

of: *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* by moral philosopher Mary Midgley, which includes analysis of existential thinking on this topic; another individual story in *How to survive the Titanic, or, The sinking of J. Bruce Ismay* by Frances Wilson and finally *The Psychology of Feeling Sorry: The Weight of the Soul* by psychologist Peter Randal.

If You Sit Very Still

Marion Partington. (2012). Bristol: Vala Publishing Co-operative.

In 1973, Marion Partington's 21 year old sister Lucy disappeared. Twenty years later they heard she had been tortured to death by Fred and Rosemary West and that finally 'they beheaded and dismembered her and stuffed her into a small hole, surrounded by leaking sewage pipes, head first, face down, still gagged... [her] flesh was trashed' (p 21).

This is about Partington's struggle to forgive the Wests in order to release herself from the murderous rages and wish for revenge for a crime most of us would consider unforgiveable. Through several chapters ranging from 'disappearance' and 'not knowing' to finally 'words of grace', she weaves the story through Lucy's poems and a series of dreams, the first when four months after disappearing Lucy returned and said 'I've been sitting in a water meadow near Grantham' adding with a smile

if you sit very still you can hear the sun move

(p 6)

Although a very particular story it does have insights that are more widely applicable and helpful. For example, the more common violent death of self-murder invariably leaves in its wake a hugely complex grieving challenge that includes the need to forgive the suicide person and oneself. The unresolved pain may continue down the generations, especially if not talked about and 'forgiven'. Realising this became one of Partington's motivations for pushing onwards – she worried about the effects on her three children of her unending grieving and stifled violent emotions.

She found help in the Quaker movement who say there is 'that of God in everyone' (p 39), and by immersion in Buddhist philosophy which sees evil as 'an enormous mistake made by the perpetrator' (p 109). She came to the view that all violence 'affects the rhythm of our shared humanity' (p 109) which resonates with Sartre's suggestion that what we do to others we do to ourselves and all humanity.

Key to gaining her freedom was facing her need to be forgiven for 'my own rotting pile of mistakes and woundings' (p 68) ranging from emotional cruelty and betrayal of loved ones to four abortions which had become a source of deep shame. She traces the antecedents of her 'violence' in the anger and dismay at her parents' divorce and later in Lucy's disappearance.

She imagines her paternal grandmother's suicide as an event that has cascaded down the family, its unspoken, unresolved pain causing further grief. Similarly her mother's stoical silence after the divorce which 'shores up pain into a solid place' and keeps everyone mute.

*it is not the dead that haunt us but the gaps left within us by
the secrets of others*

(p 79)

She goes through this introspection to begin understanding something of what led to her sister's death – that one 'mistake' can lead to another, a cycle of furious and mindless revenge set in motion and ending in something truly awful. Rosemary West was abducted from a bus stop and raped at 15. She was abused by her father, Fred West and his brother. She was 19 when she helped abduct Lucy Partington from a bus stop.

We may say Rosemary West still had choices to make, not every abused child goes on to commit such violence, but taking this view of how events unfolded helped Partington begin to make sense of things and find a way forward, much as therapy clients often want to go back and work it all out before moving on to new perspectives. As Partington frees herself, what to do next becomes the pressing issue. She participates as a 'victim' in a workshop with violent offenders and this leads on to working in prisons with the Forgiveness Project.

The paradoxical problem with forgiveness is that it is the truly unforgivable things that are hard to forgive and this is further complicated here where the question arises whether we can forgive something done to someone else. Is it ours to forgive? Living with the unforgiveable may be the only path possible for some.

Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past'

(p 26)

This idea is given to Partington by a woman whose daughter was murdered. It captures how forgiveness involves letting go of any claim we feel we have on the other, allowing their freedom, accepting the limits of our power to keep loved ones safe, realising that while we may 'forgive' someone they may never admit to wrongdoing or seek forgiveness. They may not let us go and so we have to release ourselves.

Partington ends this lyrical, thoughtful book with a letter to Rosemary West saying that through facing her own potential for violence she has learned compassion for the terrible suffering West's actions have caused herself and many others, and has forgiven her. West does not reply and asks the warders to block any more letters. But Partington now feels less powerless, more energised and freer to make full use of the time

she has left to make her own reparations.

Forgiveness? I can forgive too.

Why won't you be forgiven?

