

CENT Paper No.17:

Counselling for Chronic Pain - How Tim Parks' journey can help us to heal

An extended essay review of Tim Parks' book, *Teach Us to Sit Still: A sceptic's search for health and healing*

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Introduction

If you are suffering from chronic pain, or any chronic medical condition which could be stress related, you might find this web page helpful. It explores one man's journey from chronic pain towards self healing. That journey is shared with the world in the form of an excellent book by Tim Parks.

By way of introduction, here is an extract from a review (at Amazon dot com) of Tim Parks' book, *Teach Us to Sit Still: A sceptic's search for health and healing*. London: Harvill Secker / Random House. 2010.

"***Teach Us to Sit Still*** will be of great interest to anyone with a chronic medical condition which the doctors seem unable to cure, but also to anyone who is concerned about work/life balance and the long-term effects of ignoring the body's needs. I can't say I'm in either of those categories but I still found it a fascinating read. But the book is not only about pain and a quest for healing, for Tim, being the writer and scholar that he is, digresses frequently into philosophical and literary themes which break up the stark accounts of medical processes."

"Tim Parks developed a set of problems in the region of prostate, groin and pelvis which had a devastating effect on his life. The first part of the book describes the medical explorations which he had to undergo in order to seek a diagnosis." They were unpleasant, painful and unproductive.

The story begins with Tim's embarrassing and painful problem with peeing, which causes him to have to get up six or eight times every night, and to make frequent, inconvenient and painful visits to the toilet during the day. He was also in so much (increasing) physical pain that he could no longer sit down at the computer, but had to stand. He could no longer make love to his wife, because of the pain

and discomfort. They slept further apart, and they did not talk about his condition anymore. The pain was miserable.

The limitations of modern medicine

Medical diagnoses suggested the possibility of problems with an enlarged prostate, or even cancer of the bladder. Neither of these diagnoses could be supported by medical testing, including radioisotope x-rays. Nevertheless, the medical profession (in Italy and Harley Street, London) could not offer him any solution other than surgery. The surgery might have serious side effects, such as impotence and/or incontinence; and the pain might well remain after the surgical procedures had been completed.

Part of the difficulty for Tim was this: His father had been an Anglican vicar, and his mother a devout Christian. Tim had rejected Christianity at the age of fourteen years, and veered towards the agnosticism of modern literature and the claims of modern science. Nevertheless, because of his own researches on the internet, he was more and more forced to the conclusion that modern medicine did not know what it was talking about when it came to chronic abdominal pain and bladder problems.

He had given the medical profession the benefit of the doubt, and they had not been convincing. All the same, the surgeon he was consulting still thought Tim should have the surgery (which "might help"). Tim, being more sensible than the surgeon, and having done his homework on the internet, eventually decided not to proceed with surgery as a solution. He had collected lots of online statements which suggested that those surgical procedures had lots of victims out there complaining about the pointlessness of surgical procedures which do not deliver a cure of the illness for which they are touted as a solution!

A third review at Amazon says this: "(Tim Parks' book) is a fascinating exploration of personality, a journey through the limitations of modern medicine, an unravelling of the impact of troubles in life and a lesson in how to come to terms with oneself. All told with humour and intelligent asides..." (Cathy W.) The limitations of modern medicine are well known to me, after thirty-four years of suffering from Candida Albicans, without any sign of a viable medical treatment.

Renata (my wife) got Tim's book from Halifax Central Library (because she is constantly looking for research ideas that might help me), and I dipped into it. I was busy, preoccupied, and thought I might spend five minutes on it and then hand it back. However, I was immediately

hooked. As soon as I began to read this book, I realised that I wanted to take notes, and to make those notes available online, for the benefit of chronic pain sufferers – for I believe that what Tim explores and explains is relevant to all forms of chronic pain, and not just to his particular problem (of pelvic or abdominal pain).

Apart from the therapeutic value of this book, it is also a beautiful piece of literature; a combination of the drama of a psychological thriller and the deep richness of an artistic autobiography. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

My first notes

The first note that I took from Tim's book was this: "Every illness is a narrative". As I said above, I have an illness – chronic Candidiasis (for thirty-four or more years). Is this 'just a narrative'? Is he implying that it is all in my head – just 'psychosomatic'? Are you (dear reader) merely going to be insulted by this book, which tells you that you are somehow *responsible* for your own illness?

