PostScript

LETTER

The internet and medical humanities: a reflection

The 18th century was the age of reason, and the 19th century the cradle of science. The 20th century was dubbed the Century of War and Peace. The 21st century could be the Century of Reflection. But what place the internet?

One of the most exciting scientific developments in recent years has been the emergence of the internet as a means of communication and as a medium for the revelation of imaginative creativity by people previously unknown to science, literature, or the humanities. Lots of junk and some nuggets are jumbled up in cyberspace and most of us will not find time to surf between the flotsam and jetsam in search of the gold. Instead we rely on focused searches in our field of concern. Chain mail passed on by someone you know is, however, always a distraction.

The following piece of prose is an example. It originated in the USA and it was posted around the world for "Happy Friendship Week" early in 2002. The originator is named as Andy Rooney. It was then passed from desk to desk in an accelerating international cybercascade with the request that it be read reflectively and then passed on to friends. It is reproduced here at some length, before comment.

Enlightened Perspectives

I've learned . . . That the best classroom in the world is at the feet of an elderly person.

I've learned . . . That when you are in love it shows.

That just one person saying to me, "You've made my day!" makes my day.

That having a child fall asleep in your arms is one of the most peaceful things in the world.

That being kind is more important than being right.

That you should never say no to a gift from a child.

That I can always pray for someone when I don't have the strength to help him otherwise.

That no matter how serious your life requires you to be, you need a friend to act daft with.

That sometimes all a person needs is a hand to hold and a heart to understand.

That simple walks with my father around the block on summer nights when I was a child did wonders for me as an adult.

That life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the faster it goes.

That we should be glad God doesn't give us everything we ask for.

That money does not buy class.

That it's those small daily happenings that make life so spectacular.

That under everyone's hard shell is someone who wants to be appreciated and loved.

That the Lord didn't do it all in one day; what makes me think I can?

That to ignore the facts does not change the facts.

That when you plan to get even with someone, you are only letting that person continue to hurt you.

That love, not time, heals wounds.

That the easiest way for me to grow as a person is to surround myself with people smarter than I am.

That everyone you meet deserves to be greeted with a smile.

That there's nothing sweeter than sleeping with your babies and feeling their breath on your cheeks.

That no one is perfect until you fall in love with them.

That life is tough, but I am tougher.

That opportunities are never lost; someone will take the ones you miss.

That when you harbour bitterness, happiness will dock in elsewhere.

That I wish I could have told my Dad that I love him one more time before he passed away.

That one should keep one's words both soft and tender, because tomorrow I may have to eat them.

That a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks.

That I can't choose how I feel, but I can choose what I do about it.

That when your newly born grandchild holds your little finger in his little fist, you are hooked for life.

That everyone want to live on top of the mountain, but all the happiness and growth occurs while you are climbing it.

That it is best to give advice in only two circumstances; when it is requested and when it is a life threatening situation.

That the less time you have to work with, the more things I get done.

Comment and hypothesis

Why does such a piece of writing cascade around cyberspace, spurred on by ordinary people? Most of us press the "delete" button when chain mail arrives on screen. What made me want to pass this one on to others?

Downie provides a clue when he quotes both Coleridge and Wordsworth saying, "the function of the poet is that of removing the film of familiarity which coats everyday objects and situations, and thus making us more vividly aware of them".¹ This is important because most people don't spend their days in wonder and excitement about the ordinary events and objects around them. Familiarity numbs the imagination, and crude jokes or banter about anything are a more common currency. Everyday experience then becomes a vehicle for black humour and ribaldry. The comedian scores a point and pokes a finger, but he seldom encourages deeper reflection. The cartoon makes one smile wryly, but it is unusual for it to kindle feelings of wonder or beauty about the world around us. Wonder is a very creative force in science and art and humanity.^{1,2} Wonder is what children are very good at before they become too educated.

It would be easy to trivialise the *Enlightened Perspectives* by providing banter responses to

each line in the passage quoted. It would also be possible to plumb new theological depths by referencing each line to texts in the Bible and the Koran. Both courses would be pleasing to someone. The important question, however, concerns why it is that so many people are willing to pass on via the internet a range of jokes and reflective prose or poetry to their friends.

There are many possible answers to this question, so let me construct a hypothesis in an attempt to explain the phenomena based on the evidence above, and in the hope that this may start further debate in these columns:

All people need deep relationships and deeply reflective thoughts/prayers to be inwardly fulfilled, and to have personal growth. Yet most of them have few outlets for expression of these needs in the modern world. Most are forced to function at a very superficial day to day level, and so they cope by poking fun at anything and everything. Indeed humour is often a heroic means of coping with danger or a drab existence. Men tend to be more inhibited than women in expressing their deeper needs, and they are often less technophobic. The internet provides them with a safe arm's length solution to their need for expression when feeling alone.

