

1-1-2007

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'This article first appeared in *Ipnosis* Summer 2007, vol 26, Independent Practitioners Network The journal website is available at <http://http://ipnosis.postle.net/>

Recommended Citation

Perrton Mountford, C. (2007) 'In memoriam: Mary' *Ipnosis*, 26

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In memoriam: Mary

Clive Perraton Mountford (March 2007)

Published in *ipnosis* number 26 summer 2007

"Mary" is my Everywoman. In one sense she is a fiction; in other senses she is only too real.

Would an uninvolved and uninformed observer have heard those same false notes?

I am not sure why the question feels so pressing, but it *does*. A writer—like a therapist—is a kind of privileged voyeur. He wears different characters, partakes of their disparate realities, but that does not mean the writer *knows* or even *understands*. I might be peddling hearsay and unaware of it; I might have been seduced by the idiosyncratic perspective I meant only to visit.

My characters—like a therapist's clients—can lead me astray if I enter their world too completely: *How much of what is playing out before me depends on the particular outlook of one character?* I need a more independent witness—the naïve observer—and for myself, for my own peace of mind, I need a level of understanding.

I think the preacher would be giving my observer pause. Every anecdote—and there are a lot—ends in the implicit assertion that Mary was always something of a loose cannon. That is a strange message to be coming from the pulpit at a person's funeral, and when the preacher speaks of Mary being "sick" his quotation marks glow in the air. I sense that he really doesn't care too much for Mary.

As for the other mourners, there is a lot of genuine sorrow plus the usual friends-or-relatives-at-a-distance who don't seem to know quite what to do with themselves. Mary's mother is distraught when the coffin finally comes to rest in the earth, and perhaps the naïve observer finds nothing amiss in the attention paid to her by Mary's father. Or perhaps it isn't my imagination, perhaps there is a profound air of unreality and inauthenticity about him, perhaps there is something a little creepy about it all.

For the rest, an observer would simply be noting a funeral, a wet, cold morning, a sadly young deceased, and the absence of any sense of how or why she died. (She might, just possibly, note as well a quiet man moving to the back of the chapel before the other mourners enter, and she might have seen him later, weeping by the graveside.)

What shall I attribute to the public record?

Mary killed herself in prison. She worked hard to achieve that result, strangling herself in a cell which offered no facilities for hanging. She was not yet 30 years old. She had a "history of mental illness" reaching back more than a decade. She was a musician and a writer, and had recently won a significant prize. She was trained as a counsellor and was considered a gifted nanny. She was the beloved client of the man weeping by the graveside. She was now dead and beyond any harm which anyone could do her and beyond any help which he could offer to her.

What shall I say is not on the public record despite Mary's belief that it should have been there?

Mary was introduced to sexual activity by her father when she was three or four years old. She was routinely used by him for sex until she left home in her teens, and she was in occasional sexual relationship with him until a year or so before her death. She entered into an abusive and humiliating sexual relationship with her previous therapist and became pregnant by him. (Baby was lost consequent upon further hospitalization and the drugs prescribed.) She attempted to sexualize just about every relationship she became involved in including the relationship she had with her last therapist.

She was his beloved client. Many would judge him "over involved", but Mary believed he was the only person to love her without any kind of self-interested motive. Even so, she found it necessary to kill herself and eventually she succeeded.

Why?

Mary's self-harm grounds in self-hatred. She was raised within a severe and judgmental religious tradition, and there were times when she viewed herself as purely evil. She remembers her mother's tenderness towards her turning to seemingly unrelenting anger when she was a toddler. She is prone to hearing voices, and there are times when those voices become devils fighting for her, and she becomes a battlefield for the forces of a patriarchal god and rebellion against him. On a better day, she simply cannot stand being herself; she hurts beyond endurance, and self-harm is a way to externalize and express the way she feels. For a time afterwards, she feels okay.

During the years Mary and her last therapist work together, self-harming lessens, flares up, lessens, but generally seems in decline. Once the prison system gets hold of her, however, self-harming becomes more common and more serious. Even so, killing herself is not a logical extension of self-harm. It is her way out of an unbearable life; it is an act of total despair.