Actually, Tim goes to see an Ayurvedic medical practitioner, while he was on a lecture tour in India. This doctor told him "You only use the word 'psychosomatic' if you think that body and mind are **ever** separate".

This fits very well with CENT theory¹, which says we are body-minds, and that the narratives we tell ourselves in our heads are not 'just' in our heads, but in our integrated 'body-mind'. The mind is not separate from the body, and whatever we do with our minds we do with our body-mind. The verbal stories we tell ourselves in our minds not only have electrochemical correlates in our brains, but also muscular correlates in our bodies, and chemical correlates in our bodies, etc.

"What matters is the narrative you tell yourself", writes Tim Parks. For example, extrapolating from the core of CENT theory, if you tell yourself angry stories about the people in your life, this will produce a particular kind of body-mind (e.g. ulcerative stomach, strained cardiovascular system, and muscular tension). On the other hand, if you tell yourself calming stories about the people in your life, you will get much better results in your mind-body.

¹ See: Byrne, J. (2009) What is cognitive emotive narrative therapy (CENT)? CENT Paper No.2(a). Hebden Bridge: The Institute for CENT. Available online: <http://www.abc-counselling.com/id75.html>.

But this is not some kind of **superficial choosing** process. "Personality and pathology are related", says Tim Parks. Again, this lines up with CENT theory, which sees individual personality as a **braiding together** of the physical baby and the cultural mother, which are re-internalized in the body-mind of the baby (which grows up to be an adult: you and me). Each individual personality is a layering of cumulative, interpretive experiences. The experiences are real, but they are also narrativized by the individual experiencing them and internalizing them.

Ayurvedic medicine understands this **braiding** process, as indicated by Tim's statement that "...the structural conflict the Ayurvedic doctors were talking about (involves)...realigning the inherited and acquired aspects of personality".

Alan Watts touches on this problem in his book, *The Way of Zen*, where he says that socialization destroys the lovable spontaneity of the child, but that this is a small price to pay for the undoubted benefits of civilization. Socialization is essential for the establishment of a society, but *some experiences of socialization are more extreme than others*, and some clashes between the id (or the innate nature of a child) and its superego (or internalized mother, father, teachers) is so extreme that **unhelpful self-narratives are the result**, and those narratives, laid down in the body-mind, *produce physical (and sometimes mental) illness*.

Finding alternatives to 'modern medicine'

Through his late night trawls on the internet, Parks finds many pathways towards alternative understandings of his painful condition. Eventually he discovers a book by two Doctors, Wise and Anderson, with the rather startling title: *Headache in the Pelvis: A New Understanding & Treatment for Chronic Pelvic Pain Syndromes*.

The book is described as follows, at Amazon: "This ground-breaking book describes the Wise-Anderson Protocol for muscle-related pelvic pain in men and women, a new and revolutionary treatment developed at Stanford University. The Wise-Anderson Protocol involves the treatment of muscle-related pelvic pain and dysfunction, variously diagnosed as prostatitis, chronic pelvic pain syndrome, pelvic floor dysfunction, pelvic floor myalgia, interstitial cystitis, urethral syndrome, levator ani syndrome, among other related diagnoses affecting some twenty million men and women in the United States".

This book was published by: National Center for Pelvic Pain Research; 6th Revised edition (1 April 2010).

The bottom line is this: Wise and Anderson recommend "relaxation and massage" for the specified forms of chronic pain relief.

Tim decides to try a simplified form of the Wise and Anderson relaxation process. The complete process is very complex, but it is easy to approximate. It involves lying down, covered over, with some padding under the knees, so the spine is flat on the floor. A pillow under the head also seems necessary to straighten the neck. Then the individual breathes in and out deeply, and focuses on the pains and tensions in their body.

According to Tim, his troubles had to do with excessive, unrelenting tension, according to Dr Wise's theory. He had had independent confirmation of that some years earlier, when we was in antenatal classes with his wife, and they both had to learn how to relax using breathing exercises. As Tim was leaving one day, the doctor who was teaching the relaxation class said to him: "I don't think I've ever seen a person as completely unable to relax as yourself" (Page 151).

