

What Do You Do When Your Whole World Falls Apart?

Jane Chandler

What do you do when your whole world falls apart? One day its friends and family, school and home, but then out of the blue everything changes. To those around you it's just another day, another week, but to you nothing feels the same. For a while you cope, just going through the motions, dancing endlessly in the masquerade ball that your life has become. You try to tell yourself that it is just a phase, that tomorrow you will wake up and feel alive again. But the next morning when the alarm goes off the music is still playing, you are still dancing and the mask on your face feels tighter than ever. All of a sudden a kitchen knife is no longer just a kitchen knife and Panadol isn't just for headaches. Suddenly it feels like you're fighting an incessant battle to go to sleep when everyone around you just wants you to stay awake ...

In approximately 404 BC the historian Thucydides wrote that his *History of the Peloponnesian War* was "not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever". Consequently, it is not unreasonable to assume that Thucydides would be considerably less than surprised were he to learn that, almost two and a half thousand years later, his words were still read and studied. Thucydides understood with remarkable clarity that, as Camus said, "the purpose of a writer is to keep

civilisation from destroying itself". His "complicated style, overloaded and lacking in charm" was crafted for a simple purpose. Thucydides sought to convey the one message that it had taken him a lifetime of constant observation and meticulous chronicling to learn: that, with human nature being what it is, the events of the past will "at some time or another and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future".

... I never thought of myself as a suicidal person. I'm not "emo", I don't wear head-to-toe black and I've never listened to Death Cab for Cutie or Dashboard Confessional. However, that morning when I woke up I just couldn't be bothered any more. Yet, eight hours and one failed suicide attempt later I found myself, all rights removed, confined to the eerily bright and sunny Acute Psychiatric Unit being forced to care about the future I had forsaken. I was swiftly diagnosed: clinical depression, generalised anxiety, anorexia and bulimia nervosa, self-harm and perfectionism. Psychological jargon meant to provide a concise and succinct explanation of who I am and how I feel. In this place I'm not a sister, a daughter, a friend or even an enemy. I'm simply the occupant of room 14, another patient to be interrogated, examined, treated and cured. The pure methodology of the whole process sickens me ...

In his introduction to *The History*, Finley expresses the need to distinguish between "Thucydides the reporter and Thucydides the interpreter" because it is all too easy to take Thucydides on faith and blindly accept his often pessimistic, sweeping generalities. Thucydides took particular instances of personal crises and drew general conclusions about human nature as a whole. Thus, interspersed with his objective account of brutal civil war, are his personal opinions of the depravity of human nature, with the conclusions he draws differing only in their degree of savagery. The absence of any romantic element means that Thucydides' final comment is considerably Hobbesian in nature. The reader is left with a bitter taste and the distinct impression that human nature is basically "nasty, brutish and short". But whether *The History* represents the irrepressible ramblings of a man jaded by

decades of devastating and bloody battles, or whether its conclusions are the only logical ones that can be drawn from an analysis of the events of the Peloponnesian War, remains ambiguous. More importantly, with “human nature being what it is” can we learn to suppress in ourselves this innate bestiality, or is it inevitable that we will be the source of our own demise?

... I quickly learnt that the easiest way to pass the day in my new home-away-from-home was to read the endless supply of books deposited on my bedside table by my mum or write in my diary — a rediscovered pastime that I had previously (and briefly) taken up after seeing *Harriet the Spy* in fourth grade. The effects were immediate. Whether I was absorbing myself in the Italian adventures of Lucy Honeychurch or simply recording the ceaselessly entertaining goings on in the female wing of the Psychiatric Centre, a new-found comfort and sense of calm washed over me. Soon I was able to eat a meal and keep it down — a small step for most people, but a giant leap for me, and as every day passed I felt stronger and happier. All of a sudden there was a reason to breathe in and out and then do it again. I am not saying that overnight my life became one big, red, shiny beach ball, because I do still see Winston Churchill’s black dog lurking in the shadows. But when I do, I get out my “dark days” diaries, read them and know that, despite what Thucydides’ believed, I will never let myself repeat.

I don’t know whether words can prevent society from crumbling or whether humankind is smart enough to learn from its own mistakes. But I do know that we need to try, and that only by looking into the past can there be hope for the future. By being a writer and recording my own feelings, observations, hopes and dreams I found the strength to take control, and finally learn that “in the depths of winter ... within me there lay an invincible summer”.



Jane Chandler wrote this essay in 2007 when she was in Year 12 at Girton Grammar School, Bendigo, Victoria.