

All Problems are Betrayals

Young people carry the sense of an original, unforgiveable betrayal

14-year-old Carlos is angry. For weeks, his therapist has been gently reminding him that they're about to finish, but for some reason, Carlos has refused to hear, accusing his therapist now of abandoning him....

16-year-old Suzanne is about to leave school. No longer protesting that she can't wait to leave 'this dump', she's become silent, moody, irritable, afraid....

So much of young people's distress – their despair, panic, rage - stems from a primitive sense of betrayal. Why does the world have to be so unfair? Why do good things have to come to an end? Why do people always break their promises?

Simon's girlfriend has just broken up with him and he's in bits, wondering whether his life will ever again have meaning....

Natasha's mum is having another child. Natasha tells her mum she's pleased but, secretly, admits to being furious....

There's a famous story about a father encouraging his son to climb the stairs, catching him every time the boy jumps from higher and higher until the boy jumps from the topmost stair and his father lets him fall. "Why?" screams the boy, injured and distraught. "To teach you never to trust anyone!" says his father.

The story makes me shudder. I wonder how much the father is actually preparing his son for the brutalities of life or merely reinforcing what the boy knew already but was hoping might somehow not be the case: that people can't be trusted, that life always lets you down.

In my experience, even the most damaged young people - those whose lives seem to have been entirely devoid of love and hope, of any good experiences at all - are able to describe a better world, a world of justice, kindness and love. These young people appear to have had no glimpse whatsoever of any of these things in their lives and yet they can describe exactly what they mean: a peaceful world, a promised land somewhere over the rainbow, a tranquil place to rest....

So where does the image come from? Given the desultory nature of their lives since they were born, my guess is that it comes from before birth, the trace memory of a time when they really were held safely, kept warm and looked after unconditionally: a blissful time in a blissful womb.

"So why," they rage, "can't my life now be like that now? Why does everything have to be so messed up?"

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Shelley's lost her job.... Steven's grandfather is dying.... Nancy's friends have stopped talking to her.... Adam's failed his exam....

Young people are inclined to see every problem as a betrayal of some sort because their birth was, in effect, a betrayal, a promise broken, a hurt that's never been healed. It's as if, once upon a time, the world made a promise to an unborn baby, "This is how it's going to be!", and then promptly went and broke its promise. So young people either spend the rest of their lives trying to recapture that half-imagined, half-remembered experience, or they find a way of living with life as it is, potentially full of good things but never quite living up to expectations: never perfect but maybe – just maybe sometimes – good enough.