



Indelible



Jonathan Wyatt*

Professional Development, Oxford Learning Institute, Littlegate House, 16/7 St Ebbs St, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 1PT, UK

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ABSTRACT

Many years ago I grew away from the evangelical Christian faith that had grounded my life (before and beyond death) since my early teens. Or so I thought: the stories my body now tell confront me with the sense that I have – secretly, ambivalently – held on to elements of that faith. Over recent times, through and since my doctoral studies, I have embraced poststructural and Deleuzian sensibilities. These, one might think, run right up against the entrenched binaries and certainties that remain indelibly inscribed. The narrative of progress and development I have been telling myself over the decades – that I have not just grown away but grown up – is no longer tenable. In this paper I examine my doubt at whether I doubt. Amongst the most disturbing stories is one of being beaten in God's name. Its scars remain. I revisit this story in an attempt to dwell more fully in the pain (and pleasure?) of cane on flesh. How am I to (at)tend (to) those scars? What are their meanings? I draw from the psychodynamic and post-structural theoretical frameworks that seem to have failed me, in inquiring into the political, cultural, emotional, psychological and spiritual processes at play in this current disturbance.

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1. Saturday, Christmas Eve, 2011, Abingdon

As the sun weakens, I run beside the Thames towards the mediaeval heart of the town. I reach St. Helen's Church, whose tolling bells I have heard since the turn onto the river bank. Children emerging from the church's open oak doors cup red-ribboned Christingles¹ in unsteady hands. I can imagine the story the vicar would have told of the Christingle's symbolism, the well-rehearsed evangelical message.

Following East St Helen's Street to the right, a hundred strides later I reach St Nicolas' Church, whose bells also call, before heading towards the Abbey Meadows and back to the river.

This morning, as I lay in bed, drifting in and out of light sleep, I heard carols on the radio, sung a-cappella. One of them was the cloying Silent Night. It engages my sentimentality about childhood rather than my former faith.

I shall not attend church at midnight, nor tomorrow morning, and I shall feel neither sadness nor guilt.

Last year, in early December, before the end of the university term, we went to the carol service, my first for a decade, at

Magdalen College. We were in the cheap seats, the benches at the back, able to glimpse the choristers and readers only between uneven heads and the wooden struts of the screen. The singing was perfection, the atmosphere – of ancient, Church of England Christmas tradition – all one could have wished for. But I was bored. I dreamed instead of the darkened basement of Chicago's Rosa's Lounge and the guts of Pete Galanis' rolling blues; and the Christmas bells of Shane McGowan's old soaks.²

My regular Sunday morning routines now involve a different pattern to the one I followed during the ten years I would have described myself as a born-again Christian. One such recent Sunday, much like any others, October 2nd, Tessa dropped me outside my gym in Oxford. It should have been autumn but the sun hit the glinting tarmac like a rare, perfect mid-summer' day. As I eased out of the car, I heard the full-hearted singing of evangelical St Ebbs on the other side of the squat stone wall beside me. I didn't recognise the hymn, but it was modern, after my time. We kissed goodbye and I watched her turn our old navy Vauxhall into Pembroke St towards her gym half a mile back out of the city.

My exercise that morning took me past the small Victorian terraces along Oxford's stretch of the Thames, six miles further north from Abingdon and home, and into Hinksey park, where the ill-kept tennis courts were busy with keen players in whites and where middle-aged men sailed remote-controlled naval boats on the pond. After cutting left onto the Abingdon Road, I followed the

² *Fairytales of New York*, The Pogues.

* Tel.: +44 (0)1865 286821; fax: +44 (0)1865 286801.

E-mail address: jonathan.wyatt@learning.ox.ac.uk

¹ A 'Christingle' is a symbolic object used in children's services in the lead-up to Christmas. A Christingle is: an orange (which represents the world), around which is a red ribbon (the blood of Christ); sweets (or perhaps dried fruit) pinned into the orange (the fruitfulness of the earth); and a candle inserted into the centre of the orange (Christ as the light of the world).

path back into the city along a different branch of the river bank and its series of moored barges. My running was hesitant, my ankle still sore after twisting it in May. Healing takes so very long now.

After working out, showered and alive with post-activity endorphins, and on my way to meet Tessa for coffee, I passed St Ebbs again as its congregation gathered after the service; and I was reacquainted with my relief that Sunday's stultifying churchgoing pattern was no longer my life.

It is more than relief. A sense of liberation remains even after thirty years. There is the joy of a freedom to explore, the continuing thrill of working with new theory, new ideas, fresh ways of seeing the world; ways that seemed, and continue to seem, incompatible with my former evangelical world view. Just two days ago, Ken Gale and I submitted a new essay that works with the Deleuzoguattarian figure of 'assemblage' (e.g. *Deleuze and Guattari, 2004*). We have, of course, no idea yet of what the reviewers will make of our writing, but our excitement, even after six years of working with Deleuze, remains. As I type now, my fingers are unable to keep pace with the exhilaration I feel when I consider the implications of Deleuze for living. When St. Pierre writes of reading him, I feel the rush in my heart and lungs:

It was not simply that I 'had multiple subjectivities' or 'moved among subject positions' but that I was always already a simultaneity of relations with humans and the nonhuman (I could no longer think/live that dichotomy) – the 'women' [in her research study] and 'me' in all times and places; my father, long dead, loving me; the streets and storefronts of the town; all us cousins catching lightning bugs on a summer evening; Essex County's red clay tobacco fields; my beloved aunt whose smile saved everyone who met her; all of us, everything, de-individualized, de-identified, *dis-individuated*. A rhizome, assemblage, haecceity, my life. *A life*. Theory produced me differently, and I am not the same. I never was. (*St Pierre, 2011: 622*, italics in the original)

Nor me: I, too, am not the same, nor ever was. Deleuze sliced me open with de-individualising notions of the subject, re-arranging me into forces and flows, lines not points; a sense of not being 'me' but 'this', now, an individuation of the event.

