

POINTS OF VIEW

BY THE BY

Images

A cold day in Belfast, rain soaring in the gale and spattering upwards on windows and glistening walls. I was on a day's leave and, because this was the closing date, I had to hand-deliver letters to two offices - one office to do with education, the other with health. Unshaven, wrapped in a burst jacket, and sporting a seeping, closed eye, I walked as fast as I could but it still took me ten minutes to get from the public car park to the first of the offices. I sloshed into an elegant foyer - concealed lighting, large tank with exotic fish, dark wood panelling - and joined the short queue at reception. The lady behind the desk, dressed in canary yellow, spotted me almost straightaway. "Wait over there". I wondered why, but I obeyed. A moment or two later a sort of major-domo came towards me. And I suddenly realised, from the amalgam of contempt and wariness on his face, and from the way his dewlap wobbled, that I was not welcome there. "I only want to leave this letter", I said, hoping that the very banality of the errand might help to redress things, if only fractionally. He gingerly took a corner of the envelope, and turned away. He didn't say a word. The foyer of the other office I had to go to was empty but for the receptionist who was looking at her painted nails with intense concentration. She looked at me briefly and then went back to her nails. I was flustered. "Is this the department of XYZ?" I asked. She flicked a hand towards a large sign, "Can't you read?" she snapped.

Added together, the incidents lasted no more than four or five minutes. Clearly, the bedraggled man now into late middle age had been seen and dealt with as inferiorly different. So what's new? Long ago people spat at epileptics to avoid contagion: journalists who have joined down-and-outs in cardboard city have been shocked by the indifference or animosity of passers-by; a few autistic children, now grown up, have written of their nightmare years in a world which they didn't understand and which didn't understand them. The list is endless. What was new, for me at least, was the actual experience, however brief, of what it must be like all of the time for thousands of minority members. The image is the message. And this despite citizens' charters, patients' charters, politically correct language, pulpit exhortations, back to basics and old values, and much else besides.

The question of images can be very complicated. Have a look at R. D. Laing's "Knots" and you'll see what I mean. However, I'll stay with simpler examples, most from the learning disability field. Let's start with an enduring image in Northern Ireland. Older people remember their parents threatening to send someone to 'the big house' (i.e., a local mental hospital or even a poorhouse). Quite explicitly, odd or naughty people would learn

a lesson if they were sent to the big house, or might be locked up there indefinitely. A screwed-up form of folk memory persists. At different times I have been asked whether the hospital I work in had an underground ward, a perimeter fence, dog patrols or look-out posts. How on earth did such images arise? As to the residents there is sometimes an image of endemic violence that needs to be contained. How did that image come about? Why is it so difficult to correct?

Cut to another set of images. A young female researcher was interested in the everyday lives of high-ability residents in a hostel, a few of whom had in earlier years been in hospital. Staff accompanied them to nearby shops and it was not long before some of the men and women were able to go on their own. (A male member of staff was of the definite opinion that the ex-institutional subjects had been ill-prepared for the transfer and would take longer to adjust - an opinion not borne out by various measures but to which he clung tenaciously.) On the whole, shop assistants were very kind and patient. One of the things that intrigued us was the difference in the shop assistants' perceptions between the group who 'lived' in the hostel and the group who 'worked' there (i.e., staff). Two of the residents had day-time jobs but they were residents first, workers second. The staff were themselves part-time residents but spoke of 'doing shifts' or 'sleep ins', of being 'on duty' and 'off tomorrow'. It seemed to us that the neighbourhood was happy enough to accept the residents provided they were in what was perceived to be a safety framework. Thus the acceptance was conditional: the residents were different but not inferiorly different. A form of charitable integration had been achieved.

Now to an altogether different set of images, involving two boys who have long since left our department. Alan Smith had a profound learning disability and came to us with a history of stereotypies and severe self-injury. Unostentatiously but deeply religious, Mrs. Smith regards Alan as a holy innocent - shades of 'he walks on earth but talks in heaven'. If not breaking the ten commandments ensures a place in kingdom come, he has a significant advantage over most of us. The nearest thing to a graven image was the wooden spoon he twiddled in front of his face. He'll never covet his neighbour's wife, ox, or ass. Is this a high form of valorisation? John Black, who has a severe learning disability, was a very handsome child with dark blue eyes and charming smile. He came to us with a history of aggressiveness and of smearing faeces. When out with his parents he would suddenly attack one of them. Distressed by this, Mrs. Black said the experience was all the worse for them because 'he looks so normal - if he looked handicapped people would understand the problem better'. Smearing faeces evidently gave John a 'high', he became 'elated', he was 'right out of it', there was something 'evil' in his delight. Is this image a throw-back to one of possession?

