

Chapter 5 (In 'Help', Tom Shakespeare (2000) Venture Press, pp. 85-89)

Conclusion

In the performance of help, we take on different and changing roles. Being help recipients and help providers, helpless and helpful are conditions we have all shared, regardless of impairment or age or social situation. Yet the way in which we experience help can be profoundly different. The argument of this book has been that the social relations of help require reformation, so that these differences do not embody dependency and stigma. Change is needed in the way we occupy roles and conceive helping.

Anthony Trollope's satirical novel *The Warden* concerns a charitable institution run by the Anglican Church which becomes highly controversial. Hiram's Hospital had been set up as the result of a fifteenth-century bequest, in order to house twelve destitute retired labourers. The warden of the institution, Septimus Harding, is a benign old clergyman who lives with his youngest daughter and spends more of his time playing his cello than actively looking after anyone. However, the old men are happy with the situation, and particularly appreciate Mr Harding's care. Mr Bold, a radical young reformer, discovering this state of affairs, starts a campaign against what he sees as the manifest injustice that the will is mainly benefiting the warden himself, rather than the twelve recipients of the charity. Supported by *The Jupiter*, a polemical newspaper, he argues that this is typical church corruption, and that all the income from Hiram's investment should go directly to the old men, rather than mostly to Mr Harding.

Many modern controversies are somewhat anticipated by Trollope's plot. Is it better for older people to live in institutions or in the community? Should welfare take the form of providing collective services or direct payments so that people can buy their own forms of support? The theme of a charity becoming institutionalized, to the extent that it mainly benefits the people it employs rather than the people it helps is very familiar. As modern readers, our sympathies are divided. Mr Harding is presented as a benign and sincere man, who is shocked to discover that he may be benefiting immorally from money intended for others. He acts kindly and honourably throughout, and while he may be said to be rather naïve and other-worldly, most audiences would not judge him harshly. However, Mr Bold is also presented as motivated by honesty and principle. He regrets the difficulty his campaign will cause Mr Harding and his family, but he feels duty-bound to continue his struggle against the religious establishment. The modern reader may consider him stubbornly self-important, not to say priggish and pompous, but his good intentions are not in doubt.

The church authorities, needless to say, do not emerge well from Trollope's representation. Archdeacon Grantly in particular is depicted as reactionary, stubborn and fairly unprincipled. His slippery justifications for the status quo are easily seen as self-serving and elitist. In particular, he is disparaging of the rights and needs of the old men, who, he feels, get as much as they deserve at present, and are ungrateful to expect more. It must be said that the pensioners do not emerge unscathed from Trollope's satire either: the majority are presented as being avaricious and resentful, or else naive to the point of foolishness.

A key moral episode in the book occurs when Mr Harding's daughter Eleanor visits Mr Bold, to beg him to desist from his campaign. It needs to be noted that not only is the reformer a close friend of Mr Harding himself, but he is also the prospective husband of Eleanor, who is the best friend of his sister. Eleanor's arguments for Mr Bold to stop his action are based on his sense of kinship with the Harding family, and the kindness he feels to Mr Harding, and implicitly the love he has for Eleanor. In response, the reformer, although moved by her arguments, holds fast to his belief that an injustice has occurred and that this must be set right. Despite the human casualties that may result, he is morally bound to resolve the case in favour of the charitable intention behind Hiram's will.

The impasse between Eleanor and Bold could be analysed as an encounter between the ethic of justice and the ethic of care: abstract rights and rules are counterposed to grounded responsibilities and relationships. For Bold, it is justice which matters, notwithstanding the individuals and personalities involved. Eleanor can only see the human beings who will be hurt by the rigid application of principle. In *The Warden*, we are clearly meant to conclude that it is Eleanor who is right. The reformer's campaign will damage Septimus and Eleanor Harding, and probably derail his own relationship with Eleanor. It is implied that, while the church authorities deserve any defeats coming to them, the old men themselves may well not benefit from the results. They will have given up security and well-being for the lure of money, most of which will be eaten up in lawyers' bills. Trollope, however, is writing a sentimental novel, not a political or ethical tract. It is precisely the point of such fictions that the reader is swayed by the moral dilemmas that individuals face when personal relations and public duties conflict. The skill of an author lies in depicting characters in all their complexity and passion, which may sometimes mean that the reader feels sympathy for thoroughly reprehensible figures, and is alienated from those who do good, but are difficult to identify with.

What message, then, should those anxious to see a reform of our society's approach to personal help and care read in *The Warden*? It suggests that changing the status quo is very difficult, and that the debates which are presented are in some ways irreconcilable. Good motives may have bad results, and reform may be derailed or diverted so that the overall situation does not actually improve. Those who thunder most may be more interested in political advantage than in the well-being of those whose cause they espouse. Sometimes change will lead to conflict between the

interests of those working in the welfare state and the interests of those whom the welfare state is intended to benefit. Social progress in general will have individual costs in particular. It also suggests that being well-meaning is not always enough. Many people working as professional or voluntary carers are very well-intentioned. Yet they work within a culture of care which fosters dependency and undermines the human rights of those who receive help.

Thus far, *The Warden* seems rather a conservative book - which reminds us that Trollope was the favourite author of the Conservative prime minister, John Major. Yet the scepticism about reform is matched with a serious critique of traditional social institutions (such as the Church). And the view of human nature is not a conservative one, because almost all the participants in the novel are regarded warmly. In particular, love and affection -between Eleanor and John, between Mr Harding and almost everyone -seems to conquer all. In an imperfect world, change is necessary but not always successful: *'Human reality is messy and ambiguous - and so modern decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent'* (Bauman, 1993, 32). Human beings are' flawed, and the social institutions which they devise go wrong and fail. Yet the impetus to love and to help continues.

Helping - or acting as a moral agent - is a difficult process, in which it is not rules but conscience which opens the way forward. What is it to help? It is certainly not to overwhelm, overtake or invade, but it is to strengthen and even, if necessary, to carry for a while. It is a mutual process, in which there is agency not just in giving, but also in receiving. Help is a collaboration, a shared participation in a common enterprise, but it involves a delicate balancing act, just as with all moral action. Bauman provides the image of riding a bicycle, which involves the delicate coordination of mind and eye and hands and feet. Although we may falloff, we get back on and try again.

This book has challenged the traditional morality of help, and criticised the institutions and professions which embody the imperative, but this is by no means to undermine the duty for members of human communities to act ethically, to provide help. Our task is to remove the cultural conditioning which leads us to impose the burdens of stigma on those who are outside what is considered to be the norm, and to challenge the inequality which contaminates the fields of health and welfare. As Bauman himself concludes,

*'Contrary to one of the most uncritically accepted philosophical axioms, there is no contradiction between the rejection of (or scepticism towards) the ethics of socially conventionalized and rationally "founded" norms, and the insistence that it does matter; and **matter morally**, what we do and from what we desist. '* Emphasis original (Bauman, 1993, 250)

Birds in the Chimney

Julia Darling

in the end
we are all winged birds
caught in chimneys

crashing around rooms
searching for doors

believing, with our
beating hearts
that somewhere

in a dark hole
there is a light

a place where our wings
can find their span
where safety

is open plan
boundaries are all beneath
our feet

we daren't stop flying at the wall
until we drop, exhausted

surrendering to
our pokey rooms, the confines
of rectangular years.