If such a hypothesis has some face validity then it needs to be tested because the internet may provide creative therapy for those with no other way to clarify their deeper needs. Story telling and poetry have much in common³ and one man's egocentric poem can be another man's liberation from feeling misunderstood. But what will this do for the development of the humanities? Will the rough hewn verses of untutored people rise in the halls of fame? Or will the professionals cry "Foul" and relegate those nuggets to the bottom of the league?

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References

- 1 Downie RS. Science and the imagination in the age of reason. *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities* 2001;27:58–63.
- 2 Evans MH, Greaves DA. A renaissance for the 'sense of wonder'? *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities* 2001;27:1.
- 3 Heaney S. *The redress of poetry*. London: Vintage, 1998: 157–60.

BOOK REVIEW

Science and Poetry

M Midgley. Routledge, 2001, £19.99 (hc), £8.99 (pb), 230 pp. 0415237327

This is a book about personal identity, about who and what we are. It is about the unity of our lives.

In other words, the book is about a project many of us have entertained, in academic philosophy and elsewhere. We know, however, that there are serious obstacles to the successful realisation of the project. Far too often we raise dust by the methods of our thinking, and then complain that we cannot see. Then we

are guided by visions that are inappropriate to the study we are engaged in.

One important vision or imaginative habit is atomism. It works well in natural sciences—for example, in physics and molecular genetics. Physical atomism is not a theory of physics; it is more like a presupposition concerning the ways in which theories of physics should be formed in order to make sense.

When atomism is transferred to the social sciences, individualism results. In cultural studies atomism appears as the presupposition of “memes”—that is, a cultural object or belief that can be replicated, passed on, and evolve, and which seems to have a life of its own. Transfers of this kind are often thought of as attempts to prove that the studies concerned are genuinely scientific—that is, of the same stock as the natural sciences. So if social sciences are to be scientific, social atomism has to be presupposed; cultural studies deserve the name of science only if cultural atomism is presupposed; and so on.

Dualism, materialism, and reductionism are other visions or ways of imagining the world. Many more can be found in our thoughts and actions, and, of course, not only in academic life. They are unavoidable. There is no science without presuppositions of various kinds—for example, ontological, categorical, and methodological. Every scientific inquiry is relative to the point of view of one of its presuppositions and, when successful, it gives a true picture of a reality only in some aspect or other. The claim that one has covered it in all of its true aspects is rash, and so is the claim that all relations between the aspects have been mapped.

This aspect directed character of thought and action is therefore connected with a problem of fragmentation. In this I also include the question of how the whole(s), of which the aspects are parts, should be determined. To acquire understanding of a complex reality the problem of fragmentation must be solved or overcome. Failure to do so quickly hinders or blocks the way; it becomes an encumbrance, like heavy baggage. This seems to have happened in the social sciences with regard to individualism.

The challenge Mary Midgley has accepted for her book is to find a whole within which our ideas of science and poetry can be brought together.

How, in particular, should we talk about the relation between ourselves as subjects and as objects—between the first—and third person aspects of ourselves? What sort of beings do we—as a whole—now turn out to be?

According to Midgley, the key to understanding the unity of our lives is to understand ourselves as whole persons. Mind and body are two aspects of that whole, the former the aspect of the whole as a subject, the latter the aspect of it as an object. The whole person belongs within a wider context of interlocking larger wholes, and ultimately of that living system we call the earth, with Gaia the earth goddess as its most expressive symbol.

Many consequences follow from this radical holism. The weaknesses of individualism in social science are exposed effectively; new light is thrown on responsibilities, rights, and duties; freedom and determinism are re-

articulated; the bridge between thought and feeling becomes visible; and the similarities and differences between science and poetry emerge—the similarities turn on the presence in both of visions or ways of imagining the world, the differences on a distinction between the manners of expressing those visions. The richness of the consequences lends strong support to the form of holism that generates them.

I conclude by observing that *who*, and *what*, somebody is or was may be considered to be different questions. The former, it is sometimes said—for example, by Arendt,¹ pertains to narrative identity, and we know the answer to it when we know the story of which the individual person concerned is the hero. Thus “emplotment”—that is, the property of being located in a narrative, is the key to individuality.

The question of *what* somebody is or was is answered in terms of attributes which the person concerned may share with other individuals. Midgley does not discuss narrative identity, but as far as I can see the notion is consistent with her treatment of personal identity.

Mary Midgley has written a thought provoking book. Her polemics and engagement in current debates, and her lucid and beautiful prose, make the book a source of absorbing intellectual interest and enjoyment.

I Pörn

Reference

- 1 See, for instance Arendt H. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Thank you to the journal's reviewers.....

The editor would like to thank the following reviewers for their contribution to the journal in 2002.

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