

Brian Thorne

## A Student Counsellor's Diary

Jane is an old friend. She has been seeing me on and off for nearly two years. She makes me feel good because she knows that she is winning her particular battles and believes that I have had at least something to do with her developing confidence and autonomy. She used not to enjoy studying but now in her final year she can actually write an essay in three days instead of agonising about it for three weeks and then asking for an extension beyond the deadline. She is divorced and has a little boy who once had to be made a ward of court because his father threatened to abscond with him. For her the University was a refuge and has now become the springboard for a life of new hope. We talk about her dissertation and the way it is beginning to take shape. Once she would have been its victim, now she feels in control of it and can allot to it the time and energy it merits and no more. She is vibrant and happy and seems genuinely interested in the subject of her dissertation. When she leaves I feel enriched and am glad to be in a University which has given her the opportunity to grow and to discover her own value. I know that she will linger for a while yet in the outer office to talk to our full-time secretary, Irene. Jane has discussed many of her past essays with Irene and left some of her anxiety behind as a result. In the counsellor's jargon we call Irene a facilitating person.

David, my next client, seems to need a year or so of Irene's undiluted attention. I have not seen him before and he is clearly terrified of me. He must be in dire distress to seek help by risking himself in such an anxiety-provoking situation. For some minutes he cannot speak at all and when the words eventually begin to come they are confused and stumbling. He is very depressed and has been for months. He cannot concentrate for more than ten minutes and he is badly behind with his academic assignments. For David the effort of talking is of such magnitude that I cannot dare to force the pace. Whenever I speak he seems to stiffen and to brace himself as if he is expecting a verbal assault. I learn that he has not sought help from the faculty because they are too busy and he would not know what to say in any case. I help him to say that he is paralysed and that the very thought of his final examinations, still more than six months away, makes him feel giddy with panic. Over half an hour later, after clumsily extracting his agreement to a psychiatric referral, I hear him say that he came to University to get a good job and that his parents would be very upset if he were to fail now. When father is upset - and David's depression always upsets him - he is very angry. I feel very angry with David's father for being such an emotional cripple but David senses my anger for the fear is in his eyes again and he must believe that the anger is meant for him. I attempt to become the embodiment of gentleness but David does not relax and he mumbles incoherently about the seminar paper he is supposed to be giving tomorrow. He looks astonished when I suggest we might explore what is

involved together - it is the look that a prisoner might give to a warder who speaks kindly to him. I am horrified at the thought that we are both in the same trap together. His silence now becomes oppressive and I have to breathe deeply to prevent a splitting headache developing. It is a relief that he has a lecture to attend in a few minutes time although we both know that he will not follow more than a sentence or two. When he goes I stay sitting in my armchair for several minutes and just prevent myself from screaming. I know that next week the psychiatrist will write to tell me that he has prescribed some pill which might possibly help but that we must both face the prospect of holding David's hand for the next six months in the hope that with such support he will somehow stagger through to a consolation Third or Pass degree. I wonder at the absurdity of it all and weep inwardly for David's humiliation.

During the lunch-hour I bump into a student who never fails to cheer me up. She is confident, enjoys her studies, loves playing with my children and is not afraid to tell professors that they are being silly. She has often assured me that those who come to the Counselling Service are an unrepresentative sample and that I must beware of getting things out of proportion. It is true that she came herself on three occasions but that was because she needed to fix on a vocational object and felt I might be able to help. It takes me a minute or two to grasp what she is saying today. She is in the clutches of an immense lethargy, she says. She has to drive herself to open a book and an essay has remained unstarted for more than a week. She knows what she is going to do when she leaves this summer and suddenly she is aware of an alarming irrelevance about her present activities. Her literary studies, which only three months ago had seemed full of meaning and fascination, are now stale and burdensome. She assures me that I need not worry and that she will pull through. I believe her but for once she has not cheered me up.