I don't think either Alan or John has a problem of self-image, self-esteem, whatever you want to call it. They don't strut upon a stage like most of us do. Grown-up, they won't aspire to become straw-hatted monarchs. They are what they are. Okay, I appreciate that someone with, say, a psychoanalytic bent may disagree with me, but I'll stick to my claim. Shortly before Christmas I was in a shopping mall in Belfast and came across a group of

some six or seven youngsters, all of them with profound or severe learning difficulties, all of them physically handicapped as well, four in wheelchairs with extra orthotic devices. (The staff:child ratio was almost 2:1.) The comments from by-standers, sotto voce in some cases, not so sotto in others, were deeply compassionate - 'God love them', 'we don't know how lucky we are', 'it must be awful hard on the parents'. The image? Inferiorly different? I'm afraid so, but offset to a certain degree by pity and generosity.

Paradoxical as it may seem, there is the possibility that the more obviously affected some individuals are, the more easily you and I, honest burghers, will accept them in our midst. The youngsters in the mall were so patently dependent they posed no physical threat. But, and here's the rub, it all depends on what we mean by 'accept'. The staff accompanying them, very busy, very much in evidence, were a convenient and reassuring buffer between youngster and public. We were merely onlookers. We didn't have to do anything. We were safe. Someone will always act as intermediary, as protector. So, in this context, 'accept' may simply mean 'tolerate'. And that's not integration, however compassionate we may be.

About half an hour later, while walking along a street behind the shopping centre, I saw a man backing out of a doorway, and then going in again. He was having a violent quarrel with someone unseen. As I got nearer I realised he was a down-and-out: he was wearing two greasy coats (stuffed with paper), a filthy hat, and the uppers of boots tied with string. Wild yellow eyes in a face made of tufty leather and grime. There was no-one else in or near the doorway. But he obviously saw someone there and he did not like the look of him or her. He just as obviously heard the non-person's voice because when he yelled a question ('What do you take me for?') he was prepared to listen, cupping hand to ear. Two elderly men at a bus stop had no doubts at all where the combatant should be - locked up. The image? Mad, dangerous, a menace. Their words, not mine. Charles Simic, in his poem 'The City', describes a similar scene, and admits, 'I tell you, I was afraid'. No integration here, no compassion, no tolerance. But, then, it's possible the man in the doorway had rejected society rather than the other way round.

To a final set of images. Larry, in his mid-thirties and with a mild learning difficulty, lives at home with his widowed mother who is becoming increasingly frail. There has been role-reversal in the house. Larry, for a good many years the dependent, now looks after the newly dependent. There's help from brothers and sisters (married and living away), but Larry does much of the day-to-day work, is conscious of his responsibility, has, as our elders would have said, a strong sense of duty, and is proud of his achievements. He seems content and has no plans beyond his capabilities. The self-image is good. Richard, in his late twenties and also with mild learning difficulties, told a researcher he had a steady girlfriend he hoped to marry within the year, went weight-training twice a week with two of his best friends, was active in a church group, and went to bingo. In the event, none of these claims was true. But, then, Richard is little different from those men who, according to the newspapers, have lost well-paid executive jobs, cannot find alternative employment, and cannot bear the loss of image. So they continue to leave home at 7.30 each morning,

briefcase in hand, to catch the train into London, and return in late evening after a hard day 'at the office'.

Barney, 28 years old and with mild learning problems, is a man in a hurry. Since his schooldays he has nursed vaulting ambitions: to buy a car, become a doctor, start his own business (as yet unspecified). He also likes a bit of excitement. About five or six years ago, he decided, impulsively and with reckless lack of foresight, that his future lay in paramilitary activities. First, though, he had to get noticed. He was severely beaten for his trouble and for weeks limped about on crutches. But he enjoyed the image: war veteran, frontline experience, all in a cause he knew nothing about. Curious - the more setbacks he has, the more his confidence seems to grow.

So many disparate images, so many reactions, so many degrees of tolerance or acceptance. The advocacy literature homogenises the images, tells me how we should react. It stresses the enormous importance of entitlement and choice, not charity and sympathy. Thus far, thus good. But should we go as far as the physically disabled have on their own behalf? Members of the Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN) have arresting slogans - 'Rights, Not Charity', 'Piss on Pity' - and regard Jimmy Saville as a 'patronising old git'. (The Independent on Sunday, 9 April 1995). If they get what they want, fair enough. They will have proved themselves powerful and able advocates. Can we, should we, do the same for children and adults with learning difficulties? I suspect - and it's no more than cautious suspicion - that if we bludgeon pity, compassion, whatever you call it, out of campaigns on their behalf, we may lose more than we gain. The image is the message. And very powerful it is too.

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