

"WHAT I TELL YOU THREE TIMES IS TRUE"

Lewis Carroll

The Baron rode along on his favourite horse and finally came to the gates of the city that was his destination. The entrance was well fortified, complete with towers and a portcullis. Just as the Baron was passing through the arch, the rope holding the portcullis snapped, and the spiked barrier dropped onto the horse immediately behind the saddle, severing the creature in two. Recovering quickly from his shock, the Baron cut some thin and flexible twigs from a nearby bush, and sewed the horse together again.

Not only did the horse survive, but the twigs took root, and grew into a canopy that protected the Baron from sun and rain as he rode along.

The Baron in question was the famous Munchausen who has since become notorious by virtue of his name having been expropriated to describe a peculiar psychological condition – a ‘syndrome’, no less. This condition has since become more commonly known about than the original Baron – who in fact was a rumbustious teller of tall tales and vastly removed from the concept of a ‘peculiar psychological condition’ (though he might have been flattered by the notion of having become a ‘syndrome’!). The truth of his reputation has been degraded even more severely by having his name attached to the extended label ‘Munchausen syndrome by proxy’.

This latter label has been degraded itself as the result of certain recent and high profile legal cases, and yet it is not so long ago that the ‘diagnosis’ was being ‘knowledgeably’ bandied about by individuals working in psychiatry as if they were fully acquainted with the condition and its correct interpretation. Each time that I heard these and other similar comments, I was reminded of the results of a survey that I had read, which had been carried out amongst people who worked in areas of high finance. It was found that a significant number used the esoteric jargon of the financial world *even though they did not understand it*, simply to appear to be ‘in the know’.

Which makes me speculate that in other areas of human activity the same compulsions to appear knowledgeable exist, and in the world of the human mind and its malfunctions, the scope for professional obfuscation and self-delusion is wide, wide, wide. Within the world of the voice hearer, the alleged ‘schizophrenic’, the world that primarily concerns me, I must confess to being disturbed by such comments as:

“Let me specify at the outset which condition I am speaking of here: this is only one of the many syndromes that pass under the name ‘schizophrenia’...” *Dr. John Perry, Professor of Psychiatry, University of California.*

“A heritage of distortions, stagnant certainty, and self-serving territoriality characterises the fields of knowledge about this dreaded disorder [schizophrenia] – aptly called the cancer of the mind” – *Schizophrenias Genesis by Dr. Irving J Gottesman*, who offers his book “...to help fill the information gap between the ‘ivory towers of academia’, with its research ‘factories’ and private language, and the

idiosyncratic narratives glorifying or obfuscating disorders of the mind”. He further wrote: “The absence so far of a solution compels me to be skeptical about received wisdom from all participants, however noble and well-intended.”

In his book, Dr. Gottesman refers to more than four hundred books and other publications, all aimed at exploring and defining the human condition and studying the aberrant mind. You can search, as I have done, for anything, anything at all, that was written by anyone at all who had first hand experience of the conditions being studied and reviewed. Your search will be in vain; pointless. When you see the subtitle of the book, you may realise where the author was coming from and what his original mind-set was. He chose *The Origins of Madness* to give a wider understanding of the scope of his book. Other recent authors seem to work from a similar presupposition when they entitle their book *Voices of Reason, Voices of Madness*.

Coming closer to acceptability in terms of content, and my own determination, is the often-quoted chapter derived from a book by a Clinical Psychologist, Wilson Van Dusen. He writes in this chapter of *The Presence of Spirits in Madness*, and even though he uses the detestable terminology of his profession, namely ‘madness’, ‘hallucinations’ and ‘delusions’, he nevertheless arrives at conclusions that agree fundamentally with my own personal experience. Van Dusen’s writings are based upon the study of ‘thousands of mentally ill persons’: my experiences distilled into my book* derive from almost twenty-five years individual and daily interaction with what I profoundly know are spiritual intrusions.

Brian Inglis in his book *The Unknown Guest* provides many instances of well-known artists, musicians, composers, writers and poets who in their lifetimes had frankly admitted that without the presence of their ‘muse’ – this spiritual ‘other’ - in their art, they could only produce work that was mundane and ‘soulless’. Renowned concert pianist, John Lill, OBE, has described many times how he has received spiritual voices and visions during his long and highly successful performing career. To the best of my knowledge, no one has suggested that any of the people cited by Brian Inglis were mad. Foolhardy would be the ones who had the temerity to suggest that John Lill is. (I have a recording that I made of Mr. Lill talking to Sue Lawley on ‘Desert Island Discs’ in which he described graphically various events, but acknowledged how easy it is to be misunderstood).

I have often spoken or written about a former parish priest at my church who would wax lyrical about the marvellous achievements of those who had responded to inner voices, voices that he himself had no doubt were of spiritual origin. Invariably, however, he would end with the admonishment that if any of *us* heard voices, we should seek psychiatric help.

