

‘Vale of tears or Vale of Soulmaking? Keats’ gnostic vision as an alternative to mainstream mental healthcare’.

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‘Call the world if you Please ‘The Vale of Soulmaking’. Then you will find out the use of the world’ (Keats, Letters, p.336)

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Abstract

As the general pace of living in the Western world continues to shift up the gears, mental healthcare has become the industry that both treats and maintains what society collectively refers to as ‘mental illness’. The message broadcast on Life’s plasma screen is that solutions and coping mechanisms necessary for 21st century survival are manufactured and available ‘out there’. Many of the difficulties that, at one time, would have become fodder for our growing souls have now become disorders that must be treated - even the very personality that carries our psyche through ‘this mortal coil’ has been targeted.

The poet Keats’ Gnostic concept of soulmaking that served as foundation for his own brief life journey offers us an alternative way of being and ‘becoming’. Focusing on the fundamentals of negative capability, disinterestedness, imagination and empathy, this article offers a pathway through the pain and suffering that is inextricably woven into the fabric of our lives. More importantly, perhaps, it celebrates the life process that provides us with our sense of purpose - the discovery and schooling of our souls.

A Vale of Tears

My childhood, I recall, was full of Sundays - and the spooky clangour of heaven’s timeless bells ring in me deeply to this day. My Sunday school attendance book was crammed with a constellation of little blue-ink stars - just in case God ever decided to question my commitment. Sin, if discovered, caused tears and begat guilt ...and generated an army of ‘black-stickers’ that clung to my heart tenaciously until the caustic properties of prayer bleached them into oblivion. And in later life when the demons of my childhood sprang out from their bogey holes, it was either God or the doctor who were expected to quell the stampeding butterflies in my abdomen. Alas, most of my SOS calls to God went unanswered and, by my 21st birthday, I was already dependent on Valium and, judging by my GP’s gradual withdrawal of all eye contact, a fully fledged member of the ‘Heart-sink Patient’ club. Like millions of other people, I took the easily accessed, medical highway in order to assuage my regular attacks of ‘nerves’.

In a Western world obsessed with possessions, materialism has hit epidemic proportions. And if ‘to have’ has become the verb that best reflects western man’s (*sic*) purpose, ‘immediately, without fuss and the same as everyone else’ are increasingly the McDonaldizing¹ postmodifiers that complete the adverbial clause. Mental healthcare, too, has been McDonaldized to satisfy the growing demand for a speedy solution to all our psychological distress. Drive in to any health centre in any town or city and,

within seven minutes of placing your order, you will be clutching your prescription and walking out of the door. Next stop, the pharmacy, where they will dispense your happy pills, which you will swallow with water and some misplaced faith that a chemical capsule is capable of resolving whatever life problem has disabled you. All drugs - prescribed or otherwise - that interfere with the brain's chemistry work in only one way: they cloud your consciousness and remove you a couple of steps away from what is. Although this chemically induced breathing space may prove valuable in the short term, the opportunity to find one's own way through whatever life crisis has been lost forever. Instead of being shown how to swim, we have been thrown an emotional lifebelt.

Opening up our mental healthcare system as a dispensary for emotional medicines has lowered the national threshold for psychological pain. The stiff upper lip that caused our forefathers to endure and forego the spectral extremes of their experiences now trembles readily on simmer. As an official mender of psyches, I have the evidence of a steady stream of visitors to my room who come with the mind-set that they are less capable than anyone of navigating their own difficulties. Far too often, I am invested with the power to know them so much better than they know themselves. Occasionally, I am to be defeated and found wanting, either by intention or courtesy of the other's all-encompassing helplessness. Most commonly, I am set up as psychological saviour: rescuer and often the redeemer from the legions of demons that haunt their souls. Such missions of deliverance, of course, do not appear on my therapeutic timetable. Yet such expectations of extrication need to be exorcised as comprehensively as the devils themselves. Otherwise, any sea changes are likely to be celebrated by the ringing of my own 'ding-dong bell'. If any skill is to be taught from outside the confines of a predominantly non-directive approach, it should surely be that of internal campanology.

The profusion of therapeutic specialisms and skills-based approaches serves only to reinforce the Christly status of the therapist. Be we cognitive-behavioural therapist, consultant psychiatrist or clinical psychologist, the implications are the same: our inflated titles bestow upon us the necessary knowledge, gained only through years of academic crucifixion, to save you through some form of incredibly skilful 'doing'. Be it neurotransmitter blocking, thought restructuring or the final eradication of our childhood incestual fantasies, the amount of power attributed to the therapist is the amount of power surrendered by the person receiving the therapy. The consequence of such resignation is at best temporary symptom relief. However, investing one's faith in the expert is more likely to perpetuate dependence and foster disillusionment. Any road to recovery that has been laid by the therapist inevitably leads back to the vale of tears.