Tim is willing to consider that "I had perhaps created my chronic (pain) condition over the years, the way I had written my novels, or become part of a family, or changed my home and language and culture".

Migration and ambition

Tim, who was English, had married an Italian woman in the USA, and they had returned to the UK to live. However, after one year she declared that she could not live in the UK, and so Tim decided to move his life to Italy, where he would have to teach through the medium of Italian, and learn to live as an Italian.

I know, as an Irish immigrant to the UK, how stressful and straining that kind of permanent migration can be. I also have a client who is a chronic pain sufferer who has been through a similar cultural migration, in a different part of the world. Those migrations set up additional stresses and strains, over and above the normal hassles of life.

Additionally, Drs Wise and Anderson described their chronic pain sufferers as "over-achievers who had little time to look after themselves, tensing their pelvic floors year in and year out while they

worked their butts off to satisfy aspirations that had nothing to do with healthy living". (About ten percent of the population of the USA now suffers from chronic pelvic pain syndrome, according to Dr Wise. I wonder if they are the same people who have been moved from city to city, and state to state, by the needs of modern capitalism.)

Tim Parks was persuaded by Wise and Anderson that "Most people are too busy to pay attention to their health needs. They want a quick fix". However "Dr Wise advises chronic pain sufferers to accept their pain as the 'main curriculum' of their lives".

The pain should not be seen as an accident, or an invader. "The pain contains a message. It is trying to tell you something about the way you have been living".

Paradoxical relaxation

According to Dr Wise, the solution was this: "Spend one hour each day focusing your attention on your pains. And this must be prime time: and you must give the activity your most sincere effort".

This process is called 'paradoxical relaxation'. It is paradoxical because it does not involve any attempt to stop the pain, or to stop the tension that causes it. (The theory is that muscular tension traps or cramps the nerves which run through them, causing pain). The entire process can be summarized like this:

Lie down on a mattress or folded blanket on the floor, with pillows under your knees, and keep your feet flat on their soles. Place a support under your head also. Cover yourself with a blanket, to keep warm.

Set a timer for one hour. Cover yourself up, and close your eyes.

You might need to move a few times in the first couple of minutes, to adjust your position, to make yourself comfortable, to twitch or scratch, but aim to settle down to a quiet stillness.

Begin by taking six or eight deep breaths. And then allow your breathing to return to a more normal rhythm.

From this point onwards, for the remainder of the hour, lie still, and focus on your body.

Focus your attention on any bodily sensations that arise, like itches, vibrations, temperature changes, pulsations, tensions, pains, etc.

'Paradoxical relaxation' means to ***complete your experience of the pain***. Do not resist it or push it away. Or as Tim Parks writes: "I had taken (the pains) on board. I was learning to go towards them rather than pull away, ***to feel them fully*** as I lay with my eyes closed". (Page 172).

This was very different from his usual approach to life, which was all language based. But this new process, paradoxical relaxation, "...was a mental task that had nothing to do with words". (Page 172).

Avoid talking to yourself, or thinking about the process. Just let it happen. Shift your attention to the physical plane, to feeling for sensations.

'Monkey mind' is constant chatter

Tim found this difficult: "...the big obstacle for me with this (relaxation/awareness) discipline was the constant chatter in my head. How could it ever be stilled so I could focus on my physical sensations...?" (Page 173).

Through this relaxation/awareness practice, Tim discovered that every part of his body was tense; that he used far too much force in every task, from brushing his teeth to tying his shoelaces. And he set up unnecessary tensions between one part of his body and another. (Pages 174-175).

Some days, Tim Parks' relaxation and breathing exercises worked better than others. He had to learn how to silence his mind, or almost so – to resist the encroachment of language and language-ing, or talking in his mind – to simply feel, or experience, his body and its tensions.

He also had to learn that he must not celebrate when he has a good (successful) day; nor must be despair when he has a bad day, when his practice is riddle with distractions and ineffectiveness.

Eventually he had this insight: "You are two different people!" (Page 180). This insight is "given to him", and so it is not clear what it means. I am not clear what he eventually learns about the way to answer this question. Perhaps the answer is this: You are a body, and a talking mind. And the talking mind ignores the needs of the body.

