

What we have is what we want—applying the values of psychotherapy to our current dilemmas

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Most people here today will share a concern about the down-sides of the current era of prosperity in Ireland. These downsides are known to include a loss of community, the dominance of consumerism, the loss of a sense of meaning for individuals and groups and so on.

There are many kinds of views about why this should be so. There is an entire discourse based on sociology which seeks to put forward reasons and rationales. Other arguments and discourses on these themes are perhaps more political and philosophical.

My work as a psychotherapist brings me into contact with a variety of human problems and issues. The vantage point of the clinician naturally allows me to get inside some of the labels and clichés and relate to the real unique individual. Nothing is ever as it seems and few of you will be surprised to hear that. Many people who present for psychotherapy report an unwillingness or incapacity in our culture to listen with insight and awareness, We like people to be normal. That's all we want to know about.

No doubt some people here suspect that psychotherapy is part of the problem and not useful in pointing towards solutions. For some psychotherapy reinforces the individualistic strain in our culture which appears to be now to the fore. Psychotherapy can be attacked by some as a form of privatisation, an indulgence for the rich and famous, even an outright rejection of communitarian values.

For others the very practice of psychology in any form is inherently suspicious and potentially invasive. Of course you must know now that I am analysing all of you as I stand here, reading your very thoughts and quietly shaking my head knowingly but despairingly!

Instead of defending psychotherapy or suggesting that it is a panacea for all our ills I would like instead to use some of the core ideas from psychotherapy outside of their usual context in the therapy room, and apply them to some of our social dilemmas. While needing to be provocative and challenging there is always the danger that any form of psychological probing will give rise to even greater resistance and denial than already exists.

This conference has always been about Irish society and the evolving Irish culture. I believe it is important in examining that evolving culture from a psychological point of view, to be empathic and not judgemental, constructive and not condemnatory, insightful and action oriented rather than dogmatic and stultifying. The culture is not some vague

concept or smart excuse for an Arts Council grant but is something here and now, it's about me and it's about you.

We can always defend ourselves against emotional disturbance or discomfort by standing apart and saying: 'it's them, not me'. We can also defend by sheer denial saying 'it's not happening', or 'it might be happening but I don't see it'. Some of us defend by manic activity, by displacing all our energies and responses into manic busy-ness. Its also important for some to be important. Arguably we have far more people around who are into being important than we ever had before. Obsessive importance is a defence too. In prosperity we tend to grow more people with an important and narcissitic sense of destiny.

Sometimes what we mean, psychologically, when we talk about notions like community is a zone where there are fewer defences of this type, and less need for them and more emotional contact between people than might otherwise be the case. If we lack a sense of community perhaps we have opted for defences instead. If we lack a sense of community perhaps we have a preference for the safety and apparent certainty of defences instead.

Despite all these defences and other psychological strategies there is evidence in our culture of very deep unease. To take the most glaring and obvious example, most of you will know that we have the highest per capita consumption of alcohol of almost any advanced country. You may already be weary and despairing of this example. Weariness and despair can sometimes be defences against being touched at a deeper level. To place

the matter in context we have three times the per capita consumption of the Germans. Are we perhaps more traumatised in our history than the Germans? We also have a clearly identified pattern of destructive binge drinking on a scale unmatched anywhere.

In addition to this, some of you will be aware of an international debate that has gone on for many years among psychologists and psychiatrists about the Irish as an ethnic group and our over-representation in statistics on admissions to mental health facilities in countries worldwide. Our migrant's rates of depression, schizophrenia, addiction anxiety disorders etc have been recorded worldwide as far higher than the indigenous population and cannot be explained by the fact of migration alone. Other migrant ethnic groups such as the Afro-Caribbean group have had nothing like the same rate of admissions as the Irish.

Not many of us relish having to face up to figures such as these. We want to project a positive self-image and don't want to return to the bad old days of feeling inferior to the colonial power. That too is an understandable defence.

We know that in the past we had what we might call poverty drinking. That served as an explanation of sorts. Excessive drinking and poverty were assumed to be connected. Now it seems we have 'affluent drinking'. Excessive drinking and affluence are assumed to be connected. The excuses are wearing thin. The bingeing is increasing not decreasing, it is worse this year than it was last year. It's not about opening hours or advertising. It will not change because, by day, we enact more laws to discourage it.

It's about ourselves and only we can change it. It's about our relationship with ourselves. It's about our mental health. Binge drinking is not the celebration it appears but has always been a sign of deep unhappiness. Binge drinking on our scale and at our pace is not a party. Quite the contrary it's more like a wake, and our society is potentially the corpse.

What would happen if this outlet were to be taken away? What is it that we can do, think and say during our binges that we cannot do in our sober state? What unnamed inner frustration or pain does the binging relieve? Is this destructive behaviour a sign that at a deep level we don't value ourselves?

We still don't know why we drink so much. Perhaps we don't as a nation like to ask the question why. You've guessed it, that reluctance to ask is also a defence.

What is indeed most striking is our refusal, collectively to explore the real psychological roots of this long-standing distressed and distressing behaviour. We display a general lack of psychological curiosity about it. Perhaps we are resigned or perhaps we really don't want to know. What we have is what we want. Who wants to understand the psychology of it. That would spoil the grim fun.

Indeed to think and speculate in psychological terms at all is regarded in our culture with suspicion, as a kind of letting the side down, a damp squib. The negative stigma we

generate in relation to mental health issues and those afflicted by them is matched only by our refusal to think psychologically about social and personal issues.

