

## A Cave Mentality

*One of the most valuable things about therapy is that it's a place where you don't have to pretend you're on top of the world and where happiness is not held out as the ultimate mark of a successful life. This is a wonderful liberation. For it's precisely sunny-side-up fascism that forces those of us who walk the black dog into lonely invisibility. Obligatory upbeatness won't acknowledge the presence of anger, emptiness or despair..."*

*"...the exhortation "Have a great day" has become the ideological camouflage of late capitalism and Made in Chelsea is its purest form. The economy is tanking. People are out of jobs. A loved one has died. A relationship has ended. Don't worry, be happy. Take a pill. Watch the Olympics."*

*"No, the sort of happiness that's more than synthetic soma must hold together a range of conflicting feelings, of which unhappiness is one. And we must not be scared of unhappiness as a feature of a meaningful life. To express this as a contradiction: unhappiness forms part of the recipe for happiness itself."<sup>1</sup>*

Some of you who have known me for a while know that I sing in the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, and the other night we opened this year's International Festival with the RSNO and Sir Andrew Davis with A Mass of Life by Fredrick Delius. A rarely performed work, the words are taken, not from the Catholic mass, but from Fredrick Nietzsche's philosophical narrative *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

You know Nietzsche—declared the death of God, criticised Christianity's emphasis on pity and suffering, the Nietzsche who went mad over both his ideas and over the unrequited love of one of his students. This same Nietzsche in *Zarathustra* wants to break away from the conformity which, he believed, plagued society and which he believed Christianity was to blame by cultivating a society beyond good and evil and ever toward an eternal happiness. Zarathustra does not wish for the good times of life to stop rolling, and grief, pain and pity always seems to stop the celebration. 'Deep is the world's woe', says Nietzsche. 'But joy is still deeper than grief of heart.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Giles Fraser, "Church, like therapy, is a space where you are allowed to bring your distress" in *The Guardian*, 3 August 2012.

<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Chapter 50.

Now these words are not as shocking and hard-hitting to us as they were to imperial Germany. In fact, we have pretty much been sold into Nietzsche's vision, even in the church as we have come to realise the demise of "Christendom". Perhaps at its worst, we in the Western world are sold into it when we come to depend on feel-good activities that will hide us from the realities of ominous darkness in our personal lives and in the life of the world. To what extent did we watch the Olympics, relying on Britain's many medal hopefuls to give our wee island some hope in the midst of economic turmoil? To what extent did Usain Bolt's win give us more confidence in humanity? Does 'chinning up and getting on with it' really liberate us or further enslave us?

Elijah's descent into the wilderness is perhaps one of the bravest moves of a religious figure in the Old Testament. For anyone who has been overwhelmed by life, Elijah is an honest person of faith. If one wanted to make up biblical stories, or as Richard Dawkins calls them, "fairy tales"—I would have ended Elijah's story with the victory over the prophets of Baal. Rather, he flees for his life into the wilderness, he collapses under a tree and asks God to take his life. Then he falls asleep. Suddenly an angel touches him and says, "Get up and eat." "Get up and eat"—a very practical command, a summons for Elijah to take care of himself. In this case, it also summons him to embrace life itself.

He eats only a little, and goes back to sleep. God has to keep speaking to Elijah to keep eating, keep being nourished for the journey, and he keeps going to sleep. He doesn't really want to be bothered by anyone or anything, even God. Finally, in a cave, God strikes up a conversation with what is at first glance an insensitive question to someone with melancholy, "What are you doing here?"

As someone who lives with clinical depression, these words sound like when a person like me is asked, "Well, what are you depressed *about*? Depression, when you really have to live through it every day, is deeper than can be pinpointed by an event or an individual circumstance.

So, finally, Elijah lets it rip: "I, only I, am left of all your prophets, and now my life is on the line. Now I have asked you nicely and I say it again: please take away my life before Jezebel gets to me."

