

Monday Lent, Week 3



One of the greatest fears we can be beset by is that of losing our mind. It might come as we feel we are being taken over by obsessive thoughts or violent feelings that we cannot contain. The thought that we might altogether lose control of our minds is horrifying. Mental illness may pass through early stages where we glimpse what is coming and dread it, or choose to surrender to it or even run away from it only to discover that we are running more directly into it.

Another form of this fear is when we feel the decline of our mental powers, memory, rationality or linguistic skills. People struggle to remember a name and make a joke of it, calling it a senior moment, but underneath the laugh is a deeper unease. As more of us live longer, the prospect of dementia in a merely surviving body is a concern increasingly common in our age of anxiety.

Either of these states of mind can be nightmarish because we see what is or might be coming and because we feel so helpless and alone. There is no more secure and terrible prison than the mind.

Yet we can meet people whose minds are barely hanging on to normality, whose short-term memory is acute and can't find the sentences to clothe their thoughts with and yet who radiate peace and joy. In their radiation zone the fears and anxieties of others are dissolved. They can even laugh at themselves with a great hidden strength of character while remaining immensely vulnerable. They may have lost or be losing their brain cells and their arteries may be sclerotic but their mind has already entered into their heart and has been illumined by love.

To let go of our thoughts in meditation is frightening for some perhaps because it provokes this fear of losing our mind. But to be free from any fear we have only to expose the fear to love. The purpose of all spiritual practice, from giving up candy for Lent to meditating as a daily discipline is simply to release love. Eye has not seen it and the mind cannot imagine it and yet it occupies a space infinitely small and infinitely vast in every human heart.

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