Later, Tim mentions that Dr Wise (of paradoxical relaxation fame) uses ideas from Dr Jacobson, the creator of 'progressive relaxation'. Apparently, Jacobson had noted that "...*any thinking, however silent,*

always tensed the various muscles that control speech. To relax deeply one must be rid of thought". (Page 219).

As soon as Tim began to do Dr Wise's paradoxical relaxation – lying on the floor, covered up, and feeling into his body with his attention – he felt waves of tension leave his body. Over time, the more he learned to relax, and to breathe deeply, the more his abdominal pains declined. "...the change in my life was enormous. Little pools of comfort began to ripple out from the relaxation exercises. I recall vividly the first time I walked downstairs (after my relaxation exercise hour) and realized that the usual burning sensation (in my belly) had not returned. More than that, my belly was miraculously calm, positively comfortable. My bladder was comfortable. It came as quite a shock and I stopped and checked it..." (Page 169).

Beyond relaxation

Because Dr Wise's book also recommended massage, Tim decided to consult a Shiatsu practitioner, for full body massage. This further reduced the pains in his body until there was none left in his abdomen. The tension and pain was 'moving south', through his legs, towards his feet. When he spoke to his Shiatsu practitioner, Ruggero, he was told that "...the tension is moving down your meridians, and will exit and terminate at the soles of your feet".

However, Tim's back was still bent forwards, and he had become self-conscious about this, especially since an elderly gentleman with a military bearing had commented irritably on this in the street! Tim wanted to know if Ruggero could help with this problem. But Ruggero thought the problem could best be helped by meditation, which sounds like another paradoxical cure.

As I mentioned earlier, and he mentions in the subtitle of his book, Tim Parks is a sceptic in relation to all things that fall outside of the modern, secular, scientific mindset.

"I resisted 'meditation'", he writes. "Without having ever really understood what the word meant, I felt that it smacked of the mystical, the oriental. My mindset was not compatible with such practices (whatever they were). To accept that I was engaged in *meditation*, rather than a therapeutic relaxation exercise developed by medical experts with PhDs, would mean surrendering the tough, realistic side of my identity that had been adopted with a certain urgency when I abandoned my parent's religious faith". (Page 219).

He had substituted a faith in science for a faith in god and religion. How could he accept the idea of meditation, and especially the idea of a 'retreat', which also had echoes of his Christian youth?

Because he was now self-conscious about his curved spine, and Ruggero insisted that physical attempts to straighten it would never work, he was forced to consider meditation as a last resort. He had, after all, come to trust Ruggero's judgement, because of how well the Shiatsu process worked in draining the flow of pain and discomfort down his legs and out of his feet.

Learning to meditate

Eventually, out of desperation, Tim signed up for a five-day, silent retreat of Vipassana meditation, on Ruggero's recommendation. "Vipassana helps you to start feeling your body", he told Tim. And Tim reports that Ruggero "suggested that I look on the retreat as a *merely physical* therapy", even though Ruggero officially did not believe in the separation of mind and body. (Page 227). But there was also a secondary consideration involved here for Tim, apart from his bent spine. He was concerned that he was already beginning to lose his commitment to relaxation, getting bored with it, and he knew the pains in his lower body would return if he stopped focusing his mind on his bodily tensions. He hoped the meditation would help to prevent this backsliding process, as well as straightening his back.

Before setting out for the meditation retreat, Tim looked up the word Vipassana on the internet, and got this definition: "Vipassana means seeing things as they really are. It is the process of self-purification by self-observation. It is a universal remedy for universal problems". (Page 227).

Like most systems of meditation, Vipassana involves sitting in a cross-legged position. Tim found the meditation posture painful, on day one, and the mental strain of concentration was a major struggle for him, but he still returned to the meditation room on the second day, for more pain and mental difficulty (including lots of mental chatter, which he found it hard to control). Why did he return to such a difficult discipline? "In the end", he wrote, "I no longer believe that it is given to us to understand why we behave as we do". (Page 232). This fits with the CENT theory that humans are largely non-conscious processors of information, who do things for tacit reasons, and we then make up stories with our conscious minds to account for our actions.

In persisting with his meditation, Tim was seeking “the experience of wordlessness” (page 233), because all forms of mental chatter result in physical tension (according to Wise/Jacobson).