The answer to the question *Why?* is curled within that despair.

When in despair, Mary turns away from the hope of love, from the joy she gets from everyday things, from the joy she gets from music and writing, from her sense that living is about growing, and learning, and generally becoming more spacious however difficult and painful that may be. She gives up. She turns away from life and from the awareness which at other times can be so acute.

I do not blame her; I am not angry with her. But I find it easy to become angry with, and I am deeply sad for, those who knew Mary and those who worked with Mary and who, in their own way, effected a similar turning away and made her life a kind of hell.

Surveying the facts of Mary's life—and there is much more that could be related—the naïve observer, too, would be hard pressed not to ask *Why?* and to suppose that both wickedness and profound institutional failure are a large part of its narrative. It was a life to make the angels weep, and yet it seems not to have caused her pastor to weep, or her former therapist, or the mental health professionals who helped her on her way to prison for a crime she was certain she did not commit. It is a life which many seem to have refused to

believe in or take seriously, and she often viewed her own mother as chief amongst them.

The question *Why?* is insistent.

Why did her father do that to her? Why did her mother ignore her distress and the clear evidence of pedophilia? Why was she diagnosed psychotic and offered large quantities of drugs (which eventually caused serious physical illness) when simply listening to her for a little while made it plain that she was anything but psychotic and most probably had been abused? How could all this happen to one intelligent, talented, and very determined girl?

Here is the back story: Mary talks with her father, Len, about what he has done to her, especially as her therapy deepens. She asks *him*, *Why?* He tells her that he had a troubled childhood and that he also experienced sexual abuse. Mary digs into her family history and it is consistent with what Len claims. She learns, too, that Len abused her stepsister before her and the abuse was known of within the family. Confronted with all this, and threatened with police action, Len promises Mary that he will seek help, but he never does so.

What is going on for Len? It seems plain that Len is *refusing* to do *precisely* what Mary herself is doing, and he is making that refusal a central feature of his life: he will not relate to his own suffering and to the ways in which he eased it; he will not seek to know himself and his experiencing. He also turns away from life. He refuses growth, and healing, and change. In some ways, it is easier for Len to destroy his daughter than to embrace the spaciousness of experiencing which she sought. That is tragedy in the fullest sense.

What of Mary's mother, Pauline? She has married and had children with someone she knows is accused of child sexual abuse by his previous family. At about the time the abuse of one of her own children begins, she becomes angry and hostile towards the child. Eventually, when that child is an adult and in very serious trouble, Pauline listens, and she appears to finally accept her child's story. Yet there is no evidence of any change in her life or her relationship with the abuser. What is Pauline doing?

My best guess is that Pauline is protecting her sense of how she wants things to be and how she thinks things "ought" to be. She wants to marry this man, and she turns her face away from his history. When history repeats itself, she tries to turn her face away from that as well. In some ways, for Pauline, it is easier to allow her daughter to be destroyed than to embrace an open, honest sense of the circumstances and people surrounding her. This, too, is tragedy.

There is a difference between what I am saying about Len and what I am saying about Pauline. Len is denying his own inner experiencing, and I am suggesting that is because it is somehow too difficult for him. Pauline is denying her experience of the people and events surrounding her, and I am proposing that is because they are too dissonant with the way she wishes them to be. But is this difference so large? In both cases, there is a refusal to honestly engage with experience and with a relatively unvarnished and undistorted awareness of how it is to be this person here and now. There is a life-denying attempt to write a different story, one which will protect the storyteller at cost to others.

