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Advice from Eccentrics: We Neurotics

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ADVICE FROM ECCENTRICS

WE NEUROTICS, A Handbook for the Half Mad. By Bernard Basset, S.J. London: Burns and Oates, 1962. viii, 135 p.

The dedication comes at the end of the first paragraph of the first chapter:

Let it (the book, that is) be dedicated to those thousands of charming people, shopping quite normally at Marks and Spencers, who, in their bathrooms and bedrooms, know themselves to be a little mad.

The book is written in the first person. The "I" in this case being a certain Mr. Dawes, an estimable man who is on the verge of a breakdown when the book begins. Not a spectacular breakdown, just that prosaic going to pieces which the middle class is heir to. The good man could not ride a train without thinking it was about to fly off the rails and thereby doomed himself to trips saturated with acts of contrition. It was then that he met the deaf little nun who wrote with purple ink. She lent him a pamphlet which gave instructions for a daily relaxation period. Mr. Dawes was to lie on the floor—only one low pillow allowed—legs crossed "for polarization", each hand in a claw-like position loosely on the chest. Then he was to relax each muscle one by one. The chest muscles might be hard to loosen up; so he was to imagine the colors of the rainbow on his chest and relax each band of color one by one. In this relaxed state, he was to imagine himself "strolling leisurely through luscious, green fields" for forty minutes. This bizarre posture launched Mr. Dawes into that unobtrusive pull-yourself-together process which the middle class is also heir to.

His recovery was helped along by a series of advisers. There was Miss Copsley-Smith who thought gin with sour milk a reasonable beverage, the French priest who liked to quote journals with names like *Lettres Psychologiques et Mystiques de Lyon*, the Canon who loved that part in the Bible which deals with the measurements of the temple, Mr. Ponsonby who made circuitous detours to avoid dogs, Buzz, an American of the crew-cut-and-husky school, and Nurse Ovaltine who saw in "I am who am" (Cf. *Exodus*) a confirmation of her favorite advice to "try your best to live in the present moment where your heart beats are."

This motley crew helped Mr. Dawes to accept and love life with a measure of peace. Their advice would sound banal if reduced to formulas like: Accept yourself. The time for prayer can become a session of self-pity. Jealousy is the subtle, all-pervading defect of good people. However, as given in the book, the advice sounds un-

pretentiously wise. Here is a sample—picked definitely not at random:

In prayer we must not think too much. After all, even in this world, we only entertain thoughts about a friend when he is absent; we would scarcely want thoughts if he were sitting in the room. I am talking to you, not having thoughts about you now. When the pagan poet wrote to his girl "I would not have my thoughts of thee instead of thee", he was proposing a very useful line for us. (pp. 119-120)

Two kinds of snobs will find this book useless: the snob who is convinced he is not half mad and the snob whose madness is so esoteric that he will eschew all non-professional help. But even these snobs might be amused by the book's menagerie of eccentrics.

ROQUE FERRIOLS

RELIGIOUS PSYCHOLOGY

FUNDAMENTAL PASTORAL COUNSELING. By John R. Cavanagh, M.D. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1962.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE. By Richard P. Vaughan, S.J. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1962.

In the old days a disturbance in one's interpersonal relations would have been presented for solution to a spiritual father, who was expected to give advice from the wisdom of his own experience and his knowledge of theological principles. Today a large part of that territory, once belonging to the spiritual adviser, has been subtracted from his dominion and placed instead under the care of the psychiatrist, the clinical psychologist, and the psychiatric social worker. However, since man as a whole being cannot be easily split into his metaphysical parts, priest and doctor have responsibility over the same man. And yet if they are to respect one another each must be clear on his own functions and on those of the other. The two books under review both seek to communicate to the priest or religious some knowledge of the doctor's functions, which he may then borrow for use in religious counseling and in preserving his own mental health.

The first book, *Fundamental Pastoral Counseling*, is by Dr. John Cavanagh, a physician and psychiatrist, lecturer at Catholic University in Washington D.C., and himself a Catholic layman. He can joke about his own profession ("Psychiatry is the observation of the Id by the Odd."), but for the most part he takes a serious and at times a rather dogmatic stand on the problems of mental health and disturbances. He is at his weakest whenever he tries to justify his philosophical stand with quotations from philosophical authorities or when