The meditation retreat was organized into two blocks:

- (1) Four days of meditation on the sensation of the in-breath and the out-breath passing over the top lip (called Anapana meditation); followed by:
- (2) One day of Vipassana meditation proper. This involves focusing on specific parts of the body, from head to toe, one at a time, to promote an awareness of the normally ignored or concealed sensations which are stored throughout the body.

During the Anapana meditation, the meditator is supposed to focus all of their attention on the breath passing over the top lip, and when thoughts arise in the mind, to simply name those thoughts, and to release them. The aim is to detach from thoughts; to give up wrestling with them; and to let them come, name them (or label them), and let them go.

A significant breakthrough

Over the first four days of meditation, Tim experienced a lot of pain in his legs and his back, mainly it seems from the tension of sitting in the cross-legged position for long periods of time, in total silence. But he persisted with the practice.

Then, on the third evening, in the last session, he achieved a brief enlightenment experience and release of muscular pain. His spine straightened to a remarkable degree, for the first time in decades; the pain left his legs and hips; and life was sweet.

Minutes later, it all disappeared again, as quickly as it had arrived. But he knew that he was onto something important with the meditation process. It could straighten his back; and he could be totally free of pain, and in a blissful state.

The following morning, during the pre-breakfast meditation, tears erupted within him; just when he achieved unquestioning acceptance and letting go of the pain; letting go of the mind; letting go of the mental chatter; letting go of the ambitious ego. His body-mind decided to cry, vigorously and thoroughly – so much so that he could not go in to breakfast, but went out and cried in the garden.

(What is this crying about? My own experience of crying in relation to meditation happened like this: In July 1980, I borrowed a copy of Alan Watts' book, *The Way of Zen*, from Renata (to whom I was not yet married) and took it back to my flat. I read about half the book, so I understood some of the basic philosophy of Zen Buddhism, and then I sat down on a firm cushion on the floor, and began to meditate. Being something of an 'extremist', I did not stick to fifteen or twenty minutes, but went on for more than an hour. Suddenly, a great wave of emotion overwhelmed me, and I prostrated myself on the floor, on my chest and belly, and sobbed so hard and so loud I thought my neighbours downstairs would come up and complain about the way my belly was thumping against their ceiling. Months later, when I tried to explain what this was all about, I figured it had to do with surrendering to life; giving up the fantasy, the delusion, that I was running my life, and that I should and could learn how to run life in general. Instead, I got that, in a very real sense, I did not exist as a substantial entity, and that this organism here (typing now) was, as the Stoics say, 'an actor in a play that the manager directs'! The crying then is a grieving for *the death of the ego, and with it all fantasies about running the show.*)

Tim's crying might have been about some related aspect of giving up control, for he says that, before he began to cry, he had finally reached a state of 'acceptance', and once he learn to accept things how they were, the pain of the meditation posture disappeared, or became irrelevant: no longer a problem. He had not previously know that there was a 'movement of the mind' that can occur which involves accepting things just the way they are. (No longer trying to change the world; no longer trying to run the universe; no longer trying to stop things being the way the happen to be).

But in addition to this, Tim had an experience that differed from mine. When the crying overwhelmed him, and he went to look out across the valley, to hide his tears from anybody who might enter the garden, up came images of all of the people who really mattered to him, his wife and children, his mom and dad, his relatives and friends, and so on. It was as if they were all standing there with him, looking out across the valley, and crying. This brought up an awareness of death. Some of his important others had already died, and one day he would also die. But he resisted this. Part of his crying was for the death of his ego, and part of it was probably about the dawning awareness that even his body will die.

At this point he refers back to his earlier insight: "You are two different people" – and he now realized that those people were his body, going about his everyday business; and his ambitious ego, planning books and events that would make him famous, immortal. Now those two 'Tims' were somehow integrated. He was a body-mind, here, crying, and looking out across the valley, with an awareness of acceptance; and the barriers between him and his loved ones had dissolved. He was in touch with a raw sense of his love for others.

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After Tim's crying episode in the garden of the meditation retreat, he went back in for his first session of Vipassana meditation. What he experienced in Vipassana meditation is too difficult for me to summarize or express in any way. You will have to read the book to get the full story. (Tim Parks, *Teach Us to Sit Still: A sceptic's search for health and healing*. Harvill Secker. 2010).

