

a loved one). I believe we must honor their experience but we are not obliged to collude in self-blaming explanations or unhelpful metaphors which all-too-often, as Susan Sontag points out in her landmark essay *Illness as Metaphor*, can be moralistic and punitive.

Perhaps asking why is the wrong question. Sometimes we are ‘thrown’ into disease and there is no reason. Unrepressed rodents still manage to get cancer in colossal numbers (and presumably do not regard it as an opportunity for personal growth). With life comes disease, disability and death. It just does. No one is to blame.

More useful is to ask how. How are you going to accept your illness – and your mortality? How are you going to integrate these givens into your identity, your ‘being in the world’? What are you going to learn? How are you going to live? However dire the situation, Viktor Frankl (1946/2004) taught us, we still retain the freedom to choose how to respond.

It is true that our symptoms have much to tell us. With the help of therapists, we can discover useful interpretations, authentic narratives and enormous capacities for transcendent spiritual growth. But one of the important things your symptoms are telling you is this: go see a doctor.

John Barton

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Death of a Psychotherapist and Other Poems

John Woods (2017). London: Karnac Books

Published at the end of 2017, this is a memoir of John Woods' journey through life threatening illness. He had been working as a psychotherapist in the NHS for thirty-five years, the last twenty in the Portman, and was

beginning a six-month pre-retirement phase when this happened. His poems express the distancing and dreamlike experience of acute illness, the weirdness of hospital life, the fight to survive psychologically during treatment and, finally, the return to a new normal.

There are three sections. The first 'Death of a psychotherapist' contains a delirious 'collage of words and images' (p 37) that came to him during the first days of brain tumors and strong medication 'a journey into gods, ghosts and shadows' (p 38). The second, 'Other poems', contains a series of short discrete poems written over several months and reflecting a mind now more able to recognise and comment on what's going on.

His 'Notes', the third section, describe the full arc of his experience – how the poems came about and his subsequent musings on what it has meant for him. He draws attention to the emotional aspects of illness like indignation at the inconvenience and disruption of normal life – 'I'm a therapist! I have to get back to work' (p 38) – then the loss of agency during extended treatment that can itself be traumatic. As he says, the patient knows intellectually he is not being punished 'or abandoned to torture and degradation' (p 43) but it can feel like this, and the childish response to all the instructions about what to do or not do can induce resentment against the doctors and their life-saving treatments and a temptation to refuse to comply.

Woods had been reading the Greek poet Cavafy when the illness started and ideas from his poems are woven into Woods' poems.

*Ithaca gave you the wondrous journey;
Without her you would never have set out.
But she has nothing to give you any more.*

(p 12)

This quotation from Cavafy's poem *Ithaca* ends the first section, completing a poem where Woods asks why you would want to be a psychotherapist with the challenges and frustrations involved and the possibility of ending disillusioned. Yet his professional identity is vital to him and while his life itself is in danger he is strangely unaware of this threat and more concerned about the annihilation of himself as a therapist. Finally, Woods answers his own question with this:

*Without belief in its power you would never have set out,
never had those experiences,
maybe not have survived yourself.*

(p 12)

I didn't know Cavafy's work, translated from Greek, and was delighted to be introduced to it. *Ithaca* could be about the journey through professional

life, or through serious illness, or the voyage through life itself and the necessity to engage and experience it fully along the way, because rewards lie in the journey not the destination, which I think is Cavafy's meaning (the complete poem is available online).

At times brave, wry and witty, this is an enjoyable and affecting read. Although intensely personal, Woods' poems and reflections are also universal and I think anyone who has experienced illness, pain and hospitals will readily understand what he is on about and smile here and there as I did.

In 'What fresh hell' he experiences a new pain 'to be downloaded, decoded, woven into the daily routine of pain management' (p 22) and he captures the irritation of doctors asking impossible questions like 'Where is it, how intense, how often, what exactly – sharp or dull? "Dull ... no sharp ... stops me sleeping' (ibid).

I particularly liked this:

*I see a Spider of Insomnia
Scuttling along infinite corridors;
Stopping to spread poison on the wall
Of my silent
Cold
Godless world.*

(p 22)

Then in 'A new Kind of Good News' the cancer is 'now only in my eyes... much better than... everywhere... better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick' (p 29).

Woods was fortunate in that he survived his illness and has returned to work. While I was waiting for his book to arrive, I had been reading Helen Dunmore's final work, *Inside the Wave*, which tracks a similar journey except that she died, in April 2017. The eponymous poem likens being alive to being inside the wave, always travelling until it breaks and is gone.

In 'My life's stem was cut' she imagines herself as a wilting flower revived by trimming and placing in a vase of fresh water:

*I know I am dying
But why not keep flowering
As long as I can
From my cut stem?*

(Dunmore, 2017: p 23)

Her final poem, 'Hold out your arms', written ten days before her death, imagines Death as a kindly mother welcoming her, a shy little girl, into her arms:

*As you push back my hair
- Which could do with a comb
But never mind –
You murmur
We're nearly there*

(Dunmore, 2017: pg 70)

Woods concludes his book reflecting on how the mind works to accommodate itself to death while at the same time there is a need to create 'something that wards off the imminence of destruction... so the mind has to dig deep in to the self to produce something that not only survives, but is renewed' (p 46). Indeed, having retired from the NHS, he is now in private practice and, amongst other things, working with people affected by cancer. Having come through a long period of illness myself, I know how rewarding it can be to return, enlarged by the experience, to the trials and joys of our profession.

Woods concludes he is not sure about being grateful to the cancer for this journey but he would not have been without it.

Diana Pringle

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Existential Perspectives on Relationship Therapy

Emmy van Deurzen & Susan Iacovou (eds.) (2013). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

This is a very thorough rundown, with its seventeen chapters and twenty-three contributors. The introduction by the two editors makes the point that little has been written about relationships from an existential standpoint, so that this is an important and groundbreaking contribution.

They show that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Buber, Jaspers and Levinas all had a good deal to say about relationships.

The first chapter, by Emmy, shows good handling of a difficult case. The next chapter seems oddly incomplete, as if there is something missing. Chapter 3, by Naomi Stadlen, has a good discussion of some tricky issues. The next one struck as very technical, a bit too much so. The next chapter, by Betty Cannon and Reed Lindberg, seemed excellent and quotes Sartre to good effect. Chapter 10, on the challenge of ethics and the call to responsibility, is a strong chapter with an interesting case illustration.

It would be tedious to go through all the chapters in this long book. Chapter 16, by Simon du Plock, on couples presenting with issues of addiction, I thought particularly good. He says that 'anything can be addictive