A walk in the mountains

L

ast May, I took a holiday with my family in Norway. On our first day, we went on a hike that took us up a steep mountain path to what had once been a farm. A few goats and sheep had been brought to graze but the outbuildings were deserted and the barn now housed a small café. A woman made cocoa for the children and tea for us.

The next day, we decided to hike further up the mountain to a waterfall. It was not a particularly good day for a hike; it had rained all night and the sky was lined with heavy clouds. The footpath was slippery; not dangerous, but requiring care. A number of roughly carved walking sticks had been left by the gate for hikers to use, and the children spent some time choosing their favourites.

We were united – as we so rarely are in our everyday life – by our sense of purpose; all quite happy to be walking up the mountain together. The children – they were six and nine years old at the time – were proud to be able to climb so high. Rounding a bend, we came to a small clearing; we took it in turns to lie down in the grass and to a small room when she leaves. Another closes the door to my consulting room and, no matter how quickly one fell, my son trying to walk along the edge of the path, and my wife in front making sure that no one fell, my son trying to walk along the edge of the path, and, no matter how quickly we were doing the same course, fail from time to time – it would be impossible to carry out intentionally. If you resolved always to come to your session a few minutes late you would, of course, fail from time to time – it would be a struggle. But for the unconscious it is not.

For the psychoanalyst, these habits of mind. Habit, as Proust pointed out, is “that second nature which prevents us from knowing the first”. Our small repetitive behaviours might give us a sense of dominion, a feeling that we are in charge of time rather than being swept along in it – protecting us from the experience of time passing, with its feelings of change and loss.

Then I looked up, and saw that I had fallen behind. My family were now some way down the footpath, and had almost reached the farm. It was odd to watch them like this, together, but from a distance; my wife in front making sure that no one fell, my son trying to walk along the edge of the path, and my daughter, not putting a foot wrong.

As we made our way back down the mountain, I found myself thinking about the way time was passing – how strange it was to perceive the day unfolding in the expanse of nature, away from my usual routines, and away from other people. I was thinking too about the orderly passing of time in the course of my work. Most weeks, I see the same patient four or five times, often at the same time of day, in the same room, for a set duration. The repetition in this schedule tends to reveal certain small repetitive behaviours in my patients. One patient always arrives a few minutes late. Another never closes the door to my consulting room when she leaves. Another shaped like a bell, while my son filled his pockets with stones.

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For the psychoanalyst, these habits can be meaningful. The patient who is always a few minutes late, for example, would find it uncomfortable to be early and to sit in the waiting room before his session – he is avoiding feelings of exclusion. The ballerina? She seemed to feel more comfortable, safer, if we were doing the same thing at the same time; it seemed to mean to her that our thoughts were in harmony too.

We all have an investment in these habits of mind. Habit, as Proust pointed out, is “that second nature which prevents us from knowing the first”. Our small repetitive behaviours might give us a sense of dominion, a feeling that we are in charge of time rather than being swept along in it – protecting us from the experience of time passing, with its feelings of change and loss.

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Then I was overtaken by the thought: this is how it will be. They’ll go on without you; you’ll have to let them walk on ahead. It will be like this. You’ll be OK – and they will too.

In the consulting room, I’m so focused on details, on the singular aspects of each patient’s life – there in the mountains, where time is amplified, I felt the connections across the generations. I felt momentarily sad – but not depressed – and then acceptance, happiness.

Stephen Grosz is a psychoanalyst. Some details have been changed in the interest of confidentiality. This is the last column in his current series for FT Weekend Magazine. “The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves” (Chatto & Windus, £14.99)