



ENCOUNTER

“Unless we adapt and change, we are brittle”

The psychotherapist Julia Samuel on grief in an age of crisis

By Leo Robson

Shortly before I was due to meet the psychotherapist Julia Samuel at her home in west London, she sent me an email naming the time and place, and then wrote: “Not sure why I need to reconfirm the confirmation!” I replied that this would be the first thing I would ask her about. Then I instantly retracted my half-joking remark and emphasised that my questions would be confined to her new book, *This Too Shall Pass*.

It turned out that my anxiety had been misplaced. Samuel is a follower of the American psychologist Carl Rogers, who in the 1960s pioneered

the tradition of humanistic psychology. As a result, Samuel believes that we are able truly to know ourselves and trust each other. She hadn’t found my suggestion aggressive or invasive – she raised the subject again herself – and the situation wasn’t mired in unconscious complexities. I’d been feeling curious. She’d been feeling nervous.

“I find this reverse role – you interviewing me – extremely uncomfortable,” she explained. We were sitting in her therapy room, a few months before Covid-19 locked the world down, in a pair of Ikea armchairs. She pointed to

an empty third Poäng. “My favourite position in the room is over there.”

Samuel, who turned 60 in 2019, acknowledged a “battling relationship” between being “not that interested in myself” and “wanting to be known”. It was a victory for the second impulse that led to her career as a writer, and her appearance, five years ago, on *Desert Island Discs*. “I was so flattered!” she admitted. “I’d been practising my list for decades.”

The producer of the Radio 4 show had told her that nothing was out of bounds. Samuel was required to talk not only about her upbringing as a member

of the Guinness family (which founded the Irish merchant bank Guinness Mahon in 1836), and her work as the first grief counsellor at St Mary’s Hospital in London – a post she held for 23 years – but also her close friendship with Princess Diana and her responsibilities as godmother to Prince George.

After the episode aired in 2015 she was approached by a literary agent. At first she resisted the idea of writing a book (“it would be like homework for ever”), then one morning she woke up and dashed off a proposal. The result was *GriefWorks* (2017), a meditation on what had long been her specialist area of working with bereaved families. Now she has published a follow-up – a collection of case studies on the theme of crisis and transition, or what she calls “living losses”.

Samuel is adamant that people shouldn’t seek to be stoical. “Unless we adapt and change, we are brittle,” she said. “And when we’re brittle, we crack.” She argues that if you deny pain and discomfort, you also “incrementally block your capacity for joy, so your bandwidth for experience is narrowed”. She recommends that people keep a journal.

But she is also wary of “promiscuous honesty” – “constantly telling everyone how you feel”. Apart from anything else, it isn’t sustainable. “We need a stiff upper lip, we need defences, we need our functioning self, to feel we know our way around and have agency and competency, particularly if we’re engaging in the world.”

Samuel argued that heightened emotional sensitivity can really be a form of repression. “Reading a book can never be ‘triggering,’” she said. “It may bring up difficult feelings for you and maybe you’ll have to learn what they’re telling you. But if you shut them down and blame the professor, you’re narrowing your capacity to engage with life. And that is not going to

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work for you long term.”

While some people are granted their desire not to experience distress, others have been denied the right to suffer. Samuel referred to the description, in a 2019 *Guardian* editorial, of the “privileged pain” that David Cameron felt at the death of his son Ivan, and regrets the way that labels of all kinds are used “to disconnect from the humanity of individual people”.

Samuel embraces the person-centred approach to therapy because it isn’t, as she put it, “judgy”. Unless a client’s account of themselves “absolutely doesn’t match” what she deduces or observes, she is happy for them to tell their own stories. “If I can create an environment where I’m not looking for what’s unconscious or digging out the dark stuff – one where they begin to feel my empathy and that I’m unconditional – that frees them to open up more and they expand.”

She has more faith in the simple than in the cerebral. She claims that the phrase, “Feel the fear and do it anyway” – the title of Susan Jeffers’s 1987 bestseller – is a concept that has “changed people’s lives” but says that she found Stephen Grosz’s more psychoanalytic *The Examined Life* – a recent classic in the case-study genre – elusive and cold.

