

The Companions of Silence

I have reached the age when friends start to suffer serious illnesses and today I had to take one of them (whom I have known for more than 40 years) to hospital for his radiotherapy. Oddly enough, this was not the depressing experience one might have expected it to be.

In the first place, all the staff were kindly, even the receptionists, treating patients as individuals and with respect. The patients themselves were dignified and stoical, though many of them were clearly very ill. I heard not a word of complaint though (unusually) the clinic was running an hour late. In the context of having your life saved, or at least very much extended, such a delay seemed trivial.

I did not mind the wait at all, in fact I found it quite relaxing: I had bought a book with me that I was able to read. Suddenly I realised why this was so: not only were the chairs in the waiting area comfortable, but there was no electronic stimulation or compulsory entertainment whatsoever: no television, no pop music punctuated by drivelling presenters, no advertisements, no bullying propaganda. There was no assumption by the management that, rather than being left to our own devices, we needed to have the gap in our minds filled with the weather forecast, the latest stock prices or football results, sexual scandals in high places, scenes of war, episodes of soap opera, cookery programmes, or any other type of stimulation that acts on the mind as a food mixer acts on vegetables. It is a sign of how we are overburdened in public places by such prophylaxis against our own thoughts that the absence of it came not only as a surprise, but a relief, as after the putting down of a heavy burden. Bravo the

management!

There was not complete silence: there was the low hum of conversation, punctuated by quite a lot of laughter, but not of the intrusive, penetrating or hysterical kind that young women let loose in restaurants nowadays to persuade themselves and others that they are enjoying themselves. In short, the patients were considerate of others.

My wife was knitting beside me. A patient opposite, waiting his turn, said to her, 'You'll be able to finish that before we leave here today!' It was said in a humorous way, with no hint of complaint. Another patient had given up his seat to me and gone to sit somewhere else so that I could be next to my wife.

These very ordinary little things, or things that should be ordinary, acted as a kind of balm to my spirit.

First published in