

They Know Not What They Do.

A response to George Hyde's 'Normal for Norfolk'

by Thomas Greaves

Thomas Greaves was, for many years a successful business man. He is writing a personal account of his journey through psychological crisis which he will send, when it is finished, to anyone who wants a copy. He may be contacted at 313, Hirault Road, London E11 1ES.

After reading the article by George Hyde, 'Normal for Norfolk': Therapy, ECT and After, in the September 1990 issue of *Self and Society*, I was overwhelmed by a mix of sadness and anger. George's story of psychological crisis and his encounters with a psychiatrist and mental institutions, adds but one more case to the history of indignities suffered by so many in the hands of so-called doctors. I too suffered a psychological crisis, but in my case I was saved from falling into the clutches of unenlightened doctors by friends and my own fear of being abused. When I encounter the tales of those who put their trust and faith in individuals who parade themselves as "official curers" but turn out to be "official abusers", I become more convinced that the concepts of mental illness and sanity, in the hands of the unenlightened, are less than sane.

It is difficult to imagine any circumstance under which the horrendous violence of ECT could be justified, no matter what ends this "treatment" is meant to achieve. Whoever administers ECT does so under the pretext that it is appropriate to wire a person's head to a circuit and deliver a series of electrical charges in order to "change something". George says that his psychiatrist kept telling him that he needed ECT, and furthermore that George's real problem was his marriage. It occurs to me that his psychiatrist might have thought that by blasting George's brains with electrons he had a chance of changing something, i.e. solving George's marital problem, if indeed George had one. Just thinking about the possible motives for George's psychiatrist recommending ECT, we are already in the land where ignorance and ill-reason breeds shameful acts of barbarism conducted under the flag of "good intent". Well, we all know that the road to hell is paved with good intent, but it's a pity George's psychiatrist doesn't. And there's the rub: like every other unenlightened guardian of truth against alternative cultures, George's psychiatrist has no need to question himself because he carries the beacon of official blessings. His "wisdom" is guaranteed by order of the state.

My Own Journey

Fortunately, not all doctors are so unenlightened: over the last two years I've been in analytical therapy at a mental hospital which has proved extremely valuable to my growth process. My luck began with my G.P. who referred me to a consultant who he described as a good man; knowing my doctor I trusted his judgement. Although I was petrified of consulting anyone connected with a mental hospital I did so because my partner, who supported and cared for me with loving kindness and

selfless devotion throughout the darkest episodes of my crisis, was ready to intervene should any drugs or physical interventions be threatened against me. So, I faced my doctor not only with resolute determination that I wouldn't let him abuse me, but with the added security of knowing my partner was ready to whisk me away should anything go wrong. To my amazement, even though I was living in a psychotic nightmare, he didn't prescribe drugs or do anything else but monitor my progress in case I went hay-wire. This was in the face of my vitriolic verbal attacks upon him both personally and professionally, condemning all mankind, threatening to commit murder and believing I was dead. As my G.P. said, he is a good man.

My own journey through crisis took me into Zen training, mythology and Core Process psychotherapy at the Karuna Institute; a kind of tripartite of disciplines for my own self-discovery process. And self discovery is, I believe, what many psychological crises are all about. Where there is no definitive organic basis for psychological crisis, i.e. no grounds for believing the crisis to be a product of physical damage, psychological disruptive episodes can signal changes occurring as part of a natural growth process: a biological response to the need for deep functional change in the way we live our lives. Such episodes are transformational states so beautifully described in the myths and the spiritual traditions: the growth of the individual towards realisation of the "Big-self", by letting go of the conditioned "Small-self". This is a painful process which has nothing to do with illness or disease, but rather disease. This dis-ease is a fundamental discontent with the impoverished vision of life so perfectly represented by the behaviour of George's psychiatrist. As George rightly says of many of the inmates in mental hospital, they are "victims of a society that had put them under intolerable pressure, and left them to face their fates". Such victims are, I believe, living at the interface where personal experience meets the boundaries of cultural norms. All experience that falls outside of the accepted vision of the normal human being, is considered symptomatic of delusion, crankiness or at worse mental illness and insanity. Rather than consider the possibility that psychological crisis is a positive movement towards embracing a more enlightened perspective of life, the establishment sees such movement as a potential loss of a member from its fold. They see the glass as half empty instead of half full.

Suffering and Organic Growth

If we imagine the spectrum of human experience to range from A through to Z, taking all possibilities and all realms of consciousness, the criteria that our culture uses to delineate the "normal" experience, actually shuts out all up to the letter M and after the letter N, describing them as "abnormal". This cultural attitude was described by R.D. Laing as "psychophobia": intolerance of non-conformity which considers maverick and anomalous experiences as at best odd and at worse "insane". Living in a society that denies a place to so much of the rich reality encountered in our human condition, can lead to blocking off, suppression, denying and concealing the truth in order to appear as a normal human being not only to others but, more dangerously, to oneself. This creates a gap between the phenomenological reality of the world we experience in inner life, and the world as represented by cultural teachings that prescribe which experiences are healthy and which are not. This situation is the perfect condition in which psychic schisms take root, leading to conflict, fragmentation, confusion, self deceit and bad faith along with the extreme suffering associated with dual-mindedness. What is so disturbing about this is that such suffering is seen as a mental problem and in some cases mental illness,

when in reality such suffering is part of a perfectly natural organic process of growth away from the unenlightened cultural conditions which caused much of the problem in the first place. The individual experiencing a world which is denied a place in the reality of their culture cannot but feel isolated and shut out; thereby, the culture adds suffering upon suffering, creating conditions for extreme disturbance.

Small Self: Big Self

Suspicion surrounds the realms of the underworld, the mystical, the magical, exoteric spiritually, altered states of consciousness and even suffering itself is seen as unacceptable. Any experience that threatens the picture-book concept of "normal" humankind is outlawed. This picture-book version of life, introjected by each of us to form our cultural identity, is the basis upon which the world of unenlightened personal identity is built: It is the world of the "Small self". Within that construction there is no space for universal, non-culture bound experience which, by its nature, challenges the boundaries that underlie the enculturated, small self's version of life, by the small-self and its accompanying notions of personal identity - who we think we are - then something has to give. This "give" is, I believe, what psychological crisis is all about: the overturning of the small-self to be replaced by "Big-self" which is the non culture-bound and universal experience of the truth: how "things are", rather than how the culture says things "should be".

Discovering that our culture's version of health and sanity entails a fundamental denial of the truth, means that growth towards the truth, the embracing of the bigger-self, necessarily entails suffering and often, as in my own case, going "insane". Big-self seekers constantly warn us that the path of true sanity takes us through the lands of the "insane"; that to find our true selves we cannot avoid going crazy. But, this "craziness", with all its concomitant suffering and pain, is experienced on the path to true-self realisation which, of all things, is the sanest place of all: the heart. In effect this means that, as in George's case, experiencing psychological growth which disrupts the functioning of daily life and leads to great suffering can be hazardous indeed, especially when encountering unenlightened, picture-book doctors who are in no position to help the growth process along. Their goal is to save the "patient" from straying from the flock, and in doing so they amplify the suffering and worsen the trauma of growth. They actually try to reverse the process against the natural flow of personal evolution, and the methods they employ to do this can be mindlessly cruel. Unenlightened psychiatry has a history of barbarity which cannot, under any circumstances, be described as in the interests of personal health or the health of society. The plain fact is that anyone who thinks that passing electric currents through heads in order to alter mind-states, under the description of "helping" is dangerous indeed; especially where such a person has the blessings of the state. Tragically, neither they nor the state is aware of the truth and, thus, they know not what they do!