

**A Psychotherapist Reads the Newspaper: we live in turbulent times**

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I was a psychodynamic counsellor in the NHS and am now retired. My previous talks to the NWRPA have been about my work with clients so talking about newspapers shows how my life has changed since retirement.

Some time last year I was reading my newspaper, *The Observer*. A number of articles over the previous few weeks claimed there is evidence that for most of us in this country and around the world life has been improving over the last two decades.

That week's newspaper also carried stories warning of various impending Apocalypses that are epitomised by the title of this talk. I found that the puzzle of escalating apocalyptic anxieties at a time of increasing security kept nagging away at me. I then thought that the therapeutic ideas absorbed during my counselling career should help me make sense of this conundrum.

I found the familiar Kleinian ideas of paranoid anxiety – as well as the related defence of splitting and projection – helpful in understanding these contradictory views of our world.

Last year Paul Melia had the idea of an occasional theme for our seminars of *A Psychotherapist Reads the Newspaper*: Around that time I got a bee in my bonnet. Before creating my bee I had been feeling uncharacteristically optimistic.

I had read about a twenty year decline in violent crime, in many countries including the USA which had a high and seemingly intractable murder rate in the 1970's. In the longer term rates of death due to violence had been declining over the last two hundred years. There have been the beginnings of declines in rates of obesity, drug use, alcohol use and teenage pregnancy. The number of military coups in Africa has been in decline since the high water marks following the European colonies gaining independence.

My wife always reassures me that my good moods will not last. One particular Sunday I read the Observer's review section. Bear in mind that this was not the news section. There were twelve separate comments about different apocalypses. I did not record these but I think they included the following.

- The election of Donald Trump and the vote for Brexit are part of a worldwide trend towards Right Wing authoritarian governments which will take us back to the Fascist threat which preceded World War 2.
- Brexit will lead to an economic crisis in the UK.
- The North Korean missile and nuclear bomb tests put the world at the biggest risk of nuclear war since the end of the Second World War.
- Uncontrolled climate change will lead to the destruction of the planet.
- Epidemic of depression.
- Epidemic of childhood and adolescent depression.
- Epidemic of obesity.
- Epidemic of dementia.
- The use of smart phones is leading to extremely short attention spans.
- The use of trigger warnings and no platforming Universities will create a generation of snowflakes.
- Increasing crime.
- Increase in violent crime.

There were also generalised apocalyptic remarks. The one that stayed with me is that we *live in turbulent times*.

My first reaction was to shout at the newspaper. Why do supposedly intelligent people seem so willing to believe all this nonsense? This irritation was followed by curiosity about this prevalence of apocalyptic thinking. With that in mind I then read the News section of the Observer.

The first thing that struck me was what I think of as *read to paragraph 5*. For example the news stories about the increased threat of violence would have a later paragraph to say that the increase was due to changes in the way the Police recorded crime. This para 5 also said the Home Office Victim Survey was the most accurate measure of violent crime and that this showed a long term decline and a plateauing over the last two years.

Similarly the news story about North Korean nuclear testing was about the capacity of Korea to wage nuclear war. The paragraph 5 here was that the bomb the Korean military had tested could not fit on the new missile. They had a missile and a bomb but not a missile on a bomb.

Hence these news stories often started off apocalyptic but then became more measured. However the stories I had read without this measured extension were in the *Observer Review*, the Arts section. They were in interviews with Artists, writers, actors or in the film, TV and book reviews. Notably they were often a one sentence expression with little context and not part of a developed argument. Often they had the feeling of spontaneity and immediacy.

I started noticing these spontaneous remarks. One clear example was in an interview on Radio 4 Women's Hour with a woman who worked with troubled adolescents in London. She had talked in a measured and pleasurable way about the people she had helped. She then said that knife crime meant that the teenagers she is working with now will all be killed. The interview then moved on.

While thinking of this I recalled Paul's idea *A Psychotherapist Reads the Newspaper* and thought using psychotherapeutic ideas may help. The penny quickly dropped that Kleinian Psychoanalysis might have something to offer.

The following ideas are all derived from Kleinian ideas about the development of the infantile unconscious. The richness of these ideas means they have also been very useful in the psychoanalysis of adults. Like all psychoanalytic they have also been used to understand social and cultural issues.

