

Gone Mental



by Theodore Dalrymple

Of all the open invitations to fraud ever issued, the concept of mental health must have been among the most successful. In the past, there was the idea of mental hygiene, which conjured up images of experts pouring disinfectant into people's minds and giving them a good clear-out, but it was never as popular an idea as that of mental health, which allows people such as

Prince Harry to present themselves as unwell and therefore worthy of pity, especially of self-pity.

No doubt the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, which is produced more or less on the same principles as those of a carpet salesman haggling over the price of a carpet in a Moroccan souk, will one day turn self-pity into an illness, after which the self-pitying will be able to pity themselves for being so self-pitying, meta-self-pity as it were. Indeed, they will be able to take time off work to *struggle with*, as the phrase goes, their self-pity: a struggle that is doomed to failure, as was the attempt to kill the hydra by decapitating it.

"O the mind, mind has mountains," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins, "cliffs of fall, frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed"; but unfortunately, it also has its puddles and ditches, as any minimally sensitive reader of Prince Harry's memoir will soon realize, and in fact they are rather more common than the cliffs of fall that the great poet referred to. But puddles can spread, alas, and ditches overflow, which is what has happened in the whole of Western society.

Where mental health is the cynosure of every person seeking time off work or early retirement on medical grounds at the expense of others, it is not surprising that supposed fragility should be deemed both desired and desirable. Self-sufficiency in such circumstances seems almost callous and unfeeling. Mental fragility, besides, is a source of employment for all those who want to turn their compassion into cash—who are not a few, and growing more numerous by the year, if not by even shorter intervals.

A population trained up to fragility is therefore highly desirable from a certain point of view. Such a population will be the helping professions' milch cow, the goose that lays its golden egg. If I believed in conspiracies, I would say that those who indoctrinate children about the imminent end of the

world because of climate change are in the pay of the monstrous regiment of mental health workers, who require a timid, shallow, anxiety-ridden population in order to guarantee their future income by promising to restore it to that mirage-like entity, mental health.

I read recently in the *Guardian* newspaper (so it must be true) that almost three-quarters of 16- to 24-year-old people in Britain report that “the climate crisis” was having a “negative effect” on their “mental health.” This was a figure provided by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, which, I need hardly add, is treated by the newspaper as if it were an uninterested party—unlike, say, the industry associations of tobacco or alcoholic drink producers. Psychotherapists have only humanity in mind.

The article in which this statistic appears tells a deeply affecting story.

The other week, Amy Goodenough’s 14-year-old daughter woke her up at about midnight because she was awake worrying about the Willow project, the oil and gas drilling scheme in Alaska recently approved by Biden.

According to the article, “Goodenough, 44...has watched her daughter become increasingly concerned about the state of the world in recent years.... Her daughter’s fears about the climate breakdown are affecting her view of her future.... ‘She is apathetic about studying because she doesn’t see the point when the world is going to end anyway,’ says Goodenough, who works in domestic abuse services. ‘She’s worrying about things she can’t control. She’s really scared of the world she’s going to be released into.’”

Mrs. Goodenough added, “It’s hard, because her fears are founded in reality. It’s not like the monsters-under-the-bed fears of small children. These are real concerns that I can’t just magic away.”

If Mrs. Goodenough's child, who probably started worrying about these matters from the age of 10 or 11 at the latest, is a typical child, as the newspaper implies, it is perfectly obvious that those who teach children about climate change at such an age are, in effect, child abusers. They have no idea of childhood as an age of innocence or carefreeness. In their view, children ought to be inducted into the most pressing of abstract concerns almost as soon as they are able to speak. (I do not enter into the question of how far these concerns are actually realistic or justified.)

A psychologist to whom the newspaper spoke suggested that there was only one real solution for the children's anxiety, and this was for them to become activists—millions of Greta Thunbergs, I suppose. The climate should be to children what Hitler was to the Hitler Youth or communism to the Young Pioneers. That it was possible that children were not in a position, and did not know enough, to pronounce on how the world should be organized, did not cross the mind of the authors of the article. For them, childhood was not an age of innocence but of knowledge and wisdom.

Concern for the environment is not the same as dragooning children into fascistic regiments of humorless automata. The problems are undoubtedly huge, but they are also complex. Moreover, no age has been without its threats and dangers, and in many respects young people today are immensely privileged by comparison with their forebears, though they are too ignorant to know it and their teachers are too ignorant to teach it. Inscribed in every teacher's heart should be the last stanza of Thomas Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, where he saw children playing:

*To each his suff'rings: all are men,
Condem'd alike to groan,
The tender for another's pain;
The unfeeling for their own.*

*Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
'Tis folly to be wise.*

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