could be listened to. From these recordings and via experimentation, the effectiveness of the different variables can be discovered. Ornaments need not be slavishly adhered to, and some may be omitted, whilst personal ones may be added at choice locations. As for tempo, common sense should be the guide, but one should never sacrifice clarity of finger work for speed.

The music of the classical period is less flexible than the baroque, the piano had been invented and composers were writing specific instructions which related to the capabilities of the new instrument. For instance, they could indicate staccato vs. legato or semi staccato articulation, and dynamics. Usually a tempo is indicated, though not metronomic. This may lead you to conclude, what is there to interpret? There is however detail that is not obviously notated or is implied. For example, often one may find the same or practically the same phrase repeated in direct succession. If this is the case and indeed whenever material is presented twice, on the second time we ought to vary something, usually the dynamics. On a smaller scale we may have a group of repeated chords, and rather than play them all the same play them with varying dynamic such as a rise and fall. Similarly, if one were to repeat a whole

section of music, as often you do, particularly in playing sonata movements, then why play the repeat in the same way? Phrase marks are rarely written into classical period music, so we need to decide on the phrases, i.e., where they start and end, and if they have any climaxes within them. Another feature, which like phrases is not immediately obvious, is the implied accents that the time signature forces. Whole pieces of music such as Schubert's second movement to the D664 sonata in A can be played wrong by ignoring the time signature. In this piece the notes suggest 6/8 but the time signature reads 3/4. In elementary music with the presence of anacrusis the temptation is to effectively move the bar lines backwards to the start of the phrases and perhaps this is one of the earliest examples where the student is required to think a little beyond the notes. Naturally, interpretation at higher levels goes to much more subjective and harder to define qualities, for example one may talk about conveying the will power of Beethoven in one of his sonatas or conveying nothing of yourself and letting the composer alone speak. In terms of exact dynamics, articulation, phrasing, etc., these are difficult areas to cover and not part of the realm of the early to college level pianist.

What has been covered so far puts us in good stead for interpreting romantic music, however, one main addition that is part of romantic piano playing is the subject of rubato.

Rubato is a bit of a mystery really because it can't be taught as such. Rubato or robbed (borrowed if you like) time is the rather organic process of taking parts of time of some notes and giving them to others within the same bar. The overall effect being no change in total time to that of a purely "straight" or strict performance. Now you can't tell a pupil to make a crotchet into a triple dotted quaver and minim into a minim tied to a hemi demi semi quaver. It would be practically impossible to accurately determine the note lengths that you are seeking. The surest way to teach rubato is to get the student to listen to recordings and get the feel of the music as played by others. Rubato is essentially just that, it's the feel of the music, and as such it is something which can't be copied, it has to be done with instinct and must be natural. I remember once playing Schumann's Traumerei for my teacher, I didn't have a feel for the piece, yet I was asked to put rubato in. I did in a cold and calculating fashion. After playing the piece through, my teacher praised me and told me that was the best playing he had heard from me. I felt awful, my best playing was an insincere lie.

The twentieth century offers works with quite clear performance directions and I think it is fair to say that if you listen to great performers playing works by Ravel, Bartok, etc., you will find less to contrast between them, than you can in performances of Haydn or Scarlatti or other earlier masters.

Quite often you have added bonuses of titles with 20th century music. Composers such as Scarlatti, just mentioned, wrote about 500 pieces all with the same name: sonata. He did write a fugue called "the Cats Fugue," but you get my point? The romantic period gave rise to descriptive pieces with titles, e.g., in Liszt, Grieg and Schumann's work, but it becomes more common place in the twentieth century. The titles are useful in helping with interpretation, they give clues to moods or desired sound effects, e.g., in Debussy's "Footsteps in the snow" you can almost hear the scrunch as the foot breaks through the top crystalline surface of the snow.

The above describe aspects of the standard repertoire and a combination of the points made above provide a set of basic rules to interpreting music. One item of fundamental importance not mentioned above but valid to all music is that of deciding where the melody lies. So often students assume right hands play melodies, and the left hands do nothing but accompany. In "lefthanded", pieces students should be played (or asked to play) both hands (or parts) separately and quizzed "which is the more melodic". Having decided which hand accompanies the normal practise is to play this hand quieter than the other, but it goes further than that because accompaniments have some parts more interesting than the rest of themselves, for instance where pedal points are involved, e.g., Schumann's Humming Song. So generally, if

part of an accompaniment contains a repeated note, then we don't make a feature of it.

Technique (touch - tone production - control)

Before beginning to discuss technique, I would like to distil what I see as the three main points which lie behind most ideas of technique. These are firstly, finding the optimum balance between relaxation and tension. I say balance because there must be some tension, or the hands would just flop down and do nothing. However, too much tension prevents fine control and fluency, and tension in fingers which are not at any one moment playing is serving no purpose and therefore not desirable. Secondly, efficient use of the muscular resource, or using the right tools for the job: you wouldn't use a hand trowel to dig a trench and similarly you don't use the fingers alone to play a crashing FFF chord. In other words, always let the big muscles help the small muscles, in that way the small muscles won't tire as quickly. A good example is rotation technique or wrist rotation. Here the wrist provides part of the impetus, for example, in a lefthand broken chord passage. Also use the hand and arm to position the fingers in a sensible place, in other words avoid stretching and in the same way the fingers can be aligned with the tendons for maximum freedom. Transfer should be made of weight from the arm and hand to the finger to provide force, e.g., in playing chord passages and in wrist

staccato. Finally, it should be understood, that when we talk about weight, we are talking about gravity. Rather than just using muscles to produce the downward force, a component of gravity is used. In some cases, as with powerful octaves, where the hand is literally thrown at the keyboard, muscles would reduce the impact and so this is purely gravity backed by the initial momentum of the throw. It can be very easily and somewhat comical to demonstrate how gravity is called upon, one simply relaxes muscles. So, the key words are weight (and or gravity) and relaxation, and the ideas are really quite scientific and logical.

Following on from the above it should be noted that relaxation gives rise to release of tension so a playing technique which has many an opportunity to relax can achieve great stamina. Rests are useful for freeing tension between playing of passages. Good technique is necessary not only to hit the notes at the required speed but more importantly to achieve the desired nuance that makes the performance artistic. Without technique artistry suffers and the tone tends to be harsh.

Despite notable exceptions such as the late and great Glenn Gould, it is considered highly important to sit correctly. The pianist needs to sit at the piano not too low or too high, the elbow being in line with the knuckles and the fingers falling gracefully and naturally down to the keyboard. I sometimes

describe the fingers as falling away from the hand as if like water cascading from a waterfall, this reinforces the idea of being natural and subject to gravity. The knuckles should form the top of a bridge and not like some as the bottom of a valley with the main joint of the fingers higher up (though to some people this forms their natural tendency, and it is questionable whether to fight it). The distance from the keyboard is important also. Being too close to the keyboard the outer reaches feel unnatural to play and are harder to keep in your field of view. By being too far from the keyboard too much effort is exerted on the shoulders in holding up the arms. The effort of the shoulders goes from nothing, when the arms simply hang, to a considerable one, when the arms are at right angles to the body.

Technique can be taught using music itself, but it is easier to use simple exercises, because that way you don't need to worry about musical details and learning notes. Exercises are easy to memorise and musically trivial giving you the chance to devote your mind to pure mechanics. With notable exceptions, studies are in a way musically in between exercises and pieces. Studies are probably best left to more advanced levels when the student is expected to spend more time practising, the reason being that most students would sooner learn a piece than an abstract work such as those of Cramer or Czerny. Of this type of work Czerny's School of Velocity is a good set, or

one of the graded series of books by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music.

Generally, it can be difficult to teach technical exercise to young children. They lack the patience and concentration that is needed, and find exercises dull. The “Dozen a day” series helps make technique more fun though. With good support from parents, they can be made to do a small but valuable amount each day. Until the children are older it may be best to content oneself with teaching note reading, counting, etc., etc. With adults on the other hand, technique can be introduced as early as need be and they often need it more than children, because in today's stressful lifestyles, people learn the habit of tension, and it is a habit. Adults can more easily accept the importance of technique and its practise, however care must be taken not to put too much emphasis on it, because it can lead to frustration and hang-ups (in one case I knew of somebody who played absolutely nothing but Hanon, when asked about his playing he would simply tell you where he was up to in Hanon). Books such as the Dozen a Day series are (again) useful, along with standard scales and broken chords. Hanon, Schmitt, and later when keys are well known Beringer, are all basically good. Hanon provides bread and butter but needs transposition to be fully effective. Schmitt is good for its exercises involving held notes (less advanced than Pischna)

which Hanon has very little of, and Beringer is basically exhaustive and goes through all the keys.

Getting back to children, they are mostly, and naturally, more relaxed than adults. Their looseness means few initial tension issues, however, those that do need to be taught a basic method of playing single notes, should be done so straight away. For instance, you may encounter a very heavy and stabbing touch where the note is almost pushed down rather than pressed, with the whole arm behind it. For such children some basic relaxation or contraction and release training is necessary. This is how it is done: the arm is held by the teacher with a bend at the elbow (i.e., in a playing position) and support behind the upper arm and under the forearm. It is rocked until the child lets go of all tension and gives up the weight of the arm to the teacher. The child is asked to remember the feeling of relaxation and then the arm is dropped to the child's lap. This is repeated until the child can relax at will, at which point the arm is placed over the keyboard and this time dropped on to the key bed. Initially landing in a heap (not from too great a height!) and then landing on a single note. At the point of contact with this note the child must tense their finger to avoid collapse of the hand. The exact moment of tensing needs to be practised until it can be repeated several times on the trot. In the final stage, the child must hold their own arm up, and let it drop unassisted. When this is accomplished, a basic

mechanism has been put in place which can lead to a more natural way of proceeding. Practise of wrist dips and the playing groups of notes per motion comes next.

Scales and arpeggios

Scales and arpeggios are of the utmost importance for pianists. Both play a part in developing key sense, both (when played properly) improve technique. Arpeggios give confidence in covering distances on the keyboard accurately and give a freedom which allows music of a wider keyboard range to be played more confidently. Both aid sight reading because scale fragments, arpeggios and broken chords are found all over music, and fingers which have already practised them out of context readily cover such notes in the context of a piece. They also help with music theory, such as intervals between any two notes. Prior to studying scales, it's desirable that five finger exercises are studied, or that at least a basic legato touch has been acquired. After all scales are somewhat like finger exercises with the inclusion of thumb tucks. Which brings us on to the subject of the thumb. Most beginners don't know how to control their thumb or perhaps the thumb is too strong, the result is unwanted accents when playing thumb notes. Exercises specific for the thumb such as 12 13 14 15 or similar help concentrate on that problem. The problem is very common in scale playing but this is usually due to a thumb leap

caused by leaving the thumb tuck to late, an early tuck needs practising (the same is true in arpeggio playing). It is best to isolate the tuck rather than to correct it amidst the scale as a whole. A highlight can be made of thumb accents by asking the student to play consecutive notes CDEF using 1234 and then using 1231 and repeat whilst listening carefully. Assuming the student has reasonable evenness with 1234, they will hear the difference that the thumb tuck makes. When both fingerings result in the same sound the tuck is correct. This method gives the student a measure as to how they are doing, and they can practise this without a teacher, and know if they are getting it right. When moving away from the body, a hand at an angle to the keyboard makes the tuck easier as the thumb has less distance to travel. The hand can aid the fingers further, or rather the wrist can, by dipping at each rhythmic grouping of notes, and thus applying the weight principles covered on the section on technique (though for rapid scale playing this is not as possible). Eventually scales should be thought of as a shape that the fingers can quite naturally cover. To help nurture this idea scale can be learned by going one step back and playing as groups of notes beginning with the thumb and ending with the last note before the tuck. For example. CDE are played then FGAB and so on up the keyboard. For a scale such as Bb the Bb is first considered in isolation and then CDEb FGABb. It has been suggested, (I believe even with Chopin) that B major is the best first scale to study on account

of its comfortable shape, however beginners are not playing pieces in B major early on and scale practise lends more resource when it parallels key signatures of the pieces being played.

An extension of normal scale practise when all keys are well known is to practise them all again using the C major fingering throughout. The idea is to increase the difficulty so that the normal execution is found easier. Beringer included this study in his book of exercise. Earlier still, the mighty Liszt was reputed to do similar, though Liszt went one stage further, because he practised every scale with the fingering of every other scale, whether this is myth or not I'm not sure! Without going to Liszt's extreme, this technique is useful for developing facility, it's the awkward shape of the new scales, that require an extra degree of freedom, and it helps in sight reading by providing an alternative fingering when a standard fingering isn't useful. Just as an added note, Jazz-musicians find great value in this method because when transposing "licks" in the middle of playing they don't need to change their fingering to suit.

Arpeggio playing is like scale playing, in that a mobile thumb is involved which must avoid unwanted accents. As the thumb tucks, the hand moves in the direction of the tuck and then the hand moves back to shift the fingers over the thumb. The

fingers differ from those in a scale in that curved fingers can't be used because of the distance. Work must concentrate on moving the thumb as soon as possible to avoid a bump. As a preliminary to studying arpeggios, basic broken chord exercises should be learned to get the shape of a triad fixed in the hand. These can take the form of a run through root position, first inversion, second inversion and back, like those required in early grade exams. An easy way to give the student a feel for arpeggio playing is to get them to play hand over hand broken triads. As for fingering comfort should rule over what is suggest in a scale manual. For instance, it may be found more comfortable to play 2 1 2 4 1 2 4 for a 2 octave Bb arpeggio rather than involving the third finger, and where 5 3 2 1 is written for the left hand, again the 3 may be swapped for a 4. The all-white note arpeggios are most likely to cause note errors because they have no "landmarks", in these a strong sense of intervallic distance is needed. The all-black note scales (eb minor and F# major) seem to require the most strength and should simply be practised slowly till that strength is built up.

Pedal Use

The use of the right hand or sustaining pedal can be left till roundabout grade 2 or after and with very young children perhaps longer depending on the length of their legs. Apart

from some of the problems found later in certain advanced pieces, a basic legato pedalling is all that is required. The pedal changes basically occur at the harmonic rate of change of the piece, so an understanding of chords is necessary to really make sense of pedalling. Of course, phrasing is important also, such as the breath at a phrase end. If theory instruction hasn't started, then at least the study of broken chords and arpeggios should have, as they help chord change recognition. However, as a preliminary, chords needn't be employed as the student can be asked just to play a scale with the third finger alone and then shown how to use the pedal to join it up. Very slowly, the sequence of note down, pedal down, note up, note down pedal up simultaneously, pedal down, etc., is demonstrated.

It helps to write pedalling into a piece, because if left to the ear alone, often the pedalling can result in lack of clarity because the pianist is trying to cope with so many other things at the same time. A good piece to start pedal study with is the Choral by Schumann from the Album for the Young. At around the grade five level it is probably fair to say that most pianists study Chopin's op28 no20 Prelude in c minor.

The pedal not only functions to sustain notes, but it functions to kill sound as well, and to kill sound effectively, care must be taken to lift the pedal right up at each change. In some cases, such as with the loud bass octaves in the second Brahms

Rhapsody, a fraction of extra damping time may be needed on some pianos to ensure the strings have stopped vibrating. This is quite advanced but basically the ear must be attentive.

The left-hand pedal or soft pedal should be depressed when *una corda* is indicated. At all other times it should be used only, when necessary, because if given the chance, students will use it as a crutch to play softly. A soft touch is a fine thing to develop and must be done the hard way. Besides, if an upright is being played the effect of the *una corda* pedal is not particularly satisfying tonally. In the case of passage involving a rapid soft touch then the soft pedal may be the only option as the difficulties can become enormous, and indications such as *pppp* as found in 20th century music can be impractical without the help of the soft pedal.

Aural work

Aural work to some students is just a pointless exercise which is carried out in preparation for exams. On the contrary, aural work plays a part in playing without the pianist always being aware of it. For instance, when reading a familiar piece of music or when playing completely from memory, aural skills play some part of the process of remembering the notes. Minor sound tells you the nature of the third in a triad, a simple knowledge of up or down pitch can aid in the memory of how

a passage of semiquavers goes. Someone with a gift for aural skills, may play an entire piece solely based on how it sounds (though muscular memory would also play some part if it had been played before). Also, aural skills help to tell when wrong notes have been played. To leave aural work to the start of each exam is not likely to be of much benefit to those that are less gifted, because gradual build-ups of skill are more helpful.

At the most fundamental level a student needs to be able to tell which of two pitches is the highest or lowest. To many this is easy, but some find it hard. As with many things, the approach is gradual and step wise. Start off with glaringly obvious examples, perhaps two or three octaves apart and slowly work in.

Aural training is basically about memory, sound memory. By repeated exposure to different intervals, chord types, cadences, and modulations, etc., you can gradually recognise them as whatever type they are. Everybody can remember how the first two notes of Away in a Manger sound, and that's a perfect fourth (rising). Similarly other sounds can slowly be memorised. Popular tunes help a great deal with interval training and ones familiar to the student should be chosen for that purpose, e.g., first two notes of Kumbayah for a major 3rd, ba ba black sheep for a perfect fifth, etc.

Instrument practising

To reach even modest standards on the piano takes thousands of hours of practice. If students work at only 50% efficiency, then over the years a massive amount of time is wasted. Practise should always take place at optimum times when you can properly give yourself. If the mind is elsewhere, then what is played will not be assimilated correctly. To start off, students should do 30 minutes per day (assuming young children). For children with a short attention span, two 15-minute sessions, are better than one 30 minutes one, in which the second half might may be wasted. Playing the piano is all about sound and students should listen carefully to the sounds they are making and not simply react physically to a series of instruction on the score. Listening helps develop aural skills and leads to a more refined touch. Students should be aiming for one hour practise at the grades five or six level, and a serious grade eight student ought to be aiming for some more still.

A common habit for students of all ages is to go back to the start of a piece when they make a mistake. This is the reason that you find the start of pieces much better prepared than the rest of the piece. The end is hardly ever reached! Clearly this is very inefficient. The student should be taught to practise again and again the offending part and the notes just before and after it, and then go back to the beginning of the piece. Practise

of a piece should start out very slowly and with all the details of dynamics, phrasing, articulation, correct time keeping, etc., right from the start. If detail is missed at the start, then incorrect detail needs unlearning later. A particularly wasteful example is when the correct phrasing requires a change of fingering to what has been learned. Having played the piece correctly, with no technical difficulties, and at a slow metronome speed, the speed is gradually increased until it reaches a suitable performance tempo, with all the detail in place. Before practising pieces, it's a good idea to begin with a technical regime to warm up the fingers. Exercises such as the Dozen a day are useful for the first few years and Hanon or Beringer later. Exercises and scales should be played very careful and not simply rushed through without thought. The emphasis should be on attaining a relaxed and independent action of the fingers. A certain amount of velocity and strength can be achieved by mindless repetition of exercises, but without true relaxation a limit will be reached, and injury might be close by. Again, the metronome is useful, and speeds can be written on the student's copy, which gradually increase over the months. Eventually the many scales need organizing. An easy approach is to play C and Db on Monday, D and Eb on Tuesday, etc., taking Sunday as the day of scale rest, or better still, as the day you practise the most awkward ones.

The golden rule is to always approach the piano in an artistic manner, and never simply go through mechanical motions. Another useful basic idea, is that if something is too hard, simplify it. This often means to go slower, but also means for example to play broken chord figures as block chords, or more obviously play one hand at a time. Struggling through something might eventually get you there but you will most likely have learned it with tense muscles and a harsh tone.

