

Can you help me let me?

Alec Finlay

"...trying to speak at that moment when speaking becomes most difficult, turning towards those moments when confusion excludes all language and consequently necessitates a recourse to a language that is the most precise, the most aware, the furthest removed from vagueness and confusion..."

Maurice Blanchot, tr. Charlotte Mandell, 'Kafka and Literature'

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*the strangeness
of illness*

*never loses
its strangeness*

Our own pain is the crossing by which we reach the pain of others.

Words, poems: witness – one way to convince them, and ourselves, that their pain, and ours, is comprehensible.

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*pain is shocking
it can be*

dulled
by enduring

The effect of pain: pulled threads that draw us apart – apart from time, from friends, from the world we have known. Sometimes, in that over-powering situation, even words may not be possible.

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the it within
can become
a voice inside

The reduction of illness to an “*it*” is a cautionary reminder of *it*’s correlative: how people experience their identity *it*-ified by illness.

Well-being is defined by the extent to which we can dwell within “*it*”, or without “*it*” – we do not always have a choice – as “*it*” dwells within and without us. One measure of well-being is the ability to translate “*it*” into speech or writing.

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we may fathom
the darkness

with light
& weight

To write the “*it*” is to place “*it*” outside of our self, so that we can experience a reality beyond the dominion of “*it*”. In our work with patients we seek to offer ways to relate to “*it*”, outwith the bounds of medical science.

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*if I was being told
I'd want to hear it
from Aoife or Mairi*

The names of two medical caregivers whose kindness touched me; their speech, their tone, was healing.

As writers our task is to broaden the spectrum of language. We may draw on the professional vocabulary of doctors, and striking phrases used by the ill and their carers. We may mediate between the two.

In some hospitals one is told certain words cannot be used, as they are said to have negative connotations – *crows, blades, helicopters*. A true picture of reality, described accurately, may have a healing effect, even if it is painful to read.

Take a pumice-stone to cliché.

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*today
all I have*

are these words

Much of my work with illness and healing has been the lineation of other people's words.

Offering someone a poem composed from what they said in conversation, without the pressure of writing, may give them their own picture of their own reality.

A poem is an object of language we can meet around.

•

T T
R R
 A
N N
S S
P P
 L
A A
N N
T T

There is an imbalance between poems where illness is a subject – an occasion for empathy and inward reflection – and poems that imitate illnesses in the manner of their operations and effects. Both have their place.

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In a medical study of shell *σφοδχ*, Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed that the word be printed upside down, rendering typographically the dramatic effect of that condition.

As writers we observe and notate. We may think of ourselves less as radar-masts, transmitting emotion, and more as transcribers of reality. This record may help healthcare professionals become more aware of how a ward or consultation room is experienced by visitors.

Transcription-style poems may comfort those who are, or feel, alone with their illness to navigate from day to day, offering a companion to their medical diagnosis.

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G–’s fear:

to not live

and in not living

not die

We cannot assume the narrative of others’ conditions, nor what wellbeing may mean to them. I have listened to the recipient of an organ transplant describe months of grieving after her operation, as she came to terms with the loss of a death she had prepared herself for.

Don’t presume what is *useful*. Do be wary of expectations.

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donation

the gain from
the gift

only comes
after grief passes

All hope is a form of agreement.

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Notes

I did not train for this kind of work, except that I have had a serious muscular and breath-related condition from the age of 20. This defined the life I could pursue: I became an independent artist and poet, flexible in how I use my energy, working with, and around, my condition.

I have previously done work for hospital settings, but only recently been commissioned to work with people who are ill, or dying. Recent commissions include a residency at Beatson West of Scotland Cancer Centre, Glasgow, and the task of creating the National Memorial to Organ and Tissue Donors, at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. I consider these commissions to be a kind of service.

I have talked, listened, and read, as ways to write. I have sat in a waiting room, observing, because I did not wish to intrude when people had the

anxiety of a consultation on their mind. I have spent winter in bed with pneumonia writing poems on illness, exchanging my experience of illness for others, realising the commonality.

This kind of work exists in a wider context. The hostility to some medical conditions from some Government agencies impels us. More positively, Maggie's Centres are among the most radical social institutions of our age. They represent an *avant-garde* of wellbeing. Whatever *Bibliotherapy* may become is, for me, measured in terms of such patient-centred projects.

How can we evolve from a culture that is divided into Medical Centres/Maggie's Centres – one that creates clinical spaces for diagnosis and treatment, and non-medical reflective spaces for the practice of awareness and well-being?

How can the registers of language used in these institutions be harmonized?

How can art and writing be agents of change, guiding society toward a more integrated relation with illness and dying?

The work we do is defined by these challenges.

today today today

www.alecfinlay-today.com

a book containing the poems was published by Playspace Publications (36pp, 2013), £5. www.playspacepublications.com/today-today-today

Taigh: A wilding Garden (National Memorial to Organ and Tissue Donors)

www.alecfinlay.com/taigh.html

a book documenting the project is available on Amazon or by email:

info@alecfinlay.com (morning star, 112pp, 2014), £10.

<http://www.alecfinlay.com>

<http://skying-blog.blogspot.com/>