

13th August 2020

Melancholy

**“All my joys to this are folly,
Naught so sweet as melancholy.”**

Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy

The Anatomy of Melancholy is a book by Robert Burton, first published in 1621. At first glance it looks like a medical textbook, in which the author applies his expansive knowledge to “melancholia”, which includes, though isn’t limited to, what we now call “clinical depression”. But the book is much more than that. For Burton uses melancholy as a conduit through which he moves to explore a range of human emotions, how we live, and why, as human beings, we react as we do to what is around us.

That’s why I’ve been interested in the past few weeks in my reaction to the easing of our lockdown. I have, quite simply, been feeling “down”, more anxious than usual, lacking my usual motivation, feeling somewhat troubled. In short, I’ve been experiencing melancholy.

I confess that I haven’t explored *The Anatomy of Melancholy* in detail, but what I know of it reassures me that I’m OK. “Feeling down” is a normal, human reaction to the uncertainty and change that’s around us. It doesn’t mean we’re clinically depressed. There are tests, diagnoses and treatments for that, and if you feel you’re heading that way, go and talk with your GP. But being “down” is different. It’s part of what we are and shows we’re reacting appropriately to what we’re living with right now.

What do we do when we’re down? I can only speak personally. Be patient. As with all human emotions and reactions, it will find its balance in time. And find your place of stillness – in reflection or prayer, and maybe even a physical place too, where you can find calmness and peace.

In his satirical preface, Robert Burton (through his pseudonym *Democritus Junior*) explains, “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.” I think that’s what I’m doing now, avoiding melancholy by writing about it, and, for a little while, I’m a lot better for it.

A prayer for today

*Living God, when I am laid low with troubles, comfort me;
when I am cast down with sorrow, wait with me;
when I am turned in on myself, turn me outwards to your peace. Amen*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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