

In her recent piece in the *THES*, Rachel Moss suggests that “precarity...[is] as much a state of mind as a state of employment.” She shares her own and others’ experience of the lasting toll that precarity takes on the mind, even for those who do eventually find more secure employment in higher education (Moss, 2020). This week, others will be commenting in this forum on the material, practical and legal aspects of our predicament; my focus is the psychological and spiritual impacts of precarity.

In Guy Standing’s analysis, the experience of the precariat is characterized by the “four As”: anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (Standing, 2011, p. 22). Standing expands on the “frustration at the seemingly blocked avenues for advancing a meaningful life”, the “passivity born of despair”, “a listlessness associated with sustained defeat” and the alienation that “arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one’s own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate; it is simply done for others, at their behest” (ibid. p. 22-24). This is an experience not just of mental ill health; this is a spiritual malaise – spiritual suffering. As EAP Practitioners in Precarity our souls are parched: cut off from the wellsprings of vitality, creativity and inspiration, the playfulness of experimentation, the desire to make a difference in the lives of young adults – all the energies which originally nourished our vocation to teach.

In bringing this deprivation to consciousness, I am resourced by the framework of Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2015). The intention of NVC work is to free us to speak our truth in ways which fulfil our “nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner” (p. 1). At the heart of the practice is learning to name and to take responsibility for our emotions, and to recognize that many “negative” emotions are an expression of universal human needs which are not being met. As EAP Practitioners in Precarity (henceforth EPPs) we are likely to feel, among other things: afraid, angry, anxious, bewildered, despondent, disaffected, discouraged, edgy, embittered, frustrated, helpless, hostile, jealous, overwhelmed, pessimistic, rancorous, resentful, sceptical, spiritless, suspicious, and weary. I have selected these emotions from Rosenberg’s much longer list (p. 45-6) as the ones I most immediately recognise in my own experience.

Turning to Rosenberg’s list of universal human needs*, most prominent among the many needs which are unmet in precarity are Autonomy needs (choice, ease, independence), Meaning needs (authenticity, competence, creativity, dignity, honesty, integrity, trust, to matter to myself) and the Need to Matter (appreciation, consideration, respect, recognition, to be heard/seen, to be trusted). If, as an EPP, you recognize these emotions and these unmet needs in yourself, you may be feeling some liberation or lightening of the spirit in naming and claiming them as your own; it is also very likely that you will feel a sadness, a poignancy, or a deep sense of longing as you recognize and embrace heartfelt needs which are not being met.

In acknowledging the strength and the toxicity of this cocktail of emotions, we must understand that this spiritual poisoning is the product of our predicament, not the effluent of some inner maladjustment or defect of character. To be working a fixed-term summer contract as an EPP under a line manager who has a permanent position, who most probably has been promoted from the teaching ranks, who may have no aptitude or training for

leadership, and who, lacking a vocation for teaching, may be delighted to have escaped the classroom is to be caught in “perfect storm” conditions for breeding envy and resentment (see Greg Hadley’s (2015) incisive and entertaining dissection of BLEAPS). In these circumstances, it is also hard to form trusting, collegial relationships with other EPPs, trapped as we are in fierce competition for the same jobs, vying to comply with and please management, struggling to sustain unmanageable workloads, all in the empty hope of being re-hired. Knowing that we are all dispensable and replaceable is not conducive to fostering respect for ourselves or for each other.

Our spiritual queasiness may intensify if we are fed a diet of departmental “Values and Behaviours” – if we are exhorted to be good team players, to go the extra mile, to whistle-blow on shirkers, to have a “can do” attitude, to develop and improve ourselves and our performance, to “enhance” everything and anything – in short, to conform to what Standing calls the “alienating twaddle” (p. 24) which is a calculated denial of the realities of our predicament.

It is painful to spend our working lives within institutions which show no loyalty to us, and towards which we can therefore feel no loyalty. The EPPrecariat, being as yet part of what Standing calls a “class in the making”, has no traditions in which to take pride, no narrative or social memory of fraternity, or solidarity or loyalty to itself.

For me, the aspect of precarity that is most corrosive to the spirit is alienation from my work – from my vocation as a practitioner. EPPs lack a secure work-based identity and are forced to take a series of career-less jobs. Our work is often instrumental (done in order to live) and opportunistic (we take what we can get). The jobs we get do not allow us to fulfil our potential, or to use our skills creatively. Summer pre-sessional curricula are increasingly designed to be prescriptive and “fool-proof” (do our employers think we are fools?). EPPs are being de-skilled and demoted from teaching professionals to something akin to postal workers, whose sole function is to “deliver the syllabus”.

The neo-liberal marketization of higher education prioritizes that which can be quantified over quality. I don’t just mean quality in the sense of excellence. The teaching of each skilled practitioner has its own quality – its texture, its rhythm, its flavour, its mood, its individuality. Growing into ourselves, exploring who we are as teachers, experimenting, taking risks, failing, creating, becoming... these are the things that I have found most fulfilling about being a practitioner. For the EPP such self-actualization is almost impossible.

This same alienation from his own craft is felt by Frank Owen, the central character of Robert Tressell’s *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, first published in 1914. George Orwell described this novel as “a book which everyone should read” and it has often been cited by Labour politicians as the book which has had the most profound influence on them. Re-reading it recently, I was struck by the prescience, the accuracy and the insight with which it portrays the inner landscape – the mental and spiritual wasteland – of practitioners in precarity. I wonder if Tressell’s book will inspire a new generation of politicians, leaders and activists in the transforming of the Precariat into a “class-for-itself”, able to articulate its own needs and its own vision for how these may be met?

*I draw here on a list adapted from Rosenberg's original needs list (p. 54-55 in Rosenberg), together with categories formulated by Manfred Max-Neef, with thanks to Vèrène Nicolas.

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