The Vale of soulmaking

The Christian perception of the original sin and the promise of salvation through being re-born tend to parallel the process of mainstream mental healthcare. The mental health problem and the inevitable diagnosis that accompanies it are formulated as negative and something to be eradicated. Through the wonders of neuroscience and the 'consequitive reasoning' (*Letters*, p. 91)² that underpin the vogue therapies of the 21st century, mental

distress - the impassable Valley of Baca³ - or Vale of Tears - is transformed into a fool's paradise.

In a letter to his brother George and sister Georgiana in 1819, the young poet Keats rejected this Christian philosophy as 'the common cognomen of this world among the misguided and the superstitious'. (Forman, 1935, p. 335)⁴ For Keats, it was completely unacceptable to suggest that redemption from this valley of suffering was dependent upon 'a certain arbitrary interposition of God' (*Letters*, p. 335). Rejecting the Christian belief that salvation involves an external act of soul saving, Keats adopted a Gnostic code that involves redemption by a process of internal individuation. Whilst the blissful promise of heavenly eternity is wholly dependent on the forgiveness of one's sins, Gnosticism 'becomes an inner symbolic drama involving the paradox of a 'fortunate fall' through which salvation becomes healing self-knowledge as a heightening of consciousness' (Roberts, 1997). This developmental process begins with an initial stage of infantile innocence, which dissolves into a conflictual state as the newly discovered self breaks away and becomes disunited through its search for self-knowledge. At the point of conflict resolution - when the bare bones of intellectual knowing merge with the lifeblood of a heartfelt moment - unity is restored and the individual 'becomes'.

This process, for Keats, provided man (*sic*) with his life purpose. The trek through the trials and tribulations that we encounter in life become the very fabric that creates the soul. In an attempt to illustrate his complex hypothesis, Keats personified the components of soul making in his letter to George and Georgiana. He proposed that 'three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years' (*Letters*, p.336) were essential to the process: the intelligence, the human heart and the world. 'I will call the World a school', he wrote, 'instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read'. (*Letters*, p.336) Keats then represented the heart by the 'hornbook' - or standard reading book - his hypothesis being that school and hornbook between them produced the literate child, which he likened to the soul. Keats' metaphors provide a rather over-simplified 'homely form' for his all-encompassing gnostic philosophy of the sparking of the human soul and its perpetual development into a vaporous internal organ of salvation. Keats' Christ most definitely lived, breathed and guided wisely from within.

Keats' conviction that the tragedies of life were instrumental in our human becoming is shared or at least bought into by a number of prominent therapists and philosophers. James Hillman's Jungian-influenced concept of soulmaking talks about the soul's passing 'through the plain of Lethe' and its reluctant descent to 'get messed by the world' (Hillman, 1997, p.43-46). Built and tested on Tyneside, Phil Barker's *Tidal Model* floats proudly on a sea of metaphors that take on board the fluidity and unpredictability of human life. On this metaphorical ship, the person in mental distress is encouraged to take ownership of his or her experiences and navigate his or her own recovery (Barker & Buchanan-Barker, 2004). There is Winnicott's concept of 'real-making' and the emergence of the 'true self' (Philips, 1998, p.127). And we have Hobson's 'True voice of feeling' (*Letters*, p.385), taken from Keats' abandoned poem 'Hyperion' and used as a guiding ideal for developing a therapeutic 'language of the heart' (Hobson, 1985, p.93).

However, despite its central theme of human suffering, soul making is about as far away as one could travel from the predominant mental health

system that currently ministers to our injured psyches. A philosophy based on 'the agonies, the strife of human hearts'⁵ (Barnard, 1988, p.86) as the only true road to eternity has no comfortable place to sit in a health system built upon interventions and eradication of symptoms. By following the gnostic imperative 'know thyself', Keats' brief life journey became a process of soul searching. His faith in the gnostic principles became a beating pulse through both his letters and his poetry, never more prominent than in the five great odes that are widely regarded as his finest achievements. In 'Ode to Psyche' he has already begun to centralise man's need to take responsibility for his own growth. It is he who '*will* build the fane, *will* dress the trellis, and use his *working* brain to *win* love for the mind' (Waldoff, 1985, p.118; emphasis in original).