But God's plan, God's scheme is for Elijah to not get stuck in a *cave mentality*. God simply directs Elijah to "*go out* and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." And how does the Lord come? Well a lot of things pass by, a lot of elements of nature passed by Elijah that could have overwhelmed him further, but Elijah was told to look out for the passing of the Lord. So a powerful wind passes by, but God is not there this time around. Then

an earthquake passes by—God has been known to be revealed in earthquakes. Not this time. Then comes fire—God was once revealed thru a burning bush to Moses... But not for Elijah. It was when all the overwhelming stuff passed by that God is seen anew...a still small voice that calls one to silence all the thoughts all the paranoia, all the agonising about the future, and listen to life clearly.

It takes all the senses to listen to God and to listen to what life is saying to us. One of the worst things about depression is its subtleness. In the words of the posters you see in GP surgeries, you can look good, but feel crap, and no one ever knows how deeply your emotional pain goes. There are no wires stitched to you, no obvious signs of a serious illness. And the treatment has ranged from bizarre to passive. These days science realises that treatment of depression requires more than medication but a complete exercise of the senses.<sup>3</sup> You are told to go to the gym, go on a diet, not just one thing but many different things that will hopefully bring your endorphins to life. The key is not simply to enjoy life in spite of ones melancholy, but to embrace life through the senses. It takes every part of us to find meaning and purpose.

This is what I believe God was challenging Elijah to do on that mountaintop, to use his body to experience life anew. As our opening hymn challenged us “soul and body take your part”<sup>4</sup> in the praise of God. The praise of God is not simply a feel-good festival, but a celebration and recognition of all that makes us human; not simply happiness and not simply unhappiness—not merely victory and not merely tragedy.

Nietzsche’s idea of life was that we should shun suffering and reach for happiness by any means necessary, and Christianity was the religion of pity for him. Many would argue that his journey for an authentic self beyond the bounds of religion did not provide a cushion, a space where one could actually deal with the problems of life, which is probably why he spent his last days in an asylum and died too early at 41. In the place of faith, he had nothing to provide real sustenance to make it on the journey.

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<sup>3</sup> A close friend of mine, Dr. Monica A. Coleman is Associate Professor of Religion at Claremont Graduate University in California. She has written much about depression from a Christian perspective, and speaks of the treatment of depression as the elements of one’s own personal “sacrament”, with the ritual of antidepressants as one’s “personal Eucharist”. See “Sacrament” at <http://monicaacoleman.com/2011/06/sacrament/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Sing Praise to God who Reigns Above”, text by Johann J. Schutz (1640-1690). Never underestimate the power of the language of the hymns of our spiritual heritage!

But God's command to "Eat!" is not the command simply to *do* something, or to just get on with it. It is the command to *receive* sustenance for the journey. So, when Elijah finds his life frustrating and disappointing, God gives him something to revive his senses. God would not let him get away with staying in the cave of his melancholy and despair. And when Jesus identifies himself with the living bread come down from heaven to be received and enjoyed,<sup>5</sup> he does not let his audience, or we who listen to him now, get away with living with abandon in a cruel world which remains cruel no matter how long we stay in front of the telly.

God is not in the trappings of power and celebrity. God is hidden in the seeming weakness of The Word made flesh in us, in the humility of Jesus and the apparent weakness of the cross. But the weakness of suffering is only an appearance. God dares us to take Godself as sustenance for our journey, God dares us to break through the brick walls which tell us we are not worth anything, we cannot make it, there is no point to what we are doing. God dares us to break through those walls and be revived, regenerated, refreshed.

"Enough of feeling sorry for yourself. I have plans for you. You have work to do for me. Get on with it. And by the way, stop this nonsense about being the only one who is faithful to me. You have more allies than you think."

So Elijah gets up and does as he was told. We do not have to struggle alone - because God and God's people are with us. There's no greater "good news" than that in a cruel and amazing world.

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Rev. William T. Young, IV  
Sermon preached at Augustine United Church, Edinburgh  
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*PS- In case you missed it, I highly recommend Rev. Dr. Monica Coleman's website, [www.monicaacoleman.com](http://www.monicaacoleman.com), and her articles on "a beautiful mind blog" for unique perspectives on mental illness and Christian spirituality. She is also a regular contributor writing on the same subject for The Huffington Post.*

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<sup>5</sup> John 6: 35.