Instilling Fragility

By Theodore Dalrymple

It is tempting to suppose that any social trend must be directed by someone, or at least by some organisation, and that none is truly spontaneous. All social trends *benefit* someone, after all, and it is a short step to believing that such-and-such a person, or that such-and-such an organisation, must have arranged the trend in advance for it to happen. We want explanations and we want them simple: conspiracy theories fulfill both these desiderata.

In a world grown ever more complex and difficult to understand, where almost everything in our lives lies beyond our comprehension, the simplifications of conspiracy theories grow ever more attractive, and proliferate like fungi.

If I were tempted in such conspiratorial directions, I would wonder if there is not a conspiracy afoot to render people, especially young people, ever more emotionally and psychologically fragile.

What would be the purpose of such a conspiracy? The fact is that our universities are churning out ever more psychologists (psychology, alas, is one of the most popular courses in universities in English-speaking countries) and jobs must be found for at least a proportion of them if university departments are not to collapse through lack of demand. A psychologically fragile population is therefore, from the point of view of the trainers and students of psychology, highly desirable. The latter might be called the Jesuits of the present age: give psychologists a child for the first seven years of its life, and it is theirs for the rest of its life.

But let us put these wild speculations aside and just consider the following curiosity. In Britain, a nurse called Lucy Letby

has been found guilty of murdering seven babies and attempting to murder six more. The jury could not make up its mind on six other charges. She was sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment without possibility of parole.

The case, however, has aroused worldwide attention and there are not a few people who believe that she was innocent of the crimes imputed to her and is therefore the victim of a miscarriage of justice. It is alleged that the prosecution's expert witnesses were mistaken and that the judge misdirected the jury. It is not my intention here to consider these questions.

Rather, I want to draw attention to what would once have been regarded as a strange message at the end of a full BBC report on its website on the progress of Lucy Letby's appeal against conviction. The report is a long one and as far as I can tell, even-handed, which is not always the case with BBC reports nowadays. The message at the end reads as follows and is italicised in the original:

> *This is a distressing case, so if you—or someone you know—need help after reading about it, the details of organisations offering assistance can be found on the BBC Action Line website.*

I think I am traumatised by the BBC's uncertain grammar, but I will let that pass: there is no help available for people distressed by bad grammar.

The message is curious for more than one reason. No one would have read this story who was not already aware of Lucy Letby's crimes, or alleged crimes, which in fact are not described in any detail in this article. A person who supposedly needed help after reading it would have to be of such eggshell sensitivity that he or she might be laid low by the news that Christmas this year will take place on December 25.

> *The BBC is engaged on the work of infantilising the population. Any modicum of toughmindedness will be taken as insensibility.*

This, of course, is just the kind of person that the growing army of psychologists needs: so fragile that mere reference without description to a frightful crime having taken place, or alleged to have taken place, renders him or her unable to continue without professional assistance.

But the very idea that reading about something unpleasant, even knowingly and without compulsion, can lead to such severe psychological reaction that professional assistance is

necessary to overcome it is peculiarly demeaning of human beings and comparatively recent, occurring *pari passu* with the growth of clinical psychology as study and profession.

In 1978, Professor Keith Simpson, an eminent forensic pathologist, published a best-selling memoir titled *Forty Years of Murder*. It contains any number of extremely graphic and lurid descriptions: ten years later, it had gone through at least thirteen re-printings.

The memoir consisted largely of descriptions of corpses found murdered and of the pathologist's detective work that aided in bringing the perpetrators to justice. Often, he performed the post-mortem on the remains of the victim and the perpetrator after he had been hanged. I quote at random:

> *The stench of putrefaction was strong, the air was buzzing with flies, and the remains of the body were crawling with maggots. … I could see that there was some kind of wound in the right forearm, but the maggots obscured it. It would need a day or two in a Lysol bath to kill them off.*

He adds that it would take him a week to put the bits of the shattered skull of the victim back together again.

Needless to say, the book did not come with a warning, and no offers of helplines, publicly funded or otherwise, for those who found the scenes described disturbing. If anybody had suggested then that there ought to be help available for people who read the book and experienced a psychological collapse as a result, he or she would have been laughed at. Someone would have said that if you don't like the gruesome, don't read memoirs by forensic pathologists.

Now the BBC, once by far the most respected broadcasting organisation in the world (I used often to hear people say in Africa, "I know it's true because I heard it on the BBC"), is engaged on the work of infantilising the population,

suggesting that it, or some large part of it, is constantly on a knife edge of emotional implosion, threatened by reports or scenes, even imagined scenes, of unpleasantness. The problem is that, if people read or hear this kind of thing from an early age and often enough, it will come to be true. Any modicum of toughmindedness will be taken as insensibility, as moral failing.

When I looked on the suggested *Action Line*, I discovered scores or even hundreds of organisations that could supposedly help to prop up people psychologically crippled by something they had seen or heard on the BBC. For every distress, then, there is a technocratic solution, so there is no need to keep one's distress in proportion.

I don't say that the BBC is in league with the monstrous regiment of psychologists, counsellors, and psychiatrists, but it might just as well be.

First published at Law and Liberty