My own clinical experience has already demonstrated to me the viability and the value of pitching therapeutic camp in the vale of soulmaking. For the person in emotional turmoil, it is a mountain to climb with legs that already weary from his or her psychic distress. Yet the views from the peaks are infinitely wider and deeper than any other therapeutic vista. Switching from a need to be delivered (by the therapist) from one's struggles to an acceptance of the self as both beautiful and valuable is a paradigm shift from blind dependence to the oneness of knowing and being. It is beauty as truth; truth as beauty: it is self-salvation.

Negative Capability

For Keats, an ability to tolerate 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason' (*Letters*, p.72) was an essential stage of imaginative being and an archway to the soul. This 'Negative Capability', Keats believed, enabled the poet to linger in 'a mansion of many apartments' (*Letters*, p.143) and, in particular, the 'Chamber of Maiden-Thoughts, where he himself first suffers and comes to understand the pain which is bound up with life' (Bate, 1976, p.37). Otherwise, the poet would 'fly like Mercury ...bee-like buzzing here and there impatiently' (*Letters*, p.104). Unless the poet could tolerate such 'dying into life', there would be no passageway to the soul of his subject. 'Let the mind be a thoroughfare', wrote Keats, 'for all thoughts' (*Letters*, p.426). Any conscious striving for reason merely 'spoils the singing of the Nightingale'⁶ (Barnard, 1988, p.238).

There are obvious connections here to the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of free association (Stevens, 1983, p.28-29), where the analysand is instructed to let his or her mind drift to wherever it chooses. All material that floats up to the surface of consciousness is blurted out as it arrives, the theory being that issues buried within the unconscious will, at some stage, manifest within the patient's stream of thought. However, Keats' 'Negative Capability' had a paradoxical element to it, in that it was a form of guided abandonment. Any attempt to analyse 'A pearl in rubbish' (*Letters*, p.316) was resisted. Instead, he would become that pearl until he knew the truth of it. Whereas the classic analysis depends on freefalling thought showers, negative capability is always confined to a 'firm sense of the solid world' (Bate, 1976, p.41-42). Holding on to the concrete enabled Keats to witness the truth of the beauty and discover the very 'whatness' of an object.

Languishing in the Vale of Tears offers no such revelatory moments. Eyes are cast firmly upwards in anticipation of a pharmaceutical or psychotherapeutic rope ladder being dangled from above. However, a

willingness to give in to the burn of our suffering allows us to feel the grit of the experience piercing our skin. Applying salve to our psyche deadens those feelings and kills off the opportunity to go beyond them. We are always cut-off in the prime of our distress. Perhaps the most difficult conception for any mental health professional would be to see himself or herself as someone who does nothing. Someone who, within arm's length of a 'cure', makes no active attempt to reduce pain but who is seen to perpetuate it by remaining passive. Yet 'How beautiful are the retired flowers! How they would lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out 'admire me I am a violet!'" writes Keats (*Letters*, p.96). Each and every act of professional doing anaesthetises the soul of the sufferer, stunting his or her self-redemption and, from here, captaining the person's recovery. We, the healers, become pseudo-Christ: false prophets who steal the limelight by sitting in the expert's chair.

In a Western world that progressively places more store on the instant gratification of needs, negative capability is as alien a concept as a 1950s grocery store. And although negative capability does have its place in peripheral therapy circles (Bion, 1970; Casement, 1985; Hobson, 1985), it is a concept that does not fit the high intervention, 'doing to' mentality of a National Health Service geared towards diagnosis and cure. Any form of treatment that does not provide a speedy reduction of symptoms is rejected in favour of interventions that do. Even the more person-centred interventions available within mainstream services are usually accessed via the GP and are governed by the same risk-sodden policies as their more directive and controlling cousins. Furthermore, all forms of 'temple healing' (as they have been derogatorily referred to by certain scientific 'disapprovers') are matched against the big therapeutic guns that sit on sturdy evidence-based foundations, to be officially fingered as 'found wanting'.

Money, of course, influences most research trials and those who control the coffers will doubtless only stake their claim in projects that are likely - in some way, shape or form - to increase the bank roll. And, fuelled by a media driven by sensationalism (because it 'sells' their products), psychiatric services are now being firmly steered by green and white papers intent on eradicating risk. Any therapies that publicly embrace negative capability as a key ingredient face total intolerance from policy makers and policy implementers alike. They do not have a place on the government's agenda. Mental health 'care' is delivered by 'those who know' (experts) to those who suffer in ignorance. Those who find themselves languishing deeply down in a vale of tears, then, see only the constant message broadcast in their doctor's eyes: emotional rescue is dependent upon an 'outsider'. The salvation of sanity and mental ease can only be found from without.

