

Why Are You So Angry?

Trauma and loss in middle England, 2022

A talk at St Peter's Church, Wolvercote, 29 September 2022

Introduction: a counselling session in autumn 2016

Sophie and Ian are characters in *Middle England*, a state-of-the-nation novel by Jonathan Coe published in 2018. It's autumn 2016, and the relationship between Sophie and Ian has become brittle: there seems to be a perfect storm of ODTAA, one damn thing after another, one crisis, conflict, fog of confusion after another. Both Sophie and Ian are feeling disappointed and discontented, and feel they have lost something precious. Differences and disagreements between them that would have once seemed amusingly, even lovably, trivial in the past now appear formidably insurmountable.

The hurts they inflict on and absorb from each other are not negligible pinpricks, but shocking wounds deep into their worldviews and senses of identity and history, and in their bodies and nervous systems too. To an outsider, or to their own former selves, their pain and their grief may look ridiculously absurd and unreal. But for themselves in autumn 2016 their differences and disputes look utterly irreconcilable.

Sophie and Ian do, though, wonder whether the mediating role of a third person might be healing and restorative, and help them once again to care for and cherish each other, to have and to hold each other till death do them part. This much they manage to agree on. So, they go to see a relationships counsellor.

The counsellor they consult is called Lorna. She welcomes them and when they outline the topic on which they disagree so painfully she remarks that quite a lot of the couples she has seen recently in autumn 2016 have mentioned the same topical topic, the same cause of crisis, conflict and confusion. She explains too that she usually starts a counselling session by asking each individual the same question. 'Sophie,' she says, 'why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?'

Sophie thinks for a long time before answering. 'I suppose,' she eventually says, 'because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation.'

Lorna nods and turns to Ian. 'It makes me think that she's very naïve, that she lives in a bubble,' he says, 'and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority.'

Lorna says: 'What's interesting about both of those answers is that neither of you mentioned politics. As if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all. Maybe something much more fundamental and personal was going on. Which is why this might be a difficult problem to solve.'

Fundamental and personal

At this point I'd like to pause and say two things before continuing.

First, this talk is not going to be about the feasibility, advisability or methodology of getting Brexit done, or undone. Rather, it's going to be about more 'fundamental and personal' things going on inside us and between us. By the same token it's not about getting topical topics such as Covid-19 done, or getting the Monarchy done or undone, or getting Climate Change or re-imagining Britain and the British Empire done. Rather, to quote Lorna again, it's about 'more fundamental and personal' things – things that, as Lorna delicately puts it, may be 'difficult problems to solve'. Towards the end of the talk I shall invite consideration about the present and future role of Christianity in all this, and of other such traditions as well.

Second, I am going to take a lead, very challenging though it is, from Lorna with regard to my general posture here this evening. That is, I am going to adopt, if I possibly can, the attitude of a relationships counsellor, or mediator. Namely, a non-directive approach or even indeed a UPR approach – unconditional positive regard – towards both Sophie and Ian, and towards all others like them. I shall probably fail in this endeavour. But watching a speaker propose high ethical and procedural standards and then fail to meet them is a relatively harmless pleasure which members of this evening's audience surely have a right to enjoy if and when it comes their way.

The more fundamental and personal things going on seem to include, Coe and his creation Lorna are suggesting, differences of worldview – different narratives about reality, human nature, evolution, progress, history, morality. Also, they include different expectations of one's life partner, soul friend, intimate and significant other, best mate. If Lorna had focused her enquiry around things such as these it would have been even more difficult for Ian and Sophie to answer her. It would, however, have captured more obviously why Coe wants to explore middle England at the current time, and why I, much more modestly, albeit also much more face-to-face, am inviting exploration here this evening.

Not that Lorna's underlying questions are only about relationships between lovers or spouses. Her searching questions are also about relationships between parents and children, and amongst siblings, neighbours and workplace colleagues, and amongst members of the same team, group, club, organisation, union, political party, church.

