

I've changed my mind: the importance of reflection in our digital age

A major problem within a single artistic endeavor is that the snapshot in time gives the consumer little access to the thoughts of the artist post completion. This thought popped into my head as I read an Email from the John Byrne Award:

"You've shared work with us in the past. If you'd like to do so again, you've 8 days left."

I immediately recognized that the man who submitted that essay, seven months prior, no longer exists. Like a child with a loose tooth they know they shouldn't wiggle, I opened the essay to confront this cold stranger. I slowly read the anonymously authored sub-heading:

"Science vs human compassion: re-evaluating my own neuroscience research after care in a failing psychiatric hospital" (link available at end of this essay).

Only Theresa May's paradoxically titled memo *"No deal is better than a bad deal. Plan A is better than no deal. Plan A is a bad deal. Move onto plan B..."* beats the above sub-heading for 2018's worst titled document. Critique number one completed! The anonymity of the article highlights the shame encased around the pain evidently dripping from the words staring back at me.

I reread the article and the main tenets hold true. Yes, the BBC1 Scotland documentary highlighting the lack of care in the hospital I was admitted to was shocking. Yes, medication has helped others and I, yet the serendipitous nature of their original discovery is concerning for future discoveries. Yes, the reductive nature of science and psychiatry has the potential to counterproductively box and label the human condition as evidenced by labelling homosexuality as an illness as late as the 1960s.

However, it is difficult to read the above as I recognise how fast and scattered my mind was. Furthermore, the pathological depression had caused an obvious inherent bias. Where was the compassion I set out to highlight? Therefore, I aim to correct this bias now by recounting compassionate moments, post July, which have aided my recovery. In doing so, I wish to argue that it is imperative that consumers of art and opinions must assume creators' emotion and views are ever-changing; this is vital in the digital age where a decision to publish your views to the world is quicker than making a cup of tea.

A pivotal compassionate highlight involves spending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with a firm friend I made whilst hospitalized. To laugh, sing songs and dance with someone you met at your lowest point in your life is such a liberating and beautiful experience. We plan for these festivities to continue into 2019 and beyond.

Secondly, I moved in with my best friends and their two incredible toddlers. The children didn't see Uncle Sean's depression but only the fun and care I was able to provide. The eldest now draws all her monsters with Uncle Sean's headphones (never underestimate a 3 year olds ability to subtly and humorously dish it out) and the youngest adorably sings "A-B-Sean" melting my heart each time.

Furthermore, at a kid's birthday party, I met a quick and hilarious young man whose imagination had no boundaries; I recognized he was on the autistic spectrum and listened with delight to his stories. He gave me a hug when I left the party and his mum thanked me for giving him the time of day. For days afterwards, this caused me to spiral into deep depression as having these interactions in our current society sometimes seems impossible, but I have faith again that such personal interactions will become more frequent in the months and years ahead.

Lastly, I returned to TRNSMT festival for the second year with my 16 year old sister; even though I am 14 years her senior, I still have the better dance moves. With her kindness, humour and insight, she sincerely communicated it was one of the best days of her life regardless of my illness. Altogether, these anecdotes, juxtaposed with my words seven months prior, demonstrates I now have a greater ability to both receive and generate compassion highlighting blind spots in my prior thinking.

The internet has an amazing capacity to allow people to share their opinions and emotions; I am thankful for the John Byrne Award for publishing my anonymous article which resulted in a huge catharsis when I felt voiceless. However, if I didn't receive their kind offer of resubmission, I would have forgotten the overtly negative picture, stored indefinitely in cyber space, which has not stood the test of time.

Time has an amazing capacity to allow people to grow in unexpected ways; mistakes and victories will be encountered along the journey. I fervently believe that if I read a comment from years ago that is either racist, homophobic, or sexist then I am due the author the graceful assumption that they may have changed their position in the time that has elapsed. The 2018 Emmy winning "*White Right: Meeting The Enemy*" by the courageous Deeyah Khan is an uplifting experience demonstrating a change of opinion is still possible in our divided times. Conversely, a smiling picture of a family years ago can mask a myriad of painful events that have arisen since the shutter clicked; they may need more compassion and kindness than you could ever imagine.

Changing how you inwardly reflect on your thoughts and your interactions with the world is a herculean task often requiring medical and psychological help. However, the potential benefits for your mental health and well-being can be life-changing. Conversely, allowing others the time and space to reflect gives them the opportunity to change their position, and is the counter responsibility of having free-speech. I can only hope we continue to express and challenge our opinions in equal measure as we become ever interconnected in a digital world.

Original article: <https://www.johnbyrneaward.org.uk/blog/will-science-or-compassion-improve-mental-health-anonymous?rq=compassion>