

## It's a Crazy World

*by Anne Emerson*

Annie's qualification for commenting on the media-declared epidemic of mental illness across the U.S.A. is merely this – she has led a long life, filled with loss and disappointment. It started with a few small disappointments in her English life, such as the realization that most boys and men whom she met seemed little interested in how she thought and felt, nor to care what was important to her; or that some classmates were unable to understand that she wasn't trying to make them look stupid.

One possible exception to this ignorance was her father. He did seem to notice what mattered to her; in a quiet and unassuming way, he would intervene in situations where she was about to get trapped or truly disappointed. (Yet, not in all; when she was about four years old, she appealed to him to get back her stuffed koala bear because a neighbor's dog had entered the garden via an open gate and walked off with it. His reply was that she was able to do that for herself. Well, she did not think she was so able, and she lost the pretty toy. Nor could he protect her from a marriage that soon proved even more frustrating, although he tried to remain present in her life.)

Annie's losses grew. Her first big, huge loss was the loss of everyone and everything around whom she grew up, when she moved to the U.S. with the man who had promised her “the perfect marriage,” and whose idealistic promise she had, as young women may sometimes do, believed. Upon Annie's arrival in the U.S., it was as though she had been unaware of all the little ties that had held her into her English world, and now she had lost them. She felt rather like a ball of threads, each with other threads reaching into the web of humanity, the natural world, and the spaces through which she wandered, which had ALL been cut (except the one that connected her with her husband, who had lived in her English world, at least for a short while), and which cut-off threads, or strings, were now flailing around outside her, needing and wildly seeking new places to anchor.

Few people in her new world understood. How could they? They were still anchored to their own growing-up world, including her new husband. Back in his home now, he had little need of Annie to help him understand the thick accents in the Oxford Market, or show him how to write according to the expectations of his professors, or explain how English is used differently in England. He threw himself into his career.

Thence arrived Annie's second big loss – her husband was advancing in his career, but the career she imagined that she might have expected, had she stayed in England, did not materialize. U.K. employers are happy to interview graduates of a good University, hire and train them, if they seem likely to do well; U.S. employers expect a person to arrive at a job interview already trained. Not only that, but in the U.S., the Master's degree is more of a specialist degree than the Bachelor's, so that potential employers did not understand how highly Annie was already trained.

She could go on at length; in brief, when she became an immigrant, she lost her identity and a new one developed; of particular note, she lost her twin identity – people didn't meet her twin, and the fact of a twin's existence didn't come up in conversation very much. Yet, the twin-understanding underlies almost all of Annie's communication techniques. And, Englishness became, not something most people shared, but a conversation-piece. “I love your accent...” “I love the English...” “Bloody Brits...” “I've been to York/the Cotswolds/London...” “Where are you from?” These days, it's sort-of OK, because one gets accustomed to many things.

Another new identity, for Annie, involved society's expectations for married women – her main role, even in the 1980s, was assumed to be “wife and mother.” Well, okay, so her husband's job was to be “husband and father,” right? Wrong; his job was to bring home the money; to advance in his career; to bond with other men so that he could be assured of keeping his job. “Equality” was a theoretical idea with no real-world applications, because the Christian rule was that a woman obeyed her husband, thought like him, and did not dare to disagree with him. If she disagreed anyway, she had to be re-educated, in no uncertain terms, so that she might understand who was really in charge.

Annie won't say too much about what she lost in pursuing her ideal and a) inviting her husband into managing the household, and b) doing little plumbing jobs, electrician jobs, computer-fixing-jobs. Briefly, she lost whatever authority she might otherwise have had over the household. For example, her husband did not know or care about good nutrition; he came to the store with her and bought junk; he thought McDonald's was an acceptable alternative when no-one felt like cooking. And, his view of her more-traditionally-masculine skills (fixing small mechanical devices) went like this, “You're so good at everything, I appreciate it very much; now I can REALLY focus on my career.”

Undeterred, Annie soon understood that she was on her own in pursuing her own goals, and continued to try to have it all – both a home life and some semblance of a career. A “stress-related illness” put her into the mental health support system. Doctors said she was doing too much and needed some of her tasks off-loaded. They were right about that, but wrong about the cause of her illness. With hindsight, she believes that the cause of her illness was the potential re-entry into her life of someone who reminded her of the hopes and dreams she had had, back in Oxford, England.