Festivals, Exams and Concerts

One of the biggest problems (if not the biggest) in teaching a musical instrument is getting the pupils to practise. With adults this is not a problem and certainly not yours. However, children like carrots or goals. One way to approach this problem is to divide the year up into 3 by having 3 main targets. You can try to do one piano exam per year. In the case of grade one an introductory exam (depending on the examining board you use) may be pursued prior. Secondly the child should have the experience of entering a musical festival in at least two contrasting classes. Thirdly you can have a "piano club" at home. This is where students meet and play prepared pieces in front of one another. Obviously for this to work, you need sufficient pupils, so you can have perhaps four pupils in a group of any grade or skill level. If you own a video camera, then you can record the whole group to pen drives.

Next year when the group meets again, the previous year's videos will show who has worked hardest and act as an incentive for better future results. The piano club is not just an annual measure of progress, because hopefully it should be good fun and a chance to meet others.

Parents

It is hoped that parents involve themselves in their children's music making. For 5- and 6-year-old children, a parent's input is usually essential both at home and as a witness in the lesson. The parent should follow the lesson and then sit with the child at home to check that everything is practised correctly. Even better, the parent may like to take lessons themselves and provide a bit of competition! Either way, very young children have little concentration and if the parents want them to start at an early age, they should be willing to help.

Criticism and diagnostic aids

Criticism should be balanced. Whenever a student has performed a piece of music there is usually something of merit, it may be the way one phrase was shaped or how accurate the time keeping was, etc., however, if not vigilant it is easy to find oneself just focusing on errors. If a piece is played particularly badly such that words escape you, then this is one excellent

opportunity to enlist the help of the tape recorder. With a recording the student can be asked for their own opinion. It's quite an advanced skill to really listen whilst you are playing, listening to a recording reveals many things and is a useful diagnostic aid for more advanced students as well as beginners. On the other hand, when a student regularly plays very well, they should be praised relative to their standard and not constantly told how good they are, otherwise they may lose modesty.

Adult beginners

The obvious difference between adult and child beginners is that adults recognise the need to practise regularly. The dedication that the adult brings with them goes some way to balance out the learning difficulties that some adults may have. A common viewpoint is that learning is harder when older, to that I would say that I think it would be highly unlikely and probably impossible for an adult to become a concert pianist, one for sheer lack of time and two perhaps because certain physical and aural developments must take place when the brain is developing in childhood. However, adults can start late in life and go a long way, certainly past what one might consider average, I know of one such late starter who is quite comfortable with harder Beethoven Sonatas and some of Chopin's more extended master works. Mentally, there are no

age limits to learning, one only has to think of people in the professions, doctors, lawyers, etc., constantly learning and keeping abreast of new developments.

Adult beginners are a joy to teach because they listen and are keen. When it comes to choosing repertoire, you need to be more flexible than you are with children, because they are much more likely to have their own tastes in music, and perhaps their own specific musical goals.

Adults can be started early on with technical exercises. The Dozen a Day series are a good choice and can be studied for 5 to 10 minutes per day. It is important to emphasize quality and not velocity.

Psychological aspects

Students should be taught that musicianship and quality playing are what matters and not simply athletics. There is a saying that Mozart is too easy for amateurs yet too difficult for professionals. This says a lot about how one's attitude towards the real problems of playing, which develop with maturity. By that I mean good tone production, evenness and clarity and musical shaping. Students should be made aware that quality playing is possible and to not be content with just hitting all the notes. Piano playing mustn't become a chore, the vast

majority of pianist don't become professionals, livelihoods don't depend on it, so it shouldn't be taken too seriously.

Both talented and dull students are special cases. Dull students need to be keep feeling positive, this is achievable by progressing in lots of small steps. So, pieces should be chosen that don't present too many new ideas at once, and revision of recently learned notes and skills helps reinforce ideas. The talented student should not be spoiled by too much praise. It is better that they don't become overconfident. Plenty of new material is need for a bright student so they don't get bored.

Repertoire

The long-term aim in selecting pieces for the student is to present an overview of the literature of the piano, both for reasons of sheer appreciation and to develop a variety of skills. For most people the literature of interest begins chronologically with the baroque period. The main keyboard composers of interest in this period are Scarlatti, J.S. Bach, and Handel. Their music is predominantly polyphonic, and it requires skills in part playing. Bach's Notebook for Anna Magdalena is a good starting point.

Next came the Classical period, and in terms of the keyboard was dominated by the sonatas (and some miscellaneous

pieces) of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. However, one of the more popular introductions to this somewhat less contrapuntal style of music is the less popular Clementi and his very popular op36 Sonatinas. Scale work plays more prominence in this period.

With the romantic period came less sonatas and more shorter pieces such as Nocturnes and Preludes. The giants of this period (in piano terms) are probably Chopin, Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, and Rachmaninov. Unfortunately, except for Schumann, their music is often too difficult for inexperienced pianists. Several of the Preludes and Mazurkas of Chopin make useful intermediate teaching material, and a few Brahms Waltzes are manageable, the rest comes later. Schumann wrote a book of pieces called "The Album for the Young" which can be used at grade one level upwards. Not as great as the above composers but a writer of delightful music, Grieg, and particularly his lyric pieces, are useful for grade four upwards. Music of this period is often more chromatic than the classical period and good reading skills are need for the accidentals.

Perhaps Bartok was the most inclined 20th Century (classical) Composer to write small pedagogical pieces. The two albums of folk tunes titled "For Children", "First Term at the Piano", "10 easy pieces", "Nine Small Piano Pieces" and "Mikrokosmos" are all written with teaching in mind and well

worth study. Bartok's music is often rhythmically challenging and can involve unusual techniques or co-ordination which are fun to learn. Few of the other main 20th Century Composers wrote any easy music. Debussy wrote a few intermediate pieces which can be approached at grades 5 or 6 level. Fortunately, there are excellent works by composers such as Kabalevsky, who wrote a lot of easy music, Alexander Tansman who also contributed much and many others who contributed in a small way to the similar genre, e.g., from England, two of the authors favourites are William Alywn, e.g., "Odd Moments", and Richard Rodney Bennett, e.g., "Diversions" and "A Week of Birthdays".

There are some composers who seem to be ignored by many. One such example is Scriabin, who wrote quite a lot of accessible music (and lots of very difficult music), for instance, within his preludes of op11.

The overall view is that most of the standard piano repertoire is not accessible to the beginner, and it only begins to be accessible at the intermediate level onwards. However, when the student has reached grade 8 there are many sonata movements (and even the whole works), Bach dance movements, preludes and fugues, Chopin Nocturnes and Mazurkas, etc., that may be successfully attempted, but

composers such as Ravel, Rachmaninov, and Liszt, are still much time off being approachable.

Early grade repertoire is probably best found in books such as the following -

The Young Pianist Repertoire (Faber Music)

Hours With The Masters (Bosworth)

Studio 21 (Universal Edition)

A Keyboard Anthology (Associated Board)

Short Romantic Pieces for Piano (Associated Board)

More Romantic Pieces for Piano (Associated Board)

A Romantic Sketchbook for Piano (Associated Board)

Books such as the ones named above, are good places to begin further explorations: the purchase of a whole opus should be considered, if a student really likes a piece within that collection.

Biography

Common Sense in Music Teaching, William Lovelock.

Form in Brief, William Lovelock.

Peddalling the Modern Pianoforte, York Bowen.

Simplicity of Piano Technique, York Bowen.

Freedom in Piano Technique, Joan Last.

Piano Technique, Tone, Touch Phrasing and Dynamics, Lillie H.Philipp.

Piano Technique, Walter Giesecking, Karl Leimer.

Keys to the Keyboard, Andor Foldes.

The Young Persons Guide to Playing the Piano, Sidney Harrison.

Pianists at Play, Dean Elder.

The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature, Jane Magrath.

Guide to the Pianist Repertoire, 4th Edition, Maurice Hinson.

Music for the Piano, Friskin & Freundlich.

The Logical Bard

An Essay in structural poetry: avoiding writing prose.

Introduction

During my “formative years” I studied sciences. I covered chemistry, physics, geology, biology, and computer science. I was most likely autistic, and found English comprehension very difficult, and the construction of images in my mind whilst reading stories, impossible.

After a period of mania in my first year of university, on a chemistry degree course, I sank into a long, second, undiagnosed condition: depression. I knew something was wrong, but not what it was. I wrote “Joe” : my first poem; on Nahal Oz kibbutz, Israel, in the summer of 1987, thirty years ago. It is the only piece of creative writing of mine, that I no longer have. It started somewhat naively, like many others first attempts at writing poetry, like this –

Ex 1 “Joe” - 1st stanza

This is the story
of a man named Joe;
mother’s gone,
only his brother knows the show.

??/9/87

There is a type of person who will write poems, whilst some, particularly men, find it unmasculine or soft. Many of such people have probably read or heard little modern poetry. They have archaic ideas of what verse is.

For some, poetry offers a voice, often a veiled one, perhaps in third or second person, with a suggestion that the words are about the author or poet, but perhaps not? And they may tell or show. I will reveal how to put both images and ideas across, while being firm that verse, rather than prose, is expressing either. We hear the terms prose-poem and flash fiction, but where is the dividing line? This essay also tries to show that by introducing some elements of verse into the writing. The difference can be in the phrasing alone.

Modern Verse

Many modern poets write in free verse. However, rhyming at regular or even irregular points is often found at local open-mics. It is rarer in editor chosen and published works. If your idea of verse is that of a body of words that rhyme, and aren't related to music: i.e., as in a song form; then this essay is for you. Of course, Bob Dylan is also considered a poet by most, and no doubt other singers are too.

Ex 2 “This is where he lives” - 1st stanza

He extracts details from the China-man
in the takeaway,
who’ll show happy jpegs of a new girl
one day.

31/5/14

The above paragraph or stanza, rather, has a simple ABCB rhyming scheme, and unlike in more structured works such as sonnets, there is no formal metre, or strict definition of weak and strong stresses. For example, the first line starts with two strong stresses.

i.e. / / x / x / x / x /
He ex tracts de tails from the Chi na man

This simple “rhyming” is typical of first attempts at poems. Couplet rhyming, where consecutive lines rhyme, i.e., an AABB variety, make for an even stronger rhyming pattern.

For many, this represents poetry, but it is not free verse. That, I believe, requires the addressing of these five matters.

- i) Tightness or terseness: using one word in place of two or avoiding overstating. Rather than using adverbs, e.g., “very” angry, you might find an

- equivalent verb in the richness of the English vocabulary, such as “livid” in this case, for example.
- ii) Sensible phasing : ending lines on stronger or more positive words, even when in mid-sentence; as opposed to ending on conjunctions such as “for, and, so, after, as,” and other weak words, etc., is important and obvious when heard.
 - iii) We should present words in stanzas that relate to the meaning of the stanzas, and not necessarily of regular line lengths or numbers, but to help convey the thoughts and pictures, and to aid good reading. A longer, implied, pause ends a stanza, compared to that of a line break.
 - iv) Implied meaning should be sought after. This is not opposite to unwanted repetition in overstatements. For example, in this stanza -

Ex 3 “Lymm dam” – 1st stanza

With sun rays falling like golden sand
from an hourglass, I’m hurrying home.
I eat at indigestion speed and change
office togs for denim, finishing my coffee
as I wriggle my old Doc Martens on.

2001

The last line used to read “Doc Marten shoes,” but obviously, they couldn’t be boots, as boots are almost impossible to “wriggle on.”

- v) Imagery is important in free verse, but not essential, and as in any form of writing, clichés spoil what might have otherwise been a perfect set of words.

There follows a more successful piece of my free verse.

Ex 4 “Did Neil Armstrong wear thermals?”

I saw the Moon today at early afternoon.
It was a cloud-like curve, hidden from all
but seekers. The sky was summertime blue,
and a police helicopter drowned out the sound
of gentle jazz in my car, but raised my eyes
to the sky.

At night the Moon was a breast, illuminated
like a cream neon in Soho. But with my naked eyes
I could see a cancer on it, a shadow from an impact
too long ago to comprehend? I stared at the Moon so long
it subtly moved in my window until it disappeared.
I asked myself, with all that light is it hot?
Then I thought, nonsense, Armstrong probably
wore thermals.

1/3/12

Perhaps the reason this poem works so well is because it has a start, or an introduction, a development, and an ending. It's quite tight, and with metaphors and similes. Also, imagery is plentiful, and the question posed in the title is humorously answered.

Syllables

Perhaps the simplest form of syllabic poem is the haiku. Haikus might have a title, then do need a line of five syllables, a line of seven syllables in the middle, and a third line of five syllables. They are supposed to be about nature, but these days they are popularly about anything.

Ex 5 "Haiku - Spring -"

supposedly said,	::: sup- pos- ed- ly- said	(5)
"enjoy dafs and crocuses,	::: en- joy- dafs- and- cro- cus- es	(7)
but ponder hailstones."	::: but- pon- der- hail- stones	(5)

The haiku above demonstrates a further trick, i.e., leading in from the title. I add a dash to the right of the poem's name, then purposely begin the poem without a capital letter to continue the first sentence.

The syllables are shown and counted to the right of the treble colons after each actual line.

General syllabic poems

Dylan Thomas counted (or felt) syllables. Whilst strict adherence to a musical like metre of alternating weak and strong beats, such as in the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare (see later) is not necessary, when counting regular numbers of syllables alone, a careful choice of words remains important. The discipline of having, perhaps seven syllables per line, encourages more thought and innovation with vocabulary.

The choice of making contractions, e.g., “wasn’t, shouldn’t,” etc., should be all or not at all, else they appear to be a crutch used to lengthen or shorten lines by one syllable when the poet’s vocabulary is challenged.

Personally, I find a syllable count with subtle rhyming schemes impressive, and positively a mark of verse. For example, see the stanza below, and its reiterated line endings in an ABCABC sounding pattern.

Ex. 6 “Bonsai”

“It’s miniature,” he said.	: d	A
I relinquished my last ten	: en	B
in Piccadilly market.	: et	C
“You’ll find it easy to tend,	: d	A
give it some water and sun.	: un	B
Do not flood it, that’s my hint.”	: t	C

The complete poem has four six-line stanzas with seven syllables per line and a weak, ABCABC rhyming scheme. This verse is very structured, but with some subtlety.

Sonnets

In my opinion, sonnet form is the ultimate poetic expression, whether in the iambic pentameter of the Shakespearean structure, with end of line rhymes in the pattern abab cdcd efef gg, or in the same basic metre in a Petrarchan form with abba abba cdcd cd end of line rhymes (and other rhyming variations in the last six lines.)

Either way an introductory idea is developed and concluded, often with a twist in the end couplet of the Shakespearean version.

Strict metre can be broken, to stop too meditative a sound of alternating weak and strong beats, such as in famous examples like -

A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse,

x / x / x / x / x /

or

To be or not to be, that is the question.

x / x / x / x / x / x

(with an
additional
weak,
feminine
ending.)

Ex 7 “Shakespearean sonnet - Isolation”

As a stranger I no longer know you,
because I am starved of conversations.
Isolation is easy to construe:
talking fails to link by terse connections.
For some they have a store and can run out.
Whilst others link fresh thoughts to generate.
Bodily touch alone should raise a doubt,
if fluid brains are starved nerves escalate.
Outside clubs and churches have a structure.
In many ways, the sport clubs have a creed.
I have searched four decades for another,
to break the lonely complex in my mind.

Days like this, feel like day one, year zero.
Make me long to be that man: YOUR HERO.

20/1/17

As an added discipline, the next sonnet omits the vowel 'u'. It's in Petrarchan sonnet form. Omission of letters is a technical game that scientists might enjoy. Perhaps a word could be chosen, then all the letters of that word omitted in the sonnet. (There's a challenge...)

Ex 8 Sonnet sans 'u' - "Bipolar"

It's to do with stresses and chemicals.
Demics appear by loads hitting excess.
It can take a single massive distress,
however, lesser loops gain medicals.

A gigantic meal of liberty caps,
can precipitate a mental illness
if ingested with total carelessness.
Synapses fill with bio-chemicals.

Life needs to be re-planned: that only one.
Don't give in to being ill. Create art,
as corporate connection's over, done,
so manically paint, play, think and write.
It can be magic, not a restriction.
Adaption will become a way of life.

31/3/17

Embrace your aloneness

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Introduction

Between 2000 and 2020, Michael, the author, wrote several hundred poems, each dated by their conception (and any major revisions.) Some poems reflected on past times, whilst others journaled the present. However, particularly after 2015, Michael was using poetry less for diary writing, and more to express and ultimately cement his emerging philosophy.

Michael had worked as a computing technician, and broadly speaking, he was much more prolific as a creative writer, after being made redundant in 2010. That job's second year: 1998, was marked with Michael's bipolar diagnosis. During the initial manifestation of this mood disorder, in 1992, he was mistakenly labelled schizophrenic, because of the severity of the psychotic depression crippling him.

It is well documented that mood disorders are linked to creativity. Not only did Michael become an accomplished amateur classical pianist, after beginning studies at the age of 21, but his nonfiction that makes up Part 3 of this book (and forms Michael's central tenet) was written, proofread, edited, and published in no more than three weeks. It simply poured onto the page, whilst he was making the best of his time in the UK's first coronavirus lockdown.

Like Susan Jeffers' book, "Feel the fear and do it anyway," the title of Michael's nonfiction, "I am", summarises its contents too. So ironically, you might need not read it, but can instead accept its message from the title alone?

That's unlikely. The point of first sharing poems and remarks in this volume, is to provide a considerable context to the later nonfiction. It is hoped that the author's lived and experienced background, helps the reader to gain some trust.

It will be clear early on in this book, how profound have the ramifications of trust been in Michael's life.

* * *

Part 1 - Causing the damage

This first poem was based word for word, on a postcard that Michael's late father sent him. He was on business in America. Michael was seven, and typical of a young boy, he was interested in guns. As the poem's title suggests, his parents separated within the next year,

Divorced in a year, postcard 22 VIII 1975

Thursday:

Everything here is very big,
buildings, cars;
hotel has swimming pool,
you would enjoy a holiday here.
We hope to visit Texas before we come home,
may see a cowboy.
All the police carry guns in America,
so I'll need to be good.
I hope you're being a good boy.
I've told Andrew and Mummy
I'll be home Wed/Thurs,
since writing them it may be Saturday,
Lots of love Daddy.

9/3/11

It must always be hard for young children to be brought up by one parent, but especially so, when that single parent is the father, after maternal abandonment. At best, the adult lives of such children will be struggles, not only in terms of their careers and/or relationships, but also their mental health. Drug and alcohol issues are shockingly likely also.

* * *

Please appreciate that some of these poems have greater poetic craft than others. The previous one is on the attractive, Literary Orphans (dot) Org website, and other editors have collectively published around fifty of Michael's poems, in either print anthologies or on websites. The next one is not well crafted, but it tells the sad story of the moment Michael's mum left home for good.

The announcement

Silence was pervasive
under a blanket of Pink Floyd,
and a sewing two litre Cortina Ghia engine.

Weekend ferrying
to a fast cabin cruiser,
was an attempt at reparation,

and a chance for one of the party
to fantasise about a new life
in the Lakes.

Silence had existed as long as memory had kicked in,
the day the passengers were requested down,
as if extracted from school assembly.

It was cold as a snake's belly, pointed and short.
She didn't speak, they had to be men and watch,
as she drove away, in the car he'd recently bought for her.

James at eleven was tangled in wires and resistors.
John, three years younger, needed counselling: he lashed out
in school.

Help came much later when the damage had been done.

As young men they did drugs and drink, flunked university,
thought with the sheltering they were given, life would twig.
Dad never cried. John grew to weep in empathy for pain.