I go to the Senior Common Room for post-egg and chip coffee. It is a difficult place to steer through unobtrusively and its open-plan lounge presents a formidable pattern of close-knit departmental groups with the isolated individual dotted here and there. I see a friendly lecturer in American Studies who has associated himself closely with the work of the Counselling

Service and I pull up a chair to join him and a visiting American colleague. They are in animated conversation about the use of fantasy in the modern novel and my arrival is a mistake for it hinders the process of their discussion. I indicate that I am happy to be an audience and they resume their critical cross-fire although the American feels obliged to acknowledge my presence from time to time. I realize how much I appreciate their enthusiasm and how genuine their intellectual enjoyment seems to be. My friend is arguing that the richer the fantasy the more the reader is forced to take stock of his present inescapable reality. Journeys which take one high above the clouds illuminate with startling clarity the small patch of ground from which they begin and to which they eventually return. I feel beneficially

contaminated and survive a brief weather conversation on my way out with a physicist who a few years ago greeted me on my second day in the place with the comment that at a time of financial stringency the University should concentrate on building up its research strength and not squander its resources on 'welfare'.

The first client of the afternoon is in a frenzy of intellectual excitement. His name is Pierre and we have shared many things together including the agony of his long drawn out relationship with a girl who refused to be possessed by him. He has spent many years running away from himself but now has the courage to discover that the facts are friendly and that subjective experience is a legitimate field for enquiry. He is impatient now with philosophical approaches which leave out of account or blatantly discredit the subjective experience of the perceiver. He wants to find the bridge between subjective and objective knowledge or at least to explore the implications of a concept of knowledge which incorporates both and accords them parity of esteem. For me the room is alive with the ghosts of former selves and with the memory of the philosopher Paul Roubicek talking quietly to a Cambridge lecture hall packed with students who only dimly understood why they had come. Pierre is seeking assurance that he is too valuable to sacrifice himself on the altar of epistemology. He postulates a psychology of philosophy and is overwhelmed by the confusion of thoughts and feelings which pour in upon him. He has not slept for two nights. He feels that he is at the very frontiers of knowledge and I am swept into his excitement while feeling that I must minister to his brain fever. His current academic assignments seem to him beside the point or worse. He wants to challenge the University to acknowledge the integrity of his search and to give him the space to pursue it. He longs to put the University on trial and fears he will be told to be a sensible chap and to complete his course requirements. They will say that the doctorate which will come later - if he gets his First - will give him all the scope he needs to be original and innovative. He recalls that this is what they told him at school when he became impatient with his 'A' levels. He leaves me an hour and a half later (by which time Irene has had to placate the next client with a cup of tea and a chocolate). He has formulated a plan to draft a document requesting that he be exonerated from further course requirements and allowed to wrestle undisturbed with the psychology of philosophy. I speculate on the repercussions and am glad that I am not the Dean of the School of Social Studies of which Pierre is a recalcitrant and valued member. I wonder how responsible I am for inducing the brain fever and for then failing to produce a satisfactory remedy.

The tea and chocolate have put Geraldine in a good humour. She comments on the decor of my room and says she must come more often. She notices the sherry bottle and wonders if I shall offer her a glass if she stays long enough. I say she can have a glass now if she wants one and she helps herself and says 'Cheers!' I wonder what on earth my counsellor trainer would say about all this and decide he would probably approve. I ask her why she has come. She says she is having an affair with a member of faculty and I reflect - but do not say - that I am not at all surprised. The person

in question is married and Geraldine is frightened and excited at the prospect of being found out. She clearly feels that I am off my head when I ask her if she is enjoying her academic work. She asks me if I am trying to be sarcastic. She accepts that I am not and tells me that her academic work is a bore and that she is thinking of going back to her job with the B.B.C. She had expected so much more to be going on in the University and misses the social whirl of London. It emerges that she has really come to see me in order to debate the pros and cons of staying in the University and not to drink my sherry or to shock me with revelations about her sex life. She came to the University, she says, to be stimulated but finds increasingly that she has to do all the stimulating. The effort has made her utterly exhausted. There is no stopping her now and she launches into a critique which spares no aspect of the University's life. She gives a harrowing description of the seminar room where students sit silently in the presence of an anxious lecturer who talks his way compulsively through the hour. She refers to the "silly antics" of the Students' Union politicians and condemns the University's administrators for their lack of guts and imagination. She complains of continual noise in the residences and of petty pilfering of epidemic proportions. Her fellow students, she claims, lack all enthusiasm and her efforts to energise them she compares to the task of inciting the Mothers' Union to organise wife swapping parties. And then she is done and slumps back in her chair and looks suddenly desperate and bursts into tears. During the next half hour I learn that her 'affair' has no more substance than a friendly arm round her shoulder at the end of an interview with her Adviser but that she really did have a job at the B.B.C. and that her friends in London are deeply concerned about her present unhappiness. She will return to see me again in a few days by which time she will have tried to clarify what she really wants from the University experience and whether or not there is any likelihood of achieving her objectives. My feeling as she leaves me is that with the rosy spectacles finally removed she will decide that the reality is not worth the candle.

