



Simon Parke

Labels can be harmful

DOSTOEVSKY defines man as a being who can get used to anything, and, as if to prove his point, we have somehow all got used to the idiocy of labels.

We are celebrating the first black President of the United States. Wonderful. But, as a comedian recently pointed out: "Has anyone noticed that he isn't actually black?" Barack Obama has a white mother, and has himself made much of his dual heritage. But for the rest of the world, the label on the tin is definitely "black". It is the reason why millions voted for him.

It is also the label on Lewis Hamilton. Like President-elect Obama, he has a black father and a white mother. But, in the eyes of the media, he is the first "black" Formula 1 champion. He may be a rather pale black — but, somehow, he is still black. He is certainly black in the eyes of the racist websites that sprang up before the race in Brazil. Paradoxically Mr Hamilton is probably whiter than these bigots, since they are largely Spanish or South American, with olive skin.

But here's a thing: the label on Ryan Giggs is "white" — and not "black". The Manchester United footballer has never been troubled by racist chanting, despite the fact that one of his grandparents was black. So where on the continuum is he? When exactly is black white, and white black? We label-merchants need to know.

I had coffee with a friend the other day. He, too, has a black father and white mother. He grew up believing he was white, but, at about the age of 18, he decided he was black. This significantly affected paths taken. He chose a different label — and that made all the difference. Now, many years on, he is suspicious of the whole "label" thing. "When exactly did we become used to all this?" he asked.

A poignant question. I then remembered another: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It was a rather superior and amused remark at the time — drawing a smug chuckle from listeners, no doubt. Yet no one chuckles now; for it is a comment that stands naked in its stupidity — an icon of foolish labelling.

Often, comedy is the only bulwark against such madness. I remember the bleak joke doing the rounds when the Protestant and Catholic labels fought in Northern Ireland. A shopper is stopped by a hooded gunman. "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" asks the gunman. The shopper has to think quickly. "I'm Jewish," he says. "Then I must be the luckiest Arab in Belfast," says the gunman.

When, exactly, did we become used to all this? When was concern for quality of soul exchanged for stupid label? Concentration-camp survivors report that it took about six weeks. Initially, they averted their eyes from the routine savagery — but not for long. Soon, they could watch anything — and not care.

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We can recall those who forget

There are ways to unlock some of the isolation of dementia, argues James Woodward

WE DEAL with our fears about illness in a variety of ways. Consider how we responded to HIV in the late 20th century. We find it hard to engage with those who are different. We fear contagion. It has also taken a long time for us to face the cruel reality of cancer, and to discover a humane way of engaging with the whole person and their pain. We do not like to think of ourselves as vulnerable.

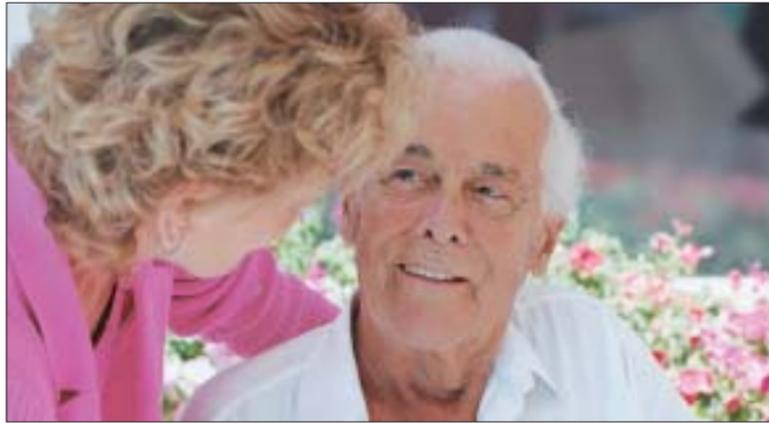
Now another challenge faces us. They call it the long goodbye. If each of us were ever in the situation of being able to choose the shape of our diminishment, a physical one might be easier to bear than a mental one. Dementia strikes fear in people's hearts, and with good reason.

The term "dementia" is used to describe the symptoms that occur when the brain is affected by particular diseases and conditions. There are different types of dementia, and a range of causes (see www.alzheimers.org.uk for a clear description).

Diagnosing dementia is often difficult, but the steady progression of memory loss can be devastating for all those involved in care (Features, 28 March). There are currently 700,000 people in the UK living with dementia, and the number is likely to rise to more than one million by 2025. About 60,000 deaths a year are attributable to dementia. The financial cost to the UK is more than £17 billion a year.

THERE IS no cure. Current treatments alleviate symptoms temporarily, at best. Caring for someone with dementia is stressful, physically and emotionally draining, and very expensive.

The implications of all this present a challenge to us and to the shape of our communities. After the best-selling novelist Terry Pratchett was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's last December, he said: "It's a strange life when you 'come out' — people get embarrassed, lower their voices, and get lost for words. . . . What is needed is will and determination. The first step is to talk about dementia because it's a fact, well enshrined in



CORBIS

Keeping in touch: good communication can help people with dementia

folklore, that if we are to kill the demon, then first we have to say its name" (interview with BBC News, 10 June 2008).

This reinforces surveys that suggest that those living with dementia suffer stigma. A report from the Alzheimer's Society says that some people see neighbours crossing the street to avoid them.

THE FEAR that surrounds dementia is bound up with our inability to engage with ageing in ourselves and others. The Church reflects this ageism (Comment, 13 July 2007), and little priority is given to older people and their needs.

