

My First Psychiatrist

Brian Coatney

I went to a psychiatrist for the first time at age forty-one. As a younger adult, the idea of even needing a psychiatrist was unthinkable, though in the years before going, I increasingly worried about having a break down. Fear of our worst fears doesn't help: we intensify efforts to keep ourselves while that same effort wears us out more. Apart from knowing the keeping power of God in our lives, we have only what we can do to retard the inevitable.

My resistance wore down so that by 1991, depression became a way of life. I frantically tried reading spiritual and self-help books. At one point, I had a stack of books by the window where I read, and next to them, a stack of note-cards with principles and insights. None of this helped because the ballast I held onto was myself, though I didn't see that. If someone said, "Brian, you are self-absorbed," I didn't relate to that. If someone said, "You live in your head," or, "You obsess," I nodded with false assent and sunk back into my more depressed efforts to do something to make myself feel better.

By early 1991, I looked at mental health treatment as a possibility, and so in desperation agreed to a local counselor's referral to a psychiatric facility in Nashville, an hour away. There I met a gentle, middle-age man who never condemned me, though sagely and with mild humor agreed that I had much to see. After a couple of sessions with him, he asked me to list my most pressing twenty problems. He handed me a tablet and a pencil, and I began.

After putting down a dozen things that really bothered me, I put as thirteenth, "I think I am unique." I didn't really know what this meant, but the doctor had hinted to me in counseling that this was a problem as well as my obsessive-

compulsive drive, which he mitigated a little by saying, "The world rides the backs of obsessive-compulsives." I understood that a little. But back to the "I think I am unique," I had no idea what the doctor meant by that.

After I finished my list, he came in, and reading over it, he circled my number thirteen and said, "This should be first on your list." Again, I listened, at a loss for understanding. I would like to tell you here that treatment went well and I came home improved. That did not happen. Instead, depression worsened, mostly by trying to fight it and trying to say and do what I thought I should. I lived feeling suicidal for over two more years before taking a hundred sleeping pills, hoping to die and get out of suffering. Thankfully, I decided after taking them to get help, and so a friend called an ambulance, and doctors pumped my stomach.

I still had no answer though. Later, the Lord showed me that He had told me His answer in the gentlest way many times without my believing. I remembered days working in a job where I cut fabric at a saw, thinking for hours at a time, "I wish I were dead." A scripture often came to mind in those hours: "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). I never thought of saying, "Yes, this is the real truth; I don't need any other death."

Not until 1994 did I get so tired of looking at myself that I was willing to look away from myself. One night, on my way to a twelve step meeting, unexpectedly the still, small voice of the Lord said, "Stop obsessing about your family and look at Me." This took me by surprise; I didn't even have a Bible anymore since every time I opened it I seemed to read a terrifying verse about damnation. When one goes through this, former theological discussions about eternal security don't comfort much. I thought, "If a person can lose his salvation, I may have lost mine." Nothing softened this fear.

But here came this gentle voice, "Stop obsessing about your family and look at Me." At first I mildly hesitated, thinking, "I

don' t understand." The Holy Spirit did not ask me for understanding but to obey, which I did. A tiny star of light comforted me. This was the beginning of a lost magi following an opening trail in the heavens to the birth of Christ in me, not as a doctrine but as a living person known to me and loved more than I loved myself.

More light came— for months mostly through praise music and a willingness to thank God in all things. God sent people into my life like my friend Barry in Charlotte and Louis Tucker in Concord, NC. Barry' s minister gave me a Bible, though I feared reading it again because of the fearful passages. I told the Lord one morning, " I don' t want to read the Bible; I have hundreds, maybe thousands of verses stored up in me from reading and memorizing: if You want to quicken any of those verses, I am willing." Amazingly, He did, and I also began to read the Scriptures again for five minutes in the morning. I noticed that the Holy Spirit gave me a stream of comforting and assuring verses about Christ' s work of forgiveness and restoration.

The Lord began to restore me, but not in a way one would think. Instead of bringing me back to the place from which I had fallen, the Lord showed me a new Brian that I had never been— one like a little babe or a toddler. My consciousness was now something that I had never experienced in my life; my sense of my personhood was not anything that I had ever known. Everything was new.

My life became one of looking away from myself to the person of Christ. This sounds like a denial of the self, as if we are not precious and loved as humans. Why then should we not love ourselves and try to fix ourselves? The secret of the new birth does not come this way, the way of looking at ourselves and affirming ourselves as humans. Instead, as we lose ourselves in another— the person of Christ— we don' t care anymore if we disappear.

Something remarkable and unexpected (that is to us) occurs.

I suddenly met a Brian that I had never seen or know— not one of my own making or even imagining. I just popped into being as a new person, and this person I loved and respected. I remembered a talk my friend Bill Bower had given years before in which he said, “ Bill Bower reappeared in a magnified way.” At the time Bill gave that talk, I felt enamored in spirit with what he said, but I could not relate to his experience. Now I understood, though I had long forgotten his words and was not trying to replicate any experience. I was simply worn out with self-analysis and ready to lose myself in the person of Christ.

As I did this, however, my humanity, a new humanity, sprang effortlessly out of I knew not what. I liked this. I have lived this way ever since: I don’ t look to myself to find myself. I look to Christ to know Him, and “ all these things are added unto you,” as the Scripture says. I don’ t offer this as a formula. Formulas are for trying, and I don’ t try anymore; I live a simple life of receiving and enjoying the life of Christ. Suffering didn’ t go away, bad feelings didn’ t go away, and negative thoughts did not stop bombarding me. A new life though, of His keeping, sustained me and still does! My first psychiatrist was right: I am not unique. We all have the same core fears and the same possibility for abundant life.