It is time to confess that Jane, David, Pierre and Geraldine did not all come to see me on the same day and that my 'counsellor's diary' is to that extent a fraudulent record. They are not, however, creatures of a feverish imagination. They all exist. They are representatives of a generation of students who struggle to make sense of their experience of higher education at a time when universities and colleges are themselves suffering from a crisis of identity in the face of conflicting demands and accusations from politicians, industrialists, manpower planners and even educationists themselves. It is my contention that identity crises are not resolved by piously hoping that they will go away. They have to be acknowledged and accepted before they can be worked through with any hope of a successful outcome. Such a process, if it is to take place in the arena of higher education, must inevitably involve pain and confusion and a deep faith in the potential of both individuals and institutions to tolerate uncertainty and to face the rigours of self-exploration in a society which is largely incapable of the former and terrified of the latter. Such a faith becomes the more difficult

when it is threatened, as it always is, by the fear that babies will disappear with bathwater and that doubt will be replaced by hopelessness as past virtues are discarded and all sense of continuity is lost. If what is most precious in higher education should be placed in jeopardy by facing rather than ignoring the crisis then perhaps it would be better, after all, to maintain a noble indifference and to be the last representatives, however unworthy or decadent, of a glorious tradition.

Unfortunately such indifference, however noble, is not possible for a practising student counsellor unless he is prepared to ignore the data of his own experience or to categorise the vast majority of his clients as misfits or deviants who have nothing important to say to the institution of which they are unhappy members. Such behaviour would, in my case, be an act of treachery and would reduce me to a caricature of a human-being. This is not to suggest that I see universities and colleges as notably worse environments for the human spirit than the general context of the society which surrounds and grudgingly supports them. On the contrary, for some students - often older students like Jane who have experienced the bitterness of broken marital relationships or the harshness of the commercial world - the university can be a haven where a human face is still apparent and hope can be rekindled. Far from wishing to denigrate, let alone destroy, the universities I see in them the potential for grappling with the sickness of a society which is in the grips of systems and institutional structures which are increasingly out of touch with human longings and human needs. It is because I sense this potential that I believe it is worth working for change. But the sands are running out.

In the counselling room I am repeatedly confronted by the victims of the stubborn refusal of many educators to acknowledge the central importance for their students and for themselves of personal development. And yet it would seem clear that as a society our greatest problems spring from our social and psychological needs. As the world becomes more highly organised and therefore our ability to relate to each other increasingly crucial, it is a person's level of emotional maturity and his interpersonal skills which will determine whether or not he can function effectively. Alexander Mood in his report prepared for the Carnegie Commission on the future of higher education in the United States wrote:

*'In thinking about the future it is common practice to give great weight to all the new wonders that we can expect from science. I don't believe the big difference in the future is going to come from this direction but rather from changes in personal philosophies, fundamental changes in attitudes of people toward each other, changes in social institutions, and creation of new social institutions.'*  
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If this is the future for which we are heading - and the eternal optimist in me - believes that it must be because the alternative is too appalling to contemplate - it suggests clear criteria for higher education in the years ahead.

My vision is of a university dedicated to excellence in such a way that the pursuit of personal truth and personal fulfilment is accorded equal honour with the search for objective knowledge. When these are seen not as two journeys but one we may begin perhaps to hasten the changes which can alone ensure the survival of the human species. Certainly we can then hope, too, for a generation of students who are no longer burdened by the painful struggle to discover and maintain a sense of identity and significance in a world where trust in the validity of personal experience is so consistently undermined that we all of us run the risk of becoming estranged from our own inner processes and of lapsing into the craziness which increasingly characterises the "normal" personality in our culture.

### Reference

**Mood, Alexander M.** *The Future of Higher Education: a report prepared for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.* McGraw-Hill Book Co. New York (1973) p.14.

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