

## The buddha in the machine

Say what you like about the NHS, it's doing its damndest to get hospital wait times down. It's eight pm on Saturday. I'm strapped to a gurney, ear-muffled and gowned as I get my instructions – "try not to move" – before being slid into the MRI scanner for my third and least invasive set of tests for prostate cancer. In my palm is a small rubber ball. In the event I feel claustrophobic I can squeeze it to halt the scan. Otherwise we'll be through in forty-five minutes. After my two biopsies – dart guns up my bum firing spring loaded needles to snatch tissue samples – this will be a doddle. And since both biopsies came back negative these images, of the front of the gland where needles can't reach, may at last put me in the clear.

The muffs prove to be earphones. "The first scan starts shortly", a male voice tells me as I glide into the scanning cylinder. Silence for a minute. Then a set of clanks like the whoosh and thud of drop hammers on childhood nights with skylines flame-red and the steam-screach, blast-bang of forge, foundry and rolling mill carrying for miles. Like those long gone sounds these are eerie but not unpleasant; just surprisingly mechanical. What digital technology could so evoke the smoke-stack fifties? In my relaxed state I'm less interested in how it works than why it's so physical. As the scans progress the sounds shift from rhythmic thud to high pitch whine; snaredrum to vocal hum: an ethereal musicality it's hard to believe not designed. Then the penny drops. It *is*. This is a soundtrack. The NHS is offering one size fits all Eno ambience, free at the point of delivery.

This and my stillness induce calm. Soon I'm contemplating with an equanimity not felt in weeks the fact that, three months ago after a year of struggling to make a case for ourselves, my colleagues and I learned that our jobs as education advisors at Sheffield Hallam University will go at the end of next month. Two of us subsequently failed 'attributes based' interviews for the only new posts within shouting distance. Now I'm learning what many before have learned. Losing a job you enjoyed and relied on is like being bereaved, an emotional rollercoaster you ride while those around you look the other way.

Aged ten, I stepped onto a wilder rollercoaster when my mother took her own life. Suicide leaves a burning legacy of shame and guilt - even and perhaps especially for children - and in '63 counselling hadn't been invented, not for the families of steel workers. Neither had closure, my father decreeing a funeral no place for kids. My brothers and I were left to get on with things and that's what we did. The night it happened, I – having come in from school to discover her – had stared out on friends playing in the street. *I'll never play again*, I'd told myself, sure of it. Within a week we were playing and fighting, doing all the things we'd done before, losing ourselves for hours on end. Then the stark irremediability of what had happened would come flooding in, tidal waves of despair my mind had no defence against. These too would pass but as days became weeks, and weeks months, the cycles grew longer and more manageable. Our emotional experience, I learned early in life, may bring horror and devastation but is never fixed.

I'm aware of this truth now as I re-experience, with some of the intensity of fifty years ago, that inner turmoil. As before there are times of being carefree; even, and with some grounds for confidence, of looking forward to new challenges. (Asked recently by a career coach to give a positive adjective for myself I first tried *determined* but it wouldn't fly. My past is littered with abandoned projects. I then found *resilient*. Perfect.) And, as before, these states of wellbeing give way in the blinking of an eye to fear, a sense of failure and levels of anger dangerous if acted on; toxic if denied. These too shift at the slightest trigger: a job well done ... the lift of the day's first coffee ... an email from a grateful student.

Feelings are treacherous but there's an upside. Being fifty-eight confers advantage even as it makes the prospect of unemployment, in a time of economic contraction I don't see the UK

recovering from, bleak. That advantage is a broader perspective on our emotions. We sense the double tragedy of young people – mum was thirty-seven – taking their own lives. *If only they had held on*, I mutter into my local paper at the latest account of some tortured teen checking out. *It would all have looked different a few months on*. At nine or at ninety, all human emotion is experienced and with the same intensity but age can loosen its grip to allow distance, hence choice, in the face of difficult feelings even as we acknowledge their authenticity. But to make grown up choices we need an inner space that has eluded me of late. After weeks of feeling helpless I now find, in a machine for clinical diagnosis whose findings may yet unleash a terror more primal than that of job loss, that inner space and the perspective it brings. From its vantage point I reflect, as though it were someone else's problem, on why I lose sleep to fear of unemployment while giving barely a thought to a cancer that kills 200 British men every week.

It's not rocket science. Men are chancers, especially on health and safety. Until the game's up and alternative scenarios exhausted, we don't dwell on unpleasant maybes. We smoke and drink, eat badly and flout safety rules because no one can tell us for sure that such things *will* kill us, far less *when*. But I know my job will end on July 31<sup>st</sup> while cancer is just a possibility. It concerned me enough to have me confide in my GP and submit to all manner of indignity but only once have I truly let in the worst case outcome. That was right before seeing a consultant for my first biopsy results. Sandwiched between other scared men in a packed waiting room, I was obliged for those moments to take on a truth few are willing to deeply engage: I'm not special, and have no cosmic exemption. Most of the time we're so adept at shutting out the fear of dying, we don't know we *are* terrified. That encounter aside, my fears of the past months have focused not on the prospect of pain, sickness or death but on the fact my employer has no further use for my skills.