**The following quotes are from a Wikipedia article on *Paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions*.**

*Paranoid refers to the central paranoid anxiety, the fear of invasive malevolence. This is experienced as coming from the outside, but ultimately derives from the projection out of the death instinct. Paranoid anxiety can be understood in terms of anxiety about imminent annihilation and derives from a sense of the destructive or death instinct of the child. In this position before the secure internalisation of a good object to protect the ego, the immature ego deals with its anxiety by splitting off bad feelings and projecting them out. However, this causes paranoia.*

What I thought of as apocalyptic thinking are paranoid anxieties. This mental list I had made are all fears of imminent annihilation. For example the Koreans are years off having a functioning weapon and would be self destructively foolish to initiate a nuclear war. However the fear of nuclear war was of an imminent and destructive event. In the *Observer* the people

fearing imminent destruction were in this country rather than some more obvious targets of the North Korean military.

One peculiar consequence of thinking about this was to be sympathetic to Brexiteers. Because I am unsympathetic to Leavers I failed to appreciate that this too is a fear of annihilation. Losing control and losing your identity in a European takeover is a paranoid fear of psychic and cultural annihilation.

The idea of paranoid anxiety helped me to a clearer view of apocalyptic thinking. The schizoid part of the paranoid-schizoid position took me a little further. *Schizoid refers to the central defence mechanism: splitting, the vigilant separation of the good object from the bad object. Klein posited that a healthy development implies that the infant has to split its external world, its objects and itself into two categories: good (i.e., gratifying, loved, loving) and bad (i.e. frustrating, hated, persecutory). This splitting makes it possible to introject and identify with the good. In other words: splitting in this stage is useful because it protects the good from being destroyed by the bad. Later, when the ego has developed sufficiently, the bad can be integrated, and ambivalence and conflict can be tolerated.*

It then struck me that the *Observer* is my Tribal newspaper. The kind of soft left-liberal culture I have always identified with. The projected bad objects in this world are the apocalyptic enemies of all I hold dear. Brexiteers, Trump, austerity and privatisation politicians, liberal economists, fascists, oil companies, big businesses, bankers, dictatorships, Narcissists and so on.

Up to this point I had only been thinking about anxieties. Now with the concept of the defence of splitting I could also hear that the people interviewed in the *Observer* were passionate promoters and defenders of all that they believe are good. The post war establishment of liberal democracies, the development of health and social care, of a free media, of a relative absence of war, of protection of the environment, of care for minorities and the vulnerable.

It also struck me that my enemies also engage in a similar process of projection. The bad objects here are the metropolitan elite, dishonest and self serving politicians. Minority groups who get more attention and help, the European federalists who want to annihilate national identities.

Hence these apocalyptic anxieties are also identification with and nourishing of our good objects. They are projected out into our bad guys so that they can be safely protected within ourselves.

The problem with this defence of our good objects is that death, destructiveness, badness are all projected outwards into the bad objects. In turn these bad objects persecute us and induce a state of paranoia. We are surrounded by enemies who will annihilate us. What worries me is the paranoid-schizoid position has a continuously reinforcing cycle of anxiety, projection and persecution.

There is Us and Them, Good and Evil, endlessly. This is my fear of apocalyptic thinking, of a closed system which is impervious to change. There is a constant reliving of the paranoid-schizoid position. It can seem like a form of thought with no escape.

For Klein infants normally develop beyond the primitive feelings of the paranoid-schizoid position into the depressive position.

*Klein saw the depressive position as an important developmental milestone that continues to mature throughout the life span. The splitting and part object relations that characterize the*

earlier phase are succeeded by the capacity to perceive that the other who frustrates is also the one who gratifies. Schizoid defences are still in evidence, but feelings of guilt, grief, and the desire for reparation gain dominance in the developing mind. In the depressive position, the infant is able to experience others as whole, which radically alters object relationships from the earlier phase.<sup>[2]:3</sup> "Before the depressive position, a good object is not in any way the same thing as a bad object. It is only in the depressive position that polar qualities can be seen as different aspects of the same object."<sup>[5]:37</sup> Increasing nearness of good and bad brings a corresponding integration of ego. As the depressive position brings about an increasing integration in the ego, earlier defences change in character, becoming less intense and allow increasing awareness of psychic reality.<sup>[7]:73</sup>

*In working through depressive anxiety, projections are withdrawn, allowing the other more autonomy, reality, and a separate existence.<sup>[8]</sup> The infant, whose destructive phantasies were directed towards the bad mother who frustrated, now begins to realize that bad and good, frustrating and satiating, it is always the same mother. Unconscious guilt for destructive phantasies arises in response to the continuing love and attention provided by caretakers.*

Again Kleinians are talking about infantile development and the infant-mother relationship. However if we transpose the character of the depressive position to my present concerns we can end up with something like the following.

