

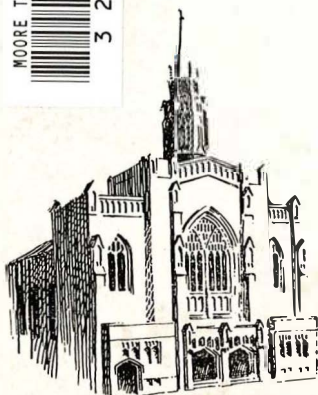
HOW ONE NERVE PATIENT RECOVERED

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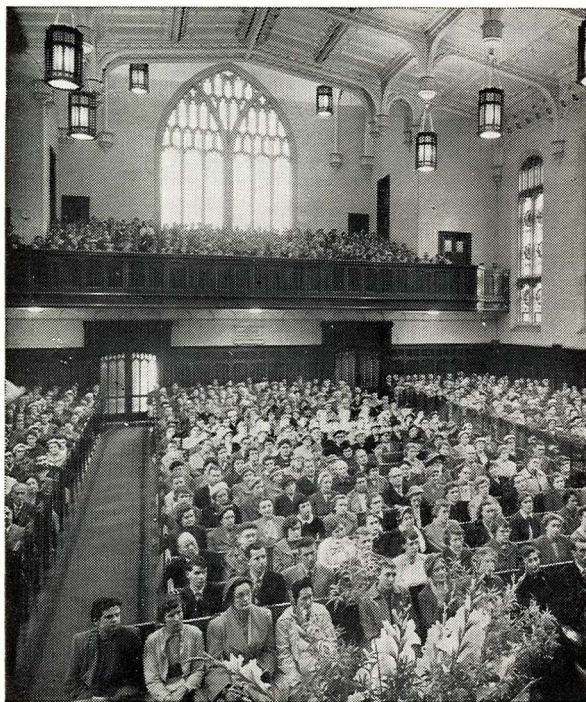
BY THE
REV. GORDON POWELL
M.A., B.D.



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This is a sermon delivered in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, Australia, on Sunday, 2nd August, 1964, and repeated at the Lunch-Hour Service.

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HOW ONE NERVE PATIENT RECOVERED

Some weeks ago I received a letter which began this way:

'In listening to the St. Stephen's broadcast tonight I was interested to hear you would be pleased to hear from people who thought their experience would be of help to others. This is the purpose of my letter.'

The writer went on to remind me that I already knew something of her story. Indeed I did. She had spent two years in a Psychiatric Hospital, and on her discharge, she came to see me for help in adjusting to the world outside. My main impression was that she was full of fear. Her letter went on to say—

'The last two years have proved to me, that far from being the calamity one would imagine, mental and physical pain can be used, for they have been the making of me as a whole person.'

She gave me permission to use her story and for the purpose of this address I will call her Mary.

Mary was born in the North of England. Her parents were not happily married. Her Father deserted the family when she was fourteen and the shock of his last words left an indelible impression on her mind. Caught up between two parents, she was always being asked to take sides. One day, she lost her temper and lashed out wildly at both of them. Her Father just turned on his heel, packed his clothes and left with these words—"Now you have turned against me, I'm going." For years Mary was haunted by the feeling that

she was somehow responsible for the break-up of the marriage. Her Mother was left with three children, Mary and two older boys. She lost contact with one brother, and the other, Peter, was killed during the War. This was a disaster all the greater because Peter and Mary had been inseparable in childhood, and great friends as they grew older. It was the deepest loss in her life, but it was a clean loss and so Mary survived. Later Mary married a man whose childhood was more tragic than her own. He was a desperate man, with one face in public and another in private, never able to be alone with himself for one single minute. At home he hid behind an impenetrable mask, never by a flicker of emotion did he betray himself. He could not communicate with his wife or anyone else. She became confused, frantic. Eventually, Mary realised she could do nothing for him, whatever private agony was his, it was his whether she was there or not, she felt, and to save her own sanity she left.

The children of broken homes, in their deep yearning for love, often rush into unsuitable marriages and repeat the tragedy of their parents. This is what happened to Mary. She and her husband had gone to Canada in the hope of making a fresh start, but when things did not work out Mary fled back to England and then found her way to Australia. Here she was not only lonely, but she was oppressed by guilt feelings about her broken marriage and something deeper still which we will consider in a moment. Is it any wonder that in her late thirties she collapsed in a really terrifying mental breakdown and had to have two years' treatment in a mental hospital? Yet today she is a well-adjusted, happy person I am proud to know. She has found 'beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.' She is

anxious to share her experience with others so that any who have sunk into the horrible pit in which she found herself may be encouraged by the knowledge that a break-down can be turned into a break-through into a new level of spiritual and triumphant living. She outlines the steps she took to climb out of this dreadful experience. As I study her letter and recall the interview it seems to me five steps to recovery are apparent.

