

THE MENTAL HEALTH INDUSTRY
McMindfulness
Simon Perry, 25th January 2026

The question I want to ask this evening, and throughout this term, is whether it is mentally healthy to enjoy mental health when our world is crumbling.

There is such a thing as the mental health industry. There is money to be made after all, from people's misery. But ... if you're going to keep making money, then you have to keep people miserable. Because, if you enable people to thrive well, despite today's context of doom and gloom in the world at large, then there are all kinds of negative consequences for income stream.

We are undeniably in the midst of a mental health pandemic. At root is an economic system that sees widening gaps of poverty and wealth (despite Hans Rosling's valiant attempts at creative accounting). But flowing from this is the simple fact that it is increasingly difficult for most people to own a property, and to live as comfortably as their parents. The horizon full of economic gloom draws ever closer in ecological realities - where burning fossil fuels and resisting alternatives, places us in what might well be the final century of our species. And just to add to this, the now seeming inevitability of World War III as nation states compete for precious resources. Economic Gloom, Ecological Doom, World War III - alongside these, the Mental Health pandemic is simply the fourth horseman of the apocalypse!

This is the white noise of our context, and with each passing year the white noise grows louder.

So, is it possible, if we are actively engaged with the world, to be mentally healthy. Is it mentally healthy to enjoy mental health?

If we were to follow the dictates of the mental health industry, what would do about this? Why, we would put our fingers in our ears, and pretend it isn't happening! We would offer forms of counselling and mindfulness that do nothing, and absolutely nothing, to address the root cause of this pandemic. Instead, we individualise this crisis, to make it ALL ABOUT YOU!

Is all this gloomy white noise, manifesting itself in an anxiety that seems to have no cause? Then the fault is yours, so we will offer you therapies that enable you to accept your fate and keep you compliant.

Less than ten years ago, the University's Therapeutic Orthodoxy was Cognitive Behavioural Therapy - a form of counselling based on radical individualism, that nevertheless worked perfectly for situations that can never be challenged or changed. Those of us who opposed the University's initiative to roll out programmes of counselling as an answer to everything - were deemed awkward, traditionalist, anti-progress and so on. But of course, in less than three years, it had

become increasingly clear that CBT was not the answer to everything, and we moved on to a new orthodoxy.

Though perhaps the best example, and clearest illustration of this dynamic, is the equally individualistic practice of 'mindfulness'. That is, a form of concentration-training, designed to compartmentalise your life and distract you from the real world. It takes various forms, according to the convictions of the customer. More spiritual types can buy into the pseudo-Buddhist mystique; secular types can deem it 'concentration training' and so on. It is used in governments to protect politicians from the consequences of their decisions, by corporations to enable employees to comply with inhuman working conditions, and by the US military to make soldiers more efficient killers.

All of this critique is brought out brilliantly, in a little book by the practitioner of Buddhist mindfulness, Ronald Purser. It is called *McMindfulness* - and during lockdown, I interviewed this author about this book for our Chapel Youtube Channel.

The point he made over and over again, is simply that when you look at the causes of the particular mental health struggles that individuals have, they are so often societal causes. People lose jobs and homes and pensions, see their children saddled with debt or trapped in poverty. And how do you address these problems? By action in the real world of politics? Where you might join collectives of people powerful enough to change policy? No! No! No!

You retreat into your own little world, focus on a sultana, concentrate your mind, and forget all about that nasty stuff that cannot be changed. Mindfulness. It is a multi million dollar industry.

Is there an alternative?

So - today, we are celebrating Epiphany, which may sound like a hangover of Christmas - but given the Cambridge terms, this is our first chance to celebrate it. And epiphany is about the self-revealing, manifestation of God's action in the world, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. That is, someone who did not come into the world to endorse the dominant regimes of truth. Nor to question it just for the sake of it. But to bring liberty and justice for those who had long been denied those things. That is why people longed for him, and why they worshipped him, and it is reflected in the readings we hear today.

The most appropriate reading for the talk today, is probably the first psalm, that some of you may know.

Blessed is the one, who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the way of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of mockers, But his delight is in the law of the lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water

Which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

With the wicked, it is not so.

They are like the chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand at the judgement, nor sinners at the assembly of the

righteous, for the lord watches over the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm One, might sound to many like a word salad of religious gobbledegook, squeezed into metric form and Shakespearian English so it sounds quaint when a choir sings it. But if you follow it closely - it is far more sophisticated and practical than modern CBT or Mindfulness, if practiced well.

1. Firstly, it is not about *walking in the council of the wicked*. I.e., unwitting compliance with the dehumanising and destructive wisdom of unreflective main-stream-ism.
2. Nor *stand in the way of sinners*. Now sinners here, are not simply people that God hates because they know how to enjoy themselves. I can't remember which medieval theologian said that sin is 'Man turned in on himself.' It is close to the classical Greek conception of the 'idiot' - one who does not engage with the realities of the real world, the *polis*, but retreats instead into the comfort of their own private echo-chamber, hermetically sealed off from the real world of politics.
3. Nor *sit in the seat of mockers*. That is, doing nothing but complaining about the state of the world, or about those non compliant folk who dissent from the counsel of the wicked, but do not take any practical helpful action.
4. No, the person who is *blessed*, is one who *meditates*. That is, who is seriously attuned to themselves and the world, a kind of world-aware version of mindfulness. Meditation is making time, taking time, radical reflection - radical in the original sense of thinking right down the roots who you are as a person - and the roots of the difficulties you face.
5. And what do you meditate on? The Law of the Lord! Not, a religious manual for escaping from real life struggle via otherworldly fantasies. Here, the Law of any people, draws attention to corporate living, a way of living together based on justice (often translated as righteousness).

Understood that way, Psalm one reflects a far better therapeutic dynamic. One that does entail mindfulness, but one that does not *only* retreat into the privacy of my own individualised safe space, but instead, engages with the major economic, ecological injustices that manifest themselves in War and Misery, and a mental health pandemic.

This is what we will be exploring throughout the term, and to some extent, next term as well.

This, it seems to me, is an area where the College currently excels. The kind of support we offer as a College, both in an official and unofficial capacities, - to my mind - goes way beyond the limits of our resources, and I think, works extremely well. And this is well attested by our students in the last few years.

Of course, there is always room for improvement, and of course, we need to remain constantly aware of the world at large, and the way it impacts on the here and now of our own community. And that is why this is a topic that we will address this term, and to some extent, next.

The challenge, that we always face, is simply that of continuity between cause and symptom and solution and prevention. The causes of the mental health pandemic at large, the way it manifests itself at the personal level here and now, and the kind of support offered.

In terms of prevention - that is something we will explore in coming weeks.