Review


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*Heavy Light: A Journey through Madness, Mania & Healing* by Horatio Clare is a candid account of his experience of mental illness, which led him to look for alternatives to medication. As a writer and frequent contributor to the BBC, Horatio Clare wanted to limit his medication because it hampered his creativity; he wanted to keep connected to his true self, rather than merely exist, chemically entombed. His book includes comments on his account from his family, particularly his partner Rebecca. These give insights into their perspective on his illness, showing how they remained in touch during his crisis and encouraged him to seek help. Clare, an intelligent professional man, manages to talk himself out of being sectioned several times. However, by using cannabis and alcohol to cope with overwork, his behaviour becomes increasingly psychotic, and eventually he is admitted to a mental health hospital. Around 60,000 people are sectioned in Britain every year. Discharge was dependent on compliance with his medication regime and that frustrated him, like many patients I meet who consider themselves ready to be discharged before they really are. When he finally was discharged, he secretly weaned himself off the prescribed drugs. He was fortunate to be able to access and pay for therapy, which enabled him to come to terms with childhood trauma and to function better as an adult. In the closing chapters, he is able to talk openly to his family. He becomes more aware of the importance of self-care – mental, physical, emotional and spiritual – and the interconnectedness of its different components.

He wrote the book to share his experience of psychosis and being sectioned, and to explore the treatment system and to research what alternatives could be used instead of a lifetime of pills. Looking back, he thanks God for his breakdown. Having lived with lies, dissatisfactions and worries
for years, he writes, “I am glad I broke down, cracked up and lost it.” Life is more precious as a result. His book also celebrates the role of family, strangers, colleagues who covered for him and the professionals supporting those who break down. For example, when he meets some local friends he reflects on how amazing it is that his manic episode managed to stay out of the local press – he had danced naked on the roof of a land-rover and crashed his car down a hill. He asks for an explanation, saying that not covering the story saved him, his son and family from scrutiny and judgment. His friend Jill replies, “We look after our own in Hebden.” Clare replies, “I’ve never thought I belong here.” Jill responds, “Well, maybe you do.” The community had seen his decline and are rooting for him in his recovery, along with so many others.

Horatio Clare was fortunate in that he was on medication for a short while, and that this was sufficient to enable him to recover his true self. He is concerned about the long-term effects and addictive nature of mass prescribing of drugs that help people to function, while not curing their conditions. He fails to recognize that for many patients, living life to the full means continuing to take drugs. While he recognizes that psychiatric medication is an improvement on earlier treatments such as lobotomy and electric shock therapy, he writes eloquently about his personal experience of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. He looks at alternative therapies to replace medication, such as the Power Threat Meaning Network, and methods such as the Open Dialogue approach from Finland, where the sufferer, members of their family or friendship group, therapists and a clinician talk together about the delusions, voices or crises that the sufferer is experiencing. Clare does not mention encountering a chaplain, but he certainly valued being able to talk and be listened to by supportive staff.

I felt that Clare’s book was a timely contribution in breaking the stigma around talking about mental health, and how it could be treated better. Writing it during his recovery, he advocates with passion for alternatives to medication, rather than the conventional treatments recommended by the brain chemical imbalance theory.

We are told that the medical pandemic has affected our mental health – enforced isolation with or away from loved ones has stretched our emotional resilience. Taking a few pills may take the edge off our distress, but talking and being understood, and accessing space for that to happen, may enable us all to live healthier, more flourishing lives in the long term.

In a recent article (https://fitnessblogger.info/health-news/author-horatio-clare-describes-the-truth-of-being-sectioned), the author wrote: “Meddling in brain chemistry is not enough. We need to offer everyone a blend of limited
medication, where necessary, and effective therapy, in every case, to address the causes of distress. Every single person in trouble deserves the chance and the tools to heal.”