Underlying all these various disputes and divisions, there is on all sides a mixture of anger and grief. Anger at being despised, and grief that something of great value has been, or is being, lost. These emotions had their being inside both Sophie and Ian, and amongst both remainers and leavers. Remainers felt despised and disrespected because they were said to be remoaners and enemies of the people, and were accused of arrogance and wokery, and of a smug sense of their own supposed superiority, both morally and intellectually. Leavers felt despised because they were said by an Oxford graduate with a first class degree in history, no less, to be 'fruit cakes, loonies and closet racists'. On the other side of the Atlantic the equivalents of leavers (Make America Great Again has a family resemblance with Take Back Control) were said by a former first lady, no less, to be 'baskets of deplorables'. All mourned a certain loss of innocence – their shocked and shocking awareness that the UK and US were ununited, unhappy, ungracious. More specifically they felt too that friends, colleagues, neighbours and family members – people they thought they knew well, sources of kindness and joy – might in fact be strangers, aliens and opponents, unreliable, wayward, potentially or actually hostile, people whom it would be prudent not to share private thoughts and fears with. In other words, people in whose presence it would be prudent to

wear metaphorical face masks and keep metaphorical social distance from. People we thought were part of *us* might in fact be part of *them*. The popular win-lose pastime of *othering* became more evident, more widespread, more rife, than ever.

Lockdown, Pestilence, Death

Next in this ODTAA saga of collective grief and trauma, only two or so years after Brexit, there was the hammer-blowing perfect storm of Covid-19 — lockdown, pestilence and death, and death-denial. Masks and social distancing were no longer just metaphorical but now literally mandatory. Final farewells and subsequent grieving and mourning were now forbidden or curtailed, as were centuries-old ceremonies of joyfully welcoming new marriages and unions, and new babes and sucklings. The trauma of deaths and endings, exacerbated by the loss of joyful ceremonies in theatres, concert halls, galleries and places of worship, were further exacerbated by being international and global, not just in Britain, as had been the case with Brexit.

The decade we are reviewing began in Britain with the Equality Act 2010, which required all forms of public government to have due regard for the need to treat all people fairly, particularly people who were in danger of being othered, and to foster neighbourly and productive relationships, as distinct from win-lose and us-them relationships. But increasingly through the decade the Act was evident much more in the breach than in the observance, and the people who most needed to be protected by the Act were also most likely to be mortally affected by Covid, and/or most likely to be cramped and confined by Covid-related lockdowns and distancing.

The so-called partygate scandal was a last straw, and the prime minister for getting Brexit done had to be gone. But the perfect storm of trauma — personal, ancestral, collective, systemic — kept on brewing and has dominated most of this month of September 2022, even though it came from nowhere, in the sense that it did not appear to be in any way connected with Brexit or Covid.

Long Live the King

The Queen is Dead, Long Live the King. There has been much ceremony and ritual and worship these last three weeks, most certainly, and hopefully this

will prove to have been healing and restorative. As of this evening, however, the jury is necessarily still out. It remains to be seen whether all the king's horses and all the king's men, directed by the king's new prime minister, can put the golden rule of monarchy back together again.

Watch this space. Just immediately here this evening, two questions for our consideration and discussion:

- 1) What thoughts and knowledge do we have regarding the nature and healing of trauma – personal, ancestral, collective, systemic?
- 2) What good practice are we aware of, regarding the healing of trauma, grief and loss in the life and work of churches and congregations? And what good practice can we imagine, and might be minded to advocate and support, in the churches and congregations we know best?

Appendix: some recent and relevant resources

Q is for Queen, a blogpost by Alison Webster, 17 September 2022.

<https://modernchurch.org.uk/alison-webster-queue-is-for-queen>

"There are times when you can understand the world only with the help of a theological framework. Without one, things simply don't make sense. The twenty-four hour queue of thousands for an opportunity to pause for a few seconds to behold the Queen's coffin affords one such moment."

Collective grief at the end of an age, a blogpost by Alex Evans and Ivor Williams, 16 September 2022

<https://larger.us/ideas/collective-grief-at-the-end-of-an-age/>

"Many of us are feeling a deep sense of loss as we mourn the passing not just of the Queen, but also the age she represented. Others of us feel more conflicted. Will this lead to new them-and-us dynamics? Or is the potential there for national renewal – and what might unlock it, if so?"

Equipping the Church to offer trauma-informed care, a brief article by Revd Dr Stephanie Crumpton.

<https://www.mccormick.edu/news/equipping-the-church-to-offer-trauma-informed-care>.

"The Trauma Healing Initiative helps ... develop a model for creating a trauma-informed, healing-centered culture within theological education institutions. It also aims to deepen relationships with faith communities and community partners to provide them with resources that can help them respond to institutional, historical, collective and personal trauma among their constituents. "

There is fuller information at <https://www.mccormick.edu/trauma-healing-initiative?rq=trauma>