

Where do we go when events become unreal?

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I have no idea what the state of the world will be like when you read this. I can only tell you that we must keep our minds alive and resist the temptation to disengage. We must find nourishment through good people who awaken us through their art, words and ideas. And we must see politics as a kind of gameshow where people rise through the ranks without clear qualification, sometimes presenting in ways that feel parochial, mendacious, duplicitous, callous and vapid.

Witnessing this has led me to trawl through decades of thinkers who act as buoys, keeping us on top of the water, hopeful when 'leaders' push their brutality onto society. Where do we go when events become unreal? How do we navigate our lives? Who do we shed our tears to when the sadness around us unfolds?

I cancelled the direct debit for my TV licence the other day, which purports to inform me of activities around the world. I have enormous respect for Fergal Keane, Lyse Doucet and others, but I find it harder to place my faith in the *BBC* than I once did. It should be unbiased, but it is not in my opinion (except for certain *BBC Sounds*' programmes). Instead, I have turned to the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, Italy and rebellious voices inside the US for much-needed perspective – voices old and young who mesmerise and enthrall. Have we forgotten that this is how life should be, versus the cynical, bullying 'leaders' who don't even have the decency to listen?

Our minds are not where they should be. We are living within the influence of powerful and often conflicting political forces that shape the narratives we are exposed to. Why is this relevant to counselling? Because our profession is steeped in trying to understand why a person suffers mentally – on a micro or macro level. And so, I have been foraging for other views outside our bubble – expressions soaked in care rather than bureaucracy, celebration rather than callousness, and equality rather than avarice.

The *Letters of Vincent van Gogh*,¹ footage from 1960 of Erich Fromm² discussing whether an entire society can be mentally ill, plus the words of Ece Temelkuran,³ Clara Mattei⁴ and George Saunders⁴ have breathed new promise into my struggling head. They have provided solace and faith at a time when I examined my horizon and saw disappointment and dread.

I know I am a serious person. I would never challenge that. But I am dry too and see beauty and humour in

neglected corners of the world. When work colleagues don't discuss the problems societies face, it hurts me. I wonder: why the apathy? How can we fix things by burying our heads? Conscious avoidance means that they can do whatever *they* like.

Van Gogh shot himself aged 37, but the paintings he produced are examples of sublime grace and brilliance. A letter to his brother Theo two years before his death, read: '... instead of painting the ordinary wall of the shabby apartment, I shall paint infinity, I shall do a simple background of the richest, most intense blue that I can contrive...' ¹ Maybe there is a lesson in this. That we are all a little shabby, but that we try to overcome this by reaching heights never quite defined. Infinity implies something boundless and endless – states of mind and places where van Gogh's art arguably takes us.

Fromm gazes at society, but is no less penetrative: 'Most people forget themselves... They forget that they are human in a deeper sense ... Our country's concern, primarily, [is] with production and consumption of things. And in this process ... we, ourselves, transform into things, without knowing. We lose our individuality in spite of the fact that we talk a lot about it... We are alienated from ourselves. We don't feel intensely. All we are after is not to be different. We are frightened to death to be just two feet away from the herd.'²

Can any of us honestly say that large chunks of our lives are not filled with maintaining our place in society? Fromm speaks of the mental health movement '[helping] to adjust man somewhat more, to make him function more smoothly. You might say that psychologists are in danger of becoming the priests of industrial systems.'²

Helping has never been more castigated. What he is saying is that many in our related professions are simply shepherding people back to the 'front line', rather than looking at society itself. And comparing his Cold War words with the prevailing atmosphere now leads us to believe that not much has changed. The present has a habit of feeling unreal. But war can creep upon us. And enough people become compliant for it to gather momentum.

Temelkuran puts it this way: 'It is as if we are mourning not for what we have already lost, but for what we know we eventually will... Humanity is mourning in the future tense.'³ This is striking. It conveys immense sadness, but also sounds an alarm. We must nourish again. Not let others destroy or redefine that which we know to be beautiful. ●

REFERENCES

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- 3 Temelkuran E. Nation of strangers. Edinburgh: Canongate Books; 2026.
- 4 Ways to Change the World. <https://tinyurl.com/3d7n6u6h> (accessed 25 March 2026).