

Fable Ten

It has become more and more common to find psychiatrists who are interested in more than their patients' medication, and are interested to talk to them about their housing conditions, family situation, etc. I think there are various reasons for this development from the purely biological model of psychiatric care, but one of them is simply advances in knowledge within the psychiatric discipline based on solid and generally accepted research findings.

In contrast, I went on an advanced mental health social work course some while ago and found that hardly a social worker there seemed to question a rigidly narrow and by now anachronistic medical approach to mental ill-health. Out of all the disciplines, one would have expected social work to stand firmly for a more complex and comprehensive view of both the causes and treatment of mental dis-ease. Not a bit of it. Time and time again, the highly questionable and in my opinion misleading phrase "mental illness" was trotted out without a single challenger. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that there was something virtuous and tough in calling "a spade a spade," even though what was being described here continues a mystery and a complexity and calling it a "spade" is simply to falsify its reality.

During a coffee break in one such course, I went over to the social work trainer to make this point and get her view on what it might mean.

"It's quite obvious!" she said without hesitation and with a great deal of built-up emotion. "The medical model is a strong model. It's like the bible to a fundamentalist Christian. It offers clear-cut simple answers, concrete rules, material answers that permit no doubt. It doesn't matter that those answers have often been oversimplistic, crude, even completely false. Because the medical model is a strong model, it offers security and detachment, a firm position in difficult weather. Therefore medical professionals are often adventurous, assertive, innovative. When your home base is strong, you feel confident to range out a bit.

"Now look at social work. What sort of models does social work have? All greys and complexities, all relativity, all emotional voyaging and non-material values, all self-doubting and fellow-feeling. It may be reality but it ain't comfortable and it ain't clear. You can't grab it. You can't count it. You can't control it. So no wonder social work keeps gravitating to strong models, however unsuitable they might be, however fictional, however alien or often plain wrong they are. What did the Israelites do when Moses left them to climb his mountain? Meditate on the ineffable? No way! They grabbed for gold! Something they could get hold of!

"These are difficult times for the people professions. Don't expect them to behave well. Expect them to lurch about in the storm. Expect them to stand wingeing by the road-side trying to hitch a lift from passing strong models. Expect them to go flying off in all directions, everyone else's directions, since they cannot find their own. Expect what is weak to have a most unhealthy reverence for what seems strong and oppressive and to make far more room for it than is necessary or honourable, out of sheer self-hatred and self-doubt.

"Who was it said 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality?'"

We finished our coffee.

Rogan Wolf