Even that's an exaggeration. Mine is a better employer than most.<sup>1</sup> On August 1, I continue as an employee at Sheffield Hallam for a further six months. I'll go on its redeployment register and, if I apply successfully for a lower grade job in the university, my current salary will be maintained for four years. That's too generous an offer to stay on the table forever.<sup>2</sup> What keeps me awake at night is the fear of finding no work during the redeployment period. An academic to my core, at a time when few sufficiently generic academic posts are coming up, I was bluntly rejected for an administrator post two grades below my own. I'm working hard to avert it but the prospect of compulsory redundancy come February is real.

If inner turbulence accompanies job loss and bereavement alike, so does the seeming indifference of those spared. The day after mum's death we went to school. (We *were* asked. No alternative seemed preferable.) Mid morning the head sent for me. Offering a huge hankie he assured me my mother was now in heaven, an enlightened concession all things considered, and would be watching me 24/7 from now on. Even in my hour of grief the idea appalled me and to this day I can't say whether he was giving solace, incentivising good behaviour or seizing the chance to do

---

<sup>1</sup> **November 2015** postscript. More than four years on, my views of Sheffield Hallam University have hardened. Apart from my subsequent job insecurity on a zero hours contract - SHU's response to my FOI request of 2013 told me one in three of its academics has a ZHC - the departmental restructuring I experienced is now a recurring event. It's hard not to see these assaults - *strategic repositionings* in the Orwellian newSpeak of managers and HR - on loyal men and women with kids and mortgages as combining the advantage of a slimmer payroll with that of a more subdued, if sub-optimally scared, workforce. Job precarity is an employer's dream.

<sup>2</sup> **November 2015** postscript. And so it proved. Even as the 'restructurings' gather pace, with some SHU staff facing a third or even fourth throw of the dice in as many years, those four years of protected salary have been reduced to twenty months for admin staff, with a similar threat currently hovering over academics. Much attention has been focused on how VC salaries have soared in recent years. (SHU's Philip Jones was earning a relatively modest £230k) but the real significance has gone largely unremarked. These are **CEO** salaries; paid - in a sector whose prime focus is now on reducing the wage bill - for delivering results in the shape of a healthy bottom line.

both. I dried my eyes, returned the hankie and trudged back to class; my form teacher transmitting an ocean wave of silent sympathy as I headed down the aisle. She made no reference to what had happened, not that or any other day, but hers and thirty other pairs of eyes followed me to my desk. Later I learned that my audience with the head had a dual purpose. While I was being told where mum was, so were my classmates. I doubt Miss Naylor gave much away but word got round. For years I'd go bright red at the word suicide, feel scalding shame as people fell silent on my approach. Some were kind, a few cruel. Most were neither; they just didn't know what to do. You could say my experience of bereavement has complicating factors but talk to any widow or, worse, parent who's lost a child. All have tales to tell of avoidances gross and subtle; greater or lesser betrayals born not of coldness but fear ...

... *and superstition*. I showed an earlier draft of this essay to a colleague in student counselling. She made the insightful observation that Just World Theory might have something to do with that avoidance. JWT, say the social psychologists, is one of those 'naive' theories we unconsciously construct as the modern equivalent of fairies and goblins. Few of us have the maturity to take onboard – at gut level, not as an abstract conceit tossed around the dinner table over coffee and cognac – the fact we live in a world where earthquake, bombing, cancer, bereavement and being laid off can happen to anyone, *including you and me*. JWT, its pervasiveness established by elegantly controlled studies, almost certainly reflects our inability to come to terms with existential insecurity. It allows some reptilian corner of our brain stems to take comfort in the childish fiction of a morally ordered universe where if something awful happens to a person, well, they must've had it coming. (New age lit is full of this. *Cancer? Your fault for being negative!*) A good friend of mine, the most morally driven person I know and it makes her special, told me she *wanted* to feel sympathy for the 911 victims but couldn't. Their culpability, as best I could see, lay in being for the most part westerners, like her, and on that count guilty of indifference to global suffering.

So it is with job loss and that's before we add guilt to the fear/superstition mix. Much has been written on downsizing and survivor guilt. It may seem grotesque to apply a concept from the Holocaust to so mundane an arena as workplace lay-offs but, backed by learned studies, the new pairing has entered common parlance. I've had surprises both ways: small kindnesses from a manager many had warned me against; a patronising union rep who seems to see her role as an extra tier of management. This last is a sensitive issue. When four advisors applied for the two new jobs one of us, another UCU rep, used her application to assert the value to her bosses of skills developed in union case work: *so choose me, not them!* Well now. Who of us can be sure *we'd* act with dignity in this kind of balloon debate? Meanwhile two colleagues I always found difficult sent emails of simple condolence and a third, someone I haven't known long and whose path seldom crosses mine, looked me in the eye, asked how I was and listened when I told her. She cared enough to do that. From across this huge organisation men and women I've worked with for years sent expressions of good will. A few in my current directorate, more recent colleagues, throw looks of sympathy not overdone, not different from my teacher's look of fifty years ago; a silent affirmation that suffices. I no more want an awkward conversation than they do.