A humble standard of disinterestedness

With minimal agenda and a feeling of privilege, I sit with the other and listen with interest to her (sic) story. I often witness her surprise and, sometimes, disbelief when I raise the possibility that she is not 'ill'; that, perhaps, she needs to feel the way she feels right now; and that, with very little other than presence and kindness from me, she has the inner strength and knowing (but as yet 'unknown') to generate her own ransom. My 'sense of purpose' during such times is, paradoxically, to abandon any personal strivings and give myself up to the other. There seems to be some

consanguinity here between my attempts to jettison any agenda of my own and Keats' desire to achieve a 'humble standard of disinterestedness' (*Letters*, p.316). Driven by 'an ellectric (sic) fire in human nature' (*Letters*, p.316) that sparks the humanistic value of putting others before ourselves, Keats seemed perpetually fuelled by the wonders that surrounded him, from 'a quarrel in the streets' (*Letters*, p.317) to 'a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass' (*Letters*, p.316). And although the circumstances may not reflect man or beast in his best light, he would extract the qualities from a situation and 'relish them properly' (*Letters*, p.318). He would become 'the camelion poet' and lose his own identity so that he could more easily slip into another body. 'When I am in a room with people', he wrote, 'if ever I am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that I am in very little time annihilated' (*Letters*, p.317).

Yet despite his perpetual learning, Keats acknowledged his own naivety and the enormity of his task by declaring 'I am however young writing at random - straining at particles of light in the midst of great darkness' (*Letters*, p.317). Although I celebrate the good fortune that already places me 30 years ahead of Keats' dying age, I doubt whether my own attempts to acquire a level of disinterestedness in myself half akin to Keats' achievements have been realized. And little wonder, as he can recall only two such others who he believed could lay claim to such lofty levels of altruism: Socrates and Jesus!

The wings of imagination

According to Keats, the 'rigid scaffolding' that supports the cognitive structures of reason forms a barrier between contemplator and object. Rather than coming to know the whatness of the object, such scientific processes reveal 'no more than the charred remnants of forms that have been deprived of their vitality' (Scott-James, 1930, p.158-159). Using poetry as his medium, Keats believed that these barriers could be penetrated only when we stepped out of 'consequitive reasoning' and allowed our imaginations to take over. In complete contrast to the 'egotistical sublime' subjectivity that he attributed to the deliberateness of Wordsworth's poetry, Keats would have us 'sit like Jove' and 'open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive - taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit' (*Letters*, p.104).

Imagination, he tells us, 'has a purpose and its eyes are bright with it' (*Letters*, p.316). It is animal-like in its instinctive approach to truth. In the controversial aphorism that concludes his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats delivers a paradox of what Burke (1944) refers to as the 'eternal present'. In an evanescent moment of escape from the pain of living, both the beauty and truth of all that the Urn contains become knowable to Keats. This chiasmic phrase not only prevents any separation between the poet and the Urn but also emphasizes balance between the opposites encountered within it (fixity/movement, art/poetry, fulfilment/frustration, death/eternity). Truth and beauty - rational logic and subjective experiencing - fuse together to produce a unity akin to Buber's (1958) 'I-Thou' moment'. Only when we completely surrender to the other can we experience 'the revelatory climax of aesthetic apprehension - the spiritual in the actual' (Mahaffey, 1990).

Blending pleasurable: a sort of oneness

An empathic fusion with the very essence of the other permeates many of Keats' poems and letters. 'Heard melodies are sweet', he tells us in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'but those unheard are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone' (Barnard, 1988, p.344). The 'heard' melodies of the separate object are pleasant indeed but it is only when we 'lose' our selves in the music - when the music 'disappears' - that we become the experience of that music. Indeed, Keats frequently loses himself in this ode, 'ceasing to be merely a spectator of marble figures and scene' and projecting himself so deeply 'that he endows them (the marble figures of the lovers) with vitality and sensation not proper to their medium' (Ford, 1951, p.137).

The aphorism that leads us out of his Ode is surely clamorous in its 'anticipation of completeness': anticipation in the Gadamerian sense as an openness and a perpetual returning to the iridescent 'truth' of an object (Warnke, 1987, p.82-91). In this ecstatic state of unity, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' (Barnard, 1988, p.346). Not 'need' in any restrictive sense but as vital ingredients to come to know. Can this, then, be the catalyst within my crucible that triggers the self-salvation of the other? No pills, no clever techniques, no wise interpretations? Just sitting - and becoming with the other? Well ...I would say 'yes!' I strongly believe it to be so. Indeed, how can it be otherwise if the other is to make her (sic) way through the vale of soulmaking? All 'doing' is rescue (I will accept that to 'gently guide the tiller' (Barker & Kerr, 2001, p.156) is necessary at times of regressed helplessness). The only mission that I am aware of as a paid helper is to whisper softly to the other (as opposed to holding back potential 'knowing') and share my words (not always verbally) as they surface from my soul. She, of course, will likewise share her words with me. 'Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour', wrote Keats (*Letters*, p.103-04). Or, as Rorty might say, 'piecemeal nudges' are the order of the day (Rorty, 1982, p.15).

