

Jane Austen and Chicken Soup

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It is a heavy responsibility to be the last speaker on any program. Here, in particular, we have all been burrowed safely and happily into our darling Jane's world, forgetting that other world out there. Now this glorious weekend is ending, and we must all go out into that world to face life's challenges—bad weather, the IRS, ungrateful children (perhaps even worse, grateful children), toothaches, headaches, depressions, and growing lists of shady contributors sleeping in the Lincoln Bedroom at the White House.

It falls on me as the final speaker to give you a few parting words of comfort and perhaps advice.

Mr. Parker in *Sanditon* recommends the sea air and sea bathing as being “anti-spasmodic, anti-pulmonary, anti-sceptic, anti-bilious and anti-rheumatic” (*MW* 373). Never mind that his sister, Diana Parker, feels that the sea air would probably be the death of her, and, of course, we have it on even stronger authority from Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma*, that the sea air nearly killed him once.

For myself, I have nothing against sea air, but I would like to recommend instead for the best possible treatment of most ailments, Jane Austen herself.

Now that we are older, my husband and I often don't sleep well. We take turns tossing and sighing deeply at about 3 or 4 in the morning, until the other one wakes up. My husband worries a great deal about politics, pollution, endangered species and the IRS. The best cure I find for his insomnia is to talk to him about one of the characters in a book of Jane's. He prefers Mr. Knightley. We not only talk about Mr. Knightley's role in *Emma*, we bring him into the twentieth century, and discuss what he would think of modern manners and morals, what kind of food he would like to eat (meat and potatoes), and what political party he would belong to (sadly, most likely Republican, but he would not approve of Newt Gingrich).

In ninety-nine out of a hundred instances, my husband will contentedly fall back to sleep after small to moderate doses of Mr. Knightley. Foolish friends have suggested that this is the case because he finds Mr. Knightley boring, but I know better. You will remember from *Emma*, that the only reason Mr. Woodhouse finally agrees to Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley is that somebody had been stealing turkeys from Mrs. Weston's poultry house. He knew that as long as he had Mr. Knightley inside his own house, he was safe and protected. My husband, I think, feels the same way.

I never go anywhere without one of Jane's books in my suitcase. Some years ago, in New Orleans, I forgot, and had the worst attack of hysterics in my life. Diana Parker would certainly have approved. I had to find a bookstore immediately, and pick up a copy of anything she wrote before I could be restored to tranquility.

There are many, many ways to use Jane. One friend, after receiving an eviction notice from her landlord, reported that an immediate immersion in *Sense and Sensibility* relieved her worst symptoms of depression. A comparison of her state with the Dashwoods' loss of Norland, gave an immediate lift to her spirits and restored hope to her heart.

A friend from New York tells me that she finds the sequence in *Northanger Abbey* in which John Thorpe takes Catherine Morland for a ride in his carriage sustains her during her daily trip to work on the New York subway.

When I was a young mother, and found myself in one of those totally hopeless days, I would retreat to my bedroom with a fierce look on my face and a copy of one of Jane's books under my arm. I'm afraid my kids' first impression of Jane Austen had to do with their mother turning into a dragon. It's astonishing to me that both of them have grown up to be fans.

Jane—in her books and letters—has helped me through all sorts of crises in my life, from infected sinuses to deep depressions. She has never failed me.

And what about Jane herself? What cures did she believe in for physical or mental ailments? She can speak for herself.

It is fascinating to think that Jane Austen wrote *Sanditon* between January 27 and March 18, 1817; she died four months later on July 18, 1817. Sick, feeble, probably aware that she was dying, this is her final testament, and what does she tell us? Amazingly, she makes savage fun of people who are sick. More precisely, she makes fun of people who think they are sick. Nobody is really sick in *Sanditon*, except maybe Miss Lambe, who is described as "chilly & tender." Everybody else is a hypochondriac "in want of employment" (MW 421), Jane tells us. The three hypochondriacal Parkers, she says, are suffering "from Fancy, the love of Distinction, & the love of the Wonderful" (MW 412). What does she advise? "Air and exercise," her heroine tells Arthur Parker. ". . . daily, regular Exercise. . . more of it," she tells him, "than I suspect you are in the habit of taking" (MW 416).

Jane really believed in fresh air and exercise for herself as well as others. In a letter, dated March 23, 1817, after speaking of her illness,

she claims she is much better, and insists “air and exercise is what I want.”

