Creative liminality in the sickness journey

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The experience of diagnosis of a possibly fatal syndrome involves learning that a status as “normal” has been critically changed and one’s body has become unknowable with negative connotations of stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). These life sentences have to be re-negotiated and roles and behaviours re-learned (Jewkes, 2013). Those who learn suddenly that they are living with degenerative conditions (Pawsey, 2014) find these role-reversals hard to understand, new skills complicated to learn and new roles difficult to negotiate (Afrell, Biguet and Rudebeck, 2007).

These realisations are often classified as Freudian bi-polar alternatives of acceptance or denial but “those whose understanding of the illness experience relies on the acceptance–denial framework may not listen when people with chronic illness attempt to tell their own unique story of how they have experienced life with illness “(Telford, Kralik and Koch, 2006).

This paper is based on an auto-ethnographic account of being suddenly and surprisingly diagnosed with a condition that occurred in a “triple whammy” of illness and disability, work-related stress and alienative locational exile. However, enforced liminality represents an opportunity for a return not to “normality” but to the opening of new experiential doors and the foundation of a new identity.

Medical and organizational labels based on assumptions about disease trajectory become irrelevant and the rhetorics of literary criticism and cultural history increasingly valuable. The voyager becomes “committed to a dualistic and vexed task of deconstruction and recovery” learning to destroy the master narrative that “that has repressed the sordid and traumatic memories of the past,” and the skills to enable the task of “rewriting that narrative into one that can sustain and reincorporate the repressed memories” (Schiff, 2009).

Thereafter one can “see from the other side of the hill” in which there is no “plain sight” and start the process of re-appraisal of the literary formats of ethnographic work, which like narrative history, possibly owe more to the “fictive” ancestors than scholars in an explanatory paradigm still largely infected with positivism commonly assume (Wagers, 2006). Concepts like double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) and liminality (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1967) may be equally valid. While as Horvath (2013) explains “liminal situations can be, and in actual fact in modern era, rather quite different: periods of uncertainty, anguish, even existential fear: a facing of the abyss in void”, attaining the other side of the hill may still represent an opportunity to enjoy the warmth of a different sun and to entertain the possibility of a more diverse reflexivity.

In this landscape neither acceptance or denial are true alternatives, and uncertainty, indecision, double consciousness, veiling, and open-ness to altered states become virtues.
enabling a viable reconstruction of identity and the discovery of roads previously not taken (Frost, 1920).

References


