

In the air

Awareness

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Now 2007 is over, I realise the uncomfortable truth: for much of the year I was out of my mind - out of the rational part of it anyway - doing and thinking and feeling totally insane things.

A part-time „madwoman in the attic“, where „part-time“ means for some part of the same time, not one week sane, one week insane – although that too. It seems to be possible to short-circuit one's own madness by occupying the brain with rational activity, such as writing, or working on *kulturissimo*, (if that counts as a rational activity) or doing a crossword.

Mad, there's no other word for it. Mad in the sense of rushing around, totally absorbed in obsessive activity, trying anything that might hasten the recovery – then ensure the survival – of a loved being; too close, too involved, to reflect on what I was doing. Mad in the sense of appealing to any gods, or ghosts, or well-disposed ancestors who might be listening, for help; in the sense of entertaining superstitious fancies: („if the traffic-lights are still green when I reach them, all will be well“).

And then, when all did not turn out well, the molten madness of grief and loss; the yearning for the impossible, for what is lost to be found again, what's gone to return; the unguarded moments of looking around for signs of change, while knowing perfectly well that change, once so eagerly watched for, is no longer possible: there is no more development, the end has been reached; the waiting, hoping, against reason, for a feeling, a presence – superstitious fantasies of return; anything, anything at all, just not nothing, just not absence for ever.

And later, the dull obstinate madness of

mourning: the physical pain less convulsive, the memories less searing; but the resulting guilt, the refusal to suffer less, to let go – out of loyalty; spontaneous acts of remembrance fixing into ritual – out of fear.

And later still, the schizophrenic madness of self-awareness: the rational part of the mind observing the irrational part in action (passion rather, as it is not in control); the flood of feeling gradually receding, leaving more and more dry land for rational thought, reflection and awareness.

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Awareness.

I've been trying to put into words, truthfully though not exhaustively, the experience – a state of mind (or un-mind) – that will be what I remember most vividly about last year.

Perhaps paradoxically, 2007 brought home to me something that sounds so obvious I scarcely dare write it.

Reader, you will already know it – I suppose I knew it too, but objectively, as you might be familiar with the symptoms of an illness you haven't suffered from, knowledge before it becomes experience.

And this momentous, exceedingly banal truth ... is the vital importance of awareness, of living consciously, every moment of every day.

Awareness is essential – in trying to „know yourself“, of course, but even more so with regard to the other beings you live and interact with: to avoid madness and suffering and remorse. Awareness as an antidote to madness: the out-of-time, one-off madness, caused by terrible pain, and the ordinary, everyday madness of indifference, or the careless infliction of hurt or neglect.

Awareness of what is happening around you.

Look how many people spend much of their time wrapped in a „virtual“ cocoon, mentally and emotionally absent from the place where they're physically present: absorbed in headphones, talking on their mobile while partners or friends sit blankly waiting, or staring into a computer-screen, surfing the waves of cyberspace ...

Of course, you also have to have moments of absence: you need to daydream, to let your mind roam free and far in imagination; it is vital to the inner life, an essential conduit for knowledge to filter through from the unconscious where the important, intuitive stuff is stocked.

You need to be able to retire into yourself, to reflect and try to understand what you experience each day, the events you hear about. But the aim should be awareness.

You need to engage with the here and now; be truly present wherever you find yourself. If you're with other people, be with them completely: listen to what they're saying and how – the words, the tone of voice, the body language – and what they're *not* saying (and why); listen and hear, look and see. Take the reality of others seriously: it is as complex as yours.

Every moment of every day, with every being, in every situation is unique and unrepeatable and precious. And you have to try and get it right.

If you make a mistake, it is often difficult (or impossible) to make amends.

Many humans you interact with are strangers and you may not have a second chance at a relationship with them: you coincide briefly and go your separate ways. The essential has not, cannot ever be expressed, but damage may have been done without your being aware of it ...

Awareness of the beings you know, meet regularly, or live with: you love them, but they can be gone from one day to the next and then you will never, ever see them again. You may realise you never told them what you felt for them; or that you didn't understand them or care for them well enough, or that you couldn't protect them properly. You may think of the phone-call you put off too long. And now it is too late: they are lost for ever and you will live the rest of your life with the loss. Absence for ever.

Awareness ... not of the Meaning of Life: if there is one, it is beyond comprehension; but the meaning of your own experience, of what is happening to you and others around you, others elsewhere. Not to be aware is to be, literally, out of your mind.

I know what I have described is an ideal, probably not to be attained. But one should at least try: you only get one go at life: it seems a waste to let it slip by unawares.



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