

INTRODUCTION

"In our highly civilized world, we acknowledge that an illness is a serious one by the fact that we don't dare talking directly about it. [...] But when silence or language tricks contribute maintaining an abuse which should be corrected or an affliction which can be relieved, no other solution remains but to speak clearly and to expose the obscenity hiding behind the mantle of words."

Albert Camus.

Chronic mental disorders are the curse of mankind since the dawn of the human species on earth. They are so to speak a counterpart that some members of the species have to repay in order to allow that all may belong to mankind, they are the ransom the species has to pay for consciousness and language, for these unique features which are distinctive of mankind and which we are so proud of.

Despite the spectacular advances achieved by man in sciences and techniques during the past five or six decades, what we are used to call mental illnesses is still very poorly understood. Remedies intended to relieve them are still far from being satisfactory.

Possibly, we can capture a glimpse of the actual horror these disorders carry only by realizing that they affect and destroy all which, specifically, makes us what we are: our identity, our personality, our feelings, our reason, thus, our humanity. The seemingly persistent ignorance and general lack of concern for chronic mental disorders and their victims at once constitute one of the most blatant and also one of the least tolerable scandals of our supposedly enlightened times.

Being powerless against chronic and severe mental disorders entails that these are ever only euphemistically alluded to, even by those spending their best efforts at relieving them.

A few belgian associations involved in "mental health" have decided to mark year 2001 as "the Year of Mental Health". I am convinced that such decision is just a poor gimmick, a mostly symbolic and somewhat pitiable gesture, a way of paying lip service to "Mental Health", whatever the latter means for them. Its only purpose can be to convey to its actors the cheap, comforting (albeit fallacious) feeling of duty fulfilled.

It is high time to remember what Albert Camus said, about fifty years ago already, and to try to take him at his word, at last. That's what we are beginning to do here.

Prof. Jean Desclin (april 2001)