30/1/11

Note: Above, Michael is referred to by his middle name
"John." Likewise, Andrew "James" is his brother.

* * *

Michael's high school friends reached an age at which girls became their focus. Instinctively, Michael shied away from joining in with their pursuit. In part, Michael feared rejection, but consequently lost contact with that group of friends.

There was a computer at home: his brother's; and Michael became interested in it. This led to his involvement in what was essentially a male dominated, bedroom-based culture and community. People played and swapped, pirated computer games. Some people including Michael, even programmed these earlier microcomputers.

Whilst Michael was in the sixth form, he fell into the relatively welcoming, soft-drugs culture of cannabis smoking. His avoidance was already evident, and perhaps worsened by the lack of what some call, "a secure base"? In fact, the reason Michael entered his school's sixth form, rather than studying for his A levels at the local college, was essentially one of fear. He even knew he had admiration for friends that made that break from school, and perhaps denied somewhat that he'd have liked too as well.

At 17, Michael had a car and could drive. Cannabis smokers valued that, and of course therefore, Michael ended up taking people from one deprived housing estate to another, and back, to "score."

The following poem relates. When Michael wrote this, he chose to hide behind the name “Thomas.”

Platt Bridge -

was “dole-town.”
John and Mark lived
on the second level
of a two-story block,
across an empty car park,
facing Fudge’s pad.
They shut the world out.

Fudge studied racing form,
and had a dog called Sensimilla.
People
dropped in occasionally.
They played whist and hearts at John’s
to pass time.
There wasn’t much to say,
after *alright?*
The focus was a homemade bong.
With a Bic, pop bottle, some BluTack and foil,
it still wouldn’t make Blue Peter.

Thomas visited,
and drove John to Hag Fold.
There were semis there,
but it was still down-market.
He'd park around the corner,
anxiously waiting,
as John sampled and scored.

Back at home with an ashtray,
John would roast a Regal.
He'd crumble dry tobacco
and mix it with the hash,
like bars dilute spirits with pop.
They'd giggle.
John would find his tongue,
then forget what he was saying.

Mark left the flat and his sanity. Thomas studied.
Eventually, John found a woman and a job.
They didn't know what happened to Fudge.

5/9/12 - 11/12/16

One highly memorable day took Michael to a local pasture field with his Platt Bridge friends. They picked very many magic mushrooms (liberty caps), consuming some at the same time they bagged others for later. On returning to Platt Bridge, they smoked cannabis as usual, and in Michael's case, that was on top of about 50 mushrooms from the field. In a trance,

watching an old black-and-white film, Michael mindlessly treated his remaining mushrooms like popcorn. When asked if he had any left, the sight of a near vanished supply, once over a hundred strong, was very disturbing. (People often take only thirty.) His fear probably worsened the experience to ensue, but he was absolutely going to have a so-called bad trip.

“Panic attack”, overleaf, attempts to express what happened in verse. It took Michael years to understand, that he had an enormous adrenaline rush of war zone like proportions. And that his perceived *physical* feelings of his brain and spinal cord that followed later, had not been real. He had not caused them physical damage, because those feelings were hallucinations brought on by the mushrooms; specifically, the drug psilocybin.

Panic attack

A spectacle of eyes transfixed by film:
some third-rate fifties black and white repeat.
Three minds imprisoned by the endless frames,
are islands.

They spend the night with oral yen to stoke,
says Freud arrested growth is why they smoke.
And in between, small mushrooms picked that morn'
keep mouths content, effects will last till dawn.
Ironic, caps they have are 'Liberty'
cause Tom seems quite entrapped, the irony.
Slow rhythmic right hand reflex feeds his face.
He's disappearing from the human race.

When asked are any 'shrooms left in his tin,
Tom confidently looks but sees nothing.
They tell him he's been popping them all night,
a moment of denial, futile; they're right.
Affectively the mushrooms make him sink.
Effectively they're time bombs for a shrink.

A den like this is alien to him.
He's guilty now just being in the room,
and anxious 'shrooms inside have yet to work;
he says *goodbye*, and goes.

Claustrophobic feelings the sky's vast heights relieve.
He breathes in the fresh air, nervous reprieve.
His small red sports car beckons patiently.
He reckons he could handle driving home,
and longing for his bed, heads to the car.
He shuts the door behind him - big mistake,
then knocks a switch. A buzzing fan comes on.
He finds his keys, inserts them, tries to think
so consciously, of how to drive a car.
How does he start? Digressing, what's the buzz?
Check gear in neutral. Clear, now what comes next?
Digressing, what's the buzz? What gear's he in?
He's not, he's checked. Digressing, what's the buzz?
What is the buzz? His head? It's in his head!

His mind no longer functions.
He's unaware of his breath.
He's drowning in thin air now.
Grasping the steering wheel,
he wants out of the door.
Think! Think! Where's the handle?
Digressing, has he air?
He tries to reach the knob,
he can't, he coils back in,
shaping like a ball.
Just about to die,
he has no air.

Cortex wrenching.
(Hormone rescue?)
A surge,
huge rush,
a slice of thought.
He launches for the knob,
the door bursts open. Out he crashes. Free.
Wild, heart beating, jelly legged freedom.

His brain's learned panic.

24/04/00

* * *

Michael's brother started York university three years earlier, then settled there. Socially speaking then, by going there too, to study chemistry, Michael made another easy and typically avoidant choice. His brother even knew a local cannabis dealer.

Whilst at the university, Michael did gain an awareness of his need to entice others with externals, as opposed to relying on his own personality, but he was not able to predict any future problems that such an approach might attract.

In the next poem Michael is again "John", and along with two others, he made up part of a regularly formed trio.

University

John stood in the queue taking in the back of a head.
Trying to look cool, he didn't expect an approach,
but not trying too hard sometimes attracts.

A lad from Belfast with caramel-tongued charm spoke.
Dribble was his magnetic verse. He could sell hashish
to Moroccans. But he was prospecting, and probed John's
resourcefulness.

John's shoulder length hair drew him in.
Three years were spent smoking,
in John's case, to excess. Their academic success was polar.

It started with a queue position, a butterfly wing beat,
and ended
with a drunken scuff, caught on film and hanging in the bar
for generations to see, with Irish advice, *watch that chin*.

11/12/10

Michael was very elated in his first year at York, and he
enjoyed a great social ease that was uncharacteristic for him.
In his first summer holiday, along with an Australian, the trio
headed for an Israeli kibbutz.

They had a month on Nahal Oz. Michael left early, and whilst
there, he chose solitary work. This involved cutting gigantic

steel rods into equal shorter lengths, to ultimately become huge nuts (see Image 1). The others joined the melon picking gang, technically in the Negev desert, but with Israel's desalination of sea water being economically viable, the area was more agricultural than of sand dunes and camels!

Although separated by Gaza, they were close to the Mediterranean Sea. And on the day Michael chose to leave the kibbutz early, a collective curiosity prompted the group to take the moderate walk into that troubled Palestinian region (see Image 2). After seeing Gaza, Michael extended his adventure alone. He visited Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Cairo, prior to worrying about returning home to the UK.

* * *

Michael was quiet and reclusive for his remaining two years in York. He had experienced a dramatic mood change, but typically for the eighties, nobody suspected a mental health problem. It was a time that not even homosexuality had been accepted, demonstrated by a whole university campus ostensibly appearing to be comprised, of just heterosexuals.

* * *

After leaving York, Michael and a Platt Bridge associate had a failed three-week holiday/tour of Morocco. In retrospect,

Michael was already very depressed, and therefore he made a poor traveling companion. Throughout the holiday he was humourless and spoke very little.

In truth, Michael thought the holiday would prove he had some autocracy, outside of the trio, but sadly he had none. Indeed, he had no friends either, so he gravitated to his mum, especially when his dad had sold the original family house, and moved with his second wife, to a completely foreign area to Michael.

Given Michael's marketable skills, his desire to avoid people, and an increasing pressure to work, he ended up programming computers. In a couple of months, he was offered two such jobs: programming fruit machines or writing computer aided learning software. He took the latter, despite it having "assistant" in its title, and a lower salary; but as with him thinking one fruit machine must be very much like any other. Therefore, he started work in a university pharmacy department, whilst also attracted by an assumption that it would be a relatively less threatening environment than some.

Soon after starting this job, Michael began learning the piano. (He now plays to a useful advanced level and has taught others.) His mother is adamant the piano saved his life.

Doubtlessly, when he was in his early twenties, he would have been a much greater suicide risk without music.

* * *

This next poem deals with the psychology in Michael's year-long first job. The other character is his immediate boss, who he found impossible to relate to, and never grasped where their roles overlapped.

Michael's self-consciousness became disabling, and fuelled paranoia. He believed people entered his physical workspace to purposefully stress him.

The programmer's first job

Can't you sense my anguish,
in this silence imposed by social anxiety?
It's anxiety borne of silence that spirals.

You've entered my cell, called such,
because it has no windows or people,
and I'm chained to a desk.

I can't ask you to leave,
as you're ostensibly superior,
but intellectually, do I better you at cost?

Computers are strewn.
They hum banshee wails,
eventually draining spirits.

Peacefully leave me with my digital monsters,
and precise rules, but YOU,
do you pity or persecute?

One year was enough.
I took alternate #1. Leaving you and hum,
and following ME, like a stalker.

28/2/12 - 11/12/16

Lunchtime drinking in a nearby pub helped Michael get through that year. However, his vulnerability caught the attention of a gay middle-aged man who essentially tried to groom him. Read on, Michael takes the pseudonym “Tom.”

Pete

Tom’s only happy respite was in dreams.
He’d dug a grave, jumped in
and tippled the soil on his head.
Any opportunity to drink was snatched,
especially lunches, punctuating the days he spent
computing alone, in his first job.

His refuge was the Ducie Arms:
Irish and hidden by a huge library.
The landlord was hunched and expressionless.
Problem drinkers were people he'd pour for
unprompted. Weeks passed in solitary Guinness supping,
till his alcove was invaded.

The invader was late forties, sporting a moustache
and jacketed spread. He tried a joke.
Tom chuckled then replied.
Both worked at the university.
Hiding behind folded arms, taciturn by nature,
Tom encouraged him a little: he was a reluctant loner.

Tom clock watched more for lunches.
The invader kept showing.
Pete was passionate about Spanish,
and spoke often of a Mexican friend, Antonio,
and Mexican travel. Tom was learning piano.
Pete encouraged him saying *bueno Chopin*, as he gave Tom
a score.

It emerged that Antonio was Pete's lover.
Pete had left his family for him.
Depth grew between Tom and Pete.
Pete implored Tom, *why do you hate yourself?*
Curious about Antonio,
Tom agreed to a night out with them both.

Antonio was Tom's age, handsome, and had dancing feet.
His smile was infectious. After much drink
 he mimed a Tango,
then kissed Tom, French style, in the street.
Tom wasn't gay, but Antonio's flamboyance,
a need for acceptance and the drink,
allowed it to happen a second too long.

Eventually Pete and Antonio parted.
Antonio wasn't gay, it was just his way of getting by,
Pete said, whilst pulling his impressive wage slip,
casually, out of his equally rich,
jacket inner pocket. Tom
was nonchalant.

Tom was invited out for a meal.
The romantic candles and dim lights
made him canvass for people's gazes.
Back at Pete's house, Tom curled up, drunk,
in front of the gas fire, Z shaped,
and was gently moulded to by a larger Z.

Pete and a suitcase ended up in student accommodation.
Tom visited after another night drinking.
With twenty pints between them
they arrived at the halls. Joy -
there was a piano. Tom played his Bartok
and simplified Chopin.

Pete marveled at Tom's grade three pieces, asking,
how can you play?

In his twin room he revealed his interest
in Tom's groin and reached out to touch it.

Tom recoiled and sternly frowned. Pete chortled.

Now depressed; had Tom unwittingly led Pete on?

Knowing where Pete worked offered Tom some safety,
he also added, *I'm not gay*,
and found his way home to his mother.

Pete and Tom met once more: late at night in the Ducie.

Tom wasn't expecting Pete, but he reported

about his worse job. He'd carried over his problem: him.

As for the pair, their depth had gone.

31/1/11 - 4/12/16

Michael left the university after being matched by an
employment agency to one of their clients, but he hadn't
realised that he was his own problem, and he'd "take himself"
to any new job.

His new environment was a big change; it was commercial.
You could rightly say he'd "jumped out of the frying pan into
the fire;" for example, being self-consciousness in an open-
plan office environment was not going to work. In just a few
weeks that was apparent, and any understandable new-job

anxieties, were not blameable. In fact, being a great computer programmer, ultimately made him a target for bullying. This next fictitious poem tries to illuminate aspects of a state of over awareness.

Self-consciousness

Can't you guess what I'm thinking,
or see through my eyes?
What was that smile about?
Am I transparent?

I shyly mirror your grins
and attempt the odd fake chuckle,
sometimes inappropriately,
and socially stumble.

I'm lost
and aim to be polite,
but my frown betrays me.
Do you see it?

If I had words to say
it'd be like balm,
but my lack of focus
is a social handcuff.

You leave and I relax,
until we meet again:
to greet
or not to greet?

We meet several times.
I say *hello*.
How weak I feel.
I'm my own proverbial fly.

28/11/01 - 16/11/10 - 11/5/13

* * *

Michael frequented bars at night, purposely spreading himself around all the village pubs, to hopefully be less noticed. It initially worked, whilst at the same time he denied it was unhealthy behaviour. But he had no friends, he hated his job, and problems followed at home. His mother and stepfather started bickering regularly. On one tense night, Michael returned from drinking, and soon afterwards his stepfather shouted upstairs to him, "if that drunken fucking bastard comes down, I'll hit him."

Michael didn't understand it at the time. Afterwards, he thought that outburst might have been linked with guilt, because Michael was an innocent victim, of the devastating consequences of adultery.

“Downfall” describes his solitary, daily, village drinking.

Downfall

It’s Friday night. He knows no villagers.
He’s deluded into thinking everyone’s out
and happy. Most pretend,
fuelled by alcohol.

He lives with his guilty mum and stepfather,
though he grew up with his workaholic dad.
He can get away with excess drinking here,
and smoking in the house.

He heads to the village to play fruit machines.
It’s a tax he pays for aloneness. He drinks
two pints in each of four bars. Even so,
he’s recognisable and tries somewhere new.

Who wants to know a cancer?
He’s predominately dead, loathing his ungrounded self.
He sits in the empty main bar,
then stands, watching passing cars.

On the next day, with regulars in the snug,
he’s alone. The landlord checks on him.
Bursting into tears, he’s asked *what’s the matter?*
So he randomly cites his parents divorce.

In the snug, a quiet man says, *he doesn't say much*,
after all the introductions had been made.
He feels inferior, as he hasn't chatted in years.
He braves offering a drink to Reggie, who's his age.
The man's always alone and refuses.

He goes for another week, but self-love
will help him to mix. It's the same at work,
so he quits, and hospital follows.
He's depressed.

4/9/12 - 11/12/16

Michael's mental health worsened. He became very paranoid in work and out of it. Then he started hearing imaginary voices aimed at himself (which at that time he took to be real.) They were always derogatory or critical, and always in the third person. He challenged just one, a much later one. Out-of-the-blue, his own father, apparently said "he's a rogue and a vagabond." Michael asked his dad what he just said, and it seemed to be repeated. On a handful of occasions over the following few years, Michael asked his dad again about this, but his father was always absolutely incredulous that his son would ask such a question.

After 18 months he resigned from the software house, but it wasn't the answer, so his mental health continued to decline, because unemployed and isolation left plenty to become less

well about, and his confused, deluded thinking, played a big part in what many would call a nervous breakdown.

* * *

On seeing his GP, who was initially flippant, Michael patently placed a physical threat in the doctor's mind, because he assumed a defensive body stance. His mother, accompanying, told the doctor he shouldn't have said "milkman"... That day Michael was admitted to a private psychiatric hospital, and quickly diagnosed as schizophrenic. His psychiatrist was extremely surprised Michael had held his job for as long as he did.

After two weeks in hospital he emerged on antipsychotics, and with some follow-up outpatient group appointments. Additionally, his mother contacted the local NHS mental health outreach service. That led to him spending nearly a year as a client/volunteer, in the social therapy department of the local state mental asylum. "Gap year" shares some of his experiences there

Gap year

Since volunteering to man the urn,
I'm less concerned about being on the dole,
no "proper role" to kickstart the day.
Life in the hospital seems easy going;
keep taking the tablets, sit around,
smoke cigarettes, do a quiz. Strange thing
is that people don't seem to mind,
after years in these confines,
sectioned in whitewashed halls and wards,
long corridors bursting with emptiness,
handrails a reminder of plodding movement.
Tranquilized silence fills the air now.

Stan's still here, John Wayne's biggest fan,
three shots kill you stone dead,
said with word salad either side,
profound but for his laugh and smile.
He seems happy to endlessly circle the hall

Bob's the man, only heard him speak once,
under very mild duress, four cig brands in as many seconds.
I smiled and gave him two Regal.
He normally used his hands,
karate chops meaning *I want*,
the context telling what.
Do away with words, refine routine,
over the years the priorities are clear,
cigs, tea, food and sleep;
in the hall with an urn nearby, tea
else sadly, smoke by elimination.

What's to be said? Odd at first, almost a joke
when I asked Bob what he meant,
tea, coffee, orange? as he bent forward,
chopping in pairs with half-mast trousers,
red braces and lips pursed. I was helped
eventually, and coincidentally, Bob took two sugars.

And I ask, what do they think about?
Some have nothing to look back on.

??/??/01

Michael's mum always looked out for stuff he might do, and she spotted a computer course advertised in a local paper. It was fledgling but may lead to a master's degree. Michael enquired. He was unemployed, with a suitable first degree,

and relevant work experience. He was ideal. Then again, being cynical, students like Michael could help the course's initial statistics: if the course was to enter a second run, it would help if it appeared to be doable.

To survive, Michael decided he would keep himself to himself. After all, it was just one year fulltime. But firstly, because Michael had shared his diagnosis with the course leader, a phone call to psychiatry was necessary, but that positively ensured Michael's enrolment.

The course ended Michael receipt of sickness benefits because he gained full-time student status. Then a week in, he was unexpectedly awarded a maintenance grant, on top of the tuition fees he had already been granted.

Michael soon began missing lectures, but only when he thoroughly knew the topics, such as 8086 assembly language programming. However, an exception was "Multimedia", in which the lecturer might discuss the pros and cons of an onscreen button being green or cyan. This was intolerably frustrating for Michael, who could happily consider delegating such a decision to a coin toss.

Despite his initial wish for a low profile, Michael's programming prowess attracted attention to himself, and

incredibly, he met a piano teacher called Clare, on the first day. Clare was 15 years older than him and joined the course to get away from music. Her first degree was in biochemistry. She'd had a varied professional career, including school teaching, and radio presenting for BBC Manchester. She also had a music degree. Meeting a keen "adult" piano student midway through their grade exams, was unlikely. (A later Clare is seen in Image 5.)

* * *

It wasn't quite right, but it may have been a necessary step in Michael's life: given his mental ill health, vulnerability, and strong piano interest, because he drifted into a relationship with Clare.

Whilst it is pathetic, this poem mentions the time Michael thought he was first meant to kiss Clare, which turned out to be an action dictating the course of many following years of his life: his journey.

Just good friends?

The concert's over. Time dwindles.
He's deep in thought as they approach
the cars.
His dilemma is that earlier look,
wide eyed and smiling, a moment too long.

