

# fills hole in road. I, too, spend life filling holes

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Llámac, Peru

I AM ON a bus loading up in Llámac. The bus is packed with local people — South American Indians. Everyone is heading for the nearest small town for the markets and festival of Santa Rosa next week, with bands, parading horses, fireworks and a bullfight dedicated to St Francis of Assisi.

A live sheep is being loaded on to the bus roof. The chickens and the guinea-pigs destined for the spit, the jerrycans of honey, sacks of soft cheese and urns of milk are already on board. Agriculture provides the only means of support in this village of a couple of hundred souls, about 12,000ft up in the Andes, in the Huayhuash range, whose glistening peaks needle into the heavens around us.

The mood, as everywhere among the indigenous people of the Andes except when they are drunk, is muted. No show of cordiality is made, and speech is quiet, direct, almost brusque. Mothers and their creepily docile babies — they could be dolls — hunch themselves against the hot sky, the cold dry wind and the dust and, shutting their eyes, retreat into their own small worlds.

Outside my bus window a man is filling in two potholes with rubble. The potholes pockmark what you might call the village square, except that it is nothing but a wide and uneven patch of rough earth, hard-packed by hooves, wheels and feet, bordered by the general store, the primary school and tumbledown adobe houses roofed in straw and tin.

The man — perhaps in his fifties, about my age — is wheeling a battered barrow with a flat tyre to and from a heap of rubble, tipping a couple of loads into each hole. He is moving very, very slowly but with a kind of trudging persistence. The sun is directly overhead.

Why does he bother? The whole square is a tip. The houses around it, many of them, are in a pitiful state. The square itself is not level and could not be levelled without resiting and rebuilding the houses. Wood balconies are rotten and sagging. There are animal droppings everywhere. Empty plastic bottles and wrappings lie discarded on the ground. Some of the children have no shoes. The tread peels from my bus's wheels. There is an almost infinite list of things around us in this place that need to be put right, before a man would turn to

filling in two small holes in the earth.

Llámac has no electricity. An ambitious government scheme has provided poles and the cables but there is no link-up to any grid. Llámac has no clinic or doctor. The nearby village of Pocpa has a smart bungalow labelled as a medical centre but it is a shell: the medical staff do not exist. There is no telephone, no sewerage system, no post, no police, no services of any kind. Why should it matter if there are potholes in the square?

The road connecting Llámac to the outside world — to Chiquian, two hours' hellish bus ride away — is atrocious: huge ruts, sump-crunching rocks and crumbling, precipitous edges, hundreds more, bigger and more dangerous potholes than this villager is attending to. The bridges are rickety affairs of nailed wood and the treads on one have been stolen for building-planks. On any considered view, such things should be made good before anyone turns to the unevenness of the square.

But the man toils doggedly away under the sun, slowly wheeling his broken barrow. And again I ask: Why?

We could ask him; but he would just reply that it was his job. Someone has told him to do it. And however contestable the priorities may seem, the task is not intrinsically absurd. There is a hole. Fill it. That is enough for him.

He is not alone. Few of us would

**To keep noses to the grindstone, perhaps the human race needs the opiate of unreason**

have much difficulty in reasoning much that we do into logical absurdity. If we let ourselves think about it we would quickly see that our daily labours are too little, too early, too late, misdirected or of no account at all. We could identify so much that needed doing first. We could paralyse ourselves with the wider picture. But we block it out and carry on, each with our own pothole to fill.

The observation is hardly original, though I do not quite mean by it what George Eliot means in that wonderful passage which, had I a copy of *Middlemarch* on this bus, I could directly quote: the passage where she reflects that the growing good of the world is half-owing to the uncelebrated labours of those who have lived a hidden life and rest in unvisited graves. Eliot's remark is inspiring, and intended to be: a kind of ode to anonymous virtue. Her heroes and heroines have meant to do good in the world.

But this man with this barrow has no thought of doing good. He is not even doing his duty, in any lofty sense of that word. He is doing what he has been told. For him, life is bearable — even satisfying — because he is lower-

ing his eyes from, not raising them toward, the bigger picture.

He illustrates more vividly than most of us do the case we are all in. I can kid myself that filling in this hole on the Comment page of a *Saturday Times* matters — may make a difference — more easily than he could kid himself that filling in those potholes matters; but in the end we both have to kid ourselves.

I wonder as I watch this man whether we are right to classify depression, clinical or otherwise, as a condition that muddies reason. I wonder whether depression may be a clearing of the mental pond, a sort of paralysing lucidity. To keep noses to the grindstone perhaps the human race needs the opiate of unreason. Perhaps what we call mental health involves a measure of stupefaction.

We call it absorption in our work and we regard it as a virtue. From the pushchair onwards I was always quickly and totally absorbed in any inquiry or task I put my hand to and have been lucky never to be afflicted by serious depression. Low spirits never last with me for more than a couple of hours. But I've seen a great deal of depression, in my late father and in close friends, and I've never been comfortable with the advice that depressives are incessantly offered: that they are "just being unreasonable". If this man were to lay down his barrow and weep at the futility of it all, would that be unreasonable? Is his stubborn labour not a kind of clouding of reason?

Some types of depression do seem illogical. Despair, crushing pessimism or paranoia may drive sufferers to objectively wrong decisions, and this can be demonstrated by results. But try arguing with a paranoid or despairing person and you will rarely find their view "unreasonable" in any sense that it is possible to prove by reason. What their depression has robbed them of is confidence or trust, neither of which is self-evidently a product of reason.

My father's depressions were, likewise, not "irrational". They were more akin to periods of numbing failure to see the point, pleasure or fun in what he was doing. As he got older he withdrew from things which (he told me) he was anyway never going to live to see through. He was a highly intelligent man and I never found any reasoned argument against his black moods.

The sheep on the roof of my bus knows her fate and her eyes show it. The guinea-pigs, however, are in the blithest of spirits. Truth is not beauty, nor beauty truth, and this is not — whatever Keats may have written — all we know on Earth or all we need to know.

I think Voltaire was closer: we must cultivate our gardens. Beware of the Vision-thing: it is not necessarily our friend. Taken beyond the politician's prattle or the management consultant's cant, the Big Picture is more likely to paralyse than inspire.