In an earlier letter, one of my favorites, dated December 2, 1815, she writes, “I am sorry my Mother has been suffering, & am afraid this exquisite weather is too good to agree with her. [I’ll get back to her mother.]—I enjoy it all over me, from top to toe, from right to left, Longitudinally, Perpendicularly, Diagonally” (*Letters* 303).

I feel good just reciting that sentence. I think it would make an excellent mantra if you are looking for one.

Jane knew about hypochondriacs. Nearly all of her books have at least one. I suspect her mother might have been the model. Certainly, we know from her nephew’s memoir, that in the last months of her life, before she was taken to Winchester, it was her mother who occupied the sofa (shades of Lady Bertram?) whenever Jane could leave her bedroom, while Jane had to make do with three hard chairs pushed together.

What did she think of doctors and medicine? None of her heroes is in the medical profession, and no doctors effect a miraculous cure in any of her books. In her letters about her own illness, she is philosophic and ironic rather than enthusiastic. In a letter dated November 6, 1813, she speaks of Lady B whose doctor is trying out a new, lengthy treatment, different from anything she had been used to. “I suppose,” writes Jane, “he will not mind having a few more of her Ladyship’s guineas” (*Letters* 254).

And what about books as a remedy for suffering? Well, yes, but maybe no as well. Books are dangerous. Anne Elliot tells the grieving, seemingly broken-hearted Captain Benwick in *Persuasion* that she hoped he did not always read only poetry and “that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly” (*P* 100-01).

Wise Jane! Just think what poetry did to Marianne Dashwood. It nearly killed her. And think of the effect all his reading had on the weak, silly head of Sir Edward Denham.

What then—in her own life—sustained Jane and can sustain the rest of us?

To the end, I think, her interest in other people continued. Maybe she complained to Cassandra, but in *Sanditon*, in her final letters, her interest in people never changed. In March 1817, she wrote to her niece, Fanny, affectionately and playfully, about love and marriage. She urged her niece, Caroline, to practice more. She worried about her brothers’ health, and in her final letter, she ends “you will find

Captain — a very respectable, well-meaning man, without much manner, his wife and sister all good humour and obligingness, and I hope (since the fashion allows it) with rather longer petticoats than last year” (*Letters* 343).

How could she do it? How could she keep her sense of humor just a couple of months away from dying? But she did, and I am sure it sustained her.

Sanditon is a very funny fragment. And what I find remarkable is that in this very short piece, both the hero and the heroine are obviously marked out for each other because they share one precious trait that Jane had in abundance—they both regard the people around them with “amusement.”

We don’t know very much about the heroine, Charlotte Heywood. She is described early on as “a very pleasing young woman of two and twenty (*MW* 374). That’s it. We know she’s healthy. We know she believes in fresh air and exercise, and we know she does not quite approve of Robert Burns whose “known irregularities, greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his Lines” (*MW* 398).

But we do know one thing about her. Over and over again the word is used—I went back and underlined it—that she is “amused.”

And Sidney Parker, whom we glimpse very quickly in the last chapter, as he emerges from the mists, as “7 or 8 & 20, very good-looking, with a decided air of Ease & Fashion, and a lively countenance” (*MW* 425).

But over and over again, we hear that he is entertained and “amused” by his family. Clearly he and Charlotte are fated for each other by their shared amusement of the world as no other of her couples are. They are, tragically, Jane’s true inheritors.

One must be courageous to stay funny through such a long and debilitating illness, even her last sentence in *Sanditon*: “Poor Mr. Hollis!—It was impossible not to feel him hardly used, to be obliged to stand back in his own House & see the best place by the fire constantly occupied by Sir H. D.” (*MW* 427).

There is only one really sick person in all of the novels that Jane Austen approves of. That is Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, her final, completed novel which she finished when she was already gravely ill.

You will recall that Mrs. Smith is a poor widow with no family and is unable to walk without help. Jane says through Anne Elliot, “Yet, in spite of all this, Anne had reason to believe that she had moments only of languor and depression, to hours of occupation and enjoyment. How could it be?—She watched—observed—reflected—and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of

resignation only.—A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven" (P 154).

And a choice, final gift of advice from Jane to the rest of us. May we all go forth into that world out there and likewise find employment and amusement which carries us out of ourselves as Mrs. Smith did—as Jane did.

I recommend very liberal doses of Jane to help all of us along. Sir Walter Elliot recommends constant use of Gowland's face cream during the spring months. Let me close by recommending constant use of Jane Austen during all the months of the year with or without the chicken soup.

WORKS CITED

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