They sit in his car before parting,
and briefly talk about the concert,
how amazingly Michel Petrucciani played,
despite his size.
His mind's multi-tasking.

Then, fifteen years her junior, he chances a kiss.
They're well matched, he fancies her,
and she responds.
It's sealed, they are more than friends.
By chance it is Valentine's Day, his birthday.

This was the start of something long term,
he's too kind to break a heart.
She later says that simple look was chance.
But can compatible men and women be
just good friends?

18/6/02 - 24/11/10

Things were Okay for several years, because Clare tolerated
Michael talking piano all the time; until it stopped, and silence

followed. The next poem is not retrospective. It occurred as dated, and it's the first such one in this book. It naively complements Clare.

Clare's mum always lived with her daughter, including during Clare's first marriage. She died between Michael first meeting Clare, and him writing this next poem. At that time, he was working for the department in which he met Clare, where he got his MSc. But in 1998, after one year in this new job, he had his third, and (at the time of writing) last psychiatric hospital stay, when he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

The Road

She dresses from eBay, vain cares put aside.
Her songs touch our hearts deeply.
She has no interest in plastic mirages,
spurns instant joy, the soul's ruination.

She found me alone, in need of a friend.
There was no mask, she had no agenda.
She loved me, healed my heart,
healed my mind, after others hurt me.

I seek truth, I must find courage,
treading together, forgetting the past.
A light shines before us, bright as the sun.
We must believe it's true heaven.

We must not hate the world. It must not fool us.
The light beckons, the road needs to rule.
Don't look back. We must keep walking,
we are growing you and I.

23/3/00 - 22/11/10

The following cameo highlights the routine Michael had already found himself in. He lacked the mental resources to change his life, and after that last hospital admission, he was permanently on lithium therapy.

Night in

I sit with my palmtop computer,
trying to compose this poem. You
with your microphone and mixing desk, are singing
upstairs in the room we call the playpen.
Is this life then?
Lucy's brindle coat is drying by the fire.
My trousers are damp too. You
don't take the dogs at night, that's my job.
What with the parrots we've a little family,
of a sort. I ought
to stop worrying whether we're normal.

2/1/01

Any spark between Michael and Clare vanished as their talking lessened. Michael tried to end their relationship, but Clare cried! He went on to lose the best years of his life. Clare's death at the age of 59, when Michael was 44, ended 18 years together.

A colleague who knew Michael well, told him the following: "you gave up your own happiness for the happiness of someone else." That was the most bittersweet thing anyone ever said to him, and the thought of it still affects him, in part, because in the verse John 15:13, it is suggested, that Jesus said, giving up your life for your "friends" is THE greatest form of love.

"Words" describes hundreds of silent occasions that Michael and Clare spent eating out.

Words

Words are incessant hailstones
piercing.

There's no hide,
our oasis is drowned.

Twenty years have passed.
Once we'd be like an amp on nine, now we're quiet
as I imagine
space is.

But we're troubled,
though food
will soon free us from standing out
in this people patchwork.

Once I could be confident yet quiet
like Hines' Gamekeeper,
and proud in the storm; a lighthouse.
Now I'm dimmed and confused, an autumnal muffled bird.

A standard BLT
with rocket added,
causes renaming of my fodder, pricing it
accordingly higher.

You eat pizza Margherita
with no surprises. How could there be?
The food is delicious and our mouths
are engaged.

It's Friday night and no wonder
ear density is high, as is volume.
We finish and I tip with just enough to make sound
into a golden metal piggy bank.

We leave; for good?

23/10/10

Clare was very spiritual, and whilst very dependable as an organist at a local Catholic church, she was much more drawn to eastern religions, and other ideas. Astrology was a speciality of hers. In time, Michael decided to try the church, because Clare always seemed calm. So, after he'd read "Mere Christianity" by C.S. Lewis, he begun lessons in Catholicism with a priest where Clare played the organ. Ultimately, he was confirmed. Being bipolar, Michael's Catholic faith had its on and off times. When he was down, he was more drawn in, than when he was up. And in time he reappraised Christianity completely, remaining mostly happy with Jesus Christ, but unsure of the existence of a supernature. He certainly read the Bible less literally. However, he also stopped attending masses.

Risperidone and Depakote were added to Michael's psychiatric medication regime. Perhaps with abusive disregard, Clare encouraged too much of the former (enter the next poem.) Small increments of that antipsychotic managed to reach overwhelming levels in an insidious manner. The maximum dose of risperidone in bipolar disorder is 6mg, but Michael was on doses of up to 12mg, alongside large amounts of his two mood stabilisers, lithium, and Depakote.

It should also be noted that the word "husband" appears in this next poem. After Clare had beaten the 60/40 against odds of

septicaemia, during a seven-month hospital stay in 2006, they made it their reason to marry. She actually died six years later. Michael had cared for her very personal needs during that time, driven her about in the car, and always pushed her wheelchair.

Michael had always lacked mental insight, and in the capacity of being his wife, Clare was probably able to have a greater than otherwise influence, in terms of his ongoing private psychiatry appointments and their related phone calls. One might postulate, that anyone 15 years older, physically disabled, and co-dependant, may have a reason to assert control over their much younger, and physically able partner, even by allowing chemical “straitjacketing.”

Risperidone

Those extra two milligrams have done it.
You’ve got your husband back.
He’s tired at night, and can’t manage
on three hours’ sleep. He’s no longer high.

No more irritability and indiscretions,
no more spending and rushing about,
you always said you preferred him low to high.
You’ve got the perfect medium.

1/4/11

* * *

Michael was made redundant in 2010, after thirteen years of continuous employment. In truth, he'd hardly done any work for a decade, but he was so vulnerable and without confidence, that his feelings of being both unemployable and trapped meant he just kept sating it out. Clare died two years after he was made redundant. Not uncommonly, she'd been in hospital again, but this time she was transferred to a nursing home. Totally unexpectedly, after little time there, when Michael visited her room very early one morning, he found her dead.

* * *

The next six poems, written during that time, chronicle it somewhat. The sixth: "Two days later," about Clare's actual day of passing, was understandably written some days after that day, and not on it. Michael was drinking very heavily at this time, in fact, up to a whole litre of tequila on one particular night.

Everything but the girl

You're there again.
This time the period will be remembered
with "Everything
but the girl."

You aren't talking, and your eyes
don't look into mine. You never
liked needles, and your arms
are black and blue pin cushions.

Saline and blood drip into your veins.
Oxygen tries to infiltrate your nose,
when you're not too confused
to dislodge the tubes.

I think of those years ago
when you presented like this.
You were sent to the ICU
I can't take that twice.

So it's night-time again.
I'm alone with our fretting dog Lucy,
a can of strong lager and a packet
of cigarettes.

I sleep two till two in the bed I've not made
for weeks. Then I drive over and hope
to see you smile. It kills me
thinking about this.

29/4/12

Tequila

Am I high? I haven't slept for two nights.
Usually I'm dead after one. I downed
a bottle of absinthe last night, didn't have
any effect bar placebo, weak 38% abv stuff.
Tonight I'm on tequila, 38% too.
It's one litre of the shit plus energy drink;
Red fucking Bull on fire. Give me
strength to last these times alone.
I drink out of boredom; loneliness.
If some other drug was available
I'd probably take that; sad fuck.

19/5/12

Early rise

It's 6:45a.m. I hear your alarm start.
You sleep downstairs, I sleep up.
I'm finishing off last night's Budweiser.
It's flat. That's how I feel. Rings emanate in the glass.
That damned touchscreen phone is frustration.
I try to text you.

I'm going to mass later to feed and pray.
I should confess as it's been long since sharing,
but I'm like the Lost Son. It'll be Okay with Christ.

My problem's semantics exploding like puffballs.
And I need people, but I can't cope: my paradox.
I'm alone except for the dog.
I'm going crazy.

24/5/12

Polefield nursing home

It's 1a.m. I've got four cigarettes,
a bottle of Irish whiskey
and our dog snoring at the end of my bed.
A power saving light is on.
I look at a cupboard mirror asking myself,
what happened to that man?
I'm sipping my drink, playing with whiskers
and unable to see beyond.

I knew I'd end up alone.
I didn't think it would be like this.
That nursing home makes me love you more.

5/6/12

Anniversary

A blank white sheet is lighting
my face. Should I pray? Would
Jesus mind if I smoke? I babble,
*take care of Clare Christ. Please
take care ...* I multitask with thoughts
and a cigarette, then write.

You've gone in a home now.
I've canine company and Jesus.

It was our Sugar anniversary today.
You battled pain. Your morphine confusion
hurt me when you said
would you sooner I died?

I left unopened Love Hearts
on your table.

13/6/12

Two days later

You'd been in constant pain.
What did you mean by *come January
it'll be curtains?*

Now you are peaceful in bed on the 15th of June.
Your eyes are cat's and your mouth
could be a gentle air passage.

I say *Clare*. You don't respond.
Believing morphine is numbing you,
I deny worse.

You're meditating. I don't want to disturb you.
Your eyes close. I deny.
You ARE with me.

I sit sharing peace.
The suffering is abated
then I leave you to rest.

Passing a nurse
I ask *is morphine doping Clare?*
She checks you.

Three times I denied. I weep.

26/6/12

Taking stock:

Michael was a mentally ill widower, and unemployed on very low income. He lived alone with his geriatric and incontinent dog. He had no social life and was vulnerable. He owned a house, thanks to giving Clare 18 years of his life, but otherwise, at 44 years of age he could be viewed as being at “square-one.”

Michael had just one regular social media contact. After about one year they fell out. Previously, they’d just *known of* each other from high school, but at the time of the upset, her abrupt Facebook “block”, caused Michael notable anxiety for a week or two. Thankfully, he listened to that feeling, and turned it into a new and needed motivation, which let him into positive actions.

* * *

Part 2 - Repairing the damage

Michael wrote the next piece six months after Clare's death. It has some profundity that makes it suitable to begin Part 2 of this book. Michael's instincts were leading him to the fundamental question: "who am I?" In another seven years he wrote his interesting and suggestively titled "I am" book, which answered that question. It forms Part 3 of this volume.

Armadillo

Who am I? Am I that child grown up?
Who am I? Am I an evil man fighting his heart?
Geese travel beautifully but greet with open beaks.

Who am I? Now numb with life, so chilled I don't feel down.
Who am I? Teeth smiling to be seen, dirty or not, who cares?
Higher, like Indian moods, what of India? -
 What of her moods?

When life's this way, you make a new self with armour,
 hiding the boy.

30/1/13

Michael continued asking questions and contemplating.
Within days of writing the last poem, "Armadillo," he wrote

the following thoughtful piece of dated verse. By this time little of his work was retrospective.

The trap

Are we children?
Haven't we grown?
Are we all mirrors
of our youths;
flies caught in amber?
We're constricted
by the truth in our mind
which we can't
gloss over,
with make up
or loud music.
Damn life's trap;
most can see it
in front of them.
Damn the trap. In life,
we've bought a pup.

9/2/13

* * *

A little after Clare passed away, Michael was diagnosed with type two diabetes. Then one night he inexplicably drank copious amounts of high sugar energy drinks, etc. In the

morning he was hospitalised. His blood glucose was over 50 mmol/l, and he could have been comatose. Whilst on the ward he hallucinated. He “heard” a male nurse say “magic mushrooms” on walking past his bed. Of course, the nurse wouldn’t have done so, and later in Michael’s life, he heard other rare but quite passive voices.

As a teenager, Michael gave himself a 240 volts mains shock from an empty lightbulb socket. In his forties he took two separate and impulsive, lithium overdoses. One was considerable.

One in five people with bipolar disorder, diagnosed or not, don’t attempt suicide, but rather they complete it. Therefore, the stakes are high to get well. Finding the good in the bad can only help, for example, Michael learned that there were times when impulsivity, could in fact be valuable. That strengthen his notion of finding **balance**.

This next piece references Michael’s hyperglycaemic stay in hospital, and more.

One of many?

The man-child is the youngest
ward member at 45.
He hears a trigger:
magic mushrooms.
His paranoia's more like denial now,
but he accepts
that he could be old
before his time.
It's not worth the anxiety.
God made him
especially for something,
even if it's just a man-child.
Perhaps life's jigsaw
will make him fit.

3/3/13

The idea of pure love began to occupy Michael. He rejected its existence outside of nature. A social media contact suggested he was a pantheist, which was a new term to Michael. Months before receiving that suggestion, he wrote this next poem revealing some related thinking.

Truth

I searched for **it**
my entire life.
Then I realised
it had been there all along.

Nature asks for nothing.
She feeds us, clothes us,
warms us: body and heart.
Nature must be love.
We take advantage
and she forgives.

I saw a robin today.
Surely it was God
with its characteristic trust.
I shared moments
in my space; its space.
I smiled at its lack of dogma.
I knew simplicity was divine.

23/1/14

Michael appeared warm, by his writing the fourth line in
“Truth”: “**it had been there all along.**” Ironically, nature was
a red herring, because he grew to learn that nature wasn’t ***it***.

* * *

Michael's ability to read and comprehend words continues to be poor. He has read precious few books, and then usually technical or scientific ones. As such, Michael's broader knowledge and wisdom of life, stems from his lived experiences, observations, reflections, and cross-referencing. He works best with pages holding pictures, signs, symbols, equations, mnemonics, numbers, graphs and/or tables. He rarely tackles pages of just words. It's not surprising then, that his first degree was in chemistry, and his master's was in computing, and for an amateur pianist, his sight-reading is very strong.

In essence, many thinkers, systems, and religions, etc., suggest similar things to this book. That strongly validates Michael's writing. People want ideas presenting in manners that suit them. Some need a supernatural element. Some want it very clever, perhaps they devour Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Jung, Freud, Nietzsche, etc., etc. There is no reason that the simplest person can't arrive at a position. Michael is touched by the film "Forrest Gump." He thinks it offers so much. Yet that beautiful story, will give nothing to an untrusting and closed mind. Of course, much depends on trust, for that reason, Michael offers succinctness in an original manner and/or form. Importantly, although he is autobiography writing, he has avoided most things about himself that give little to the reader and could be seen as extraneous, to the spirit of this book. If he was famous

and had the inclination, then perhaps by putting every little detail about himself in a much bigger book, it would be vastly more popular than this one. Whilst Part 3 can be read separately, as stated earlier, trust might result from reading the initial parts.

* * *

Ideas continued crystalising within Michael's head. The next poem is about "child-selves," and how that notion might lead to more truth and honesty. However, societal rubbish and his own bipolar disorder, might have made Michael's battle to clarify the notion of a child-self, harder than most. Therefore, it is no wonder, that Michael's writing asks the following question more than once: "what is my essence?"

Becoming a child-self

Mine computed
and didn't go out.
Last Christmas
I saw a pale reflection,
whilst watching children's magic tricks.
Shyness charges.
Acceptance dissolves ego.

I went full circle:
drugs and Catholicism,
then dogs' love exclaimed Eureka.

I smiled at bedroom reclusiveness,
realising we're together when we're us.

28/1/14

The last stanza above anticipates even the subtitle of Michael's 2020 "I am" book, that being, "Conforming by nonconformity," meaning we are equal by being different individuals.

* * *

Notably, the body of the next poem (or piece): "Made", forms from seven words in a number seven shape. Seven is the number that represents completion: seven days in the week, seven wonders of the ancient world, and without wasting ink, there are multitudinous examples.

Michael featured that number in his poetry in various ways, even "I am" has seven chapters. Its importance is not numerological as such, it is a reminder that things end; they complete. Everything turns around: "this too will pass." At the same time its regular appearance indicated a consistency.

Made

Childlike, Openness,

Truth,

Nakedness,

Oneness,

Courage,

Destiny.

30/1/14

* * *

Some identities are less deniable than others. For example, being born makes you a biological son or daughter, despite even family feuds, etc. However, does an accomplished musical instrumentalist remain as such, after a serious physical injury prevents them ever playing again?

Many identities crossed Michael's mind in "Being."

Being

I'm a son.

I'm a brother.

I'm a nephew.

I'm a relative.

I'm diabetic.

I'm bipolar.

I'm an allergy sufferer.

I'm a pharmacist?

I'm a poet.

I'm a pianist.

I'm an art collector.

I'm a bohemian.

I'm a pantheist.

I'm a Green.

I'm a vegetarian.

I'm a hippy.

Most of all,

I am.

1/2/14

Perhaps through increased mental activity, Michael became more elated, or he was getting more elated anyway, and his thoughts increased, and even deepened? Either way, straight

after meeting an old school friend (on the actual date of this next poem/piece) a **paradigm shift** occurred. Then in the small hours, Michael text messaged that friend with these same words.

Hypomania

This may sound bizarre.
I feel a huge black cloud
has lifted from my head
for the first time in my life.

I wonder if I still need meds.
I think I've grown up at the age of 45.
I've had to battle with being raised
by my dad; drugs, alcohol and spending,
but I've had some successes, too: piano.

I wonder if some people
have tried to prevent me from growing up.
Jesus taught forgiveness.
This might be a crazy idea, but I'm calm.
A psychiatrist said
I would be feeling better round now.
I can't decide if it's the meds
or the fact I've got my head together,
and my perspective right.
I need to step out. I'm 45.
What has happened to me?

12/2/14

* * *

Michael's mother was again helpful. She financed ten psychology appointments, which led to two important things: firstly, Michael realised he was avoidant, and secondly, he got the details of a city centre based, free- and long-standing creative writing group. Despite fear, he absolutely had to go, and in his favour, initially he would take previously published and admired poems.

As it happens, Michael wrote these next thoughts whilst having a coffee just before heading off for his final psychology session. This book's title is amongst these brief sentences.

My three words

I could cry.
We're all alone.

It's not fair.
Embrace your aloneness.

Gimme a break.
Why'd she die?

Opportunists are twats.
I want connection.

Everyone is hurt.
Religions are lies.

Dogs are love.
Everything turns around.

16/7/14

Eventually, embracing his aloneness made greater sense, because many people have a limited understanding of others, and consequently use their own personal examples as yardsticks. After generalising, the existence of normality, or “normal,” may develop, along with an assertion of belonging to it. Furthermore, those who are misunderstood must be abnormal, or “not normal.” One imagines this is rooted in the psychological mechanism of “projection.” However, what better and more logical way to broadly integrate into the world, than to assume like yourself, that everyone is individual, with an individual aloneness deserving mutual respect, and like you, neither strongly affiliating with any groups, or especially protective of their own identities.

* * *

The regular writing group meetings were going well, and Michael was gaining confidence from them, aided in part by the continued good reception his work enjoyed. One evening

he shared the next poem, “Hiding in the corner.” It’s an observational piece penned in situ at the back of a city centre pub, where Michael sat alone.

Hiding in the corner

Her brow feathers
some consciousness out.
It’s love tainted:
instincts polluted.
It’s a boy girl thing.
They accommodate.

He surveys compulsions
whilst accepting aloneness.
His pen is company,
stuffing his face with its flavours;
documenting the “normality”
that his social model excludes him from.

The band’s shite:
stereo sound, stereotypical stunt.
He’d like to kill the singer,
because he lies.
Volume perverts,
it’s mortar.

The blokes want to fuck.
The women want to talk.
The landlord's satisfied,
surveying on an end-of-bar perch;
armed with a half
and an antidote to smugness.

He writes one last stanza.
Weeds are bluebell-like assassins.
There's incense in the air,
but the beer's unconsecrated
and no-one offers peace.
Everything's religion.