(1) TRAINED PSYCHO-THERAPY. Before I finish I hope it will be very clear that the spiritual factor was vital for Mary's recovery and the main reason why she won such an amazing victory, but it would be very wrong to suggest that this in any way displaced the psycho-therapy she received at the hands of highly trained doctors and specialists. She needed both and one without the other would have left her cure incomplete. More and more we are realising that prolonged emotional stress can affect the chemistry of the body and hence the physical tissues of the brain and other organs. The development of certain chemicals in tablet or capsule form in the last ten years or so has produced most heartening results. In the United States in this period there has been a pronounced drop in the number of patients in Mental Hospitals in spite of a considerable increase in population and also much greater tension in many lives.

Along with the discovery of new drugs and the value of tender, loving care, or T.L.C. as it is referred to in the treatment of nerve patients, there has been a healthy change in the attitude of the public towards psychiatrists. If you saw the film **KNOCK ON WOOD** you will recall that Danny Kaye played the part of a ventriloquist who was terrified at the suggestion that he ought to see a psychiatrist. Too many people still react in the same way. Because of a sense of shame, people hesitate

to go for psychiatric help until they are absolutely compelled and then the treatment of necessity has to take much longer. It is said that one person in every five will need psychiatric help before they are through and from my own personal knowledge I would say that this figure would be pretty accurate as far as the people in this Church are concerned today. So there is nothing to be ashamed of and this should be a source of encouragement because most people not only make an excellent recovery, but like Mary are better for the experience.

(2) ACCEPTANCE OF THE PAST. The second of Mary's five steps to recovery came from acceptance of the past. She writes,

"A mental break-down drove me to look at myself through intensive psycho-therapy for a period of two years, and to accept that whatever had happened in the past—through whatever circumstances, by whomsoever inflicted, and by my own human failings—as things which were past indeed."

How many people torture themselves with memories of the past, the mistakes they have made, the tragedies with which they have been afflicted, or worst of all the hurts and injustices inflicted on them by others. They get eaten up by resentment or remorse. The prayer which has helped so many alcoholics find freedom from tension and build serenity of spirit does not refer only to the past, but the past is a very important factor in it. I refer to the prayer,

"God grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change things I can and wisdom to know, the difference."

Mary had a tragic past, a broken home, the loss of two brothers in different ways, a broken marriage. No wonder her nervous health broke. But all this was now

in the past and psychiatrists helped her to see this.

(3) THE RIGHT KIND OF PRAYER. In learning to accept the past Mary came to a new understanding of God and entered into the discovery and the use of the right kind of prayer. There are some who might assume that any kind of prayer is right, but in my experience this is a dangerous attitude to adopt. Nerve patients are full of tension and if they try to pray hard they are in danger of increasing their tension, especially if they pray the wrong prayers and then assume their prayers are not answered. Here let me quote again from Mary's letter,

"Towards the end of psycho-therapy I was suddenly struck with a severe spinal complaint. Once again after futile attempts to justify my rebellion to God for the excruciating pain . . . I prayed something like this, 'Dear God, if I must bear this pain, please give me strength to bear it quietly. If not, show me the person who can help me.' The nights I spent walking the hospital wards, gazing on the velvet nights which murmured through leaf and whispered through wind, were the most beautiful and rewarding experiences, for I felt as if I were wrapped about with heavenly grace, in spite of severe pain which sleeping pills did not penetrate. God answered the whole of that prayer. He gave me strength to bear the pain by showing me the beauty of night and he led me to the man who eventually cured my spinal complaint."

As one who has suffered the agony of back trouble as Mary did I want to say this, that while the intense pain is caused by physical factors and pressure upon important nerves, prolonged emotional and nervous strain can affect the muscle tone and in my view is often

a major cause of the trouble in the first place. I believe I had spiritual healing for my own back trouble as described in the last chapter of my book *THE BLESSING OF BELIEF*. That spiritual healing came when friends prayed for me and brought peace at the spiritual and mental levels. At the same time it is only right to say that I was very glad of the support given by a surgical belt for some time. Also I know the value of infra-red rays, diathermy, and other physical treatment, not to mention the importance of complete bed-rest on a hard mattress if that is possible.

May I emphasise the nature of Mary's prayer. She might have prayed desperately, "God help me. God take away this pain in the back." I don't doubt that at first she did pray like this and then was rebellious when God didn't take away the pain. But that rebellion only increased her sense of guilt and built up more tension. When she had the grace to pray for strength to bear the pain and then to be led to a man qualified and able to help her at the physical level, then results began to show. By learning the right way to pray Mary took a big step forward in the conquest of her mental trouble.

(4) FAITH IN CHRIST AND COMMITMENT TO HIM. Mary's letter continues:

"Eventually I obtained permission to visit St. Stephen's while still in hospital, and on the theory that Jesus Christ was a mystery to me and quite unacceptable in his claims on the grounds of intellect I was prepared to accept on blind faith if that was what God wanted."

