

Church on Sunday morning

Peter Bates

Like a collage of photo fragments, the following story is fiction built from the truth spoken by my friends and by my own heart.

Sunday morning and prescribed lethargy pins me down under the duvet. Perhaps I'll feel livelier when I get to the service, although Jane, my psychiatric nurse, looked worried when I mentioned church the other day.

Nowadays I walk to church. Before Sunday shopping I could get my favourite seat on the bus so that I could watch without being watched and get out without speaking. Jane says brisk walking will help my mood, but sometimes it expands my thought balloon until it presses against my skull. At those times, I find the church building comforting in its ancient solidity. I picture myself as part of a long line of humanity in which each tiny marcher brings their fears and their laughter, their babies and their dead through this old red door.

Richard is on door duty. He knows to say hello and let me pass. Others he shakes warmly by the hand or even hugs, but that sort of thing is not for me. I go and sit with Sue and Dave, who nod to me and then resume their companionable silence. We are in the same group that meets every Wednesday evening, and though I don't say much, it means more than I can say to have some people who have known me half my life. Last Wednesday I clawed uselessly against a quicksand of despair as other people talked and said their prayers aloud, but afterwards Dave offered me another cup of tea and we talked a bit. It was kind, but I am so tired of relationships in which I view myself or am viewed by others as the needy one, and I am poor company when I need company too much.

Back here in church the music group are finishing their sound check. Thankfully it is not too loud, but last week it made my ears buzz and I have enough weird acoustics in my head already. Who's that playing a flute?

Doug is leading the service. He knows I use mental health services so I don't need to hide it from him, and often asks me how I'm getting on. Having a few friends outside the system who know but don't mind counterbalances the fear I expect from others. His version of pastoral care is to sit down beside you, chat, say a prayer and then offer to help decorate your lounge. I never accept, but he means it.

The service has started and the church is filling up now – most of the families with young children seem to arrive five or ten minutes late, which always strikes me as odd, given how serious most of them are about their faith. Sometimes the music group start with children's songs and invite everyone to join in with the actions, but I'm safe enough sitting next to Dave as he never moves a muscle. A few people seem to love the naïve words and clap along with the song or raise their hands in the air, but I just find this part of the service irritating.

After the songs, Doug introduces the prayers of confession. Church leaders who treat their people like naughty children just make me angry and I'm not one of those horror-movie junkies who feasts on bad feelings, but the words of confession can still sear me with self-loathing. Today Doug briskly moves us on from confession to forgiveness. The sharp pain of confessing and the rush of forgiveness feels a bit like cutting did when I was first ill. I remember a recent lecture on recovery where we were told that forgiveness is a vital step on the way to acceptance and escaping the trap of the past.

Then the children go out to their Sunday School groups and the notices are given, followed by a teenager called Alice who comes to the front to explain that she is off to Africa for a month to work in schools. She explains how she felt that God led her to go and how sponsors miraculously appeared to help fund the trip. Her gauche exuberance has the congregation smiling and nodding, but it's a world away from my mundane half-life where things are endured rather than fixed.

The prayer time provides a space for me to recalibrate my inner yardstick, think of God and others, and connect with longings. The absurd requests for peace in the world reach beyond the dull injunctions of common sense and help us lift our eyes to the horizon, clarify our goals and set to work.

Next we settle down for the Bible reading and sermon. Today it's Janet's turn to preach. She was off work for a few months last year with depression and seems to understand what people's lives are actually like. The sermon explores how hope and thanksgiving are central to the Christian faith. That recovery lecturer said it is hope that sustains us on the journey. Perhaps my Christian hope in God's goodness will help me find a recovery path. And thanksgiving helps to form a positive mental discipline that appreciates kindness in others and abandons the role of gloomy victim.

The sermon is personal, vulnerable and devotional. Janet explains that, on the positive side, Alice and others have spiritual experiences in which they believe that God meets them, motivates them, helps and heals them. But there is also a negative side, where suffering is not relieved. Sue and Dave's daughter is back from a death dance with anorexia, but Colin's young wife is dead. God sometimes intervenes with help and healing, and sometimes doesn't. No one knows why. To view God as disengaged would resolve the conflict, but be a hopeless retreat, no more true to our experience than the opposite escape into naïve optimism where every sorrow is mended through faith. Janet ends by saying that, like a child reaching out her hands

for a butterfly, our church seeks healing through prayer, but we know it doesn't always land on us.

I love that image of the butterfly. I know that my mind has a habit of latching on to an idea and going over it again and again, so I try to get it on to gentle images. This is harder than people tell you it is. As soon as I realise that I am ruminating on something pleasant, then it's as if another part of my mind hunts out the unpleasant alternative topics to think on - like trying to think of holidays whilst in the dentist's chair. But perhaps I can be still for a while and give the butterfly a chance to settle.

After the sermon we sit together in silence for a time and then quietly sing '*When the darkness closes in, still I will say, blessed be the name of the Lord.*' Both modern song lyrics and the ancient psalms occasionally validate my experience and point me forward. Nobody seems to have noticed the tear on my cheek as a tsunami of feelings rushes in from nowhere. Rather than drown I go to the kitchen for a drink of water.

When I get back to my seat, the service has moved on to communion. The familiar words and shared ritual helps me feel connected when I don't know who I am, when I have nothing to say, when the quicksand has swallowed me whole. There's a blend here of childlike trust in the mystery and grown-up responsibility as I choose to stand, walk forward and kneel at the rail.

Just before the last hymn, a woman comes forward to describe a vivid mental picture she has had that might contain a message from God for someone. I don't know her name. Is it a psychotic moment, a spiritual experience or an over-active imagination? The kindly invitation is a far cry from the sarcastic accusations I sometimes hear before sleep.

Doug follows up by explaining that members of the prayer team will be available at the end of the service. He says that team members work hard to avoid putting pressure on people. You don't have to tell them anything or explain yourself before they pray for you. They also resist giving advice in their conversation or disguising it in their prayers. One day I might overcome my feelings of self-consciousness, shame and unimportance and ask, but not today. Perhaps Dave would agree to come along and support me.

The final hymn and blessing sends us out from the building and from a preoccupation with ourselves to enrich the lives of other people. Tomorrow I'm going to the Volunteer Bureau with Jane. For now, though, I make a swift exit as the service ends, rather than stay for coffee and small talk.