



Back to the future

Then and now ...

by Stephen Poxon

This is the first of a new series examining historical stories, in response to which readers of **accord** are warmly invited to submit feedback regarding avenues of counselling and pastoral care that might be appropriate in today's more enlightened times.

Comments and opinions are most welcome, at accord@acc-uk.org

Back to the future will highlight the lives of well-known individuals who lived with mental health issues of different kinds – and, incidentally, often did so quite heroically – but, crucially, without access to modern-day medicines (anti-depressants, for example), counselling programmes or adequate pastoral care. Expertise was all-too-often sorely lacking, as was, in many cases, even

basic sympathy. Tragically, people carrying the weight of poor mental health, and who might, nowadays, have been able to avail themselves of all kinds of assistance, were confined to what were called lunatic asylums or other such grim institutions. Failing that, their problems were kept secret (within families), which meant that entirely avoidable and unnecessary elements of shame and embarrassment were added to their existing woes.

Readers, counsellors and pastoral carers are encouraged to share their thoughts on what they feel would be appropriate

responses to each 'case study'. God has richly blessed the evolution of our understanding of mental health issues, and so many resources are now at our disposal. If, therefore, these matters crossed our desks today, how might we respond?

Feel free to tell us what you feel might have helped those whose stories we will consider. The guiding premise of this series will be Hebrews 4:16, NIV: 'Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need'.

We go back to the future, then, with Charlotte Elliott, a uniquely gifted poet, hymn writer and editor:

Charlotte Elliott (1798-1871) was, by all accounts, what we might

call the life and soul of the party; a skilled artist, loved for her colourful nature as well as her vibrant use of paints and colours, her charmingly witty repartee and her captivating, vivacious flamboyancy. This, though, was all to change, when, thanks to what was almost certainly a horrible combination of some kind of physical ailments, emotional difficulties and (possibly) some kind of neurological chemical imbalance, she fell victim to depression, and lived with that experience until only the mercy of death released her from its torturous grip. Part of the (unexpected?) fruit of Elliott's bleak midwinter of misery, though, was her world-famous hymn, *Just as I Am*. Should we meditate upon her words, we are reminded of the clear truth that God was with Charlotte Elliott all throughout, albeit without any healing experience or apparent respite.

Any reading of this hymn will clearly tell us that Elliott, to her credit, made no attempt at all, in writing, to conceal or disguise her turmoil and distress, but somehow managed to keep in touch with God most of the time. She is to be greatly admired for her courage in even attempting to outline the burden she carried for half a century. Perhaps, in doing so, Charlotte Elliott discovered a spiritual principle that is heart-warming: even on our coldest, bleakest days, our Father loves us, just as we are, and has not forsaken us. Nor will he.

From *The Invalid Hymnist*:

'The last fifty years of her life were spent in physical and emotional bouts of suffering which would often leave her bedridden for extended periods of time. Bishop Moule of Durham, who was related to the family, would later write, "Ill health beset her. Besides its general trying influence on the spirit, it often caused her the peculiar pain of a seeming uselessness in her life." One friend referred to her condition as "a crippling fatigue," which may very

well have described her emotional and spiritual state as much as her physical state. Charlotte herself wrote, "My Heavenly Father knows, and He alone, what it is, day after day, and hour after hour, to fight against bodily feelings of almost overpowering weakness and languor and exhaustion, to resolve, as He enables me to do, not to yield to the slothfulness, the depression, the irritability, such as a body causes me to long to indulge, but to rise every morning..." There were times when just getting up in the morning was almost more than she could bear to do. It doesn't take long for such affliction of the body and mind to wear a person down to the point of despondency and despair. Charlotte was often in the full grip of such emotions, and she would not infrequently find herself indulging in a full-fledged pity party.¹

Victorian Magazine illustration



POINTS TO PONDER

- Given that she was the life and soul of the party, might there possibly have been some kind of building emotional pressure upon Charlotte Elliott, as perhaps she struggled to keep a smile on her face at times when she might have felt anything but cheerful? (Might that stress have provoked some kind of breakdown?)
- Might there have been, in Charlotte Elliott's life, some kind of fine line/breaking point between her undoubted

creative genius and the frustrations of a life that was often more mundane and ordinary? Might that have been an emotional strain?

- Can we consider the possibility of Charlotte Elliott carrying some kind of spiritual burden, whereby her mental illness might have been considered (by her and others) as a type of 'failure' in terms of her Christian faith?
 - Might Charlotte Elliott have laboured under a sense of shame, in an era when issues of mental health were still somewhat taboo?
- ¹ <http://www.zianet.com/maxey/reflx540.htm>

*Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot;
To Thee whose blood can cleanse
each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

*Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a
doubt;
Fightings within, and fears
without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

*Just as I am, poor, wretched,
blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind;
Yes, all I need, in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

*Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse,
relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

*Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down;
Now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

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