

## Duping the Dupes: Belle Gibson's Deception Dance

Deception, a ubiquitous practice in nature, occurs with equal facility among the human species. It is when it occurs with disease or tragedy that it causes the most consternation. The latest example to catch our attention is winsome 23-year old single mother Belle Gibson. On social media she claimed to have vanquished intractable cancers by a program of healthy diet and positive thinking. As her fame escalated, she rode the well-worn celebrity path of talk show appearances and publication of a book with the fetching title of *The Wholeness Pantry*. Good sales followed and when Apple announced that it was to be an app on their new watch, it seemed the sky was the limit. Gibson then announced that there had been a recurrence of her illness and a difficult time lay ahead.

This prognostication was entirely accurate but not in the way she had intended. It emerged that not only had money raised been given to charities as promised, but Gibson did not have, and had not had any kind of cancer. There was nothing wrong with her – well, not physically.

Following the revelation, her publishers withdrew the book, Apple deleted the app and her credibility was about as high as the proverbial snail slime. The on-line rage of the many followers who had been taken in by her story was spectacular, hell having no fury than a dupe who realises they have backed the wrong horse, or should it be tumour?

Gibson followed a predictable path and went into damage control. After a few token obfuscations, she went to ground and closed her web sites (complaining that people were making unkind comments about her), then emerging for a tell-all interview with a woman's magazine. Is it not a feature of the age that the confession booth is now the carefully orchestrated media presentation before thousands or millions? Gibson, demonstrating the moral vacuity of her type, blamed her childhood, saying that she was now doing the responsible thing in 'fessing up – presumably trumping the massive fraud she had perpetuated – and requesting only that people understand her humanity – whatever that means.

Unless the mooted investigations lead to charges, that is the last we shall hear of Gibson. It will not be long before another wellness epigone fills the gap.

In 1957 Richard Asher described a series of cases he called Munchausen's Syndrome: psychopathic young men who went from one hospital to another claiming serious illness to obtain admission. Any problems they had was entirely self-created by lacerations, swallowing items or guzzling poison. A prominent feature was their tendency to tell fantastic tales of their history, usually of a tragic nature, to engender sympathy in the listener. Asher, who had a great facility with language, called this *pseudologia fantastica*.

We have learned a lot about MS since then, but the essentials remain unchanged. Someone – and now it is more often women than men – will go to extraordinary lengths to create a condition that will allow them to be admitted for treatment, often equally destructive. A particularly nauseating example is the injection of faeces into the bloodstream. Trainee nurse Beverley Allitt, who went on to greater notoriety as “the Angel of Death” by injecting 11 of her child patients with lethal doses of drugs, was a regular at casualty with injuries made by dropping a stone on her hand.

How does this relate to the Gibson girl? MS patients have a perverse desire to assume the patient role. This makes them the centre of attention of those around them and seems to arise from a desire to ally themselves with the treater, as opposed to the powerlessness they experience in their daily life.

This phenomenon has now formed a tendentious alliance with the prevailing victim culture in our society. Being a victim – provided it is the right kind of victim – provides a special cachet. And in the hierarchy of victimology, what better to have than cancer? After all, you don't suffer from it the way you do, say, impacted haemorrhoids or chronic halitosis: you *battle* it, the now-universal term to indicate the cancer sufferer's heroism.

Added to this, invariably in those who have the income to support it, is the pursuit of wellness, as opposed to illness. The poor, unfortunately, have other priorities. It is a cult of shallow individualism combined with near-mindless belief that a good lifestyle can cure anything. Lifestyle, it seems, means thinking positively, eating a healthy organic diet and exercising regularly (if possible, wearing a fashionable gym outfit and a device to measure your vital functions). More than anything, it means ignoring the dry and depressing statistics from doctors that lifestyle factors (with the

exception of smoking and alcoholism) play a negligible role in these illnesses.

The dogma of the wellness set is intensely puritanical, if not savagely judgemental. Tolerance for human weakness or frailty, a feature of the Judeo-Christian ethic, is out the window. If you don't follow a healthy lifestyle, then you only have one person to blame when you fall ill or don't get better – yourself. So much for the post-Hippocratic ethos of not blaming the patient for falling ill. But then, to the intense narcissism of the committed wellness type, if you don't come up to expectations, you deserve what you get – you are truly sick.

To make the situation worse, deception to weld oneself to tragedy is now widespread. Falsely claiming to be a Viet Nam veteran or have served in Afghanistan is only the start of it. As a reverse form of Holocaust denial, a number of unsavoury characters faked claims to have survived Nazi death camps. If it were possible to crown this, we have the example of Alicia Head, who claimed to be a survivor of the 9/11 catastrophe when she was nowhere near the place.

All of which brings us back to Belle Gibson, who appears to have had difficulty with the truth from an early age according to people who know her. We can assume that her life before she became a publically anointed victim and successful 'battler' of cancer was lacking in those qualities she sought: fame, financial reward and celebrity status. Alas, all gone now, the forgiveness of the wellness movement does not extend to those who penetrate the shallow membranes of their flaky beliefs; there is nothing quite as dead as a revealed wellness dupe.

But all is not lost. Just as Marx turned Hegel upside down, we can invert Asher's MS. Instead of claiming illness when there is nothing wrong, Gibson claims health when there is no illness: Munchausen's Syndrome in Reverse.

Stand up Belle Gibson and take a bow. Why, it can't be long before you start a website and write a book about it.

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