I was not the same from that morning, 10.30 am on 3 February, 2004, at Berkeley Square, Bristol, the first day of the first unit of my doctoral degree, hearing Jane Speedy talk about Foucault, Cixous, St. Pierre, Denzin, Deleuze, and others who have become my ancestors, elders and companions (see *Gale and Wyatt, 2009*) on an exhilarating journey of discovery.

Nor indeed the same since reading Camus when, in my final year as an undergraduate at York, and as I first began to welcome doubt, I had finally started to read. In my first two years, scheduled around my priorities of playing sport, my French Horn, and being active within the Christian Union, my study habit had been to head to the library, sit at a table with my books open and fall asleep. Camus shook me awake, though too late to make up for two-and-a-half years of evangelical, one-dimensional slumber and gain me a decent degree.

I kept a journal, a series of green exercise books, during those years of transition. Turning to writing in the hope of giving birth to myself (*Barthes, 1989*):

16 May 1981: The bible seems dull, steeped in laws and dogma, in extraordinarily elaborate theology which, to me, is so dry. The church even more so. This is frightening. Perhaps my faith has been more of a prop, a niche, where I know I am of value, than a living, vibrant love for what, or whom, I have called 'God'. Take away the label 'Jonathan Wyatt is a Christian' and I am lost. My present is based on the faith I share with the people who are my friends, my

future around the security that I have a role to fulfil, somewhere, within Christian circles... I have missed, and am missing, in my relationships, the variety of vision and emotion that there is in people. I have been afraid of that, defensive about my own expansionist philosophy, seeking to have others take on that philosophy in the arrogance of claiming that mine is the truth.

Nor was I was the same after Victor Frankl.

Marc was my housemate and friend that final year. A few years older, in his hunger for learning as a police trainee he'd studied at night school to get the grades for university. Whilst I struggled to complete just my set books, he would stay up through the night reading Foucault and be alert enough in the morning to beat me at squash. It was Marc who pointed me towards Victor Frankl.

During the weeks after finishing my degree, the *assemblage* of Victor Frankl, Liverpool's raw streets, ravaged by the horrors of early Thatcherism, and my emergence from stupor, barked in still-deadened ears. I read *Man's Search for Meaning* whilst living and working evenings in an inner-city Liverpool youth club I had made my temporary home. One entry in my journal marks my meeting with Frankl (*2006*), just with quoting him:

3 February 1982: Victor Frankl – 'A lack of tension created by the loss of meaning is as dangerous a threat in terms of mental health as too high a tension'. And, 'Like iron filings in a magnetic field, man's (sic.) life is put in order through his orientation toward meaning'.

No other comment. Only those two Frankl assertions. A legal clerk by day, a youth worker by evening; newly-politicised, full of regret at wasting my undergraduate studies, with an awakening of desire for learning, and in touch for the first time with my rage, Frankl stoked the fires. I learnt that meaning was not a given. There was no Absolute Truth.

Nor was I the same after Melanie Klein, Judith Butler, and Donald Winnicott; nor after group relations theory, nor a host of other writers, thinkers and experiences. My former evangelical faith became even more remote, meaningless, naïve and dull. Though I felt that it had not been a waste – I learned much that has remained of value – I regretted that I had invested so much in it.

I speak only for myself. Not all those who profess evangelical Christian faith would feel that their faith precluded engaging with ideas that seem to challenge their view of the world; nor do all evangelical Christians come to a point where they find their faith claustrophobic. For me, though, it was something I had to shed. I recently told colleagues that I once thought about training for the clergy but feel better now.

I feel better. Alive. Free. Hopeful.

And yet.

That is one version of the story. A progress narrative, one that casts learning as releasing me from the shackles of a narrow life and allowing me to skip into a better, more enriching future. I wish it were the only story. This narrative – of casting off an unhelpful, restricting, oppressive faith – is not the only one I could relate.

For example, I catch myself now, in 2012, whispering behind my back to a god who I believe cares for me, though I tell myself that s/he is projection.

And when Ken and I fell into conflict in finalising our recent writing, it seemed I was tossed back onto singular senses of the self. In writing and thinking with others over recent years, in valorising Deleuzian conceptualisations that reject the humanist subject, I find that, when the seas get rough, I hold onto 'selves' like limpets to rocks. When push comes to shove, I act as if I know that I am a modernist me, an individual in need of salvation.

And, most alarming, there was July. Tessa and I distant, a sense of looming upheaval, a crisis like no other we have had, she sat on our

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