

ST IMULUS

Hard to know, really, if a church upbringing is a bane or a bonus when it comes to mental illness. Is the child who attends a service week after week, the child who grows up amidst “God’s family”, more prone or more protected? Is there *anything* sane about singing “You can be very sad, I can be very sad, but that’s not the way it should be,” week after week at Sunday School? Yet is there anything *more* sane than other people’s Dads bowling underarm to you at church picnics, your best friend’s Mum tucking you into bed and saying a prayer with you at a sleepover? If you can come through the wrong-headed song lyrics, and the notion that prayer is an exercise in getting God to do what you want Him to, and the identification of God’s providential hand with every vacant carpark and every cloud that hangs off long enough for your washing to dry, and if you can come through puberty without feeling guilt at every throb and twitch, you might just make it to a sane adulthood: a faithful, Christian sanity, a full and rounded sanity, one that laughs with life’s ironies, rolls with its doubts, and rolls its eyes at the crazy weird stuff masquerading as “reality”. I am thinking, of course, of the necessity for an iPhone 6.

You find yourself wondering, sometimes, how church might be made more sane more of the time. Do Sunday Schools need song lyrics inspectors? Do prayers need to be vetted before being uttered? Do sermons on Revelation need to come with a warning: Metaphorical Language Follows? Surely not. An overly regulated church can sap the enthusiasm of its members and make them feel unwelcome, their gifts unused and undeveloped. But an under-regulated church can leave the child pilgrim awash in confusion. I remember querying Dad about the handwritten comments in the margin of his Bible. Did he not realise that this same Bible prohibited such improvement? We’d learned about it in Sunday School: Revelation chapter 22 verse 18 – “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll.” It couldn’t get much clearer than that. The Bible in the hands of an eight year old – it’s a remarkable thing, sounding the child’s inmost soul, while also flummoxing her and leading to preposterous fixations and conclusions.

The second time I suspected I was suffering from mental illness, I sought out a counsellor. I had not done this the first time. It had never occurred

to me to. Counsellors were for weak people, but I was strong. I wasn’t the kind of person who went to see counsellors. I told him all of this at our first session. I was blubbing uncontrollably as I did so: out of shame, out of relief, and out of an awareness of some kind of irony. The irony, I guess, of potentially insulting the counsellor, despite doing what he wanted me to do, which was tell the truth. His room was upstairs in a row of terraced townhouses in the heart of the city. It was carpeted, I remember, the kind of carpet that made you feel like you ought to take your shoes off. He listened to me talk about my sense that counselling was for the weak, and then he said something I’ve remembered ever since: “All of us are weak sometimes, and all of us are strong sometimes.” I went and saw him eight or ten times, but that’s the thing I remember best. It was a relief not to have to be strong, and a relief not to be classified as weak. He’d been a Catholic priest before leaving the priesthood to get married.

My wife – though she wasn’t yet my wife then – encouraged me through it. Sometimes we’d pray together. Sometimes she’d just pray for me. She kept me going to the counsellor. She also got me to visit the GP to seek a prescription for anti-depressants. It was helpful to have someone who saw the depression as needing multiple solutions, and not just one. I was not exhorted by her, or anyone, simply to pray harder, though of course I did pray harder. I prayed desperately during that time, prayers full of thrashing and anguish, prayers broken by sighing and tears. I kept seeing the ex-Catholic priest and developing strategies with him for combating destructive thought patterns. And I took the pills.

I wouldn’t say my bout with depression was particularly bad relative to what many suffer – more bantamweight than heavyweight. Even so, it was bad enough to make me never want to go through it again. If I were to compile my own personal dictionary, I’d define the word “harrowing” as simply the feeling I got while depressed: a kind of washed-out-ness, a feeling of strain in my face, a wornness, a desaturation of the spirit. It meant waking up in the early morning and knowing there’d be no more sleep till dawn; panicking already about how tired I’d feel all day; wondering how I could possibly muster energy to perform basic tasks.

Would I have been less susceptible without my church upbringing? It’s possible that without it, I’d have been less surprised when things went wrong,

less idealistic about how things should go, and quicker to reconcile myself to disappointment or surprise. I might have been less anxious about how I *should* feel, and more attentive to how I *did* feel. That's possible.

Would I have endured it as well as I did without God's family standing with me? I believe not. When I had nothing left to pray, they prayed in my stead. They waited me out, allowed for my weakness, and nurtured me back to strength.



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