

Everything will not (necessarily) be all right

Young people have to learn to live with chaos. And that's difficult.

Libby comes to see me because she's never failed at anything before, and now that it's finally happened, things are unravelling and she can't stop crying. Reece had always thought that his parents would be together, so is distraught at their sudden break-up and is taking his anger out on everyone. Annaliese talks with fear in her eyes of despair, vengeance, suicide, of feeling betrayed by the very person in her life she'd always thought she could trust. Darcus was apparently overwhelmed by anger – seemingly from nowhere - and ended up hitting a teacher. He sits in my room, desolate, sobbing, unable to understand what it was that happened to him. "I don't know why I did it!"

Young people are always trying to make sense of something they can't name, something sensed and always likely to erupt without warning....

Growing up, we live with the perpetual threat of chaos, of life changing suddenly, of our parents abandoning us, of getting lost, losing control, dying. Our fledgling defence mechanisms are forever alert to danger and to unforeseen attack, even when we know that the chances of these things happening are slim. Yet still sometimes chaos catches us unawares, still sometimes it threatens to crush our sense of ourselves, and when that happens, we either break down and give up, or we find ways of living through the chaos, of living with it.

Fifteen-year-old Lois is a perfectionist. "I've always been like that," she says, "but I just don't seem to enjoy anything anymore. I don't even want to go out or see my friends, and I don't know why I don't, but I don't!"

I wonder to myself whether, having held chaos at bay for so long in her life, Lois is now realizing that she can't go on like this, that something has to change, that she has to find a way of accommodating the potential chaos of sexual love and other strong feelings, the chaos of the world's uncertainty. It might be that her perfectionism is no longer adequate to the task of dealing with the complexities of the world. As Wieland-Burston (1992) writes, "...it may be only when chaos erupts that we are forced to realize that we have come to a dead-end. Our old, adopted points of view prove insufficient for our present life circumstances. We need to recover the natural flexibility of our personality" (p106).

It takes most of us a long time to realize that our parents aren't going to step in and make everything all right. And sometimes it takes parents a long time to realize that they can't make everything all right for their children either, that no amount of planning or positivity is going to stop bad things from sometimes happening, is going to rid us of the potential in life for chaos.

So young people oscillate between believing, like Lois, that they can control everything, and believing that they can control nothing, that they might as well give up. Like Lois, they try various strategies to stop bad things from happening and to control the chaos within themselves. They try

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working obsessively or not eating. They try self-harming, or taking drugs, or a whole range of other behaviours designed to control their experience of the world.

And when that doesn't work, they need reminding that chaos is normal: that their attempts to control the potential chaos of life were never guaranteed to succeed; that life is always about being able to control some things and not others; that we can never entirely shield ourselves against adversity; that we have to find a way of living with a degree of chaos. Otherwise young people persist in the belief that sheer hard work, that planning, that education, that rationality and determination will be enough, and then when those things aren't enough, life just feels impossible.

"Being with friends is difficult," I suggest to Lois, "because we never know what they're thinking or how they're going to react."

"It shouldn't be like that, though, should it!" she says. "Not if they're your friends. You should look forward to seeing them...."

I tell her that it's never that simple, that friends can be exciting but also scary, that we can love them but also be let down by them, that they can support us but also turn on us. "People are a mixture," I say. "In fact, life's a mixture!"

This isn't what Lois wants to hear, but I think it's what she needs to hear. In the long run, shielding her from life won't be doing her any favours.

REFERENCE

Wieland-Burston, J. (1992) *Chaos and Order in the World of the Psyche*. London: Routledge.