Other colleagues say or show nothing however, a fact that disappoints but does not surprise me. Of these, some avoid me altogether. One man, having secured one of the posts we'd applied for (except *he* didn't have to interview) and seen his salary rise, bounced into work like a puppy dog. "Yo!" he cried, exuding energy and insufferable bonhomie. I've known him for decades; he's a thoroughly decent guy and I can't stand being around him. I would never have anticipated this but now find I prefer avoidance to insensitivity.

I'm being unreasonable; it isn't his fault. He wins, I lose. The decent thing is to shake hands like after the cricket match. Others neither win nor lose but are lucky enough not to have had the axe fall in their neck of the woods. *Yet*. Others still, fewer, are the architects and arbiters of change,

executors of allegedly transparent processes I've yet to write about.<sup>3</sup> One of a few blows dealt before the interviews was being told that Yo-Man, not previously reckoned in the frame, had been granted a 'non competitive matching' that would further reduce the number of available posts. "So the odds just got longer for us", I said in a phone call to a middle manager, one of a trio making the decisions. She actually laughed: not, I'm sure, in mockery; just the nervous giggle people make when – *because* – it's the one response they're not supposed to give.

These are ordinary people. Even the movers and shakers, giggling or otherwise, did not create a situation where fifteen percent cuts had to be found. If *they* didn't make the tough decisions someone else would, right? It's an argument hard to counter - though the *process* should surely be meticulous and in our case was not - but it's also hard not to recall the nightmares history throws up when the argument is taken to its logical conclusion and decent folk go with the flow. Right now though, I feel no need to resolve such dilemmas; to try the axemen in a Nuremberg Court of my mind. There are those whose effigies I could slowly skewer with a hat pin but while such fantasies are a natural and well known response to my situation – which *always* feels personal – if dwelt on for too long they'll damage and diminish me. Seeing that, and acting on it, are different kettles of fish but for the moment I've found that place where malice and fear are neither denied nor enslaving. Buddhalike in my machine, I'm free from the tyranny of wanting things other than they are.

The disembodied voice tells me we're done. The machine ejects me with the grace of a DVD tray as two young radiographers come to unstrap me. I thank them and ask if they have more patients tonight. "No, you're the last". As I leave to get dressed they go with practised efficiency into shutdown mode. These silent wards and corridors notwithstanding, it's Saturday night and life goes on. I dress, exit and walk home through the sunlit, leafy streets of early June. That night I get my best sleep in months. It's good to be my age and have a big perspective.

\* \* \*

**Postscript November 2015.** The scan also showed negative. These are statistical samplings and, as with all scientific knowledge, conditional. But my chances of developing prostate cancer are now deemed neither higher nor lower than those of any man my age.

---

<sup>3</sup> **November 2015** postscript. The most senior 'arbiter and executor of change' - let's call him Paul - was himself axed a year or so back. I can do schadenfraude with the best of them but, when told the news, simply nodded. I felt nothing. My prime memory of him was not as axeman, nor author of small kindnesses after the fact. It was of copying him into an email circulating this essay. He panicked because he knew (from an earlier travel email where I'd inadvertently used Cc not Bcc for recipients) that I had readers at the University of Sheffield. One sign of our times is the corruption of academia. Collegiate commitment to furthering knowledge has given way to corporate rivalry and its concomitant paranoias. Paul's immediate - and, as it turned out, misplaced - loyalty was to the good name of Sheffield Hallam Ltd.

**PPS** In my trials and tribs at SHU I had valuable lessons in human nature. Here's one; repeated four or five times with other individuals. Paul's own boss - let's call him Clive - departed abruptly not long after I lost out. I've two memories of him. One is that after my 'displacement' he spoke warmly to a colleague of the *professionalism* (a word beloved of managers but dangerously elastic) shown by those in my position. That infuriated me more than anything else, and marked a turning point in my view of SHU and what it had become. He'd meant, of course, that we weren't kicking up. The other is that, shortly before Clive shipped out, I'd copied him and the Vice Chancellor into a semi-open letter to Paul. Closely argued, and polite in tone, it pointed out where and how the restructuring process had been flawed. I did not get the courtesy of a reply but, a week later, happened on Clive in the street. He turned theatrically away, nose in the air. You do find out about human nature at such times. Colleagues, usually senior, would make decisions which, right or wrong, impacted hugely on my life. When I voiced concerns over the process they would demonstrate - and I don't doubt this was subjectively genuine - a sense of hurt and disappointment. How could I be so cruel and disloyal? So *unprofessional*? Funny old world, innit?