“I like minutiae, knowing what people wear, the smells – the stuff.” In life, Samuel’s observations tend to be intimate and instinctive – a person seeming “flat,” or the sound made by someone’s laugh – and she hopes that her book will go some way to clarify the therapeutic process. “I don’t want people to think it’s some mysterious, magical room where things get resolved or that the therapist is some special person. I want everyone to know that it’s just a relationship – being listened to, and having an opportunity, in this cut-off time, to focus on yourself. It’s not really much more complicated than that.” ●

I hesitate to be gloomy, but I can’t help thinking of all the ways the plans for mass vaccination against Covid-19 could go wrong. Worried about post-Brexit transport blockages, ministers are already considering military planes to get vaccines into the country. But think of other stories you could be reading in the New Year.

Widely publicised side-effects – all vaccines have mild ones at least – persuade millions to refuse their jabs. A huge wave of infections, following the relaxation of rules over Christmas, puts thousands of NHS nurses and other staff out of action. Shortages of raw materials (already reported in some newspapers) slow vaccine manufacture. Several loads of vaccine prove useless because they were stored at the wrong temperature. It emerges Pfizer unwittingly provided the UK medicines regulator with incorrect data about the vaccine’s efficacy. Hackers put the computers that control distribution out of action.

Boris Johnson’s government promised a “world-beating” test and trace system which never materialised. Can we be confident it will deliver “world-leading” vaccinations?

The rule of law

A fundamental principle of law is that it applies, or should apply, to everyone, including rapists and murderers. The celebrities and Labour MPs who protest against Priti Patel’s deportations to Jamaica miss this point as much as the Home Secretary’s supporters. That some deportees are guilty of

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Mass vaccination, an Eton mess, and the *Guardian*’s silence on the Moore affair

Peter Wilby



relatively minor crimes or were victims of modern slavery, as protesters claim, is irrelevant. Even the worst criminals are entitled to due process and lawyers who can make the best possible case for them. Out of 36 due for deportation on 2 December, 23 had to be removed from the flight because judges considered the arguments for expelling them required further scrutiny. If Patel wants to throw people out of the country, she should ensure her case is legally watertight. Or wait until she has removed all human rights from the statute book.

Report yourself

The late Harold Evans, the celebrated editor of the *Sunday Times*, used to insist that, when his paper was in the news, his journalists should report it as they would anything else. How, he asked, could readers trust the *Sunday Times* if they couldn’t rely on it to report its own affairs openly and fairly?

Katharine Viner, the *Guardian* editor, clearly doesn’t agree. As discussed here two weeks ago, the paper’s columnist Suzanne Moore resigned because, she said, senior editors gave her inadequate backing when 338 colleagues protested over “transphobic content”. The affair was covered across the British press. Not a word has appeared in the *Guardian*, however.

Allegations that BBC *Panorama*’s former reporter Martin Bashir used forged bank statements to secure his interview with Princess Diana in 1995 have been fully reported on the BBC’s own news website. The *Guardian* should follow that example.

Muscles and money

I supported Moore’s right to free speech. I cannot support the Eton teacher Will Knowland, who was sacked for refusing to take down a YouTube offering called “The Patriarchy Paradox”. In the 30-minute video, planned as part of a school course on critical thinking, he argues that male aggression is “a biological fact” and a jolly good thing too. Life expectancy would be reduced to less than 40 without men killing wild animals. Women, who just gather roots, nuts and berries and gossip behind each other’s backs, prefer “guys with muscles and money”. The “alternative to patriarchy” is incest and paedophilia, which feminists support. The “paradox” is that, in societies with greater gender equality, men and women revert to traditional roles, a truth, according to Knowland, established by psychologists (it isn’t).

The video, illustrated by violent film clips, is so relentlessly misogynistic – making it barely legal in any context, let alone a classroom – I thought it might be a satire on male supremacist attitudes. Perhaps Knowland intended to challenge the extent to which pupils shared such ideas. But neither he nor his noisy supporters plead that defence. ●