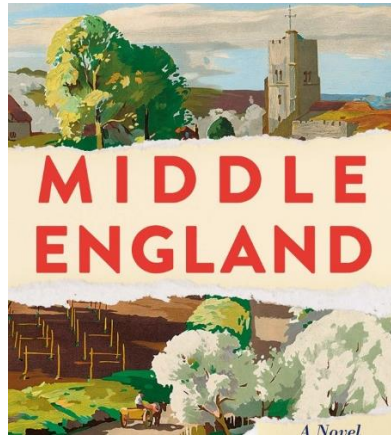


Why so angry?

Notes for a talk, autumn 2022

Differences and disagreements, the case of Brexit; the Covid-19 pandemic; traumas and grieving; the need and search for healing.



A counselling session

Sophie and Ian are characters in *Middle England*, a state-of-the-nation novel by Jonathan Coe published in 2018. It's autumn 2016, and the relationship between them has become brittle: there seems to be a perfect storm of ODTAA, one damn thing after another, one crisis, conflict, fog of confusion after another. Both Sophie and Ian are feeling disappointed and discontented, and feel they have lost something precious. Differences and disagreements between them that would have once seemed amusingly, even lovably, trivial now appear formidably insurmountable.

The hurts they inflict on and absorb from each other are not negligible pinpricks but, it seems, shocking wounds which pierce deep into their identities and worldviews, and into their bodies and nervous systems too. To an outsider, or to their own former selves, their pain and their grief may look ridiculously absurd and unreal. But for themselves in autumn 2016 their differences and disputes look utterly irreconcilable.

Sophie and Ian do, though, wonder whether the mediating role of a third person might be healing and restorative, and help them once again to care for and cherish each other, to have and to hold each other till death do them part. This much they manage to agree on. So, they go to see a relationships counsellor.

The counsellor they consult is called Lorna. She welcomes them and when they outline the topic on which they disagree so painfully she remarks that quite a lot of the couples she has seen recently in autumn 2016 have mentioned the same topical topic, the same cause of crisis, conflict and confusion. She explains too that she usually starts a counselling session by asking each individual the same question. 'Sophie,' she says, 'why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?'

Sophie thinks for a long time before answering. 'I suppose,' she eventually says, 'because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation.'

Lorna nods and turns to Ian. 'It makes me think that she's very naïve, that she lives in a bubble,' he says, 'and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority.'

Lorna says: 'What's interesting about both of those answers is that neither of you mentioned politics. As if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all. Maybe something much more fundamental and personal was going on. Which is why this might be a difficult problem to solve.'

The more fundamental and personal things going on seem to include, Coe and his creation Lorna are suggesting, differences of worldview – different narratives about reality, human nature, evolution, progress, history, morality. Also, they include different expectations of one's life partner, soul friend, intimate and significant other, best mate. And about how someone copes with and recovers from trauma. If Lorna had focused her enquiry around things such as these it would have been even more difficult for Ian and Sophie to answer her. It would, however, have captured more obviously why Jonathan Coe wants to explore middle England at the current time, and why I, much more modestly, albeit also more face-to-face, am inviting exploration here this evening.

Not that Lorna's underlying questions are only about relationships between lovers or spouses. Her searching questions are also about relationships between parents and children, and amongst siblings, neighbours and workplace colleagues, and amongst members of the same team, group, club, organisation, union, political party, church.

Underlying all these various disputes and divisions, there is on all sides a mixture of anger and grief. Anger at being despised, and grief that something of great value has been, or is being, lost. These emotions exist inside both Sophie and Ian, and amongst both remainers and leavers. Remainers feel despised and disrespected because they are said to be remoaners and enemies of the people, and are accused of arrogance and wokery, and of a smug sense of their own supposed superiority, both morally and intellectually, a gang of Guardian-readers and tofu-eaters. Leavers feel despised because they are said by an Oxford graduate with a first class degree in history, no less, to be '[fruit cakes, loonies and closet racists](#)'.

On the other side of the Atlantic the equivalents of leavers (*Make America Great Again* having a family resemblance to *Take Back Control*) are said by a former first lady, no less, to be '[baskets of deplorables](#)'. All mourn a certain loss of innocence – their shocked and shocking awareness that the UK and US are ununited, unhappy, ungracious. More specifically they feel that friends,

colleagues, neighbours and family members – people they thought they knew well, sources of kindness and joy – may in fact be strangers, aliens and traitors, unreliable, wayward, potentially or actually hostile, people whom it would be prudent not to share private thoughts and fears with.

In other words, people in whose presence it would be prudent to wear metaphorical face coverings and to keep metaphorical social distance from. Someone we thought was *one of us* might in fact be one of *them*. The popular win-lose pastime of *othering* has become more evident, more widespread, more rife, than ever.

Lockdown, pestilence, separation, death

Next in this ODTAA saga of collective grief and trauma, only two or so years after Brexit, there is the hammer-blowing perfect storm of Covid-19 – lockdown, pestilence and death, and death-denial. Masks and social distancing are no longer just metaphorical but now literally mandatory. Final farewells and subsequent grieving and mourning are now forbidden or curtailed, as are centuries-old ceremonies of joyfully welcoming new marriages and unions, and new babes and sucklings. The trauma of deaths and endings, exacerbated by the loss of joyful ceremonies in theatres, concert halls, galleries and places of worship, are further exacerbated by being international and global, not just in Britain, as had been the case with Brexit.

The decade under review here began in Britain with the Equality Act 2010, which required all public bodies to have due regard for the need to treat all people fairly, particularly people who are in danger of being othered; and to foster neighbourly and productive relationships, as distinct from win-lose and us-them relationships. But increasingly through the decade the Act has been evident much more in the breach than in the observance, and the people who most need to be protected by the Act are also those who are most likely to be mortally affected by Covid, and/or most likely to be cramped and confined by Covid-related lockdowns and distancing.

The so-called partygate scandal was a last straw, and the prime minister for getting Brexit done had to be gone. But the perfect storm of trauma – personal, ancestral, collective, systemic – kept on brewing and has been a further last straw dominating most of this month of September 2022. The Queen is dead, long live the King.

There has been much ceremony and ritual and worship these last three weeks, most certainly, and hopefully this will prove to have been healing and restorative. As of this evening, however, the jury is necessarily still out. It remains to be seen whether all the king's horses and all the king's men, directed by the king's new prime minister, can put the golden rule of monarchy back together again.

Watch this space. Just immediately here this evening, two questions for our consideration and discussion:

- 1) What thoughts and knowledge do we have regarding the nature and healing of trauma – personal, ancestral, collective, systemic?
- 2) What good practice are we aware of, regarding the healing of grief and loss in the life and work of the organisations which we know best?

Recent and relevant resources, September 2022

[Collective Grief at the End of an Age](#), blogpost by Alex Evans and Ivor Williams.

[The Myth of Normal](#), brief talk by Gabor Maté about his [book of the same name](#).

[Q is for Queen](#), blogpost by Alison Webster, 17 September 2022.

Quotations

'Fruit cakes, loonies and closet racists': David Cameron, about UKIP.

'Basket of deplorables': Hillary Clinton, about followers of Donald Trump.