Let me say just this: His pains disappeared completely. And his back straightened. And he felt calm and happy.

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Key learning points

At a number of points on his journey, Tim Parks realized there is a connection between his tendency towards *anger*, his physical *tension*, and his *chronic pain*.

At other times he is clear that he *neglected his body*, and spends most of his time in his mind – languaging, theorizing, constructing stories about what he is doing, so that he can make his life 'more real' by putting it in a story. He is constantly *knotted up in a world of words* and images. His physical pain is like a constant nagging by his body to *pay attention to his physical existence*.

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After his Vipassana breakthrough, he went back to his normal life, with the intention of continuing to use relaxation and meditation to heal his body-mind. But he slipped back, and his condition began to worsen.

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Five months after the original five day silent retreat, he was back on retreat again, this time for ten days of silence. He was back at square

one, minus the physical pain, but his mind was in turmoil; constantly chattering. "Perhaps I should give up writing", he wonders, as a way to silence his mind.

Although he was now free from the stomach pains that brought him to relaxation, massage and meditation in the first place, now, when he sits in meditation, at his second retreat, all kinds of other physical pains emerge, in his hips and back. He saw this new pain as being linked to his years of living in his mind, in words and language, tensing his body and neglecting it.

He also found, on this second retreat, that if he placed his attention **beside** these pains, during meditation, they would, in the end, subside.

And he learned to forgive himself and others. He had a long-term habit of yelling angrily at himself, and of humiliating himself for acts of failure.

The Vipassana meditation process

As mentioned earlier, the Vipassana meditation was a very detailed form of body awareness, beginning at the crown of the head. A group leader, whose name was Coleman, called out the parts of the body, one by one, and paused long enough for the meditators to focus their attention on that specific body part, to attend to any sensations that might arise within that body part, or any other kind of response that the body-mind might generate in response to focusing attention on that specific body part. The roll call of body parts went something like this:

The crown of the head.

The left temple. (Pause) The right temple. (Pause) Both temples.

The left cheek. (Pause) The right cheek. (Pause) Both cheeks.

The left eye. (Pause) The right eye. (Pause) Both eyes.

And so on, through the nostrils, teeth (top and bottom), gums (top and bottom) chin, neck, shoulders, and all the way down the torso and arms and hands, through the internal organs, and down into the legs and feet.

The idea is to feel into each part of the body. Check for tension, heat, buzzing, or any other form of sensation. Feel the body, feel the

sensation, and feel any related emotions. Avoid making up stories about what is happening. Minimize naming and describing.

I have been doing this roll call of body parts in my own meditation over the past few days (and nights) and I have been able to reduce my night awakenings from three to one; to reduce my night time antifungal treatments of my Candida problem from three to one; and to reduce my physical discomfort (itchiness, physical irritation and pain) significantly (say, by more than 50%).

Tim Parks goes beyond this kind of list of the physical benefits of Vipassana. Now, remember, this is a strong sceptic; an anti-religionist; a materialist. But somehow, he says, in the process of this focusing on his body, his ego was dismantled, bit by bit. It was being dismantled throughout the time that his moods and emotional states were fluctuating. There were times for tears; times for confusion; times of panic, and times of optimism. But in the end he was transformed.

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### **Emotional turbulence and familial love**

On the last day of the ten-day meditation, he had been feeling very calm and mentally peaceful. Then Colman, the guru who was leading the meditation, began to recite St Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, on charity. This stimulated memories of his (Tim's) father, who had been a vicar, and his (Tim's) rejection of his father's (Anglican Christianity) religion. Suddenly Tim's tranquillity was gone, and he was in emotional turmoil.

But it was resolved. And he realized that the process of meditation had "opened his heart", causing him to love others, or to get in touch with his love of others, including his father. Meditation reconnected him to the world, breaking down the barriers he had constructed by his linguistic categories: you, me, over there, over here, etc.

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One year after the ten-day silent Vipassana meditation retreat, Tim is very well. He no longer gets pains in his bladder or intestines, and he sleeps much better than he did. (Whereas he used to get up at least six times per night to pee in pain, he now gets up twice, to pee comfortably, and to meditate, during the second awakening, around about dawn).

