

## **‘Losing our faith?’**

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After having worked in psychiatry for over two years, during an unusually quiet on-call, I was flicking through the channels on the television in the on-call room. I came across a film about a legendary figure in history about whom I did not know much about because I was not brought up in the western world. The film was titled ‘Joan of Arc’ and with nothing else to do at the time I decided to watch it.

While watching the, I could not but help notice the very unique characteristics of the story of this fascinating and remarkable lady.

At the time, everything that she was going through, and all her actions, seemed to me to be the result of a psychiatric illness. This was no surprise as at the time I was cramming for the MRCPsych Part 1 and everything I saw or did reminded me of psychiatry!

Joan of Arc appeared to fit the bill of Schizophrenia to a ‘T’. She was a winter birth, was growing up in tumultuous and stressful times and was a witness to distressing events during the early part of her life. At the age of 13, she began to hear ‘voices’ from God, instructing her how to conduct herself (Spence 1999). Her voices initially told her to go to church, not lose her virginity and to be good. The voices then started telling her with regularity that she was to lift the siege of Orleans. She later started to have ‘visions’ and in one such vision she describes seeing St. Michael with her ‘bodily eyes, as well as I am seeing you’. It is also said that she saw a sword in a field and was convinced that it was a sign from God for her to free France from the English. She obeyed these voices, convincing an entire nation that they were real, and went on to secure her place in history before she was tried and executed at the age of 19 for heresy.

Egged on by this fascinating story, I did some research on the web and was not surprised to find that her story has been of interest to many authors, film makers, philosophers and, of course, psychiatrists. The explanations put forward by psychiatrists for Joan of Arc’s experiences range from schizophrenia (Allen 1975), creative psychopathy (Ratnasuriya 1986), types of psychoses, psychosexual disorders, personality disorders (Henker 1984), ecstatic epileptic auras (Foote-Smith 1991), and disseminated tuberculosis (Nores 1995)

I felt quite comforted by the fact that I, a trainee psychiatrist, was thinking along the same lines as some of the top psychiatrists of our times until another, competing idea started to challenge me.

What if, although perhaps improbable, all these people were wrong? What if Joan of Arc did not have any mental health problems? All these articles at best hypothesised what could have been wrong with her, even the article suggesting that she had ecstatic epilepsy said this could explain her ‘visions and convictions in part’. None of these people could attribute her behaviour confidently and fully to a mental illness. If something cannot be proved and is without an evidence base, does it by default become false?

There are a lot of things even in the modern world which cannot be explained by science, yet which exist. Did gravity not exist before Newton in an inspired moment proved its existence? If man evolved from primates, do we know why all the other primates didn't evolve to a human form, or died out completely as a result of natural selection? Why can't science explain the therapeutic effects of a placebo, said to be on account of the faith a patient has in treatment?

This letter is not meant to be a criticism of psychiatry as such, but of modern psychiatry as being too much an empirical science. Traditionally, as a professor of mine has pointed out, psychiatry has always had a humanities component in addition to an empirical component, as can be clearly seen in the work of Karl Jasper's *General Psychopathology*. Yet the humanities facet of psychiatry is rarely emphasised during the training of psychiatrists such as myself.

It makes me uncomfortable to think that I'm being 'trained' to think in this manner, *not to accept anything that cannot be proved*. This is a concept quite alien to me until now, because I have been brought up in the eastern world where faith is an integral part of life.

I then couldn't help speculating on what could have happened if Joan of Arc was born in this day and age, or if our current system of mental health services had existed in her time? She would have probably been under the care of psychiatric services and if she did have a mental illness would have probably been treated and cured of it. She probably would not have been executed at the age of 19 but history would have been robbed of an astonishing figure and lost a saint.

Have we mental health professionals lost our faith in not looking beyond mental illness for an explanation? Have we given up our quest for what is beyond the physical sciences, into the realm of metaphysics? Or would the critics just say that I am writing this to avoid cognitive dissonance because of the beliefs and faith I have been brought up with.

### **References:**

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