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On ECT and Rainbows

Abstract

While on his way home from visiting his youngest son in South Dakota, the author stopped in Oak Grove State Park, Iowa and was surprised by a rainbow over the Big Sioux River. This leads him to muse on how a few years earlier he would have naively interpreted the rainbow “as a sign from God that everything was going to be okay” with his middle son’s prolonged clinical depression. Now, with his youngest son in Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) to deal with clinical depression, Kesha’s lyrics about just putting on the rainbow’s colors seem more appropriate. “Perhaps,” he concludes, “God surprises us occasionally with rainbows so that we may better endure the implacable storm of life’s unavoidable and disproportionate sufferings.”

About the Author

Before coming to Northwestern, Dr. Robert Hubbard worked extensively in both academic and professional theatre as a director, actor, teaching artist, and playwright/adaptor. Among the shows he’s directed are an award-winning production of *The Comedy of Errors* and an original stage adaptation of Larry Woiwode’s novel *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. Hubbard debuted his original, one-person show, *Dancing with Jimmy*, at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in New York City in August 2003 and has since performed it in a number of venues. In 2005 he received a fellowship to participate in the O’Neill Critics Institute at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center. He also publishes articles and reviews in numerous academic books and journals.

On ECT and Rainbows

by Robert Hubbard, Ph.D.

If in the thick shadows of dread, in the prey of terrible thoughts, we are abandoned, abandoned almost by the language we speak, still You would not have forgotten us. You would understand our language, You who hears the cry of all. You find a way to us which is prompter than light and more constant than the stars.

--Søren Kierkegaard¹

I found a rainbow, rainbow, baby

Trust me, I know life is scary

But just put those colors on, girl

--Kesha from “Rainbow”²

The weather-beaten sign surprises me. I pass it at a cruise-controlled 59 mph and take a few moments to process the unexpected marker. The cognitive delay forces me to squeeze the brakes and finesse the steering wheel just enough to successfully round a wide corner leading to Oak Grove State Park. I used to bring the boys here when they were little and still wanted to go, even though the park was over twenty miles one way away from anything else desirable to them. I sometimes drove them straight from daycare as one of Daddy’s spontaneous late afternoon adventures. We played frisbee on the shoreline and tried to skip rocks on the muddy river. A few years later, we pulled out here after canoeing a small stretch of the Big Sioux River on a random summer day. Their mom dropped us off a few miles upstream and moved the car downstream to

¹ From *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, ed. Perry D. LeFevre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/poetry-prayers-visual-arts/prayers-for-today-soren-kierkegaard/>.

² https://www.google.com/search?q=kesha+rainbow+lyrics&rlz=1C1GCEA_enUS855US855&oq=kesha+rainbow&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l5.10692j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

meet us at Oak Grove. Pretty sure that was the last time I was here. Must have been at least nine years ago now or more.

I’ve grown aesthetically cynical living in Sioux County, a prosperous and manicured prairie of corn stalks, soybeans, hog confinements, and polite Republicans. If given enough time, most of us fail to see the beauty of where we live; such visual negligence comes easily, at least for me. But the spontaneous detour to Oak Grove State Park temporarily cures my cynicism. In that inimitable prairie way, you drive through a flat field with no visible sign or hope of topographical variety, and then, like magic, the upper-ridge of a previously invisible basin appears below the horizon; it dives dramatically into a verdant valley of trees, birds, deer, and picnic shelters. Like all of those unspoiled, bygone, precious times when I drove here with my boys when they were still boys, the reveal surprises me with delight. A simple thing, but so needed now.

You see, I only noticed the sign for Oak Grove because I chose a road less taken on the now daily trek back from Sioux Falls where my youngest son, 17 years old, fumes in a locked-down hospital ward for suicidal teens. I usually take a more direct route back, but today required variety. This afternoon’s visitation was particularly rough. My son’s serotonin-starved brain locked his mood in an angry spiral of suicidal ideation and lashing out at loved ones. His most recent words to me, “I hope you die in a car crash on the drive home,” metastasized in my thoughts. Although I would have allowed a phone call to suffice in place of these brutal daily visits now and again, his mom forbids it; more sacrificial and unconditional than I, she insists that one of us drive the 150 miles round-trip... Every. Single. Day... to see our beautiful boy and

to remind his seemingly deaf ears that he is indeed loved. She is right, of course, but man it hurts to go—like watching a purposed dream descend into nightmare. Our parental agony cannot compare to his deep dread of life, of course, which somehow makes things even worse. If only we weren't so helpless; if only we could carry it for him for a while, we would. Unfortunately, depression does not work that way.

Driving by campsites, shelters, and primitive cabins at 15 mph, I descend down Oak Grove's winding road to the valley below. Dusk begins to settle into evening on this late spring Sunday, a sabbath day. A superficial rain drips just enough moisture on the windshield to require the occasional use of my shrieking wipers, smearing bug guts across the glass. As I reach the valley's bottom—a lush, large, oval meadow of picnic spots adjoined by a boat ramp—I notice a group of unaccompanied teenagers enjoying a late spring revelry. Two of them tend a campfire at a designated pit, while three others giggle and rock on two colorful hammocks precariously strung from nearby trees. I resent their carefree lives and park as far away from them as I can.