The contrast between the bright future she had imagined, and the empty, duty-filled, thankless life she was now leading allowed her to believe she might find a better life with that potential re-acquaintance. Yet, as forgotten memories returned, she came to realize that the man who might be returning to her life had been no saint himself. A life with him would likely have been just as difficult as her life was now; perhaps more so because he appeared to be one of the “beautiful people” and it would be even harder to see the cracks in his world than it was to see the cracks in Annie's present world. Cattiness and envy would have been really up there; reality, unmentionable.

So, here came another loss – after loss of home, loss of career, loss of identity, loss of spousal cooperation, there now followed loss of illusion; along with the realization that few people of her acquaintance had lost even half as much. She began to find comfort in the presence of those who had; and they were other so-called mental patients, like herself. And that brings her back to her opening statement about this crazy world, that she is qualified to have an opinion regarding the epidemic of addictions, shootings, suicides, etc. that the media tell us is going on here in the U.S.

Annie has long believed that what is called mental illness has its roots in trauma; perhaps a war, or a lost parent; poverty, abuse or neglect. She will now take the matter further. Some cultures or subcultures, and some people, manage “trauma” better than others. So, she suggests that mal-adaptive responses are largely rooted in the inability of modern Western culture to help children grow up in emotionally healthy ways, and especially, in a failure to help them learn to deal with loss. Some types of traumas, such as wars, cause a sense of loss – loss of trust, perhaps, or loss of a caregiver, or loss of a home. There does not have to be physical violence or trauma for there to be loss, although they often go together.

So, what “loss” is it that many modern adults have in common? In my generation, we have parents who remember the 1940s and WWII. These adults were deeply traumatized, and only some came out of it in such a way as to heal, emotionally. Some would never talk about it; they appeared cold, distant, intellectual, and sometimes their silence was peppered with angry outbursts. A much-older friend once dated a soldier. He tried to kill her. Not, either of us thought, because she deserved it, but presumably because he had not processed in his own mind what it means to be a soldier.

During that war, many women went out to work because many men were away fighting. A lot of women liked how it felt to work, and began to lobby for the right to continue to participate in the workforce. So, in my generation, (baby-boomers, born right after WWII) the issue of the day was what we might call Feminism, or Women’s Liberation. That was easy enough, until we grew old enough to have children of our own and realized that “parent” is a full-time job.

Fast-forward to today’s dysfunctional society... Adult women now are expected to work, and can get high-powered jobs if they are “lucky.” Discrimination still occurs, and nastiness to those who don’t play the game as the culture demands, but women and men both are expected to be on-call almost 24-7 in many jobs, not only in high-status jobs. So, who is looking out for the children?

And that is my (Annie’s) answer to the question of why we have a mental-health crisis in this country. Too few people are looking out for the children. If you are away from the home, as so many working parents are these days, you do not see how children respond to the world; you do not see that they are not small adults with the educated minds of modern adults; you do not see that they need to grow and develop through certain natural stages. And – here I am guessing, but I consider it an informed guess – you do not see that their natural (emotional) growth and development can be arrested or distorted if they encounter something that is too much for them.

So, I say that we live in a world where many so-called adults operate as though they are children whose natural emotional development was arrested or damaged by some sort of loss when they were young. We can’t see it, because we are fooled by the fact that they look like full-grown adults. But we need to deal with it, because some of the worst offenders – the children who are the biggest bullies and want to win at all costs – are the kinds of people who end up in important positions. They lie, cheat, steal, and perhaps even kill, to get there. Because they have adult bodies, they may rape too.

“Help not handcuffs,” I say. But if certain people have spent their whole lives not getting help, honing their skills at being bullies while ensuring they are neither caught nor punished, and they don’t want to believe that they behave like little children, how are they to get help? And in the meantime, more wars, more loss, and more trauma are proliferating. If we don’t destroy ourselves, we are for sure leaving a ghastly legacy for the future – both emotional and environmental (physical).

I think the younger generations understand. Yet, who is to teach them a better way to be, now that many of them have grown up without good guidance? Are they to throw us adults over, thinking they can fix the world? I fear they will be disappointed. If it were easy, we would have done it. My suggestion, for what it is worth, is for all of us to return to the “wisdom of the ages” – to trust in our God, Gods, or spiritual philosophy; to learn what the wisdom of the ages teaches, in our own culture and in other cultures, because some cultures are good at things our culture does not do so well – and to put our hearts and souls into building better institutions, better families, and better educational systems, so that future generations have a decent framework within which to build their new world. “Let there be peace on earth, And let it begin with me.”