His mantra is “**embrace your aloneness.**”

18/7/14

Michael's psychologist was good, as his writing group attendances remained positive; although he continued to live alone and didn't work, and whilst he was compliant with his medication, his mood could drop at times. Of course, everyone's mood changes, but as he'd experienced severe and catastrophic depression, that was once mild, then rather naturally, the mildest slump bothered him. Michael still thinks that having a second very severe depression, like the first, it would result in his death.

He wrote this during a typical mild lowering of his mood.

I thought “Capriciousness” then “Untitled” then this

I knew my mood had changed,
because I visited the crematorium
for two consecutive days.
I’d been high for months.

She was the only one who understood.
Many liked the ups.
She preferred the downs.
I wanted to be me.

I spent my ISA.
I tried to date.
I spread my poems
and offered my house.

I woke.
It was gone, pfft, just like that.
I surveyed the battleground:
the people I’d hurt and deceived; not least me.

It’s just another day. It’s my drama.
I asked, “what is my essence?”
That’s carried through.
That’s me.

31/7/14 @ Blackley Crematorium

That question, “what is my essence,” might be clearer now. Whilst being singularly important, the drive to realise a central and personal distillation of self, has even greater gravity for people with severe mental illnesses; but also in sufferers of serious physical illnesses, and not least in those amidst personal issues like divorce, or perhaps bankruptcy, etc. All such aspects of our human condition can, or should, trigger introspection, and there is never any end to that process.

* * *

Beyond his writing group activities, Michael began walking dogs once weekly, for the RSPCA. Later, he took the plunge of buying a six month’s subscription to the dating website, Match (dot) Com. He took an honest approach in “selling” himself, and very briefly it was too honest! But by incredible chance, “Michelle” sent him a so called “wink.” She saw his picture in the “Daily six,” a somewhat peripheral feature of the system, which perhaps mismatched the pair on this occasion, because Michelle had “ticked” options indicating a preference for marriage and having children, which Michael had not. Whatever placed him in her “Daily six,” his voluntary dog walking made Michelle think he might be a person who would view her **five** cats, not as potential relationship baggage, but at least as an interest. So given their mutual physical attraction, and what followed: texting, Facebook contacts, and an

extended phone call, they had a date. Later Michelle said she would have wanted to have met anyway, because her view is that you can't have enough friends.

* * *

Michael and Michelle had a whirlwind romance. Both had unfortunate histories: unsuccessful first marriages, etc., and Michelle followed hers, with a wasteful relationship costing her significant family building years. Herself and Michael started trying for a baby almost immediately, and Michelle soon caught, but not before Michael had proposed. They were married in six months from meeting. At the wedding, Michelle shared copies of the 12-week baby scan.

Some relevant poems follow.

You sleep. I write this love poem

It's six a.m. and I kiss you,
easy as scales ripple away,
tenderly, and diamonds say
"I love you," and we are tighter.

I have no exit. I'm flowing.
Rapids offer binary trust.
C'est la vie, it's easy. Just wait,
no decisions need to be made.

When it is felt within your heart,
your mind calms down. I think that's love.
There is no escape. You will have
what's coming, like or not; it's life.

26/10/14

Michael sent "Seeds" into the annual Rialto magazine's nature competition, for which you submit one or more poems broadly about nature. On the surface this is about a garden, but it's really about a couple getting on in years who are trying for their first baby. The poem didn't succeed, but maybe the judges missed its point?

Seeds

I knew our whirlwind would last.
We'd hit the epicentre.

I gained trust from your sunflower hearts
that you always offered wearing pyjamas.

My microcosm was novel to you. Even jays
were won; their beauty fooled.

Robin performs, but frustratingly
his love's a tease too. Only the stillness
of an angler can seduce him.

I'd shifted the leaves. They die to foster growth
on the bed our randomising rescue dog fouls.

Snow is due. Your silhouette will trace
regularly. I hope it will prosper.

Maybe you will synchronise with spring.
Last year wrens built in the rusty alarm box
that not even magpies could infiltrate.

Daffodils form a strong wake from crocuses.
Monochrome days miss them, till summer's promise
gifts beyond feeding trays.

Innocence appreciates.
Right now the seasons are precious.

2/12/14

Whilst briefly diverging from poetic journaling, Michael wrote the next thoughts down. He returned to using poetry to record events, with examples like "Wednesday 29/4/15", which is a tragic poem that poured out of him on the morning the couple buried their baby: Rose Megan Holme. The pregnancy was terminated after the 20-week ultrasound scan showed Rose had severe spina bifida.

Four philosophy stanzas

The world was mean
because I'd been mean.
It turned out,
there was no doubt
that minds were blank,
but I had mine to thank
that bad proliferates,
creating paranoid states.

Do not be a bully.
You're your own enemy.
That's how it'll be.
You'll never be free,
unless you formulate
a chance for better fate,
by life analysis, programming bliss,
and getting off the piss.

Do not think,
but give a fuck
about values.
Avoid news.
Follow a passion.
Have faith, hope and compassion.
Some call it charity.
Lay down your actuality.

If it didn't work out
give all you're about.
It's the greatest love of all
and easy after a fall.
Bad can become good.
What's intrinsic should
be subjugated by the mind,
that's what science can ultimately find.

9/3/15

Wednesday 29/4/15

I played "Somewhere over the rainbow"
to make us cry. Michelle wept the most.

My life:

I get up, I get through, I sleep.

If it was a good day it was a blessing.

If it was bad it was a curse.

I try not to think, like meditating.

I don't need yoga.

The beat of a butterfly wing a hundred years ago
could have changed everything.

I hope it didn't all end in the still birth room
aka "The butterfly room."

This isn't boringly affective is it? As I say,
"I write poems and walk dogs."

It's not raining.
That's good.

29/4/15

After Rose was lost, Michael's mental health deteriorated, and he became increasingly manic. Around then, he wrote "To Michelle."

To Michelle

It was May.
Was God penciling us in for spring?
I'd be forty-eight,
diverted by art for three decades.

We deserved blessing.
You, an intrinsic mother,
would be tragic
(more than that)
if you weren't actively a mum.

Paradoxically,
life was humbling complexity,
because time had insisted simplicity
was worth pain.

We'd stopped worrying about the system.
Peripheral confusion melts.
What better armour is there, than naked honesty?

I've never properly loved a woman.
I can't imagine loving you more.
Simple seems surreal.
In silence or bipolarity,
I might understand,
a silent baby or sacred storm.

23/5/15

In terms of Michael's writing, the following, "Joe's second-hand testament", was a landmark poem, but also in terms of his self-discovery. It is very rich, and took several few weeks to plan, structure, and to populate its eventual form. Like his "I am" book, both works were products of a manic or hypomanic creative energy. Michael remains proud of them both.

Rather than break "Joe..." down, bit by bit, with many interpretations, it is offered in full below, so that some of it, but not necessarily all of it, will profitably resonate with the reader. Incidentally, Michael wrote his first poem when he was on the kibbutz in 1987. It was simply called "Joe" and was sadly lost back then. Of course, Michael and Joe are the same person.

Joe's second-hand testament

Nahal Oz kibbutz is close,
via melons, to Gaza.

Is it “cool” to risk your life
for foreign travel stories?

His first poem was obscure,
written in past tense and true.

Thirteen years flew, till he thought
“I will share more honesty.”

His openness
 defined him.

Confessional open-mic
was part of his adult path.

He wrote poems
 and walked dogs.

* * *

Life is a Venn diagram
in multiple dimensions.

We strive for one boundary
like a central unity.

It does not
exist.

No trust
is perfect.

There are
no saints.

We only have one model,
projecting it on others.

Paranoia has its roots
in the crossed wires of childhood.

* * *

Only compete
with yourself.

Everest is locally
known to the plain and humble.

“It is lonely at the top”
where the Eucharist dissolves.

There our child-selves socialise,
ultimately via sex.

We attempt, but suicide
leads to absolute mind-sets.

Humour fleetingly connects
like a drug the masses crave.

Denial of aloneness
promotes control of masses.

* * *

Anxiety: not knowing,
might lead to paranoia

by ideas
of reference.

Delusionary thinking:
a form of bizarre logic,

is self-perpetuating
like recursion running wild.

If you were stressed in your youth
adulthood might feel softer.

Meditation may still minds.
Perhaps the east is more chilled.

Self-realisation sucks.
You can't accelerate life.

* * *

Existing as someone else
allows your exploitation.

We all end up being us,
even if we are evil.

Obsession for more money
generates competition.

Depression
stems from conflicts.

Life
has too much illusion.

It
is biological.

Return
to the school playground.

* * *

Individuality
is lacking with Catholics.

Sacraments control people
producing robotic drones.

Everything is religion,
even without a structure.

Everyone's path is
unique.

Find your own God:
nature? Sun?

The Bible is man's construct
and not immune to logic.

Accept we are different
and essentially alone.

* * *

He does not walk dogs (plural)
anymore. He knows nothing

apart from his own madness,
that came by observation.

The world is not
absolute.

Make an early decision
and hope that your luck holds out.

Risk your life
to have a life.

Accepted, there is some truth
in the Bible. Take a chance

because everything
is HYPE.

June - July 2015

“Joe’s second-hand testament” is perhaps unique in its literary form.

Michael insists the next piece is poetry because it has lines of seven syllables, and other more obvious structural elements. And regardless of whether words “tell”, or they artistically “show”, or they’re literal or figurative, if a rigorous form is evident, then so too is verse.

Therefore, Michael followed with many poems using the writing formula of the next one, “Recalling the wilderness”. He found it to be an excellent vehicle to share thoughts and ideas.

Recalling the wilderness

Trade a decade? Trade your life.
Head to personhood. Have choice.
When you don’t know, it can’t hurt.
Be livid later with voice.

Play piano. Learn guitar.
Go far with isolation.
Manic dedication helps:
obsessional exertion.

Write verse. Nurse dogs by walking
them all over everywhere.
Do anything positive.
Don't drink and smoke. Sight then dare.

Be aware that most folk act.
They are not better than you.
Be you. Honestly, be true.
You are amazing. Just do.

1/9/15

Please, please paranoid people

If third person references
seem to be getting common,
confide in a companion.
Don't quiz when TV is on.

Ideas of reference
do not make sense to the well.
If you smell rot that is not
there, maybe prepare for hell.

You are not in the paper.
It is not about you. True,
madly there is some logic.
Dilute your ego, so few -

will attack you. Jesus Christ
was right. When you are anxious
paranoia can occur,
if your mood is obvious.

2/9/15

It cannot be synthesised

Confidence founded in light
is unfounded. Your darkness
collects deposits of hurt:
investments of hopefulness.

It is said, “no pain no gain,”
and fools build houses on sand.
You can sail through life unscathed,
a dope with your brain unmanned.

Some people never wake-up:
approximating normal:
the path of least resistance:
herd safety they can follow.

The straightest route is shallow.
If you divert off its road
you cause your halo ruckus,
you sap your heavenly food.

16/10/15

Tomorrow and yesterday

Wisdom is a cursed surprise.
When you end your false selfhood
you start another hurting,
and different yearns for good.

What should or could have been life
becomes clearer. Compromise
and see the broader picture.
Everything is at a price.

Be compassionate and share
your empathetic nature.
Some people never wake-up.
Don't exploit. Try to nurture.

There could have been difference
if a change had taken place.
It's pointless saying what-ifs.
You'll become a mental case.

30/10/15

Real life or fantasy?

Life begins in its good time.
It might creep there unnoticed.
It can become manifest
if the past is diluted.

What a blessing to live life
without needing to begin.
That makes blissful ignorance.
Be humble to avoid sin.

The past can be foundation
or it can be a horror.
By learning from your errors
you make a good tomorrow.

For some it might start plural.
Without pain it may fleet by.
You may waste yours for normal.
They say, “feel the fear and try.”

5/11/15

I am

For some that is everything.
Others strive to qualify.
Vagueness might negate attack.
Hence, do not identify.

Everything is tenuous.
Even love is not perfect.
It comes and goes with reward.
Grave payment may be respect.

Truly we arrive and leave
with absolute nothingness.
Surely purpose is to make
purposeless feel less pointless.

Perhaps honesty is brave:
honourable naivety.
Sod it? Release everything?
Choose capitalist pathways?

16/11/15

The next poem was in answer to a homework. A different writing group (one that Michael helped to run) asked, “what would you like to hypothetically tell a younger you.” Writing a poem wasn’t mandatory, but Michael answered this question in his established style of verse.

The group existed as part of a charity that helped people to recover from alcohol, narcotics, and any other substance addictions. Of course, everyone there, could have profoundly used, good earlier advice.

A letter to young Michael

You’re in the system. It’s hard.
On balance, two point five kids,
mortgage and bright holidays,
are less pain, but close eyelids.

When mum left so early on
her action caused a ruckus,
implying you were worthless.
But you're equal, not surplus.

Don't act the goat and fall in
with the easiest of "friends."
Laziness can be a route
to denial and pretend.

It's good to freely say "no."
Opinions are respected.
By slowly braving feelings,
one day you'll know life's started.

25/11/15

"Life 1-0-1" - The poem

Can pure love be possible?
Satisfaction is reward.
Pantheism is plausible:
all is God and we are Lord.

How can that be when we take
isolation as a truth?
Groups are total delusion
to an existential sleuth.

What is the function of life
when children are not gifted?
Is it to buy bigger cars:
rewards for painful business?

For some there is no purpose,
that alone is firm belief.
Thinking can make us worthless.
Mindlessness is stress relief.

25/3/16 - 18/4/16

I said, "What is my essence?"

I change up and down my range.
I do not know if you know
who I am, now I have slumped.
Smiles between us are now few.

If I gave you love before,
and my loyalty and time,
now I love you more. Stay close.
Am I done? Are you still mine?

Fluctuating is a swine.
People intertwine, wine, dine.
Me? I might when I am high.
Do you see the thread, the sign?

Will we become over, done,
through a change you cannot stand?
Take a stand or give commands.
That way our bonds might withstand.

15/4/16

* * *

Whilst breaking the trend for structure, Michael proposed, or even asserted, a general course of life in this aptly name poem, “This is life”. Its first stanza is Matrix-esque, i.e., like one of his favourite films.

This is life

You are sleeping.
You do not want to wake.
You shun the truth.

You have one life.
Thieves abound.

Remember once living?
You were a baby.
You became a little child.

Afterwards you were fooled.
It seemed acceptable.
Your parents pushed you.
They had to.

Mad people are not mad.
They saw truth once.
It was in part or whole.
They understood Gnosis.
Jesus was censored.

The true path is harder.
Ideas cause danger.
Your thoughts confuse.
They may be chemically culled.
Chlorpromazine could mean well or ill.

6/10/16

* * *

The poems to follow continue to strengthen themes in this book; however, they were written after Michael's more elated period, when he met Michelle, proposed to her, got her pregnant, married her, and they lost Rose.

Michelle, you wanted a poem

I found me.
Stay by me.
Not everybody
knows their unique “me.”

It took
the everlasting summers,
from a way back,
to become, five annual fishing trips.

There are only so many years
in a life. I pissed away eighteen,
with risperidone, alcohol,
and my late fucking wife.

When I am most passionate,
I feel I can do anything.
I mean, I FEEL; Yes?
I get fucking ELECTRIC ...

In our early days,
we made Rose.
God only knows
if..... God only knows...

For months, mania woke me
from our bed, in less hours
than one hand can count,
and shed loads were spent.

Now I say, “I change,
up and down my range,”
and stuff like
“what is my essence?”

I don't think I could fall in love again.
Is this good? “I can't possibly
imagine another life,
and certainly not a third wife.”

I love you; #justsayin ;)

19/11/16

When the mania has passed

I ask you if you love me.
I ignore a queue jumper.
I calmly leave our front space
with its road neighbours capture.

My stomach feels my self-doubts.
They play havoc with my brain.
I can do it. Feelings pass,
but manic wakes are insane.

Projects start to panic me.
They used to be exciting.
I still keep my diary.
I say this stress; is “living.”

Bipolar lasts forever.
The rhythms fool me every time.
I ask you, “what’s my essence?”
You don’t understand that line.

2/7/17

Michael experimented with forming groups of poems, for example, his Gnosis series (and the Fragments one.)
Here’s the first and last poems from “Gnosis”.

Gnosis #1 - “We”

We were brainwashed at our schools.
We buy pointless bigger wheels.

We eat, smoke, drink, copulate.
We are dopamine addicts.

We should compete with ourselves.
We chase reward chemicals.

We learn “no” for our own good.
We gain choice and real friends.

We learn that we're chemical.
We gain noble-gas comfort.

We have always been ourselves.
We stop turning anger in.

We're an atom of a god.
We're infinite gods of gods.

We're fractals and energy.
We're nothing if not spirit.

We're more like balls than bipeds.
We know through popping mushrooms.

We'll find a messiah, BUT
We'll have no trust to listen.

We'd pride, now it's suspicion.

20/11/17

Gnosis #7 - "Gnosis"

No pair view life the same way.
That is a religious aim.

Everyone has a gnosis.
Then that is an assertion.

You cannot share a gnosis.
That is also assertion.

Logically, a gnosis
cannot be validated.

Confidence negates gnosis,
by its slowing of thinking.

Analysis is pointless.
Mindlessness is blissfulness.

Projection of empty minds
should remove paranoia.

Paradoxically, age
aids living and ends it too.

Embrace your aloneness, not
the construct of a council.

Escape your self-made prison.
Master tyrannical thoughts.

Empty your mind to be free.....

8/12/17

Just before Michael wrote the nonfiction, “I am”, he wrote
“When I changed:”. He’d been performing at open-mics for a

few years, after being nudged into doing so by a lady in his original writing group. With covid-19 restrictions stopping such live events, “When I changed:” was the last poem Michael read to an audience.

When I changed:

It happened in one moment.
I realised my worth.
Some people stopped liking me.
Some people started.

Most days became valid.
Acting out me was fun.
I could drink alcohol sensibly.
I became interested in humanity.

The longer I was me, the more me I was.
Dare I say I increased in wisdom?
My empathy rocketed.
The plight of others could make me cry.

In part, the right wing grated.
I gained personal rules.
Turning a blind eye was not one.
Further introspection was.

An adult relationship was possible.
I'm made up I became me.

I'm saddened some don't make it.
It's hard, but the "before-me" bit has a name.

It's called Hell.

26/1/20

Part 3 - Michael's New Testament?

"I am - Conforming by nonconformity"

Introduction

The author was born in Lancashire, England, in the late 1960s, over a decade before Margaret Thatcher closed the pits. His generation knew of the writer Barry Hines, and how Hines' Jud Casper replied to his younger brother, Billy, after Billy said he would not work in the local mine. Jud said they would not want him anyway, as the job required literacy skills, but cuttingly, and in a more stylistically accurate tone, he added, "they wouldn't have a weedy little tw@t like thee."

D.H. Lawrence wrote his classic, "Sons and Lovers," before Hines' time. It paralleled "A kestrel for a knave," quoted from above, by also powerfully covering mining. Mr Morel was one of its main characters: hard working, a man of few words, and head of his family. He appeared resigned to his endless cycle of toil, domesticity, and an absence of recreation.

The author was aware of such historic lifestyles, not least because his high school sat on coal, and the National Coal Board (NCB) was a major local employer in that parochial setting. Younger people are unaffected by these past realities.

Unfortunately, the passage of time, pacifies the power of such messages. Therefore (especially in developed countries) the young find that a life without choices, is an unacceptable reality. It is a nonreal existence, in equal but opposite magnitude, to the reality of their all-powerful entanglement with the Internet.

An interesting parallel would be to ask whether Second World War soldiers, felt not having to climb out of trenches, was something to feel lucky or entitled about?

