

Pastoral Issues in Psychiatric Context

This *was* going to be a very academic presentation about clinically based pastoral care in psychiatric settings.

Then we suffered a sudden onset of common sense. So...

Mostly, you find here words of those who have lived with mental illness as they reflect on their experience of God. These are sacred writings, by living human documents of religious history.

Read respectfully. As God told Moses: *“Take off your shoes, you are on holy ground.”*

Traditionally Attributed to King David

The Psalmist

O Lord, my God, my Savior, by day and night I cry to you.

Let my prayer enter into your presence;

incline your ear to my lamentation.

For I am full of trouble; my life is at the brink of the grave.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;

I have become like one who has no strength;

Lost among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,

*Whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from
your hand.*

You have laid me in the depths of the Pit,

in dark places, and in the abyss.

Your anger weighs upon me heavily,

and all your great waves overwhelm me.

You have put my friends far from me;

you have made me to be abhorred by them;

I am in prison and cannot get free.

Do you work wonders for the dead?

Will those who have died stand up and give you thanks?

Will your loving-kindness be declared in the grave?

your faithfulness in the land of destruction?

Will your wonders be known in the dark?

Or your righteousness in the country where all is forgotten?

But as for me, O Lord, I cry to you for help;

in the morning my prayer comes before you.

Lord, why have you rejected me?

Why have you hidden your face from me?

Ever since my youth, I have been wretched

and at the point of death;

I have borne your terrors with a troubled mind.

Your blazing anger has swept over me;

your terrors have destroyed me;

My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me,

and darkness is my only companion.

Psalm 88

*...I am,
each day,
typing out
the God
my typewriter
believes in...*



*The
Awful
Rowing
Toward
God*

ANNE
SEXTON

**...the typewriter that is my church
with an altar of keys always waiting.**

**...Maybe my mother cut the God out of me
when I was two in my playpen.
Is it too late, too late
to open the incision and plant Him there again?**

**...I who wanted to crawl toward God
could not move nor eat bread.
So I ate myself,
bite by bite,
and the tears washed me...
...and Jesus stood over me looking down and he
laughed to find me gone,
and he put His mouth to mine
and gave me his air.**

Anne Sexton's Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry often included dark visions. She started writing as part of her psychotherapy. She was a frequent resident at McLean Hospital, Westwood Lodge, and the State Hospital at Brookline, MA. She suffered from Chronic Depression and probably Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). She noted wryly:

**"A little Thorazine they say,
will take the Rhymer quite away."**

She died of suicide at 47.

Anton Boisen

“The Exploration of the Inner World... a message from purgatory.”

Remembering a locked seclusion room on Ward 4 of the old Boston Psychiatric Hospital, the Reverend Doctor Anton Boisen recalls:

“...then the room was filled with the odor of brimstone. I was told that witches were from the ventilator shaft... I stuffed my blanket into the shaft... checking the invasion of black cats (and) a process which could be used to save other people. I had found an opening in the wall which separated medicine and religion. (After a few days of cold sheet packs and ‘bismuth’)... I found that by lying near the ventilator shaft, I could hear the most beautiful voice... it was the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.”

Boisen was an ordained minister and professor of religious studies who spent many years in psychiatric hospitals—both as a patient and an educator. He argued that emotional collapse is a chaotic encounter with God:

“I hold there is no line of separation between valid religious experience and abnormal mental states which the alienist calls ‘insanity.’ Ezekiel, Paul of Tarsus, George Fox, and others are classed as religious geniuses, not as insane persons, because the experiences through which they passed had a constructive outcome.”



Florence Nightingale

The founder of modern nursing heard voices, particularly the voice of God. Her first “vision” came when she was 16 years old:

*“That a quest there is, and an end,
is the single secret spoken.”*

Shortly after this mystical event, she and her family began to travel. While in Egypt, she reports God spoke to her again:

*“God called me in the morning and asked me
would I do good for Him, for Him alone,
without the reputation [self-interest].”*

Nightingales’s correspondence describes long periods of depression and auditory hallucinations interspersed with periods of high productivity. Biographers report that she spent much of her life isolated in her room suffering



from depression, nervousness, insomnia, spinal pain, and fatigue. Modern medical historians have suggested a more probable diagnosis of Bi-polar disorder. She nevertheless obeyed the voice... of God.

A DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE



"...I was in the hospital on 72 hour hold. This meant that I was Jonah the prophet, and that I had been running from God my whole life and was sent by him to spend three nights in the belly of the whale... The process was a healing one; all the shame I felt for decades about being a disappointment to my father (an internist who died when I was 15) had fallen away... I was receiving reassurances from Heaven itself that I need to feel ashamed no longer, that I was loved for all eternity. Everything that existed was holy. Angels were everywhere, beautiful and terrifying... I told the psychiatrist about being overwhelmed by angelic presence and he told me this idea was psychotic and that he would put me on risperidone... Thus the mental health care system and I were at cross purposes; what I was experiencing as a wonderful healing process was construed by my doctors as a serious disease process..."

It is a very serious matter when a physician mistakes a healing process for a pathological one."

Edward Whitney, M.D., M.P.H. His full account appears in Psychiatric Services 49:12, p.1547 (1998)



New Year's Prayer

"I dreamed the gates of heaven were closing and I wedged in my head like a doorstop. Now I have a headache and amnesia.

I have sinned against life, O God of life. I have sinned against the Danish modern furniture in my mother's living room.

I dreamed that heaven clanged shut on my head, leaving dent in the back which I swear you can still feel, the kind that infants have before their skulls freeze over like an ice-age. I cannot remember my childhood.

I have sinned against the religion that made my life. Oh God of life, I do not mean to be ungrateful, but I was never comfortable in my parent's house. I have sinned against my life.

I remember being afraid of everything. I do not remember growing up. I only remember being here. That is not enough.

I have sinned against my life by not remembering it.

Please inscribe my name in the book of life anyway because I'll remember it when I see it written down...

I have sinned against life, oh God of life. Once on Yom Kippur I stole a prayer shawl from the temple and used it as a motorcycle scarf. I stood in the hall of my mother's house and said, I have stolen this scarf, because on the Day of Atonement you admit what you have done. And my mother said, you cannot steal on Yom Kippur, you have not stolen it, I will return it tomorrow. But I knew that I had stolen it, and that I alone must atone for keeping my neck warm.

Every day is a Day of Atonement. I prefer to call it "the day of beating myself up." On this day I must atone for everything and forgive everyone the way I'd like to be forgiven. But I cannot atone when I am still angry, and I cannot forgive what don't remember. Each year the gates of heaven close before I know forgiveness."

L.S., published author and inpatient;

Axis I: Chronic depression, PTSD, DID;

Axis II: BPD ("*...even the borderlines say I'm borderline.*")

The Mystical Experience of God



St. Katherine of Siena, by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo;
or The Saintly Fool swearing her pain.
(Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

In the late middle ages there was an flowering of mysticism among Christian women in lower Europe. Physical illness, excessive fasting, self-injury, fainting, fugue states, and hallucinatory experiences were common behaviors to these (usually) young women. Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Begin, Katherine of Siena, and Beatrice of Nazareth are but the many who might fit this description. It is time and cultural milieu that frequently determines whether someone is remembered as a saint, or simply insane.

Beatrice's self mortification is notable: garments—including shoes—made of thorns wound tightly with ropes and leather belts, praying for hours on bare knees in snow, fasting, and sleeping on rocks. Her community actively discouraged these excesses, partly because of their disruptive nature—as when she fainted or drifted into trance states during the daily offices—but more probably because her colorful piety forced an already burdened community not only to do her share of the work, but physically care for her as well. Beatrice likely understood her mutilative behavior as bearing in her own body the mortification of Christ's passion—including experiencing the scorn and rejection of others—in order to experience God's grace.

Beatrice writes in the third person in her classic **On Seven Ways of Holy Love:**

"...that it seems to her that her heart is repeatedly being painfully wounded, and that these wounds are daily renewed and being made more painful by even more painful misery and new emotional pains. It seems to her as if her veins break open, and her blood is being heated, and her marrow pines away, and her legs weaken and chest scorches, and her throat dies up so that her face and all her limbs take part in the heat inside, take part in this primal rage of love... and like a devouring fire that draws everything towards itself and consumes what it can destroy, thus she feels that love ardently rages in her, without saving her and without measure, and that she takes and consumes everything. By this she is being hurt heavily and her heart is weakened very much and all her strength is nullified."