Many Remainers would want to point out how irrational and paranoid Brexiteers are, often pointing to right wing populist fear of the Other which is classical Kleinian paranoid thinking.

By contrast a football fan had a letter published in the *Observer*, He pointed out that most of the teams relegated from the Premier League over the last three seasons were in classic economically depressed pro-Brexit areas. Sunderland was the most notable example. He wrote that football had often been a comfort in difficult times but in recent years continuing football failure makes attending matches a misery.

This ability to hold good and bad objects in mind together and be psychologically realistic may also be present in what I termed *Paragraph 5*.

The impulsive thoughts about all teenagers being stabbed to death, that we are at imminent threat of death in a nuclear war, that we have the psychological annihilation of epidemics of depression and dementia, are all paranoid anxieties without mitigation or perspective. However paragraph 5 means that the paranoid thought is part of a more psychologically complex and realistic whole. It says there is an increase in violent crime *and this may be due to a change in the way the Police record crime*. There may be an epidemic of depression *but this may also reflect better services where there is less undiagnosed and untreated depression*. The North Koreans have intercontinental ballistic missiles *but without nuclear warheads*.

This depressive position thinking was not just a matter of my understanding of these serious issues. All this balance was already there in the newspaper I read. Because of the drama of the paranoid-schizoid position we can overlook some of the social forms of depressive position thinking.

Social media is yet another existential threat on this list of apocalypses. We will become dupes of Facebook; Google is part of a surveillance society that is worse than Big Brother. Private thoughts and acts can instantly become public knowledge. Trolls can quickly form an online mob and even drive people to kill themselves. Any kind of more complex and realistic dialogue is rapidly driven out.

I was listening to the Radio 4 programme *More or Less*. This expertly examines statistics in the news. The presenter pointed out that any dodgy statistics (which often support these apocalyptic stories) attract a very quick examination by a community of statisticians. Social media, in combination with old media, means that there is now a means of the complex dialogue that is a counter to the simplicities of paranoid anxiety. More generally I think we are a much more open society than the rather repressive one that I grew up in the 1950s.

Another irritation I had when I first started on these thoughts is that these apocalyptic anxieties are nothing new. I have lived through the Cold War fear of nuclear war and the 1970s fear of exhaustion of the World's natural resources. I even thought that these modern anxieties are not a patch on those of the past and that anyone who thinks we are at the greatest risk of nuclear war since the end of World War 2 never lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis.

This led me back to Klein who *has described the earliest stages of infantile psychic life in terms of a successful completion of development through certain positions. A position, for Klein, is a set of psychic functions that correspond to a given phase of development, always appearing during the first year of life, but which are present at all times thereafter and can be reactivated at any time.*(my emphasis.)

We do not move beyond the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position and then stay there. Paranoid anxieties are reactivated and then we can work through them to achieve the complexity and reality of the depressive position.

If we accept Kleinian thinking then apocalyptic anxieties are our instinctive, part of heritage and we will have recurring apocalyptic paranoid anxieties as part of the human condition. We also have the capacity, individually and as a society, to work through these troubling thoughts in to the depressive position.

At this point I again felt optimistic about our capacity to manage the irrational elements of existential threats and sufficiently to deal with the realistic risks that face our world. As you know my wife always reassures me that my good moods will not last.

Again I was listening to Radio 4. There was an interview with a man who has written a book on the value of listening and his views will be familiar to therapists. He was also enthusiastic about an increased social capacity to listen in this way and the increased capacity to solve problems that flow from this.

The interviewer then asked specifically about Brexit. The interviewee was then pessimistic. He said he has heard a lot said about Brexit, both for and against, but he has not seen any evidence of effective listening.

Several years ago I read about research by Industrial Psychologists. Theory found that a few people who have consistently negative states of mind lower the mood of a whole workplace. Similarly a few people who are consistently positive can raise the mood.

While these researchers do not use Kleinian theory this suggests that splitting and projection can be contagious. I suspect that the dominance of Brexit in the news, in the media generally and in ordinary conversation has led to a society wide reinforcement of paranoid schizoid thinking and a lessening of the depressive position thinking that allows us to work through these deep anxieties.