

ALIVE BUT ABSENT

Patrick Clervoy – I would like to tell you the following story: it happened to me when I was a young psychiatrist at Val de Grâce and when I got there, there was a man who I noticed straightaway because he was the old German teacher of my boss. This man was consequently very old and he was afflicted by a particular form of dementia that we call Lewy body dementia, because when the anatomopathology of a patient's neurons are analyzed, inclusions are seen in the neurons that are called Lewy bodies, the result being dementia. And this man was in a permanent catatonic state. That is to say that his limbs were rigid, in a tension so forceful as to be painful, so that this man would cry out each time he was moved in the course of his care, but at the same time it was a coma, this man did not reply to any question, his eyes were open, but he did not react at all, he was no longer with us if I can put it that way. And this is what is called an extreme catatonic state. We used to describe him as lost, we tried to find a house where he might finish his days, because this disease was irreversible. And it really was irreversible for him, he eventually died of it. But I said, "I am going to look into this". While it might have seemed to everyone that this case was uninteresting, since all that the psychiatrist could do was to find an appropriate place where we could put him.

And one day I come in to the ward, and something extraordinary appears to have happened because people seem stunned by an event described that morning. Very late in the evening, a little before 10 pm, all the patients in the ward are asleep, the hospital is silent, the nurse is sorting out his medicines when all of a sudden the nurse feels a presence behind him. He turns around. It's this man. This man who hasn't stood up for a year, who hasn't said a word in the last six months, what was he doing there, upright behind him? "Are you OK, sir?" asks the nurse. The man answers "Yes fine. What's on TV this evening?" The nurse replies, as naturally as he can, "Well if you like, there's football on, but I don't know if that will interest you?". "I love football!" He goes off to watch football with three or four other patients, he watches the whole match, then at the end the staff say, "Well, it's time, everyone back to your rooms to sleep", and off he goes to bed like all the others and next morning there is the same person, catatonic, completely rigid.

And there you have this enormous enigma that is: what is going on, how is it that these people who are seen as no longer existing, in inverted comas, because they are unable to communicate, unable to reflect, unable to interact with their surroundings, yet at given moments like that, as if there was an on/off switch, we find these people can speak. And the part that gets me, maybe vis-à-vis madness, maybe vis-à-vis people at life's end, is this: where are those people when they aren't here, what is it that still exists, when they

don't reply to us anymore? And for my part, I get enormously worked up trying to make that out: where are people when they aren't there? Because... they have to be somewhere.

3min 10sec