To give a recent example, an Expert Group on Mental Health in Ireland established by the Minister for Health and Children and comprised of leading psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and others, issued its report in January of this year after two years of deliberation and extensive consultation. A psychotherapist colleague of mine at the Tivoli Institute was a member of the Group. The Group's report appropriately entitled 'A Vision for Change', contains much that is thought-provoking and stimulating but was given derisory coverage in the newspapers and other media. In The Irish Times it got three column inches on page seven for just one day. Mental Health issues affect one in four of the population. It is very likely that as an ethnic group we are significantly more effected than other ethnic groups. So we give it three column inches on page seven

If it had been a 'Vision for change' for the Irish Stock Exchange and how it works or for the Irish Race Horse industry and how it works, I guarantee it would have made the front page in prominent headlines and on more than one day. This is what we want to be the case. To be curious about psychological issues is too threatening. It's safer to collude in a collective stigma. That too is a defence.

Lets ask some more awkward questions.

If community values of old were so important and dear to us then why have so many of us colluded in their near abandonment? How have we done so on so many levels? Is it possible that little real or authentic community ever existed, that there was little emotional contact taking place? Might this explain how quickly the appearance of community was abandoned? Or was it that instead of authentic communication and caring between people we had merely a sense of solidarity in poverty, an interdependence that rarely went further than functional co-operation?

If the elderly were ever valued and revered and included in our communities as we tell ourselves they were, then why have we now shunted them to one side so quickly and treat them as irrelevant to our collective pursuits?

The notion of family has always been held up as an ideal, as an answer to all manner of social problems. Yet there was always so much going on in families that did not fit with this idealization. The family is a complex entity. If we can be nurtured in families we can also be destroyed in families. All of us here know this. The surface appearance and what is supposed to happen is very different to what really transpires. The truth about family is held by all of us as private knowledge which finds little space in the public sphere. Our culture does not permit the more complex reading of family and its potential toxicity as well as potential strengths. Why is this so? Are we afraid of the necessary depression that such public disillusionment around family might bring? Have we no faith that after disillusionment we might find more solid ground for ourselves and our culture?

Another question. Structures are important. Living a long way from the workplace and having to commute long hours is not necessarily something the individual can manage long term and has a huge impact on the quality of life and on mental health. But apparently immovable structures and strictures in the world can mask the degree to which we collude with the forces that shape us.

For example Dublin is now held up internationally as an instance of how not to plan a city. It is celebrated internationally as a planning fiasco. A city with a relatively small population manages to sprawl over an area greater than Los Angeles. Commuting dominates and damages so many lives. It makes the development of community almost impossible. Why did we let this happen despite the many warnings over so many years? Its not all down to politicians taking bribes. Don't we value ourselves enough to protest effectively?

It's often said that we are more individualistic nowadays, but are we? If a large group are following a similar path in the direction of corporate profit at the expense of other values or even in the direction of disastrous city planning, how can we say, in any meaningful sense, that they are individualistic? Surely it's more true to say that we live in a deeply conformist time where little real individuality is to be found.

Conformism which is a defence, is now on a scale and at a depth that it has become difficult to see for what it is. Consumerism on the scale now evident here is about conforming And conformism is always rooted in deep anxiety. Why are we so afraid to

appear different, to break with the herd? What is this anxiety about? Is it the old existential anxiety about who I am and why I'm here which is denied and avoided by means of addictions or defences? Or is it something else? Is it about our fear of limits and boundaries, the fact that we die and others around us die, the fact that we can't merge with someone else to avoid the pain of life however much we might want to?

Do we lack real confidence to be ourselves and for that to be enough? Does that explain our conformity?

Certainly in the past we afflicted ourselves with impossible ideals and impossible loyalties resulting in the splitting of the psyche, between light and dark, good and bad, sober and drunk, outwardly conformist and inwardly rebellious. Is this splitting still going on in us only in a more disguised form? Do we find it difficult to be whole people in the world rather than split people? Are we afraid would we might become too boring to ourselves if we became whole? Are we afraid to be criticised, to have to stand alone without defences, just as we are?

Hand-wringing and blaming always seems preferable to any kind of accurate self-reflection, to the hard work of seeing our part in how things are.

It is only when we give up our blaming of others, of circumstances, of fate or even our blaming of God and take responsibility now for how we are now and what we have

created, that we make progress. What we have is what we want. It must be the case.

There is nobody to blame.

It is not easy to stop blaming. It is not easy to see our part in things as they are. But that is the only way that personal change or any real change takes place.

Our apparent lack of psychological capacity leaves us ill-equipped to help our young people, to support them with psychological insight and awareness. We know that young men in their late teen and twenties are committing suicide at an increasing rate. In each case there are stages on the way to such tragic acts. These stages are internal not usually externalised. Young men need us to be attuned to this, not hiding in our defences or our complacency.

It's well known that young girls and young women in the 14 to 21 age group are increasingly prone to self-starvation on the one hand and obesity on the other. These extremes are very striking and, especially with self starvation, quite alarming. Eating disorders in this age group are fast becoming the norm not the exception. The regression to a pre-pubescent appearance among many young women suggests a deep unease with the progression towards womanhood.

Young women in this age group are in a group which is desired. Our collective culture projects onto them in terms of expectation, longing, frustration sexual and otherwise. They are set up as 'the models' metaphorically and sometimes in reality. Is full-bodied womanhood too difficult a step for them to take and if so why? Surely young women

need all of us to be attuned to these pressures, to be able to interpret accurately and empathically what might be happening for them at a deeper level.

What is clearly needed now is a new psychological sophistication grounded in psychological curiosity and characterised by a willingness to ask the hard and searching questions. We have to be prepared to enter the zone of useful but still perhaps frightening confusion before we discover what is solid and what is ephemeral. We have to challenge our defences and avoidances, to subject our comfortable beliefs and defensive habits to scrutiny, not in order to weaken ourselves but to make ourselves and our society stronger and more authentic, so that eventually we and our children can have, not only what we want, but what we truly need as well.

Thank you