Our modern profusion, of global media sources, has allowed the monster that is personality, to have decimated the value of having character, whilst increasing people's feelings of entitlement, not least in their "God given" rights, to display Hollywood originated characteristics, whilst the figurative miner, who did not want to be a miner, is further buried in the irrelevance of the past.

Beyond not wanting to mine, miners did not necessarily want to marry. But without social security, that meant cooking, washing, cleaning, etc., too, and without the modern help of things like electric washing machines. Also, who would be looking out for the aging retired miners if they had no family?

In England, formal adoption procedures began in 1926. Couple that with the taboo that illegitimate children created, then the likes of Mr Morel had to marry to produce offspring. Even

family sizes were not a choice, because contraception in those days, meant monasterial life or practising a “withdrawal” method. Fertile couples were likely to have children, whilst not having complete control over how many.

Celebrities, personalities, reality show contestants, Twitter influencers, etc., all help build a picture suggesting choices are increasing. Even the photonegative of the picture, presents more decisions, for example, dislikes, and things to find disgusting. After all, so much is so topical, it draws people in.

Some of these choices automatically define us. You could stop eating meat and be a vegetarian. Even without any action at all, choosing your gender identity these days, is a potentially instantaneous label creator. Of course, that was an unavailable choice to people in Mr Morel’s era.

Within modern cultures, societies, politics, and religions, you can have many picks. Maybe the film “Forrest Gump” is out of date. His mother said, “life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.” There are a lot of people now, who would reject this metaphor, because they would want the description card, AND a Google search on possible allergens, AND the working conditions of the chocolate factory employees to be of sufficiently acceptable standards, before considering eating any of them.

It is the author's purpose to show that these many choices lead to strong attachments, and ultimately a dangerous tack, because they become weaknesses, or "Achilles heels." He thinks Jesus warned against this, as recorded by St Matthew.

Matthew 7:24-27 "The wise and foolish builders."

In this passage, Jesus spoke about the risk of building your house on sand, because internal, intrinsic, or supernatural based identities, i.e., the more solid and independent ones, are less vulnerable to losses, whereas strongly world-based ones, that might be susceptible to external influences, are the houses on sand.

It is also recorded in the New Testament, that the Kingdom of Heaven is in your midst (or "within," in other translations.) See Luke 17:21. What is intrinsically yours, or you, and not external, is better to build that house upon.

Although the author is technically a Catholic, it is important to note that he is not a Christian. He maintains that Jesus Christ was real, and existed, but he thinks connections made between Christ and God, were well meaning ideas aimed at drawing people to the religion. In fact, the author does not want to promote any religions. He talks about Jesus, because Christianity is by far the most prominent religion amongst the members of social groups and communities, that have been a part of his life.

Chapter one

It is reasonable that the author offers credentials before you continue. He wants you to have faith in his words that follow. After all, he lacks a humanities degree. All academics validate one another through such qualifications. They imply that certain books have been read and assimilated, whilst perpetuating their academia, their academic jobs, and occasionally producing an innovation.

The author is poorly read. He is a scientist with 18 years direct inner-academia experience. When he was 22, a colleague told him that “universities are a haven for the unemployable.” That became abundantly clear, through the author’s own example, and not just that of others.

His lived experience, as opposed to a read-out-of-books doctoral theories one, is his eligibility for sharing these words and ideas, and suggesting strangers finish his book. At 52, the author has been carefully studying life for three decades. Most of his contemporaries have been focused on common specifics, such as careers and families. That is what most people do.

With such major distractions, people do not necessary, observe, broadly and fundamentally, and with care and commitment. Further to that, if you have no reason to do something, you are unmotivated. Motivations cause emotional

drives. By just thinking something “sounds like a good idea,” you will not supply long-term energy.

An example of a distraction is when an interest is developed in a colleagues’ professional habits. A clear and likely reward from such a focus, is a possible ultimate promotion. That is in the realm of microcosms. This book covers the macrocosm.

However, people often want to understand hierarchies. Broadly speaking there are two types. Skills hierarchies, which are straightforward. They are less emotionally dangerous things to exist in, than the other type, i.e., power hierarchies. Life is more likely to approximate to the latter. In power hierarchies, the complexities of different characters and personalities can be almost baffling. And without your own basic life-fundamentals, that parents, schools, clubs, etc., should have instilled in you, then an ability to flourish in power structures, will be highly compromised.

At the age of eight the author suffered maternal abandonment, with its many, ongoing, and profoundly serious consequences. Not least, a complete nervous breakdown in his 20s, and the following serious psychiatric diagnoses, in this order; schizophrenia, psychotic depression, schizoaffective disorder, and bipolar disorder type 1.

The author now has good mental health. He is reluctant to say he has fully recovered, because he believes that theoretically,

that statement can only be asserted moments before death. During the author's breakdown, his sense of identity was absolutely destroyed in every understanding of that statement. However, he found happiness in 2014, 22 years after his mental destruction, and he quickly remarried one year later.

His previous wife was domestically abusive, for example, she encouraged his gross over medication. She passed in 2012 after their 18 years together.

Herman Hesse in his famous quote from "Siddhartha," suggested wisdom cannot be imparted, adding that knowledge is different, it can be freely shareable and comprehended. However, when someone tries to share wisdom, it sounds like nonsense to some.

"So why read further?"

When people who seek, look, and listen, are given enough time, they consequentially collect an amount of data that enables patterns to emerge. The ideas, behaviours, effects, and outcomes witnessed, that recur to greater or lesser degrees over time, may make some sense. Eventually, some seem more sensible or profitable, whilst others are the opposite. But even the latter are useful. They may become things to avoid.

Either side can be subtle, for example, attitudes and behaviours in people, as opposed to direct "do and don't" rules, are the

route. Therefore, a gradual presentation, to physically present and receptive people, typify this kind of teaching, furthermore, mixing with positive people, as opposed to the path-of-least-resistance easy to access types, is something people can strive for.

This book offers good pointers. The author holds two science degrees: a bachelor's in chemistry, and a master's in computing. The latter prompted his terms like "data." He has considered the Bible seriously, but not covered other humanity works. He tries to be strictly logical.

In recovering from his quarter century setback, grounded in a childhood and early "adulthood" completely left to chance, it is a clear fact that some people never become adults. In fact, the elucidation of the word "adult," is a point of this book.

Returning to the data idea: the author suggests people should observe life, and if possible, observe themselves, too. No-one ever knows everything. Younger people often fail to realise that we never stop learning. Older people's social media profiles, sometimes make a reference, to going to "The university of life." Such people might write a book like this. One of them did: the author. Even the less analytical will see things others miss, and what one person misses, that might have been profitable, another person might have missed and lost nothing.

This is not academic, and excluding religions, there are no quick fix books. If there was, we would all have one, and the author would not have wasted his time writing this. There is presumably much overlap amongst the primary texts of the main religions, for example, the core teaching of humility. But in the Bible specifically, St Paul has a metaphorical “quick fix” whilst on the road to Damascus (Acts, Chapter 9.) The author had a similar experience in his forties. He describes that personal “road to Damascus” moment, in less profound terms, as a paradigm shift, and he shares the essential substance of it on a later page in this book.

The Bible’s Narrow gate and Ten Commandments are a path, but richness either side of it is not necessarily ruinous. People get back on track. Some straying builds firmness of wisdom, because whilst compliance is safe, greater self-confidence stems from lived experiences that incorporate that richness, whilst banishing the banal.

Slavish obedience necessitates great trust, patience, and other virtues, because ultimately it insists life is more about a conceptual infinity to follow, rather than the now.

This book tries to guide people, with their own aspects of their own “data,” i.e., their life experiences. Manoeuvring the likely and certain things to come in life, is not an intended scope of this text. Everyone has preferences, and other unique aspects

anyway. Therefore, a general approach is required. All our differences lead to a fascinating world, whilst not necessarily being negative or dangerous. However, we all fear and/or avoid something.

Hopefully, we will reinforce our positive behaviours over time, and keep incorporating other ones, whilst reducing the negatives. That way we become more adept, wiser to pitfalls, gain trust in ourselves, and hopefully acquire faith, but not in a religion (though we can); but more in life, and beauty in little things, such as for starters, us all!

Chapter two

The introduction suggested that these days we might be led to become many more things, than was the case generations ago. For example, it is unimaginable that Lawrence's Mr Morel would have chosen his gender, despite the insistencies that some people today, in more liberal countries, have in that respect. And it is complex, and reliant on other people recognising the choice. For example, the psychologist Dr Jordan Peterson, of Toronto university, was an early challenger of those notions, and he ran into considerable trouble around campus because of his refusal to use what he saw, were the incorrect gender pronouns to address people.

In the author's hometown of Manchester, England, a huge number of people decide to follow either Manchester United or Manchester City football clubs. The former has a red strip, and the latter has a blue strip. Football is life to many, even without them physically touching a ball. They spend entire lives watching others play it. Public houses, particularly in the suburbs rather than the city centre, regularly feature groups of males discussing nothing but the game. They are often impassioned and very opinionated discourses. Ignorance of the subject can literally be socially handicapping. If such features were compared against those of typical religious cults, a notable overlap would be evident. Whether a "red" or a "blue," allegiances can be inherited in families. Whilst that implies

less choice for some, the risk of social isolation makes group membership an obvious attraction for others.

A bizarre phenomenon occurred after the Manchester Arena bomb tragedy. The concert of the US singer, Ariana Grande, on the 22nd of May 2017, was most tragically ended by a suicide bomber triggering his device. He killed 23 people including himself, whilst physically and psychologically injuring hundreds more.

The author himself was once a victim of an assault. It led to him suffering very regular night terrors for years, but he cannot imagine some of the mental scars that would have resulted from surviving that concert.

After the concert there followed a public reaction, that in the author's 52 years, he had never seen or heard of anything like before, because all over Manchester, people had (permanent) bee tattoos tattooed on their bodies. (The bee, or "busy bee," has been a symbol of Manchester's hard work ethic since the 19th century.) Whilst some of these symbols were small and discreet, others were quite large. Not all were particularly artistic, looking more like signs.

By chance, at this time, the author drove past a tattooist shop, and witnessed a queue of people emanating from outside of it, and to a remarkable distance down the road. It was obviously for bees, and completely unprecedented for such a business.

Such queues have in the past, presumably been limited to the likes of concentration camps.

Many people showed solidarity by putting less permanent bee signs on the backs of their cars at this time. Such manners of display were not new, because backs of cars (at least in Manchester) showed “Child on board” signs for many years, then quite suddenly not. The implication of course, is that the driver is a parent, and therefore in the group of people who are parents.

Christians have been attaching fish badges on the backs of their cars, for much longer than people displaying indications of their parenthood status. The fish symbol existed in the early years of the church. By displaying them outside a building, it was a covert sign telling other Christians that their brethren dwelled inside. Modern day atheists have occasionally reacted by attaching identical signs on their car rears, but for the important differences of their fishes having legs and the word “Darwin” in their bodies.

It is a fact that the backs of cars are used as spaces for personal announcements, often suggesting a proud group membership. It is also a fact that this cultural trend is relatively modern. The author gained his UK driving license in 1985, he has considerable motoring experience, and insists in the veracity of this statement. There was an earlier trend for Bumper

Stickers in the United States, but statements like the classic “Shit Happens” were more typical.

After the desperately bad events at Ariana’s concert, the social reaction seemed to be part of a general compulsiveness, to gravitate towards the perceived good and wholesome. Topical popularity, enhanced through general publicity, just increases such urges further. And attempts of religions to wholeheartedly offer similar, fail, due to their over-involving complexities, and lack of online “with-it” factor.

The 21st century is the Internet age. It is no longer an age of fast food, but an age of fast food and I want it fetched to me. People expect quality without a wait. “Bang for buck” and “something for nothing” have broadened, for example, gaining an identity by virtue of acquiring a membership of a group is now an example.

During the 2020, worldwide Coronavirus outbreak, a soon to be centenarian, ex-army Captain called Tom Moore, embarked on a social media/internet fundraiser for the NHS. His goal was to cover one hundred laps of his outside space, during the so called “lockdown,” and to collect £1000 for NHS charities. In fact, he past £30,000,000, such was the popularity of his undertaking.

Donors almost became NHS appreciation society members. However, if achieving the maximum good was the sole point, then ironically, the UK government had already issued the NHS itself with a blank cheque, and with innumerable victims of the virus impacted in ways other than direct medical ones, a greater impact, or greater good, might have been possible with the sum.

A human herding like mentality was seemingly placing people in a bubble of goodness, rather than one of getting hands dirty and down to business. In other words, the final achievements of the cause, were not questioned before donations were made.

Chapter three

Developed capitalist countries often create groups that are essentially, displays of, or other expressions of loyalty; for products, hence the expression “brand loyalty.” Looking from 2010 onwards, a curious phenomenon evolved in Manchester, and although it is irrelevant, it surely manifested in many other places, too. German saloon cars became exponentially more popular, and consequentially, they had a strong presence on the road. Particularly, AUDIs, BMWs and Mercedes Benz gained a vogue status. In opposition to most saloon car manufacturers, these makers routinely installed powerful engines up to 6 litres in size.

With many people becoming environmentally concerned, some UK motorists regressed. In 60s and 70s America, a trend was to drive V8 saloons and fastbacks. They were collectively referred to as Muscle cars, and included classics such as Dodge Chargers, Pontiac Firebirds, Corvette Stingrays and Ford Mustangs. The latter is especially interesting, because it was remarketed in the UK at this time of interest, as an obvious alternative to the more powerful German cars.

Black or white were once the main colours of these cars, then, as if in a competing two-part biological system, one dominated. Consumers’ colour options effectively mirrored the Ford Model T scenario, i.e., any colour “as long as it is

black.” Such powerful German cars looked menacing. Recognising that drivers increasingly liked to look mean, manufacturers made further adjustments. For example, chrome trims and badges became black, too, and bizarrely, their black on black was practically invisible. Previously silver/greyish looking alloy wheels were also blackened, and consequently made to easily highlight scratches received from rubbing curbs, etc. Worse still, these cars encouraged fast and antisocial driving habits in their owners.

With such desirability displayed daily, feelings of exclusion and inferiority nagged people to join the group of German saloon car owners. The arrival of the first credit score company advertisement, on UK national television, was contemporary with this. It looked like loan agreements for these cars, were indicative of the obsessions their owners had about keeping up appearances, especially when the great majority of these cars cost more than an average annual salary.

Not wanting to be outdone, the people who could not afford a newer example of these modern muscle cars, sometimes settled for a much older mechanical liability instead. The psychological problem with this and many similar behaviours, is that they are always linked to other people’s opinions; very much including strangers and not just acquaintances. In other words, they highlight a reliance.

Especially younger people feel little reason to analyse their motivations. It can almost appear like a “herding instinct” is operating. Today’s world is far from the one D.H. Lawrence described in *Sons and Lovers*.

Chapter four

Identity and identification are psychological ideas, whereas group membership may just be statistical. When the latter is linked directly with positive aspects of mental health, pride (or ego), self-worth; or it boosts self-confidence (whether denied or not), then it should be personally analysed, because the enhancing of any of those aspects, needs to be robust to attacks.

Maintaining an identity that emerged from chance circumstance, or fixed truths (such as being a man in the biological group of males) is an unnecessary acceptance of potential burdens. What is the point of bothering? Hopefully, this book has pointers helping to answer that.

Identities divide the world. Uneven distribution of natural resources, and widely varying climates will always cause imbalances, too. We can do something about the first one though. Emphatic individuals, who try not to maximise their own comfort, whilst improving themselves, might make small positive changes to the world. They realise we have one life. As in Susan Jeffers's message, in her book "Feel the fear and do it anyway," they exercise some trust and faith, and with or without identities, they act.

Through having group membership, you must hold the requisite criteria of entrance, and automatically have a high likelihood of overlap with others, thus you enjoy mutual validation. Significantly, many people increasingly crave validation. This century, a priority for acceptance and popularity, especially amongst younger people on social media, has become much more culturally significant.

Three identity groups follow.

- 1) The male subgroup, gay men, holds some members who continuously broadcast, that they sexually prefer other men. The rest of the subgroup do not; their sexual preference is not obvious from outside. People in the earlier half are effectively asking people, including strangers, to be receptive of their messages. It involves reliance again, plus feedback/validation. Unless you were an anarchist, you would not put out messages to invalidate yourself. In fact, psychological mechanisms such as confirmation bias, may be lessening negatives.
- 2) German saloon car fans can be financially excessive, as stated, and they seem motivated by desires to impress strangers. Ironically, those overstretched budgets aim to fool us in to believing that they are rich. In truth, no-one cares, apart from likeminded people, and they are in the same group.

- 3) Veganism is becoming more common and talked about. A meme appeared on Facebook which makes a point about vegans. It pictures a face with pronounced blood vessels. A caption reads, “A vegan who has not told anybody they are a vegan for 15 minutes.” Whilst unfair, it is not entirely untrue.

Here are three questions:

- 1) What relevance have strangers got within my sense of self?
- 2) Can I become more independent?
- 3) Will I always need others to enable me to be who I want to be, or who I like being?

Associations lead to tenuous and potentially dangerous concepts of identity. If too much is assumed, then incorporated into to your identity, through the ramifications of who you mix with, you are dependant.

It is not unusual within groups of children, for one to be more magnetic. Being with such a person can make others assume they have acceptance. Whilst socially together, the positivity of such a “vibe” might boost self-worth, and consequently increase the time others may want to be with such a popular person. It is somewhat addictive though, and may compromise

chances of personal growth, even leading to denial of the negativity.

Individuals have immunity to situations like this. They are “their own person.” It was mentioned before that this book is essentially an explanation of the word “adult.” “Individual” has mostly the same meaning.

Later in life, relationships such as marriages can be of these natures. But in his late teens, the author spent his first year of university in a manic like state with effortless social skills. Then his mood plummeted, and two years of reclusiveness followed. Finding new friends was too hard, and he clung to two old ones. They were popular college personalities who did well later in life, especially one, who is now a successful international entrepreneur.

Driving home on the author’s final student day, his fantasy that he must be special because he knew special people, began a path to complete erosion and realisation. Of course, his self-esteem vanished in sympathy, without those two physical presences. This was a major psychological blow, and coupled with other significant negative experiences, a nervous breakdown and further psychological annihilation resulted.

Just before returning home from university, the author began to develop a love for classical piano music, having had a chance exposure. He was aged 21 at the time. As his father was

musical, he soon began to encourage this, even buying his son a digital piano. The author was working as a computer programmer. It was his best way of avoiding people. However, being tied to a computer screen all day, was not that different to looking at a coal face, like Jud Casper and Mr Morel.

This career attempt was very unsuccessful. After one year he changed jobs due to feeling psychologically bullied. Then after a further 18 months he quit his second programming job, with its significant bullying and stress levels. As he was developing psychotic signs, some of the bullying was probably imagined. That made little difference though, because stress does not care if the source is real or imaginary.

He lived with his mother and stepfather, who argued a lot. Without friends, and having a programming job, he was very isolated. There were about eight local bars around his home area. He used all of them to drink in, soon developing a very unhealthy habit. He drank every night, and swapped locations regularly, but over many months, strangers seemed to realise, that he was a loner with a bad drinking habit.

With other factors including unemployment, he ultimately became under psychiatry, and his psychiatrist labelled him schizophrenic. Thankfully, he was more treatable though, because it turned out he was depressed, and so severely, that it presented like paranoid schizophrenia.

Before seeing a psychiatrist, the author remembers a night in his mother's house. He burst out of sleep, realising that he did not know who he was. He had lost all his connections, labels, and identities. He was nothing, but the gigantic task of learning piano had started. Without it, perhaps his risk of suicide would have been high. His mother still says piano saved his life.