Now personally I never ask anybody to accept Christ on blind faith because I don't think that is necessary. I believe that Christianity can stand up to every test of reason. If I were not quite sure of that I could not

continue in the ministry for another day. But I am also sure that there comes a point in everybody's life when we are put to the test and when God virtually says to us, "Do you believe in my Son Jesus Christ enough to trust Him, to trust Him with your life?" When we obey Him and commit our lives to Him something really tremendous happens in the personality. This is where I am quite certain the hand of God could be seen in Mary's recovery. The day she came to see me was Saturday, 28th October, 1961, towards the end of the afternoon. I know it was that day because Billy Graham's brother-in-law Leighton Ford began his nine day Crusade in the Sydney Stadium that night. I had to put an end to my interview with Mary because of a wedding I was to conduct, but I hated showing her out because she was so ill mentally and spiritually I was really worried about her, in spite of the prayer we had in the vestry together. Something prompted me to suggest to her she might attend the meeting in the Stadium that night. You can imagine my feelings when Leighton Ford gave the invitation to come forward and make a decision for Christ and the sixth person to come forward was Mary, with the most radiant look on her face. I nearly jumped out of my seat with joy, not realising she was even present. Not everybody needs to make a public commitment but with certain people like Mary it can be a spiritual and emotional shock treatment which can have most beneficial results. In an article in the *Reader's Digest*, Billy Graham wrote:

"I feel sorry for the man who has never known the bracing thrill of taking a stand and sticking to it fearlessly. Moral courage has rewards which timidity can never imagine. Like a shot of adrenalin it floods the spirit with vitality . . . Commitment to great causes makes great men. In our Crusades

we ask those persons who wish to make a commitment to Christ to arise, come forward, and stand with others. Why? Not because there is any saving virtue in such a step, but because it witnesses to the spiritual about-face they have taken. It is the going on record—publicly and boldly—which reinforces the will and helps to make the decision stick.”

I discovered later that Mary had previously made a decision at the 1959 Billy Graham Crusade. Whatever happened then the fact remains that she gave herself some shock-therapy at the spiritual level in 1961 which did an enormous amount of good. Among other things it led her away from herself to trust in Christ and like the woman in the crowd who touched the hem of his garment in faith, she found healing power flowing into her—making her complete, integrated and whole again.

While this is true, Mary is anxious lest others in dire need should get the impression that all you need to do is to make a decision at an evangelistic meeting. She feels that what was even more important was the daily spiritual discipline which she then imposed upon herself. She took Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's **THOUGHT-CONDITIONERS** which are similar to the Tonic Cards issued at St. Stephen's and based on the same principle. (They are found in his book, **INSPIRING MESSAGES FOR DAILY LIVING**.) Each morning as she awoke dark thoughts crowded her mind and she would wonder how she could possibly face the day. Now whenever a negative thought came to her she immediately repeated one of the great texts in the **THOUGHT-CONDITIONERS** and kept repeating it until she had killed the negative thought. So health returned to her thinking and to her mind.

(5) The final step in Mary's recovery was **FINDING**

THE LOVE OF GOD.

All of us are hungry for love and if anything deprives us of the love of parents when we are small children we are bound to pay for it later, as Mary did. This is one reason why tender, loving care is so important in the treatment of nerve patients. Here again I want to quote the exact words of Mary's letter.

‘It (psycho-therapy) brought to light that my attitude to God was conditioned solely upon my feelings towards my own Father, who left us when I was 14. Somehow I had twisted this into a peculiar failure on the part of God, not my Father, and therefore my idol had feet of clay. Not until I saw that could I make any recovery at all. ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’”

This quotation comes near the beginning of Mary's letter because it really belongs to the first step in her recovery. Among other things it shows the importance of having psychiatrists who are Christian believers. Mary had got her Father and God all mixed up. She didn't want to rebel against her father so she rebelled against God and blamed Him for all her misery. But deep down, in her unconscious mind, she knew the truth and down there tension was created. She knew God was not really to blame and she was guilty of rebellion against Him. I noted in my diary after the interview with Mary: “Full of fear”. She seemed to be breathing fear, but in the prayer in the vestry and still more in the Stadium that night as she made her decision, she came face to face with the love of God. She tells me she came to a growing experience of that love as she worshipped Sunday by Sunday and especially as she attended the classes for new members of the Church conducted by my colleague, the Rev. Alex Tulloh.

I can think of no better way to conclude this story

than to use Mary's own words at the end of her letter:

"All that was two years ago, but today I am happier and healthier than ever before. My feeling is this, people who undergo the tortures of a so-called nervous break-down are called upon to find an answer greater than their previous belief in earthly pleasures or human nature. If they are capable of descending to such dire depths, then they must also be capable of ascending to great heights. . . . The soul is driven to search for a love which is the fulfilment of the heart's desires, to a love stronger than death and a friend who sticketh closer than a brother, to Jesus Christ, who will give unto them,

'Beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning
The garment of praise for the spirit of
heaviness'."

POSTSCRIPT

After the above sermon had been preached in St. Stephen's, Mary sent me the following poem which she had written about her experience:

The Light of Love

Come boldly to the Throne of Grace
So bathed in light
It clears the sight
Come, bravely, love is in its place.
This is the answer to the night
That miry pit;
All desolate,
For God is Love, and Christ is Light.
Oh, come with awe, 'tis hallowed ground,
The Lamb is there
His gifts to share,
Behold, she who was lost, is found.

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