In his final chapter (Cathedral), Tim presents a quotation from Samuel Beckett, who "...describes how illness forced him to change his life:

'For years (said Beckett) I had been unhappy, consciously and deliberately ... I isolated myself more and more, undertook less and less and lent myself to a crescendo of disparagement of others and myself. But in all that there was nothing that struck me as morbid. ... It was not until that way of living, or rather negation of living, developed such terrifying physical symptoms that it could no longer be pursued, that I became aware of anything morbid in myself.'

"Skin conditions, boils, panic attacks and a racing heart finally forced Beckett into (psycho)analysis. Over some years and with great, as he recalls, reluctance, he recovered". (Page 319).

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Immediately after the ten-day retreat, Tim found his writing was a little less negative, less angry and less cynical. He now takes time to breathe as he writes. He is less tense.

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Conclusion

If every illness is a narrative, what was Tim Parks' narrative?

It clearly had something to do with the way he rejected his parents' culture, and adopted an alternative perspective on life to fill the void. Perhaps, like Beckett, he had made himself unhappy, by his choices of literature to read, and his choices of literary heroes. Perhaps like Beckett, he loved too little, and disparaged himself and others too much. Perhaps his narrative was too much to do with negativity and too little to do with positivity. What narrative of his allowed him to ignore his body, and to live in his mind? What narrative promoted his geographical isolation from his family and culture of origin?

And what about my own narrative, and the narrative of my current chronic pain client? Have we also been too angry, too isolated, too far from home; aiming too high; placing ourselves under too much ambitious pressure to succeed, to prove we are okay? (In my own case, there were also dietary problems, which could have originated from self neglect, ignorance of my body's needs, and the malign impact of modern agricultural food production, especially the use of antibiotics and hormones in foods).

And what narrative did I construct when my first marriage failed disastrously, in infidelity and rejection? What happened to my narrative about trust and hope? What happened to my narrative about "myself"? (My problem with Candida Albicans became quite pronounced within one year of the end of my first marriage, but while I was in a very stressful new relationship, in Bangladesh! Long way from home!)

Any narrative that produced excessive, unrelenting tension would do the trick of breaking down a person's physical and/or mental health. And any inbuilt tension between the innate personality and the process of socialization would contribute to the total load of tension and stress. (In this sense, even my own Candida Albicans problem could have been at least *facilitated* by running down my immune system thorough unmanaged stress).

What about narratives of "personal worthlessness"? Did I neglect my dietary needs because the world (including my ex-wife) seemed to rate me so lowly? And did that self neglect lead on to the onset of Candida Albicans overgrowth?

And what of the solutions implicit in Tim Parks' book? To be less angry, more loving, and more relaxed; To listen to the body and its many messages; To avoid total domination by languaging and self-talk; To avoid unnecessary migrations and cross-cultural trauma. These are some of the components. Also: To be more connected to others, and to life; more at ease in the world; less nihilistic, and more accepting of the imperfections of ourselves, other people and the world.

The solution that Tim found should work for me and for my chronic pain client: Relaxation, massage, meditation; self love, connection to others, acceptance of life just the way it is; demotion of languaging; and remembering to breathe as we work, rest and play.

This could be further boiled down as follows: Live in the present moment; pay attention to the body; accept what is so; and maintain connection to others. (Of course diet, exercise, meditation and relaxation cannot be ignored).

And perhaps Jane Seymour's comment is relevant here: "You have to count on living every single day in a way you believe will make you feel good about your life – so that if it were over tomorrow, you'd be content with yourself".

I believe Tim Parks has shown me how I can do that; or at least added to my ability to do that; or given me hope that I can learn to live a better life.

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PS: In the two weeks that I have been working with Tim Parks' book, I have not been able to cure my Candida Albicans problem using the Vipassana meditation approach to body awareness, but I have reduced my physical pain and discomfort significantly; and I now sleep a lot better than I did. I still have to take just as much anti-fungal food supplementation as before. But who knows what the longer term benefits might be? I live in hope!

If you have a chronic pain problem, you must read and apply the ideas in Tim Parks' book.

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(c) Jim Byrne, Doctor of Counselling, 1st November 2011

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