As I step back from Mary's family and think about the preacher at her funeral who had known her and her family all her life, and consider the various professionals involved in the destruction of that life, then I think that I see a similar mechanism at work. It was not easy to engage with Mary and with the things she had to say. She was angry; she was manipulative; she was contemptuous; she was both a frightened child and a frightening adult at almost the same time; and—as I said earlier—she sought to eroticize most encounters. Being in relationship with Mary meant constantly questioning one's own motives, behaviors, feelings, beliefs... Almost without trying, she could tear pretense and pretension into little pieces and throw it in a person's face. Mary demanded precisely what she was struggling to achieve for herself: an open, honest, and ongoing engagement with experience. *Is it such a surprise, then, that she killed herself?*

It seems plain, when I think about it, that the mental health services and the criminal justice system which had control of Mary towards the end of her life are *designed* to avoid open,

honest, engagement with the individuals in their care and to protect those who work within them from such engagement with themselves. At least one psychiatrist who works with Mary believes it likely that her father sexually abused her. Yet he continues to prescribe drugs to suppress the "voices" which were almost certainly her own voice speaking her experience. He is not a cruel man, so why does he do it?

My guess is that he does it because that is the nature of his job. He works within an institutional and cultural framework which fosters and promotes a kind of disengagement from experience and even views such disengagement as "healthy". Most psychotropic medicines serve in some way to distance a person from their experiencing, and the "objectivity" of the medical professions serves a similar purpose.

In other words, it also seems plain to me that what I am depicting Len and Pauline as doing—turning willfully but tragically away from honest, open experiencing—is a kind of cultural norm that is nothing less than a *culture of dissociation*. It is usual, it is respectable, it is even considered healthy to be dissociated from and to distort the immediacy of one's own inner experiencing and of one's environment. To me, this looks utterly misguided and wrong, and I find myself meaning that there is a kind of *moral* wrongness about it amongst any more practical kinds.

When I turn away from full engagement with what life is offering—and we all do it to some degree and most of the time—then I must of necessity involve others in my deceit. I cannot play "let's pretend" all on my own. That then messes with the experiencing of everyone else involved. It may even lead me to seek a measure of control over others, and over their lives, and make them players in my game.

It seems so simple really: the root of most of the bad things we do to each other is our individual and cultural refusal to engage honestly and openly with our experiencing and the world around us. It may not be *easy* to engage honestly and openly with experience, but *conceptually* what I'm asserting *is* simple. Furthermore, if there is one moral imperative which can be safely claimed in face of the personal and cultural differences that so exercise modernity, then it is

that we *should* try to live as Mary was seeking to live: in awareness.

Suppose that what I have sketched here stands up to scrutiny. It promises at least a partial account of what is sometimes called "the dark side" of human nature. That is interesting to me because all I am claiming is that—for the most part—the dark side grounds in what Carl Rogers called "denial and distortion"¹. One criticism leveled against Carl and those of us who think he was onto something is that we do not pay sufficient attention to the dark side. I seem to be saying that even if we do not dwell on it, we do have an account, and that account parlays into a powerful critique. Furthermore, as so often with ideas culled from Dr. Rogers, that critique is compatible with assertions and practices developed over time by different spiritual traditions. That, however, would be a whole additional story.

And now it doesn't really seem to matter whether this writer has been led astray by his protagonist, whether my perspective is too much hers. What I am saying demands only that we recognize that these kinds of things *do* happen to little girls like Mary, and that they *do* grow up into deeply troubled women whom our culture does not seem willing to listen to and seek to understand, and that some fathers and mothers *do* behave as I have described, and that my account of how this all happens is convincing: it grounds in our small and individual refusals to struggle towards self-knowing and greater openness of experiencing despite the pains and costs involved². This is a refusal to fully engage with life. The horrors I have drawn all ground in personal refusals to accept the invitation life extends to us.

¹ Most notably, perhaps, in Rogers, Carl (1959) "A Theory Of Therapy, Personality, And Interpersonal Relationships As Developed In The Client-Centred Framework" in S. Koch ed. (1959) *Psychology: A Study of a Science* vol.3. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

² I am not the first to make a connection of this kind: see, for example chapter 12 of Thorne, Brian (1991) *Person-centered Counselling: Therapeutic and spiritual dimensions*. London: Whurr Publications.

I am left, however, with one concern: will *others* read and engage with what I've said? To quote a colleague, "What it's saying and illustrating is going to be another challenge to real openness". I do not apologize for that; I owe it, and so much more, to Mary.