Jermore Kroll, MD, compares self injurious behavior in medieval (Christian) mystics and modern psychiatric patients:

- *The self-injury is done in a heightened state of emotional arousal with the goal of achieving altered consciousness;*
 - *there is an important public component—the wounds are displayed and in turn society responds, simultaneously caring for and protecting as well as criticizing and denigrating the person;*
 - *the person is considered not fully responsible for the behavior because of ecstatic (medieval) or dissociative (modern) state;*
- *society provides symbolic meaning by societal values: otherworldliness (medieval) and passage through childhood (modern).*
- Kroll also makes two distinctions, "more of content than form:"*
- *The experience of the medieval person was guided by the image of the crucified Christ, while the modern person is haunted by the image of a violated child.*
 - *The medieval ascetic self-mutilated to remove mental and physical interference to union with God. The modern dissociative patient self-injures: to interrupt flashbacks, painful affect, and intrusive auditory hallucinations.*

(PTSD/Borderlines in Therapy, 1993)



"In his hands I saw a great spear... this he plunged into my heart... when he pulled it out, I felt that he took (my entrails) with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God... the sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one could not possibly wish it to cease..."

St. Teresa of Avila

The altered consciousness and visionary experience of the sacred is not confined to either Christianity or medieval Europe. Outside of their culture and frame of reference practices of excessive sensory stimulation and profound emotional arousal in the pursuit of God could be construed as pathological by modern psychiatry.



Whirling Dervishes in Konya, Turkey.



Self inflicted cutting as mourning in Pakistan.



Handling snakes in Tennessee



Mandan Indians (N. America) hoisted on skewers.



At the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem.



"Charismatic" worship service, Ohio.

PSYCHIATRIC ILLNESS & RELIGIOUS ABUSE



A woman is stoned to death for the "sin" of adultery by a village in Afghanistan. Her family must watch.

Speaking of his nightmares and isolation after returning from church camp "...then the counselors came running out of the woods dressed like devils and threw these dummies (store mannequins) into the bonfire and started yelling at us: 'That's going to be you in hell unless you are saved and keep yourself pure.'"

-Matthew, age 12

There is high correlation across all faith traditions between:

- child abuse & religious fundamentalism
- paranoid delusion & theological "election" or being "set apart"
- sexual abuse & authoritarianism

"After I told the pastor about what my dad did to me... and my being depressed and not wanting to eat, he told me it was because I had a demon... when we got into the church service, the deacons brought out these brooms and a big bucket... they beat me on the back with the brooms to try to get the demon to go into the bucket... I've been in hospitals, the medicine doesn't help, I am not any less depressed, so I guess I still have the demon inside of me... I am so evil they couldn't even beat it out of me... what's going to happen to me?"

Angel, age 20

*"...he was a priest... he said, **"if you tell, you'll go to hell."** I've never told anyone.*

-Adult clergy sexual abuse survivor

...I am chaplain to an ancient, awesome, sacred people who dwell on the edge of the same world in which the rest of us live. You might just see a pile of dry bones. I know a holy people living on the edge of the world.

It is the kind of a place you read about in the Hebrew Scriptures, where people hear voices, fast, slash at themselves, and have visions of supernatural beings.

It is the kind of place where people wander around in circles, in complete wilderness for a generation or so, waiting for someone to die before finding the necessary grace for their destiny.

It is the kind of place where things burn, but are not consumed.

It is the kind of place where ax heads float, donkeys talk, and giants still roam the earth.

It is the kind of place where you meet strange creatures on the road at night and wrestle with God in the dark.

You can learn a lot in this place. I do love it, with these people, looking for God on the edge...

From the “sick souls” of James *Varieties of Religious Experience*, to the religiously pre-occupied women of Charcot’s Salpêtrière, to Sexton’s *Awful Rowing*, to Luther’s dissociative fits, to the adolescent women of the 13th century who were set aside as religious—as well as those 300 years later who were burned as witches, to Wiesel’s characters who must still live—even though they have died, all share a common wish with the biblical prophet Job: To see God face to face and get some explanation, some reason, some meaning, for their experience... to search for God is to search for meaning...

I am chaplain to this people. I am a priest, therapist, and anthropologist for the church. I believe I am supposed to return occasionally to report my findings. I think they might contain a message from God...