



Chris Ellis

Written by Chris Ellis, a family physician from KwaZulu/Natal, South Africa.

Correspondence to:

Dr Chris Ellis,
e-mail: cristobalellis@gmail.com

The Noble Symptom Bearer

In childhood games there is often a child standing on the periphery of the playground, who is called in by the more active members to play the passive supporting part in the drama. The child, usually a girl but not always, is ordered by the dominant brothers to be the nurse or mother in the plot. She is intuitively chosen by the other actors for her passive nature and grateful willingness to be included in childhood's enactment of the play of life; the strong and the weak, the doers and the supporters.

As we grow up through unassuming teenage lives into adulthood these more vulnerable souls may become teenage pregnancies or "failure to launch" adults while others gain security from working in certain institutions. Some become the family's scapegoats or strawmen, left at home to care for mother or a debilitated father. A daughter, chosen almost sacrificially never to marry in order to look after mother, or a son who becomes the saintly husband sitting quietly in the car outside, listening daily to the family's multiple woes and unfair insults.

Sometimes the ancient mother or father is pushed into my consulting room in a wheelchair by a daughter who has been manipulated into dependency and chronic guilt. This is not necessarily one way traffic as she has found some gains by shifting her life responsibilities onto the care of her mother in the role of noble spinster daughter. In this way unwelcome suitors may be deterred by her responsibilities and social interactions conveniently escaped.

These are subtle figures well depicted in Victorian literature by Dickens and Eliot and Austen but seemingly they have become even more marginalised in today's modern Rambo world.

With this life of endurance comes an infinite variety of symptoms and attitudes that are common to us all, soliloquies drawn from the Book of Job. It is the need, from time to time, for some form of recognition and thus we may present ourselves often in a rather pathetic light to our fellow travellers bearing our symptoms as self-attracting trophies; messengers seeking a compassionate carer.

These messages are hidden behind the socially acceptable chronic backache, the rebellious intestines and the "it's my migraine again, doctor". These are noble symptoms carried in through the door as well as several learnt roles deeply hidden and defended in a labyrinth of justifying backup manoeuvres. In my consulting room I can see and instinctively feel them sussing me out. Is he also a noble symptom bearer? Will he understand? Can I reveal my suffering in the codes that both of us will be able to understand?

Noble symptom bearers must be careful to whom they offer themselves. We are pathetically transparent in our efforts to gain recognition and sympathy, which is often met with cynicism and derision by our stronger brethren.

In a woman's case there may be a dominant male figure in the background, a sociopathic husband or aggressive alcoholic. For a male patient there may be a dominant woman; a mother figure often even referred to as "mother" or a similar epithet. There are the stoic, the fearful and the complete collapse. We often salute each other knowingly in the high street of the village.

We know that we are explained away by theories such as sick roles, hidden agendas and secondary gains, and somatoform disorders.

Noble symptom bearers don't necessarily need to be treated in a conventional way. It may take only two universally underestimated medicopastoral approaches; confirmation and acceptance. A recognition, almost unobtrusively done, of our human weaknesses.

If I have had a bad day, back to back, with a lot of my fellow sufferers, then when I get home I try some new techniques I have learnt in the day. As a ploy, I shuffle around the house and pretend that I am too old to carry on. I try to do this with just the right amount of snivelling and seek reassurance that, despite everything, I am doing a grand job against insuperable odds. This is usually met with a weary dismissal by the family. I must pull myself together. They have heard it all before.

It is not easy bearing symptoms nobly. I think I will go and see my general practitioner. She will understand.