Ironically, as well as giving the author a personal career/skills hierarchy, studying classical piano started building some sense of identity back. This is where he had been before though, and previously, he had experienced people who had not held the same view of himself, that he held of himself.

With successes in grade music exams, he arrived in a competitive structure. Rarely, he would meet another music maker, but sometimes humiliation resulted from this structure. That was clearly worth analysis. Then he found that the better he got, and the increasing number of years he had played, he turned his playing into something commonplace that he just enjoyed.

Classical music can certainly involve competitive structures, but whilst that is unwanted, a more psychologically destructive total loss of skills can occur. The self-taught Russian genius, Sviatoslav Richter, is widely regarded as one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century. He died in 1997 at the age of 82. Before he died, Richter allowed Monsaingen to interview him

on camera. This ultimately led to the production of the video, “Sviatoslav Richter the Enigma.”

In the video, we learn Richter lost his sense of pitch by a whole tone, which prevented him from playing. His last concert, a good while after his next to last, was given to a small private gathering on the 30th of March 1995. And having been so immersed in music, then no longer able to play, he appeared very depressed in this video.

The author’s first wife, Clare, developed a hearing problem that stopped her singing. She had been in demand as a professional singer and could also simultaneously play the organ. Sadly, during a considerably long hospital stay for septicaemia, Clare received Amikacin. It is a drug that can permanently affect your hearing; and unfortunately, that happened to Clare.

Years earlier she took the exam of the Licentiate of the Guildhall School of Music (LGSM) singing diploma. She was so good she received the college’s silver medal, which only the best diploma performance of the year attracts. However, on discharge after the previously mentioned hospital stay, her singing was ruined: musically unpleasant.

Amongst all the spiritual ideas that Clare explored throughout her relatively short life, and starting with Catholicism in her youth, she was ultimately set on Kriya Yoga, which was first

brought to the west by Paramahansa Yogananda. Clare eventually travelled to Germany for advanced instructions in it. Whilst amongst her temporary group of strangers in that country, one evening they were asked “what are you?” People began to answer, and everyone other than Clare had been saying, “I am” followed by something, like “a parent,” or their occupation, etc. But Clare’s answer proved final. It was clearly the sought-after one, because the instructor said, “that’s it.” Clare had said only “I am.”

Chapter five

Originating in Christian theology, the seven deadly sins are pride, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, sloth, and wrath. In the book “Mere Christianity,” by the famous 20th century Christian apologetic, C.S. Lewis, it was suggested there is effectively one deadly sin, due to the other six being based on the one, i.e., pride. Lewis considered it to be the deadliest of the deadly sins.

Pride leads people to fight one another, and to despise one another. It can even exist at a national level, or it can be a feature of a group of any smaller size. It is a characteristic we hate to see in others, but particularly so when we perceive they have more of it than us. You cannot directly measure it, but it may be gauged comparatively.

If for example, a person seeks divorce as a solution to maintain their pride, then ipso facto their pride was more valuable than their marriage.

That example should hopefully be enough, because pride overlaps with almost everything that is bad in the world. It is found everywhere: in people, countries, football clubs, and ironically, in members of religions, etc., etc. The lack of it in nature is part of nature’s beauty, and the fruit of the figurative Tree of Knowledge, should never have been tasted, thus bringing it into the world. Everyone is guilty of this theological

sin. Lewis said, whoever claims to have no pride, is very conceited indeed.

The life of Jesus Christ resulted in the formation of a religion centred around the opposite of pride, i.e., the virtue of humility (of course.) We can miss that all religions overlap on this aspect.

With Sigmund Freud, the concept of ego was suggested. It is much like pride, but whilst the latter is originally a religious idea, ego stems from psychoanalytical thinking, and it manifests in a similar way to pride.

People do not like egotists, as such the word is used as an insult. As with pride, we do not like seeing displays of ego. When two overtly egotistically people meet, especially if it is regularly, like in a work environment, then they might compete to discover who has the bigger ego. They might deny a competition, despite having spectators and any suggestions at all of childishness.

Often then, pride and ego are somewhat interchangeable, but where they differ and do not overlap, includes cases where having pride is generally, socially acceptable. These include situations like having some pride in your children, or a little personal vanity expressed via your looks, because looks, for example, are relatively harmless.

Chapter six

It is implausible that we would readily accept, identities we know of which to suggest predominately negative characteristics about us. Furthermore, if we did, we would be likely to deny the connection. In fact, if a frank statement, such as “I am a convicted criminal” is shared, it could quite easily imply elements of, humility, reflection, contrition, and acceptance, for it to have been voiced at all, because negative personal attributions can point to a depressed mood.

When we say to another person “I am a -” followed by some descriptive noun, it is usually a matter of indifference, or better. It is common in the UK, to say “I’m Okay,” in reply to someone making a general inquiry about you, even if you are bad. Our broader UK society does not expect people outside of closer networks, to share any negative information.

We even make inquiries about others, primarily to gain opportunities to boast about ourselves. In the author’s experience, the capitalistically more advanced culture of the United States, makes it easier to jump straight to the boast. At the time of writing, 2020, the American president Donald Trump, was continuing to make personal and national boasts, on a regular, and international, basis.

The author met a lady called “Debbie,” through his local NHS mental health services. He was unemployed as it was after he left his second job. Debbie and himself were attending the local social therapy / community outreach service, and at this time, with Michael having a strongly honest tack, if someone asked him what his job was, he would naively say he was unemployed, then paint an even worse picture by saying he had been ill. Unfortunately, many people asked this. It is a hard question to avoid. Debbie chastised him for his excessively open, sometimes negative behaviour, so much so, that she taught him to begin to tell occasional lies.

No-one wants to be in the group of losers, and seemingly accept and identify with it. People want to be winners, and to identify with being in the employment/occupational group, that holds the greatest potential for societal respect. Of course, this book wants you to resist that, and not be motivated by respect. The ego, or our pride, wants respectability, but as has been covered, it is a state of reliance. It needs what is outside of us, but “the Kingdom of Heaven is within.”

In 2020, Love Island presenter Caroline Flack, lost her television show hosting position after unwanted publicity around an assault charge against her, and she tragically took her own life. Bearing in mind again, that the author is not a Christian, he thinks fame and fortune are very linked, and can be interchangeable, as typified by this statement of Jesus’, “it

would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, than for a rich ‘man’ to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Jesus also insisted that, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

You’d imagine that finding the internal, must be an easier prospect, when there are fewer external complications?

Chapter seven

It is fitting that this discourse is in seven chapters, because the number seven is special to the author. Many of the poems in his complete verse, considerably feature the number. It is present in forms, and more directly. Seven commonly represents completion. As well as having Seven Deadly Sins, Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, seven days in a week; seven is everywhere, and throughout the Bible.

This book has at least one thing in common with Susan Jeffers' "Feel the fear and do it anyway." The titles of each of those books, say such great amounts about their contents. However, people say "don't judge a book by its cover," but the author made that kind of judgement 30 years ago, and approached Susan's wisdom in the standard painful manner, the one many of us opt for?

Whether reading Susan's book would have generated sufficient motivation to cause actions, can never be known. In a similar manner, if someone reads this book, they may not be changed through an emotion, but going back to the author's earlier language style: people collect data, information, and experiences, and with sufficient time, they hopefully recognise patterns in that data. The author's ideas are suggestions to spot. If we do not tune in, or are not sensitive to something, it could be unprofitably bypassed.

Most people eventually reach a workable way of thinking and viewing the world. However, the author still hopes that his own message may be considered, and lead to useful ramifications for others, but earlier rather than later.

This requires faith and trust. Of course, the author thinks he is worth reading. These pages took a great amount of work. At the same time, the author also accepts that people perhaps half his age have already internalised all of this, or for some, rejected it.

The author was 45 years old before general people could no longer easily exploit him, threaten to take things from him, or control his anxieties.

When St Paul headed to Damascus (Acts 9) he changed in a moment. A similar thing happened to the author. Such things can happen in a moment because decisions happen that fast, and it must be decisions that are needed, in moderation though.

Importantly, rather than a religious conversion, a “paradigm shift” was a more accurate description of the author’s experience.

He suddenly realised, that all along, the only thing he had needed to be was himself. It followed that he must be the best person in the world to do that job, and he immediately realised

that the same thing was a truth for every individual on the planet.

No-one could be better at being him than he was himself. At the same time everyone is different, but as such, a logic makes us the same, because we are equal, through sharing an equal difference. Groups and identities separate us. The author's hope is that everyone becomes an individual. It was said earlier that this book explains what it is to be an adult. The core of adulthood is individuality, with outer parts mirroring our inners.

Jesus Christ said, "the Kingdom of Heaven is within." This eventually made sense. It was even emotional for the author when it did. He had been to places, joined organisations, bought things, been with people, done things; then he found it, "under his nose." He just could not see it before.

The author's wife, Michelle, has maintained there are too many choices today. That is also the author's view. Michelle would add, that having too many decisions leads to anxiety and stress. Return to D.H Lawrence, Mr Morel's choices were scarce, although physical hardships created different stresses.

With so many opinions big and small, many of which readily become identities, the adage "can't see the wood for the trees," and perhaps even, "chip off the old block," might now have a different interpretation?

Finally, the author likes to say - “**Godspeed.**”

Part 4 - Gallery

Image 1

This shows Michael's temporary workplace on Nahal Oz kibbutz, Israel, 1987. In the centre of the photo, a great steel rod can be seen in the grips of a ferocious metal cutting saw.



Image 2

Walking through Gaza in the summer of 1987, Michael “snapped” his Irish friend boldly leading their group of four young men. They had ignored the advice of an Israeli border soldier, who tried to put them off entering the region!



Image 3

It's 1989. Michael is in Marrakesh, Morocco. He was in a very low mood before going, and made a poor travelling companion; but the "Djemma el fna" was a highlight.



Image 4

This picture was taken at the local school where Michael's mother worked. By chance, a photographer was there, and Michael had been able to drop by. It was circa 1978/79. **Michael was 10 or 11** and looking unexcited.



Image 5

This is Michael and Clare in the house of her friend's. It was millennial eve. **Michael was 31.** He had been diagnosed bipolar in the previous year. Clare was 46. This was a bad day, he hated being there, and felt both unhappy and trapped.



Image 6

This is Michael at 52. He was with both Michelle, his second wife, and their second rescue dog, Chloe. The year was 2020, with the world in the grips of the coronavirus pandemic. Despite that, this moment was a typically happy one for them.



Found?

* * *

This part 3 section, i.e. “I am”, is available separately.

See also www.exithell.org to reach Michael’s broader online presence, or try his more generic URL - www.michaelholme.com

Michael Holme (15/05/06) 1st Assignment, 1500 words - What are NRMs?

The acronym NRM stands for ‘New religious movement’, and it is a modern replacement of the older terms like cult and sect. Both these hold negative connotations, not by a small part due to the aftermath of the ‘suicide cults’ such as the People’s Temple and Branch Davidians, but also, the work of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM). Cults are viewed as non-mainstream religious groups with a charismatic leader (in the sense that the leader has some possibly divine quality), and with little organisation. The membership is nebulous. As time passes the group becomes routinised and institutionalised or more business-like, and the term sect is generally used at this point (although the terms cult and sect are often used interchangeably by the public). As husband and wife introduce their children to the sect, and their children do likewise eventually a denomination emerges. We have in effect a cult-sect-denomination continuum, and once the denomination status has been reached, the group is no longer an NRM though this can take a long time.

“NRM” was first used by the academic community, who in general are more objective when dealing with minority religious groups, such as cults and sects. The word minority here is difficult: Sikhism is in the minority but not in the

Punjab. The same is true of Mormons, but not in Utah. Clearly, numbers can cause problems. Fundamentally an NRM is new, religious and a movement, so what do these three terms mean?

“New”

Defining at which point in time we call a religious movement new, is difficult. Zion’s Watchtower Society, the forerunner of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, formed in 1874. This is hardly new. Indeed, they claim to be reviving the authentic church, but no good book on NRMs, cults and sects, would ignore this branch of religion, that is commonly perceived as deviant, for example, due to their actively world rejecting beliefs, including their refusal to fight and vote, and quite famously, their beliefs that lead them to reject blood transfusions.

One dividing line that has been used, is that of the Second World War, but this rather parochial approach, doesn’t take account of the thousands of NRMs in Africa or places like Brazil. Eileen Barker (1) suggested 1950 as the divide. This is a good point, because before this date NRMs didn’t deviate a great deal from the Judeo-Christian tradition. and after the 1950s, through immigration, ease of travel between east and west due to the Repeal of Oriental Exclusion Act 1965, and the growth of missionary work, all manner of traditions spread. This spread of different traditions was fuelled in 60s USA by

the youth counterculture looking for meaning outside of their parents predominantly Christian, middleclass values.

An example of an eastern tradition that spread to the west is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) that emerged in 1965. Their beliefs are based on the ancient Baghavat Gita, and they worship Krishna. Although formed in the west in 1965, their teachings are ancient, so is ISKCON an NRM? In view of the time of formation of the organization, it is, though the members would probably disagree.

Even the word new is difficult, e.g., ‘new secondhand car’. Considering new in the context of disliked is perhaps the most reliable approach. Methodism was an NRM once, but it has long since been an established denomination, and if disliked during its ‘new’ period, as it was by the Church of England, it isn’t anymore. So new is basically a woolly term.

“Religious”

According to Frank Whaling (2) there are eight elements to religions. These are community, ritual, ethics, social and political involvement, scripture, concepts or doctrines, aesthetics and spirituality stressing the inwardness of religion. Some people claim that football is their religion, and this idea

can in part be justified. Football has its community of supporters in the stadium. They worship the team. They don't miss important 'festivals', e.g., cup matches. They try to influence wider society by advertising their club loyalties with shirts, etc. They have an oral tradition of chants, etc. In other words, there are many elements of Whaling's definition of religious, so like new, the term religious can be vague.

A simple definition of religious is to believe in the supernatural. There are those that would argue that David Beckham is supernatural! However, sociologists of religion often use a 'functional' definition, e.g., Yinger (3) states that "religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practises by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human aspirations".

One point that is quite fundamental to all religions is that whatever religion a person is a member of, they believe that to be 'the way' and many religions actively seek to convert the whole human race to their 'truth'.

Taking Christianity as an example, Frank Whaling's eight elements of a religion, manifest themselves as follows. The

church brings believers together in a community. Sacraments such as baptism and the Eucharist are examples of rituals, and they're performed in the church. The Bible has a system of ethics in the Ten Commandments that believers try to live by. Religious communities feel the need to be involved in society, to influence it for the betterment of its values. The Bible is obviously the scripture of Christianity. Doctrines such as God as a Trinity and the Virgin birth are all held to be important. Aesthetics are things like music, dance, sculpture, and stained-glass windows. Music plays a very large role in Christianity, for example hymns, Anglican Evensong, and organ voluntaries. All these things are particularly important for those that can't read. Finally, spirituality, as Richard O'Brien says (4), "Spirituality has to do with our experiencing of God and with the transformation of our consciousness and our lives as outcomes of that experience".

It could be said that a group of people constitute a religious group if they offer a means of coping with the key life events, illness, death, loss of any form, adversities and misfortunes, and the joys of course, birth, etc. Usually help is called upon in the form of prayer. Though Buddhists traditions, for example, don't believe in a transcendental being as such, and therefore don't pray to one.

“Movements”

A movement is a current that's moving within a wider organisation, or within society (e.g., the New Age movement), and is more nebulous than the highly defined main body. NRMs such as the Unification Church, ISKCON and the Church of Scientology are highly organised and don't really fit this definition though. Also, what starts as a loosely organised movement, centred around a charismatic leader, ends up structured and the leader's authority becomes institutional. But for groups such as the Jesus Army, which is an orthodox Christian group, the term movement, i.e., part of the wider Christian body, would seem appropriate.

A lot of NRMs have reached the stage of organisation, so it is questionable whether a term implying looseness and current is appropriate. Unfortunately finding an alternative is difficult. At least the term movement implies that NRMs change, one of the older established NRMs, the Jehovah's Witnesses changed by once celebrating Christmas. Indeed, like the established churches, some NRMs change by division, for example, Paramahansa Yogananda's 'Self Realisation Fellowship', based in California, became divided when Donald Walters left to start his own community, called 'Ananda', also based on the same teachings of Kriya Yoga. This was followed by a blaze of court cases. The practise of Kriya Yoga, which was brought

over from the east by the guru Yogananda, is now taught by a Canadian group called 'Babaji's Kriya Yoga'.

Types of NRMs

Various typologies have been arrived at to classify NRMs, and it is evident that NRMs are notoriously difficult to fit into discrete slots. There will always be a number that don't fit the pigeonholes defined. NRMs differ in their origins, beliefs, practises, organisation, leadership, finances, lifestyles, and their attitudes to women, children, education, moral questions and how the rest of society is concerned. So many variables are involved.

Roy Wallis's popular typology distinguished between World-affirming NRMs, World-rejecting NRMs and World-accommodating NRMs. The first of these three types believes that suffering is within rather than in society, e.g., Transcendental Meditation and the Church of Scientology. They believe that problems with the world are problems that the individual has with the world. It's our own approach to living that causes us problems and we must be taught to improve ourselves. So, for example, Scientology uses its system of Dianetics whereby individuals strive to become 'clear'. World-affirming NRMs can be divided still into two main categories. First there are those groups which add a

spiritual element to western psychotherapy, such as the Rajneesh Movement (Osho) and secondly those that westernise an oriental product, e.g., Transcendental Meditation.

The second of Roy Wallis's types, World-rejecting NRMs, e.g., ISKCON, the Unification Church and the "The Family" tend to be quite notorious. They withdraw from society, living communally, etc., and believe that society is evil.

Finally, the World-accommodating NRMs are those that are content with the world or are at least indifferent to it. They neither seek to change themselves in the manner of, for example Scientology, nor change the world by parading down the streets like the Jesus Army. An example of a World-accommodating NRM is a typical Charismatic Christian group, charismatic in the sense of gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusions

New religious movements are both difficult to categorise, and indeed are difficult to define. Too many variables exist to put the thousands of NRMs into a small number of discrete slots. As for what an NRM is, perhaps a commonly held impression is most useful, i.e., they're of recent inception, a religious body of people (what is religion ?!) and disliked or distrusted. The

subject is difficult and the number of NRMs in some areas, such as Africa is growing. But in the UK, NRMs have to some extent made way for the New Age, especially in today's socio-economic climate, where 'downing tools' to run off to a religious group is no longer a viable choice.

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- (3) JM Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, (London 1970), p.12.
- (4) Richard O'Brien - *Catholicism* p. 1058

Michael Holme (07/08/06) 2nd Assignment, 1500 words - Do NRMs Brainwash?

The term ‘brainwashing’ is relatively modern. Its use, at least in printed English language, was non-existent before 1950. Its first occurrence in the printed form was in September 1950, when the Miami Daily News published an article by Edward Hunter (a CIA propaganda operative) entitled, “‘Brainwashing’ Tactics Force Chinese into Ranks of Communist Party”.

Brainwashing was used to explain why a relatively high percentage of American GIs defected to the communists, after being taken prisoner by the Chinese during the Korean war, in the 1950s, and American attention came to bear on the techniques because of this.

In more recent times the brainwashing debate has moved away from the treatment of prisoners of war, to drift towards recruitment and maintenance methods of New Religious Movements (NRMs). It is one of the (if not *the*) most polarising issues of the whole 'cult' phenomenon.