No matter what I start to write about, invariably and unerringly I am drawn to this same point and the resulting conclusions, conclusions that may be said to be reinforced by the overturning of yet another verdict laid at the door of the now infamous Baron Munchausen and his ‘syndrome by proxy’. A retrial has been ordered in the case of a woman jailed for life for murdering her infant son, jailed by the label given her by the now discredited paediatrician whose diagnosis was invariably accepted *because who was there to question it?* This very morning I heard on the radio the distressed voices of mothers whose children had been taken into care because of a diagnosis of M.S.B.P. (Munchausen’s Syndrome By Proxy has become

just another set of initials to be bandied about in a 'knowledgeable' fashion!). These mothers had been trying via the General Medical Council to have their complaints of misdiagnosis heard and their children restored – one woman has waited seven years and her case has not yet been dealt with fully. The mothers have found that the very act of trying to get redress has been treated as yet another bit of evidence that they exhibit M.S.B.P., and that their appeal to the G.M.C. is 'just another bit of attention seeking'! It makes me think of the times when women were accused of witchcraft: once the 'diagnosis' had been made, a form of collective hysteria seemingly took over, and the outcome for the woman was inevitable.

In the world of mental health and psychiatry, labels abound and are fastened on individuals often on the flimsiest of evidence and never subsequently questioned – only added to. Thus the 'voice hearer' suddenly becomes 'the schizoid'; 'the psychotic'; 'the schizophrenic'; 'the *paranoid* schizophrenic'; finally (beloved of the tabloid media) 'the *violent* paranoid schizophrenic'. But who is there to order a 'retrial' for the person labelled, found guilty and 'sentenced'?

How many people in the past have been incarcerated for long periods, possibly for life, in mental institutions because of a label stuck on them early in life? How many even now are 'imprisoned' and held in the shackles and chains of some mind bending drug or drugs – held without remission in some cases, for often a point is reached where life without the drugs has become impossible? I am acquainted with one man who had an alleged psychotic episode when he was seventeen. He is now forty-seven, and for thirty years he has never known life without serious 'anti-psychotic' drugs. Yet he knows, and knows with absolute certainty, that his 'voices' derive from spiritual sources, but he now has lost all confidence in himself and his ability to cope with real life and dare not give up the drugs.

Where are the advocates, the 'protectors' of the defenceless? Who is there to ensure that 'psychiatry' doesn't hold sway over the lives and futures of the vulnerable? Who is there to blow the whistle on the pharmaceuticals for whom a successful outcome of their trials is far more important than restoring the lives of individuals whose 'illness' is often the *result* of an intake of prescribed drugs? Recently I read of a report in which responsible authorities drew attention to the fact that tests that had recommended levels of prescription to juveniles allegedly suffering from depression, had been conducted by groups or individuals who are sustained financially by these same drug companies, and the levels were far too high. (I have since heard that results that did not support the desired outcome were actually suppressed). I know, it happens all the time and profits are far more important than individuals. But my rage is intense when I hear of young people being dragged into the psychiatric net, and given mind-altering drugs, when often all that they need are properly balanced diets, and the avoidance of poisons that are pumped into convenience foods and drinks under the guise of additives and sugar substitutes: substances that add nothing to the nutrition of the product but make it more attractive, saleable, profitable: substances that can and do cause asthma, hyperactivity, obesity and depression, and much, much more. And of course, the kids get a label.

Where are the *real and genuine* advocates? Where are the organisations to which people can turn before they get sucked into the great maw of the 'mental machine'? Cancer has its 'Gentle Approach' organisations. The cancers of the mind need the gentle approach as well, but apart from such groups as the Hearing Voices Network and centres such as The Retreat Hospital in York, where are organisations

that are not tainted by the money and support of commercial organisations? I'm sorry, but I could go on and on as I dwell on lives and minds that have been altered drastically and for the worse by the very institutions and research bodies that purport to protect them. Before I carry on getting carried away, let us return to Baron Munchausen for some moments of sanity, and before he became a syndrome:

The Baron was travelling on his own through a tropical jungle, when his way was barred by a large river. He stopped to decide what to do, for he was prevented by forest from going to the right or left, but suddenly realised that a huge crocodile that had been basking was making a rush at him with its mouth wide open and ready to snatch him. He turned to run only to realise that a mighty lion that had been stalking him was about to spring. Instinctively he dropped to the ground, and his terror was immense as he expected to be torn by claws and teeth. When some time had passed and this had not happened, he took courage and opened his eyes to the amazing sight that was revealed. The lion had sprung right over him and had gone head first into the open jaws of the crocodile, which hung on with all its might. Seizing the moment, the Baron cut off the lion's head and pushed it further down the crocodile's throat, thereby suffocating it. His triumph was complete when he took the stuffed crocodile, forty feet long, back to his native Amsterdam, where it can be seen even to this day in one of the museums, along with some tobacco pouches that he had had made from the skin of the lion and then given to the Aldermen of that city.