As I curl out of the open door, I barely feel the sporadic and gentle rain. I reach into the hatchback of my super-compact car—my colleagues call it the clown car—and withdraw a commemorative windbreaker that *Sports Illustrated* sent me the last time the Denver Broncos won a Super Bowl. I barely need it. I walk towards the water, overhearing the distant teenagers giggle about the rain or other things. The river, running high this early in May, soon obscures their voices as it laps over the crumbling shoreline onto the grass. My eyes trace the braided current upstream away from the setting sun toward the forested skyline. That's when I notice the rainbow.

Almost a full rainbow, actually. It curves dramatically toward the heavens until its arching top blends into the gray-blue sky and temporarily disappears only to be picked up again by an identical spectrum of light shooting to earth on the parallel side. How did I not see this until now? The rainbow dominates the sky. The racing river flows out of the center of the half circle of red, and orange, and green, and blue, and purple. The spectacle is magnificent and dazing.

As I marvel at the rainbow, it occurs to me that I may have read this rare but natural occurrence differently in the not so distant past. Three years ago, *before clinical depression visited my children; before my middle son suddenly stopped getting out of bed for school in the morning a month into his junior year; before the yelling; before the resisted therapy; before the trips to distant specialists; before the ineffective drugs that took several months to realize that they were ineffective; before the special blood tests not covered by insurance; before dropping out of swimming and band; before the cuttings; before the hospitalizations; before the thirteen thousand dollar credit card balance for a hospital stay that crossed into the new fiscal year; before the cautious visits with empathic school administrators to discuss failing grades; before the experimental ketamine drug-trials in other states; before the daily grind to simply live; before the constant helicopter parenting prodding the half-assed completion of late assignments required for graduation; before limping through the end of his senior year; before the attempt at college followed shortly thereafter by the medical withdrawal; before the awkward inquiries from concerned friends about how my 19-year-old son, previously recruited by colleges as a*

swimmer and honor student, now spends his days isolated in the dark basement looking at screens and professing a philosophy of angsty nihilism... (Breath.)

And then it happened again when my youngest son—a year and a half junior to his depressed older brother—was similarly afflicted by an insidious wall of despair. Before his weekly visits to psychologists and psychiatrists in Sioux Falls who knew us so well by then that they gave us their personal emails; before more blood tests; before the newer drugs not covered by insurance—all ineffective; before the cuttings; before the suicide threats and attempt; before quitting cross-country, soccer and the tuba; before the hospitalizations (four of them); before the crippling anxiety; before completely dropping out of high school five weeks before the end of his junior year; before the medical recommendation to send him to the other side of the state to a long-term facility for delinquent youth, which we refused to do; before the desperate turn to ECT (Electroconvulsive Therapy) that required three psychiatrists to sign-off because they'd prefer, if possible, not to zap a teenager's still developing brain... Before all these hateful and horrible circumstances took control of almost every facet of our lives, I might have naively viewed this rainbow differently. Had it occurred during the early goings of this joyless journey, I may have embraced an easy and shallow theology that presumed this surprising rainbow as sign from God that everything was going to be okay. While awed and appreciative, I do not see the rainbow this way today.

We have all prayed so much these past three years. Daily petitions have humbled me and tethered me to God. More so than ever before, prayer forms a soothing rhythm of my life. Our faithful prayer chains also link dozens of pious believers over thousands of miles relentlessly

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praying for our boys. But throughout this fury of depression and well-intended medical futility, God’s intervention remains a mystery. Maybe things would be even worse for my boys without these intercessions, but such logic relies on proving negatives. I’ve understandably grown weary of looking for signs. True... three long years ago, I would have likely interpreted this beautiful rainbow as an assurance that the ECT treatments scheduled to start next week will provide the medical miracle necessary to allow our beautiful boy to want to live. I have prayed this very prayer multiple times today alone, but I’m weary of seeing the rainbow as an answer.

Sign-seeking seems uncondusive to this pale, despairing, feckless, and helpless time, this darkling plain—an existence so polluted by worry and regret that food doesn’t taste as good as it used to and previous expectations of family flourishing now seem like voyeuristic pipe dreams enjoyed by other families, not us. Perhaps God’s intervention remains simpler and more elegant than prayed-for medical miracles signaled by water molecules suspended in the atmosphere. Don’t get me wrong; I desperately want these prayers answered with healing grace; I plead with our Creator for this daily, hourly. But an immutable God may have other designs. Rather than preventing or halting terrible occurrences, my pleading faith sustains me through them. In this way, the glorious rainbow reminds me that beauty still exists around us, and that, more than ever, I need to witness it. That’s all. That’s got to be enough, I guess. Perhaps God surprises us occasionally with rainbows so that we may better endure the implacable storm of life’s unavoidable and disproportionate sufferings.