There is a spectrum of opinion on brainwashing, with ‘cult’ sympathisers at one end, ‘cult’ critics on the other, and a small number of individuals/newspapers, etc., holding the balanced

middle ground, with the picture being a bit more detailed than that simplistic view. The main players are the 'NRMs', the members/possible new recruits, the parents of the members, the media, the Anti Cult Movement (ACM), the deprogrammers, academics who study the field, and you could include the courts and judges who have had to deal with problems that have reached a head (though regrettably, in the case of such groups as 'Heaven's Gate', if indeed the members were brainwashed, any action was too late).

The picture in brief

NRMs want new members, they really want everybody to be a member, with the possible exceptions that groups such as Transcendental meditation have, who believe a critical mass can be reached to provide profound benefits for all mankind. Therefore, NRMs want to be persuasive to recruit, and once they have a recruit, they want to keep them.

Although there are many, probably thousands of benign NRMs, some require very high levels of commitment that invariably involve the recruit both leaving their family of origin and making a financial sacrifice. Also, as most recruits are young idealistic people, this can often mean quitting a college/university education. Naturally this causes the parents a great deal of anxiety. This anxiety is fuelled by the tabloid

press who print stories such as, “My Child was Brainwashed by an Evil Cult”, which is a much more grabbing headline, than “Young Man joins Cult”, but presses want to sell papers and compete. Also, the ACM, that’s composed mostly of ex-cult members, with axes to grind, will propagate stories in their meetings and on the Internet, of the evils of cults.

Then there are the deprogrammers: ‘hired-guns’, who snatch adult children and return them to their parents, after practically brainwashing them themselves (if we’re going to accept the deprogrammers assertion that their subjects are brainwashed in the first place). It’s in their interest to support the brainwashing hypothesis, as they get paid many thousands of pounds to reverse the alleged process.

Amongst all this there are some academics who try to be objective, and it must be said, some of the more respectable newspapers do too. The British sociologist Eileen Barker in her classic work on the subject, “The Making of a Moonie, Choice or Brainwashing?”, described herself as leaning towards choice.

Recruitment and maintenance

With the hard-hitting headlines created in the wake of groups such as Jim Jones’ People’s Temple, and Heaven’s Gate, it’s

no wonder that the very word 'cult', creates suspicion and fear amongst most people. The question when faced with a recruitment situation, is how can anybody in their right mind join anything like that, often leaving their previous life completely behind? There are two possible conclusions: either their objectivity and critical faculties are impaired, because of deep insecurities; or alternatively, extremely persuasive techniques of brainwashing, turn people into passive zombie adherents.

Certainly, some people joining NRMs are not mentally strong, or at least they may be overly suggestible, and lacking assertiveness, and perhaps in need of an emotional bedrock. On the other hand, some people joining NRMs, as Eileen Barker's study of the Moonies showed, can be very strong individuals. However, the fact is, that within of all those who are approached to join a group, only an extremely small percentage join, and of those, the vast majority drop out of their own free will after about two years (see 'Radical departures' by Saul Levine, 'The Making of a Moonie, Choice or Brainwashing' by Eileen Barker). This doesn't support a theory of effective brainwashing. That's not to say that some NRMs wouldn't like, or even try, to brainwash. Accusations pointing at the Church of Scientology, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the afore-mentioned Moonies, are typical examples. However, in the fifty or so

NRMs Eileen Barker has been in contact with, she has found them all eminently resistible.

However, some people do join NRMs and work long hours for little or no pay, or in exchange for expensive counselling, e.g., Scientology auditing. They might give up their possessions and money, etc., to the group, e.g., the Jesus Army. Once in the group recruits may be ‘love bombed’, this can take a physical form as well as emotional (e.g., The Family). They’re living in the group and are constantly exposed to the group’s philosophy, and these factors can be viewed in a sense, as elements of brainwashing, as the individual loses his/her outside reference and ‘eats, sleeps, and drinks’ the group. In the classic study of the sociology of knowledge, “The Social Construction of Reality”, the authors make the case that the plausibility of any given idea, depends on the people one is in daily conversation with. Thus, if one were to live in a community where everyone, i.e., one’s conversation partners, believed that Revd. Moon was the Messiah, before long it would become a plausible idea for oneself. Or at least you may start to go along with it, as it is a socially learned value to not want to disagree.

Imagine the situation on one of L Ron Hubbard’s Sea Org ships where there really is no escape from other scientologist 24/7, and a quasi-naval/military regime is in place with strict

rules and regulations. Before long, you could believe that ‘clearing’ the planet is paramount. So membership maintenance is strongly supported by an isolation from the outside world, and a constant affirmation of the groups doctrines. However, this doesn’t necessarily mean the concept of brainwashing is in place, and although you may ‘toe the line’, you may harbour your own doubts but not want to exclaim, that ‘the emperor has no clothes on’.

What is brainwashing?

The Free Dictionary (www.freedictionary.com) defines brainwashing as follows -

“Intensive, forcible indoctrination, usually political or religious, aimed at destroying a person’s basic convictions and attitudes and replacing them with an alternative set of fixed beliefs.

The application of a concentrated means of persuasion, such as an advertising campaign or repeated suggestion, in order to develop a specific belief or motivation.”

The word forcible is interesting here, as in the legal context it is force that is the element above all others that must be present, in the context of brainwashing. It may be used as a defense against an alleged crime, as in Patty Hearst’s famous

case. She was accused of robbing a bank along with the Symbionese Liberation Army who, it was claimed, kidnapped her, raped her and brainwashed her. She went to prison for a short time before Jimmy Carter gave her the presidential pardon, on his last day in office.

It's interesting to note how the media and fashion industry 'brainwash' us. It may comically be known as the 'herding instinct', but we sheepishly adopt one another's desires and aspirations. In the context of a NRM this is magnified as there is only one belief on offer, and every which way the recruit turns they are going to meet it.

Again, in the context of NRMs, there is another factor not mentioned yet, which is one of the methods of alleged brainwashing, and that is the practice of taking confessions, thus making the subject more vulnerable, and increasing the bonds in the group. Three main factors exist -

Force

Regular confessions

Ongoing indoctrination

Perhaps surprisingly, most NRM member have IQs higher than average, and are of sound mental health. These factors don't appear to deteriorate during the period of membership, and

nearly all members have made the decision to leave within the first couple of years, as stated earlier.

Conclusion

The author doesn't believe in the existence of 'cultic' brainwashing, however he is very perplexed as to how groups such as, for example, the People's Temple could hold such bizarre UFO beliefs, and could all commit suicide. However, it is due to such isolated cases that widespread fear of NRMs, and their alleged methods, have surfaced.

Having said that, one may argue that there is 'no smoke without fire', and it is probably true that some groups do try to brainwash members. Such attempts may exist, but in general they do not seem to work. The bottom line is that recruitment activities are in most cases, very ineffective, e.g., in the case of the Unification church, out of 1017 who attended recruitment in London in 1979, 85% finished the 2-day course. 30% started the follow up 7-day course of which 25% finished and to jump a bit, only 5% were still affiliated after 2 years (p146 *The Making of a Moonie, Choice or Brainwashing?*). This hardly supports a powerful brainwashing model. Saul Levine's study 'Radical Departures came to similar conclusions.

An unfinished view of the seven miracles performed by Jesus and documented in The Book of Signs: John 1:19 - 12:50

Jesus' first "miracle." John 2:1-12

Jesus' first miracle: the turning of water into wine during the wedding at Cana in Galilee, which is documented in John 2:1-12, is a case where, I think, metaphor needs accepting, against the scientifically implausible, literal words.

Jesus had been invited to a wedding, along with his mother and disciples. They were perhaps witnesses, giving possible credence. We are told water is directly converted into wine. However, water cannot be changed into wine. Water is the most abundant liquid on Earth. It is colourless and odourless. It supports life. Due to the existence of hydrogen bonds, water has a surface tension and even solid water floats on the liquid form. Water is found in pockets both large and small, everywhere. Just like mankind exists in pockets of isolation, small groups and larger bodies, water does, too, and ultimately in oceans.

We are like drops in the ocean. We are nothing alone, but together we provide a store to harvest. Jesus' metaphoric conversion of water into wine, indicates how not water, but

man's individual "pockets" of knowledge and wisdom, are converted into a more valuable form, by the action of Jesus' ability to distil and precipitate a NEW wisdom, previously out of reach by a lack of mental capacity and free association. Jesus could produce this wisdom from a cumulative body, an "ocean."

The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine, then exclaimed that the best had been illogically served last. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the master, more senior in age and responsibilities, found Jesus' wisdom (his wine) remarkable, he especially, would have expected to have had prior knowledge.

Jesus' second "miracle." John 4:46-54

Jesus suggested that people should see signs and wonders, in order that they would believe. Signs and wonders need not be tangible or physical actions. If you were to tell a young person today, "at school you have the lesson followed by the test, whilst in life, you have the test followed by the lesson," that offers a great sign or wonder. Those words are clear, unlike many of Jesus', and they are strong; soon manifesting. Flippantly, they don't need supernatural confirmation. Besides, Jesus often dealt with psychotic people who heard voices and saw false images.

In Jesus' time, documented in John 4:46 - 4:54, there was a nobleman whose son was sick in Capernaum. He told Jesus that his youngster was dying. Jesus told the nobleman that his son was in fact well, which the man believed, and he headed to him.

The nobleman was met by his slaves, who announced that his son was living. On asking when the fever left his son, the slaves told him that it was at the seventh hour on the previous day. John recorded that the nobleman believed, because the slaves gave the time of the wonder, or "miracle," as the seventh hour. The nobleman had never been told this time though, prior to him leaving." However, there is significance in the number seven. It is no surprise to me that seven "miracles" are documented in The Book of Signs, and that this "miracle" should happen on the seventh hour. Seven implies completion, a symbolism that is in many places in the Bible.

In my opinion, the assumption that Jesus' said on the seventh hour, that the man's child was well, because the slaves said the same hour, is complete guesswork. I think it is symbolism, i.e., it means completion, and to do with early ideas about numerology. Completion is a sign the fever had run its course. There was no concrete evidence that a miracle had occurred, as opposed to a numerological suggestion, that nature and good fortune had run their complete courses.

Peter's Confession of Christ

The term synoptic comes from Greek and means “seeing with the same eyes”. It is used in the context of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke because all three follow a similar course, with similar material and even common wording. John is very different. Scholars call the study of the similarity of the first three Gospels, the Synoptic Problem, and Peter's Confession of Christ is a good example.

If one didn't know anything about biblical study it may be fair to say that Matthew, Mark, and Luke didn't all eyewitness this event, because the accounts are a little different, particularly Matthew's account. However, the accounts are thought to have been written some decades later, and the authorship is also in question by some. So, there may have been a case of Chinese whispers in the early oral tradition.

Biblical scholars have theories about source documents. One such theory is the Two Source Hypothesis in which both Matthew and Luke were written from material from the earlier Mark's gospel and a second document, which is referred to simply as 'Q'. Understandably this is not a universally popular idea.

My own view as a Roman Catholic, is that Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their three accounts, sometime later, and small details such as Luke “strictly” warning the disciples, rather than just warning them, were lost in time by Matthew and Mark, or indeed Luke was imagining this. Also, Matthew is the only one to mention Jeremiah. But by far and obviously the largest discrepancy is Matthew 16:17-19. Roman Catholics believe Peter was the first in the line of Popes, thus “on this rock I will build my church”. Peter or *petros* was interchangeable with rock or (*petra*) by Jesus’ day. However, protestants maintain that Jesus is the rock referred to here.

It is strange that such an important statement isn’t documented in Mark and Luke. I suppose with Matthew being an Apostle along with Peter he would have felt pleased for him and wanted to record the event. The others could on the other hand, have harboured human jealousies or disloyalties towards Peter, given his “promotion”, as they were only human. In my opinion, as we don’t have the original documents we can’t say as a scientific/factual certainty, whether the extra material presented in Matthew’s gospel wasn’t added a hundred years later by the early Christians as they formed the early church. Myself I believe with my current knowledge that Peter was the first Pope and the “Keys” signified his ordination. Further, what he binds and loses, relates to the forgiveness of sins as practised by the Roman Catholic church, in the sacrament of

reconciliation, but I'm aware that many don't share that viewpoint! I know of no other meaning of Matthew 16:19, and this sounds plausible. However, to repeat, I think it is strange that the other gospel writers didn't add this.

It would be good if biblical archaeologists could find more concrete evidence from the early church like an intact set of original gospels. The Nag Hammadi discoveries of 1945 were very exciting, though these were of the gnostic variety. However, they go to show that documents found in the Bible as we know it may lie buried in a vessel somewhere awaiting recovery.

A final thought: “Love is ahead of itself...”

During the first UK coronavirus lockdown, I wrote my “I am” book, and gave it the subtitle “Conforming by nonconformity.” It’s a short nonfiction that suggests we should avoid forming identities, and we should shun group mentalities and general use of labels, too. Instead, it promotes an alternative tack to respect one another, and acknowledge our equally opposite individualism. But it doesn’t predict that a global utopia is possible, because even with our 21st century’s rocketing levels of sophistication, any cursory acquaintance with world and/or national news, will make it clear that the perpetual aggressions between and within religious and secular units, very much don’t look likely to stop.

My central message is different to Jesus’. Humility and love are strong nuclei, but taking stock after two thousand years, are they working? Granted, through humility and love we ought to promote more harmony. Then after hearing a priest sermonise around The Parable of the Good Samaritan, my individualism, and Jesus’ love, felt very linked. This story highlights the problem that groups, and/or factions, generate in society. Without those mindsets, there wouldn’t be such a story, because the protagonist could have been helped by anybody, and probably much earlier than the final, and famous, Samaritan.

I don't feel or think that love or perhaps its concept, is seen by many, in the true position it really holds. It's ahead of itself, because identities, group mentalities, and labels, are so prevalent and increasing. Younger people especially, accept extra complications in life, and then place them in other people's lives, for example, by having insistences that we fit around gender identities, pronoun preferences, and frankly complex sexual definitions. Labels in general, have become so default and ingrained today, that some people chase one or more psychiatric one's, to explain perceived personal deficiencies. The current DSM, i.e., volume five (V), must have hundreds of categorisations of our human condition.

I beg there is a more useful concept of the human nucleus, perhaps with a different subjective and nebulous centre, overlapping readily with objective externals, with relevance and virtues?

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Addendum (to the complete verse)

Since the 6th of April 2018, when Michael wrote his penultimate poem, “Why John dislikes being called love”, it took virtually twenty months, before he wrote his final verse. Michael had become a writer of nonfiction alone. His “I am” book is a very good example.

Michael read both these last poems to open-mic audiences. Fittingly, the very final poem, “When I changed:”, was unique, because another performer asked to read it after hearing Michael share it. Whilst Michael wasn’t there to witness it, it was the only ever time, someone other than Michael, read his work.

When I changed:

It happened in one moment.
I realised my worth.
Some people stopped liking me.
Some people started.

Most days became valid.
Acting out me was fun.
I could drink alcohol sensibly.
I became interested in humanity.

The longer I was me, the more me I was.
Dare I say I increased in wisdom?
My empathy rocketed.
The plight of others could make me cry.

In part, the right wing grated.
I gained personal rules.
Turning a blind eye was not one.
Further introspection was.

An adult relationship was possible.
I'm made up I became me.
I'm saddened some don't make it.
It's hard, but the "before-me" bit has a name.

It's called Hell.

26/1/20

66+2 Koans

Whilst **integralzen.org** interests me, and rests quite well on me, I don't know that much about it, so I don't recommend it. **Koans** relate though, and I've offered similar words of my own below. I joined mostly pseudo-random pairs of lines together, using only my verse as a source of text. Perhaps my subconsciousness spoke more within some of these than others? Meditation on the more obscure ones, might be like the experience one would find by doing similar, but using classic words such as, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Life is feeling meaningless.
What is life? To be childless?

Life begins in its good time.
We've no option but to live.

Mania coloured last year.
They say greens have brighter hue.

He tried not to make demands.
Take a stand or give commands.

It is easy to be slaves.
Jesus Christ said, "feed my sheep."

Autumn can be deceptive.
You ought to hear my gamut.

Your being here says something.
“Something-ness” has an ending.

Sure, I’ve tried to top myself.
What is life? The “Hell” is it?

They say, “silence is golden.”
It is said, “no pain no gain.”

Difference must begin wars.
We have to learn back-scratching.

The past controls reaction.
Don’t fucking cross me, alright?

A little help would be good.
Enjoy chroma and gain blood.

Do you see the thread, the sign?
Fluctuating is a swine.

Play piano. Learn guitar.
Sometimes autumn is winter.

Honesty comes from the voice.
Head to personhood. Have choice.

It's clichéd, but "anal treet."
It's a great gay place to meet.

Ego forbids art to flow.
Jolts of two-thirty volts fail.

Rose was pure without a drop.
Pantheism is plausible.

Lives can vanish with no trace.
The tarot fool's journey teased.

I'm not a fucking player.
I'd like to be a daddy.

Autumn can be deceptive.
Will we become over, done?

Be you. Honestly, be true.
You are amazing. Just do.

This Fool thinks he is ahead.
Who knows what is round the bend.

Masturbation is a crime.
Am I done? Are you still mine?

Men can become crossdressers.
From outside love is madness.

Trade a decade? Trade your life.
Don't hide, wisely choose your wife.

Thinking can make us worthless.
Vagueness might negate attack.

Even love is not perfect.
Everything is at a price.

I'm sure there was a Jesus.
Perhaps I have a calling.

Validation is not free.
Sesame Street attracts me.

In life, there's no cast iron.
Everything is tenuous.

Be aware that most folk act.
I can tear a strip off folks.

I've always strived for the truth.
They say, "feel the fear and try."

Are moods like a lottery?
I'm not a nut; really.

There is no escape from flows.
Mind-stillness might give good fate.

Childhood games are miles away.
Cast iron comes through great cost.

Thinking hurts. I find no point.
Don't exploit. Try to nurture.

Please be well and in the light.
I have no map for my life

Eddies often have trapped me.
I don't do adultery.

The Tree of Knowledge sniggers.
You can't harm me with promise.

There's only faith, hope and love.
Light or darkness is your child.

Text holds lies. It is not life.
Religion came, then it left.

If insight lacks there's danger.
You are not in the paper.

Words offer wagers of trust.
Be aware and build up trust.

You're in the system. It's hard.
CV holes remove demand.

Be you and be very true.
By habit, past shit will mend.

Satisfaction is reward.
Mindlessness is stress relief.

The straightest route is shallow.
Smiles between us are now few.

Be aware that most folk act.
Do not be a question mark.

Meaning is in expression.
You are not, but you still are.

You can only be yourself.
Sacrifice is Biblical.

Christians may ponder their good.
You can pray. You can hold on.

Aloneness put bread to test.
Life is big so truth is blessed.

Last winter was different.
I change up and down my range.

Still minds help peacefulness grow.
It's good to freely say "no."

Do anything positive.
Awareness may be eastern.

Wisdom is a cursed surprise.
Go far with isolation.

Can pure love be possible?
Opinions are respected.

Your madness is my normal.
You may waste yours for normal.

The young do not cogitate.
Don't expect the chance to live.

Character is intrinsic.
Don't drink and smoke. Sigh then dare.

Some people never wake-up.
You might call her a slogger.

Moods just "are" and context fleets.
Quetiapine gives more clout.

Things can collapse, then you're lost.
They say SAD lights are no good.

Dispel the myth of friendship
When you don't know, it can't hurt.

Be immediate action.
Grave payment may be respect.

You are not the depression
or the flipside mania.

You are the essence of it,
but you are not the essence.

Fine...

