

An Arm Down The Rabbit Hole

Recently, a friend of mine from my workplace took an extended trip, in his words, down the rabbit hole. While I can never possibly know the bizarre and frightening bipolar world he had to negotiate, I did the only thing I knew how to do. To extend the metaphor, I reached in as far as I could, in the hope I could catch hold of something, anything, to help him return to the surface.

I was one of the few people at work he had chosen to disclose his condition to, and we had often talked about his experiences of a previous manic episode leading to hospitalisation. None of this, nor the very general and arm's length "awareness" of mental health issues as provided by public service training courses, prepared me for my regular visits to the psychiatric ward. As with most things in life, we learn most from practical, not theoretical, experience.

Each time I visited I received a guided tour of my friend's room and the facilities. He was particularly interested in the various words, signs and symbols to be found in graffiti, on the mural wall, and on official signs around the ward. I was sometimes astonished at the minute scratches and scribbles he had found. My friend would ponder and posit possible meanings for these markings, and attempt to see the hidden connections between them. For him, everything burned bright with significance. As we walked, or sat in his room, he attempted to piece together recent events, for himself as well as for me.

His memory having been quite severely affected, there was much repetition each visit as we started over. However, each time the story was extended a little further, another piece of the puzzle slotted into place. This was quite a fascinating process for me, as I had recently developed a quirk in my own behaviour. I am a voracious reader, and I had begun to read magazine and newspaper articles out of sequence. That is, I might read a paragraph from the middle, then the end, then near the start, and so on until I had covered it all. Thus, I was setting myself a puzzle, to construct the meaning from the jumble I had made of the author's choice of narrative sequence. With his story, my friend had done the deconstruction for me.

Once it was reassembled, the story that emerged was quite extraordinary, and probably quite beyond the comprehension of anyone who has never suffered such an episode. It involved dark magic, rituals, dogs, cats, strange encounters in milk bars and barber shops, lemons, chalk marks, arrows painted on roads, terrorist plots, and much more besides. Throughout our many talks, my friend was most concerned whether this story made sense to me. My responses, for which I had sought some advice, were that, yes, it made sense so far as I understood the sequence of events, the cause and effect as described to me, but that I would not necessarily make the same connections, attribute the same meanings, or make the same choice of actions.

The psychiatric ward was a world unto itself, an isolated space station in a distant galaxy. It had its own strange set of social conventions, hierarchies and laws. I could only admire the way my friend, even in these darkest times, sought to make friends and to connect with the other patients. There were moments of humour, too, as the patients felt each other out regarding their respective conditions or classifications. I

visualised prisoners in a late-night movie, asking, “What are you in for?”. My friend was also accused of helping another patient to escape. Fearing for the other man’s safety as he climbed precariously onto stacked furniture to access the roof, my friend had held the construction steady for him. Such things are doubly aggrieving when intentions are noble.

My friend improved steadily over the weeks, making a gradual return home, then to work. The return to work has been gradual, with reduced hours and reduced tasks, and gradually increasing to full capacity. He has received unqualified support from his supervisors, and has access to a work psychologist. All have reinforced his value, both as a worker and as a person. These measures seem to be common sense to us, but I suspect there are many workplaces not so enlightened, especially, I am guessing, in the private sector.

On his return, my friend has opted for full disclosure, talking to his team-mates, most of whom have taken it in their stride. He now carries a card to direct interested people to a website with information about bipolar disorder. This decision is something he has thought about for a long time. I think there are advantages, despite the understandable fears about the consequences. For one, it removes the double life, having to be constantly on the alert about every word and action lest somebody guess the truth. My friend had also connected with another colleague diagnosed with a mental health condition, bonding over common experience, which might not have occurred had she not been open about her condition.

Our work involves analysing words, images and symbols for meaning. We have to be well versed in semantics and semiotics, by necessity. Given that attributing additional meanings and making unusual connections are an obvious observable symptom for my friend, this type of work is therefore a considerable ongoing challenge. How should he moderate his tendencies to the appropriate level of enquiry? How does he recognise where this line should be drawn? Our workplace has a quality assurance system involving continuous auditing of samples of work. This applies to all workers, but becomes particularly important in these circumstances. More important still, those who know him well should be vigilant for small signs of over-obsession. To do this, there should be a mutual “contract” that these issues can be aired when observed.

Hindsight has 20/20 vision, but I still feel a degree of guilt that I did recognise signs in my friend’s behaviour leading up to his episode, and did not say anything about it. I had noticed he was edgier, more intense, and more emotional than usual. While these things are a part of his character, and it is a matter of degree, the fact of noting such a difference to myself suggests I could have acted.

By pure coincidence, during this whole period I was dealing with some stresses of my own. My father had been battling cancer for twelve months, and he passed away shortly after my friend returned to work. My marriage was also on its deathbed, again after a long illness. I was not diagnosed as clinically depressed, it being quite natural to grieve over such events. However, my doctor did prescribe medication (a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) along with counselling. I was suffering sleep disturbance, fluctuating appetite, inability to concentrate, anxiety attacks, and lack of motivation for both work and pleasure. My work performance, while not

unsatisfactory, certainly suffered. I became a “bare-minimum” worker, nowhere near capacity and adding no value. As a manager, I was helping people to deal with personal issues, and trying to manage their underperformance on a daily basis. At times self-pity took over and I felt like screaming, “You think you’ve got it bad...”

I have become extremely conscious of the spectrum of mental health issues. If I was experiencing such a debilitating effect at the mild end of the spectrum, what must the severe end be like? I have always thought of myself as a compassionate and considerate manager, and yet I am guilty of thoughtless and insensitive behaviour in relation to mental health. I particularly remember speaking a number of times, jokingly, but nevertheless mockingly, about a client I was dealing with who clearly had a severe mental health condition. This kind of unthinking response is common until we have a more personal experience. Leaders have a responsibility to choose their words and their messages carefully, and to model appropriate behaviour.

In truth, I was probably no more than a bit player in my friend’s recent experiences. I am sure, though, that the combined efforts of family, friends, and work colleagues are vital to recovery and return to work. I would like to think that as the owner of one of those arms down the rabbit hole, I played some small part in the retrieval.