

The Mortal Clear-Out

By Theodore Dalrymple

My grandmother believed in a good weekly clear-out, by which she meant a dose of castor oil to remove the body poisons that she believed inevitably led to the mind poisons. Fortunately, my mother did not share her obsession with bowel function.



I thought of my grandmother as I indulged recently in a clear-out of my own, that of the enormous, depressing and reproachful accumulation of papers that have rendered an entire room in my house impassable. I want to be tidy before I die.

I suppose these papers represented a biography of a kind, since they all referred either to some event in my life, or to an intellectual interest that I must have had at some time during it. It was startling to discover how much of my own life that I did not remember. The past is not only another country where they do things differently, as L.P. Hartley put it, but we seem to have been different people in our own pasts, connected to our present selves by a mere thread of fallible memory.

The things I found were very various, and I was not at all sure when, how or why I came by them. They delighted me by

their sheer variety. Some were remarkable and worthy to be spared destruction. For example, there was a letter, dated April 26, 1852, of a man apparently on the eve of his execution to his accuser:

Dear Sir, Your suspicions has [sic.] been wrongfully founded when you place them on me. As this will not reach you before I am out of all earthly power, I beg to tell you I never had that mean and cowardly heart to rob and afterwards fire any place but I must say your conduct towards me might cause some suspicion on my part that my only crime was yours. Yes yours, look at the daylight robberies you commit daily... You have hurried me to an untimely grave, may your lot be the same. We shall meet again and be judged... Think of my death and farewell.

How I came by this letter, I do not recall, but it has an air of sincerity about it: why would a guilty man on the very eve of his death by hanging have written it? But human beings are strange, and sincerity is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Perhaps the letter was an impotent cry of rage, or an attempt to discomfit for the rest of his life the person to whom it is addressed, the revenge of the guilty upon the innocent. Moreover, I have known murderers in my former career as a prison doctor who vehemently, and with apparent sincerity, deny what they subsequently admitted almost with insouciance. One notorious murderer refused to confess on the eve of his execution because to do so would, he said, ruin his reputation.

Among the detritus of my life, I also found the visiting card of a man who gave himself the title of "Professor" and who was an "international renowned spiritual healer and advisor [and] clairvoyant with spiritual power of [his] ancestral master spirit."

I can help you with bringing back Loved Ones, Domestic

Issues, Family Problems, Depression, Substances Abuse, Addiction, Losing Weight, Impotency, Infertility, Immigration, Court Cases, Breaking Black Magic and helping with White Magic, Jinx, Demonic Forces, Anti-Social Behaviour in People, Good Luck, Success in Business, Exams, Career, Spiritual Guidance, Stress Release, Job Interview and Marriage etc. Please do not remain in silence with your problem. YOUR PAIN IS MY RESPONSIBILITY. Quick results 100% guaranteed.

A London telephone number was appended, and my guess is that the “professor” was a Nigerian. “Please do not remain in silence with your problem” reminded me of a slogan I saw painted on the side of Nigerian buses: “Why die in silence.” The amalgam of socio-psychological terms—substance abuse, antisocial behavior, stress—with the belief in magic, both black and white, is surely common in the mentality of recent African immigrants.

At first I laughed, but this was a callow response. Did not this card succinctly enumerate what Dylan Thomas, in one of his poems, called “the griefs of the ages”? It did indeed summon up to the imagination a world of pain and suffering; it appealed to the natural, but delusive, desire for a simple magical solution that would put an end to the suffering.

Was the “professor” a charlatan, and were his ministrations successful? My guess is that he was neither totally honest nor a complete charlatan, and that his ministrations were neither completely successful nor completely a failure. To fool others consistently, you have first to fool yourself. His rates of success and failure were probably not much different from those of antidepressants.

He was a one-man welfare state: “Your pain is my [the state’s] responsibility.” That is what the welfare state tells its citizens. That is what psychiatry and psychology insinuate to

their patients and clients. For every human ill, there is an equal and opposite technical solution. It seems to me likely that the “professor” has as much success as the legions of professional, certified therapists, though he might miss cases where distress is caused by identifiable disease. Certainly, the age of magical thinking is not over, and I suspect will never be over.

Amongst my papers, I found an advertising circular, sent to me four years ago, for what it called “a fuss-free cremation”—my own, that is. I would save money this way: There would be “no money spent on funeral frills.” I could have an eco-friendly coffin, and my ashes delivered by hand to anyone who wanted them. One happy customer said that, before signing up, he had “dreaded an ordinary funeral”—presumably an opinion given before his death.

Included in the offer was access to “experts in caring for the bereaved” (if any). It is true, of course, that mourning can become morbid or pathological, but this seems to imply that *all* mourning, *all* grieving is pathological and can and ought to be smoothed away by some special means known to experts, as if it were a dose of flu. How deep can attachments be if there is no profound grief when death ends them?

Having thrown this circular away, I came on the scientific paper by my friend, Professor Ferner, about the potential harmful effects of laughter: a list surprisingly long, from fainting to irregular heartbeat, from asthmatic attack to pneumothorax, from severe headache to stroke, from hernia to esophageal rupture, from dislocated jaw to incontinence.

“In this world,” said Franklin, “nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”—to which might be added medical risk.

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