

# 'MAYBE I AM WORTHWHILE'

## a true encounter

I wrote you recently regarding the employment problems of the mentally ill. I regret that I may have equated employment of any kind to apparent "normality" and "salvation from a life of misery".

I would like to share some of my recent experiences and impressions with you.

After my first emotional breakdown, I desperately sought employment. After half a dozen or so attempts, I was able to stick with one job - yes, as a typist - for one year. (Typists are people. They, too, have their story.) At any rate it was a year of great misery. I was competent as a typist, but my supervisors informed me that I was totally lacking in initiative and drive. Weighed down with depression I slept every lunch hour in the ladies' lounge and also slept immediately after returning home from work. I was absent from work more than was necessary. Anti-depressants increased my appetite and I gained weight.

It seemed clear that I was a person of little value. All aspirations crushed under the realities of weakness and fatigue, I allowed myself to be completely defined as a person by my work role and by the attitudes of my employers. I tried to explain to my employers that I had been emotionally ill and that in time I would change, but it was to no avail. It was clear that they did not believe in me. I did try to change, but it seemed futile and painfully slow. In desperation I quit the job. On my last day they refused to give me my cheque until the last hour for fear I would leave early.

I became a nursing aide. I worked as hard as I could, never being late or absent. It was another world. I worked on a floor consisting of gynaecology patients and female geriatric patients, many of whom were classified as requiring Level 4 care. I learned how to feed and to bathe them, to provide fresh linen and gowns at regular intervals. But I wished there could have been more laughter and some song, a little joy to illuminate the stark white antiseptic rooms. I worked seven and eight day stretches, including weekends and holidays. I worked there as long as I could, six months. I knew I could never be a nurse.

Once, having read Germaine Greer, I thought it would be nice to work at what is considered to be one of the "male" occupations. Alas, I lack the strength to be that kind of liberated woman. It seems clear that I may never find a ready-to-wear occupation.

I have returned to the world of the typist. I work on temporary assignments. I would really like to find permanent part-time work. However, it seems that no one would consider hiring me on a permanent basis.

I am not yet ready to write myself off. Society seems capable of writing me off; a small voice inside me keeps whispering persistently that, yes, I do have something to offer, I do have some small abilities as yet untested, I do have a right to be here.

I would like part-time work. Unemployment Insurance provides no security; it does not last forever. Welfare satisfies one's dire physical needs. They are not interested in paying for one's aspirations, particularly if these aspirations are not going to lead to employment. If I can satisfy only my dire physical needs, there seems no reason to go on living.

I would like part-time work. I would like to have the time to visit the elderly, to teach a retarded child on a part-time basis. Why would I do these things? Partly for selfish reasons, I admit: "...some faint feeling of confidence that my smile...my presence...has value and can give life." "...I can do something worthwhile...maybe I am worthwhile..." (Jean Vanier, "Tears of Silence".)

I would like part-time work. I would like the time to study conversational French. For no practical reason. It happens to be part of my heritage.

I would like part-time work because I no longer aspire to live in an expensive apartment. I did once. It was my refuge from the world, my prison. I would now like a room. I would hope to challenge its utilitarian nature with shades of hot pink and brown. And I would pray that it not become a prison but a warm and happy nook with a welcome mat.

I would like part-time work because after a full day of typing I am drained.

But I can find no part-time job. There is no guaranteed annual income. Welfare will not pay for my French lessons, my other aspirations or the decoration of my room. What is the answer?

They say I am mentally ill. I have met many people during the course of my illness, some shattered, bleeding egos. We share our pain in group therapy - my sense of the reality of others forever altered by these true encounters.

What is the answer? I don't know. I only know that I encountered in print the hope that is Jean Vanier. I quote from "The He of Silence":

"he who clutches desperately to security - to every day habits, work, organization, friends, family... closed off... no longer lives: more than security, life needs adventure risk dynamic activity self-giving presence to others"

"the worthy lady, over rimmed glasses, saying: 'lazy' the bank manager shouting: 'stupid' are right...in a way... the miserable man knows it only well his misery is the awareness of misery

'i remain in the vomit of my worthlessness...'

"you are a human person important mysterious infinitely precious what you have to say is important because it flows from a human person in you there are those seeds of the infinite those germs of love...of beauty which must rise from the earth your misery so humanity be fulfilled. if you do not rise then something will be missing if you are not fulfilled it is terrible you must rise again on the third day... rise again because we all need you for you are a child of God you, sam john willie mae my brother...my sister be loved beloved".