What 'tis to die and live again

Keats' reference to Man as 'a poor forked creature subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest' (*Letters*, p.335) succinctly captures his acceptance of life as 'A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways' (*Letters*, p.336). Rejecting the Christian ideal of redemption as a notion that 'affront(s) our reason and humanity' (*Letters*, p.336), he stored all his faith in man (sic) as his own potential saviour. And experience, he believed, when 'proved upon our pulses' (*Letters*, p.142), is decanted straight to our souls as further nourishment that feeds our sense of purpose. Living is, indeed, a journey of soulmaking scattered with fresh scented petals and wrapped in stinking rags; a journey that always sees death beckoning at every bend. Feelings of suffering are no less real in the therapy room and any attempts (through our own anxieties) to avoid them denies the 'Beauty that must die' ⁷ (Barnard, 1988, p.349) (within us all): a dying that must be felt each and every time before the 'Songs of Spring' ⁸ (Barnard, 1988, p.434) can make their entrance.

What follows is an anonymised account of this process of soulmaking, taken from my own clinical practice, which I hope will be another shutter opened as opposed to the closing door of a final conclusion.

Lisa

Lisa sat and visibly shivered in the emptiness of my waiting room: a small, child-like figure frightened by the prospect of her first encounter with me. Bravely, she responded to my call and I remember a conscious urge within myself to go gently. She was fragile, crumbling, abandoned and alone. I felt guilt and sadness within me ...I did not yet know why.

Our first few sessions together were fraught with silences. I listened to the words she did not speak ...I saw the helplessness of her eyes, the freeze of her fear, the paralysis of her surrender. I imagined her sat upon a stool in the middle of a huge, empty room - her limbs hanging limply. Again, I did not yet know why.

As time moved on I learned how to be with Lisa. She seemed to become less anxious and more able to let the words fall from her heart. I learned how to catch her words - how to keep a constant space in me that always had enough room to receive them ...to store them. As each week passed by I came to know her as a part of me ...yet I knew she was not me. Her unfolding story was touching my soul ...I was becoming very alive with the songs that she cried for me ...I was beginning to understand.

Lisa had suffered hurt as a child that I found difficult to accept: finger-poking, crazy staring, hand-crashing, sense-bashing, heart-crushing hurt ...hurt that hurts too much to cry ...hurt that flings you bone-breaking in a damp walled prison cell and you stop existing as your only means to exist. In one particular session, Lisa had travelled back in time to be flung, sprawled cold as stone ...dead-eyed and petrified as she touched the very agony of this heart-killing crime. I could not let her be there alone. Drawn to her recall like filings to lodestone I joined her - became lost in her - and we journeyed together and lived the here-and-now torture that oozed from the corpse of her experience.

I heard the colours running from her moment; I listened to her helpless pleading eyes; I watched the cry that froze within her belly; like broken gasps do just before we die. I saw it all - the sickening lot of it ...and I died too ...in her nothingness.

Lisa surfaced from the darkness of our journey. She blinked in the harsh light of the room. Scripted by our experience we began to share our words ...soul words ...wrapped up in warm pauses. She told me that she could feel ...yes, feel ...my somethingness.

Notes

¹ For a detailed explanation of the concept of 'McDonaldization', read Ritzer (2000).

² According to Keats, consequitive reasoning is a process that analyses, compresses and reshapes material in order to fit it into already constructed theorems and explanations. It is the antithesis of negative capability.

³ The 'Valley of Baca' is referred to in the Bible in Psalm 84:6. It is usually translated as 'The Vale of Tears'. Since the 15th century it has been associated with emotional depression and translated by some as representative of this world, as opposed to an afterlife.

⁴ Owing to frequent quoting from Keats' Letters, I have referred to all future in-text reference to Forman's book as '*Letters*'.

- ⁵ From the poem 'Sleep and Poetry' by John Keats.
⁶ From the poem 'To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.' by John Keats.
⁷ From the poem 'Ode on Melancholy' by John Keats.
⁸ From the poem 'To Autumn' by John Keats.

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