What is needed is investment in awareness campaigns. Government, charities, Churches, and employers need to work together to offer support and information.

There are many innovations in this area of care that challenge us to develop better practice. The distinguished psychologist Oliver James, in his book *Contented Dementia* (Vermilion, 2008), takes the reader into

the world of the self, and the way the disease strips away memory, dignity, and hope. He shows that dementia need not be a nightmare of frustration and embarrassment.

In an approach that puts the person at the heart of care, through sensitive and radical listening, Professor James shows that it is possible to unlock isolation and distress.

It is often best to retain some of the security of a familiar environment, he suggests. A memory box containing meaningful items that say something about the individual can help those with memory loss. It can be a starting point for conversation, and a challenge to carers to see an older person's individuality. A packet of seeds is a prompt for memories about gardens, for example.

Memories from the past can remain largely undamaged — and these can be released through attentive friendship. Released from some of the burden of having to store new information when communicating, the person with dementia can find some satisfaction. Conversations

need not be long or rushed: ask only one question at a time; key into a person's feelings; allow time for a person to reply; and do not be afraid of silence. All these help to establish good communication.

Professor James argues forcibly that there are viable alternatives to the use of anti-psychotic drugs. "If the person is comfortable with their familiar old narrative, then they are much more likely to see the necessity for eating, sleeping, going to the toilet, and other vital functions that can be so difficult for carers to orchestrate."

THE BOOK is a radical plea to move beyond an approach that is dependent on medicine, and, as Professor James argues, leaves people befuddled and doped. This seems obvious, but it has attracted some opposition.

Graham Stokes, head of mental health at BUPA, warns his readers not to be seduced by the simplicity of the model: "It is just one psychosocial intervention in the therapeutic toolkit," he says.

Yet none of us should be content with a status quo in which a reductionist medical model of care has the potential to overlook the person suffering from the condition. People living with dementia need to have their condition reconstructed. If we can redefine the problems of time, memory, and history for them, then new solutions can emerge.

Before Dame Cicely Saunders died, she wrote to me about my work in caring for the elderly, challenging me to see it as pioneering, as hers was in hospice care in the 1960s and onwards.

I hope the Church will play its part, and share in the challenges and opportunities of those who live in the complex land between remembering and forgetting.

The Revd Dr James Woodward is Director of the Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality, and Social Policy (www.levesoncentre.org.uk). His book Valuing Age: Pastoral ministry with older people has just been published by SPCK.

'Dementia need not be a nightmare of frustration and embarrassment'

Is our worth measured by our pay?



IT IS AMAZING how much power secular myths have. Many hang on the question of how much people should be paid. There are two myths that are especially powerful: a popular, and an academic version.

The popular version is that people are paid what they are worth. This is nonsense. We

have all heard of bonuses for poor performance, nurses who are worth more than doctors, and secretaries who keep bosses organised at a fraction of their pay. We know those who take credit for other people's work, and those whose work redounds to the credit of others.

But there is a more powerful argument against this whole idea. You cannot individuate work contributions. As you cannot separate the horse from the plough, so you cannot separate the accountant from the IT team. We work together and have communal output or worth. Moreover, there are wider patterns of dependence: the weapons manufacturer, for example, depends on university engineering departments. In terms of worth, we are members one of another.

This matters, because discrepancies in pay have increased enormously. Formerly, someone at the top of an organisation earned about ten times more than someone at the bottom. Now, the top person is earning about 100 times more. Within

It is time to return to a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, says Alan Storkey

our present system, someone can be paid £1 million for the same work, and the same hours, as someone on £10,000.

This is astonishing. It is like saying that one week's work by A is worth two year's work by B. Of course it is not. All kinds of myths, such as "wealth creation" (which now evokes a hollow laugh) and "leadership", have been used to support the idea, but it will not wash.

The discrepancy opened up during the Thatcher era. Then, company executives mastered the art of laying off 1000 workers while telling those remaining to work harder. This produced a culture of overworking, which allowed executives to pay themselves far more on the basis of other people's hard work. Clobbering the unions helped this process. But these claims of worth do not stand scrutiny.

The second, more academic myth is that the employment market functions by means of small price adjustments. This is the myth on which free-market economics supposedly depends. Leave markets alone, and they will adjust automatically.

In some areas, such as pay in fast-food shops, this may work in a local situation, but on a larger scale it clearly does not, because human beings — usually the powerful ones — run markets.

I recently came across someone who charges £200 an hour, at other people's expense. He had found a niche that was protected by law, and was exploiting it. That comes as no surprise, but the work was no more complex than that done by a volunteer in a Citizens Advice Bureau.

It is not a marginal adjustment: it means that in a selfish society, where righteousness and justice are ignored, everything depends on what money people have access to. Doctors suddenly had access to a 30-per-cent pay increase in two years, and took it. Bankers appear to have been raking money in wholesale, not because of their worth, but because a false credit boom left a great deal of notes in the till.

Often, pay does not make sense and is not just, because it depends on power, and whether one works for the rich or the poor. The system is destructive, creates wealth and poverty, is unfair, and can be covered up by privacy and secrecy. If we all knew each other's pay, the present system would not survive.

It is time to wrest the power of setting wages from the rich, and return to the Christian principle of paying a fair wage and being generous to the poor. We are now discovering that that costs us all far less.