

'DOING STUFF'

In many ways mental illness is an intensified form of the anxiety, insecurity and delusional thinking that we all experience in day-to-day life. 'If I was wealthier and more beautiful I'd be happier' (is there a diagnosis for this kind of thinking?). As a friend of mine says, 'We are all insane, to a greater or lesser degree'. No wonder mindfulness is becoming so popular. In this culture of abundance, the resources of clarity, stillness, confidence can become the hardest to find. A couple of years ago I spent a little time at a monastery in New Norcia, Western Australia. I asked one of the monks what he actually did all day. He said, 'I fight evil spirits'. 'But the evil spirits are not red little men with small beards and large forks. The evil spirits are the voices within me that say "You're not good enough", "You've never achieved anything important", "You're weak" "You don't matter". "You're a fake".

"So how do you fight them?"

"I work and I pray".



Last week I sat with David. A young man who was preoccupied with all the problems in his life: accommodation, his ex-partner, access to his children, his case-worker, his so-called friends, his family, his neighbors. He sat hunched forward, head bowed, as if all these burdens had been literally placed on the back of his head. As I sat and listened I noticed another resident outside the office, bent over as well, working in the garden bed. I knew his story. It was full of heartache and heartbreak. But today he was clearing the garden bed of cigarette butts. Both men hunched over, both with heads bowed. And yet one had turned in upon himself, the other was changing the world, one cigarette butt at a time.

That day I'd intended to work at a food bank, unloading trucks and assembling food parcels. I listened to David's problems and having nothing to offer I asked him to join me at the food bank. With some hesitation he agreed. As we put on our safety vests and took our place among the other volunteers I saw David transformed: from a 'client with problems' to a person with a place in the world. And more than this: a person changing the world, one food parcel at a time. Being among others, all of us with our diagnosed and undiagnosed 'issues', David's issues became just the issues of life itself: all part of the frailty and glory of being fully human. Sometimes, there's no substitute for doing stuff: for simply putting our hand to the plough.

Next to the washing tubs at Mother Theresa's home for the Destitute and Dying in Calcutta is this inscription -

Yesterday is gone
Tomorrow has not yet come
We have only today
Let us begin . . .

James Godfrey
EACH Chaplain