Lucy Partington (p 152)

Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay (Routledge Classics) 2nd Edition

Mary Midgley. (2001). London: Routledge.

Brief, dense and intellectually satisfying while also very readable and at times witty; Midgley's explorations range over a broad canvas encompassing the ideas of Sartre, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung and Darwin amongst others, using historical cases such as Hitler and Eichmann and literary figures like Iago (from Shakespeare's play *Othello*) and Milton's Satan to develop her investigations.

Her chapters, each with a helpful summary, discuss 'natural evil', responsibility, aggression, fate vs free will, 'selves and shadows', Freud's death wish and evil in evolution; despatching errors in immoralism, relativism, fatalism, subjectivism and determinism *en route*. As Steven Rose says on the back cover she is 'one of the sharpest critical pens in the West'.

Midgley says dismissing wicked people as 'mad' may mean little more than that we have given up the effort to understand. She argues for a common starting point in 'human nature' saying 'unless evil is to be seen as a mere outside enemy... it seems necessary to locate some of its sources in the unevenness of this original equipment... our specific [human] capacities and incapacities' (p 16).

In the case of wickedness she suggests the ordinary motives we all experience have narrowed down to a single overriding one and become an obsession (or addiction) while the rest of the character has atrophied so that the individual disintegrates and what follows is as likely to destroy the perpetrator as well as the victims. 'Self destruction is.... [a] seemingly inevitable consequence of indulged resentment' (p 205). As with Hitler chasing Jews ever more obsessively towards his own destruction and loss of WW II.

We all have conflicting motivations and must find a way to balance our contrary impulses in order to have a sense of being a complete, integrated personality. Midgley describes this obsessed motive as a 'plan' for life where an ordinary motive has gained corrupting control.

With Iago she says 'crazy paranoid envy serving crazy paranoid pride' (p 152) have pushed aside all other motives including prudent self regard. Finally facing his accusers he refuses to speak. 'It has dawned on him that

he has nothing to say' (p 153) he has suddenly realised that his blind, obsessed malice has made him forget himself (in existential terms he is alienated from himself) and he has nothing left to live for. He is taken into custody declaring he will never talk about it. To do so would be an unbearable loss of dignity, 'pride being the centre of his life'. This analysis bears comparison, although we don't know their overriding motives, with Rosemary West's silence and Fred West's suicide in custody, unlike the moors murderer Ian Brady they finally have nothing to say.

Where a personality has begun to disintegrate, Midgley says the motives do not need to be adequate, since this is an assessment only relevant to a complete integrated personality. The motives here need only be obsessive or addictive. While it is useful to consider the badness of a bad motive, its negative aspects and what it lacks e.g. 'selfishness is not centrally excessive self-love, but indifference to others' (p 206) we will not understand wrongdoing unless we look for the 'positive' characteristics – the perceived advantage involved that set things in train. As can happen with clients where we may unearth their original project and perceived advantage of adopting a strategy early on that now severely restricts their life and spoils their relationships.

To sum earlier events as causes does not provide an explanation – as with Partington suggesting prior events as 'causes' of Rose West's behaviour – naming a precipitating cause does not give a motive for the act/s. Whereas if we name something like envy, as with Iago, we do have a sort of explanation for actions which may appear to have nothing in common until realising they all gratify some frustrated wish and can be summed as 'such things madden him' (p 147), to know what such things are we return to the life plan and his principle of interpretation. She rightly says this requires standing in their shoes which is especially hard where it is a motive we do not fully share. Those around Iago were notably unenvious (although capable of envy) and absorbed in their own concerns hence no one suspects him. He is a monomaniac and because such extreme onesidedness is unexpected in everyday life he goes undetected. This also bears passing resemblance to the case of the Wests who went undetected, living a 'normal' family life for years.

She explores a Freudian suggestion that Iago has a sexual passion for Othello and 'like many other persuasive psychopaths owes much of his success to being extremely disturbed sexually' (p 154) regarding others as not people but things to be 'manipulated, destroyed, or sexually devoured' (p 154). While accepting the truth in this argument she does not find it sufficient. Nor does she accept that Iago in the grip of his obsession is any longer truly a free agent rather he is enslaved to it.

Midgley is also interested in science and frequently uses examples from science and the animal world to help make a point, vividly and often very