

Madness, Genius, & Sherman's Ruthless March

-David Dobbs, "Science Magazine" 2012

In 1864, in a radically risky move crucial to winning the Civil War, William Tecumseh Sherman [led his army of some 80,000 men to Atlanta](#), burned it to the ground, and then marched to the coast of South Carolina, destroying almost all in his path. It was a wild, improbable gambit: He meant to and did destroy the South's infrastructure, crops, railways, and will. But to do so he had to work for weeks without supply lines for his own army and in near total isolation — no supplies, little communication — from both civilian and military leadership to the north.

Was there a method to Sherman's March? And what did it have to do with him being crazy? Nassir Ghaemi's [A First-Rate Madness: Uncovering the Links Between Leadership and Mental Illness](#), which I'm now reading with mixed feelings and total fascination, raises these questions in a single, succinct, startling chapter, and answers Yes and Yes.

I have a few beefs with this book, which I'll note and then set aside. Ghaemi seems a wonderful psychiatrist, and he writes vividly. But, following [Ernest Kretschmer](#), he pathologizes not just dysfunction but abnormality; he defines mental health as "the absence of mental disease, plus being near the statistical average of personality traits." Thus if you're too far from the average, you're not healthy. Both the mad and the abnormal, he says, can excel "in crisis," but presumably not in 'normal' life. This ignores countless examples of odd eccentrics who thrive absent crisis — from Einstein, Woolf, Beethoven to Curie, Proust, and [Manny Ramirez](#). Ghaemi's schema of normal versus abnormal people operating in either stable or crisis environments seems to me unnecessarily black and white; the value of any trait depends on environment, and Ghaemi seems to assume a stable environment is the norm, which is hardly the case.

Yet I forgive Ghaemi all this and more in exchange for his sensitive insights into how patients actually experience and talk about their troubles, and for the way he mines some of the literature surrounding the lives of the people he examines in this book. He is especially sensitive to the creeping, often vague nature of melancholy and

madness as it actually shows itself. His thumbnail sketch of depression's distinctive reality, for instance, brings to mind that of William Styron's incomparable [Darkness Visible](#). His close-focus definition holds far more nuance than do his high-altitude distinctions:

[D]epression adds to sadness the constellation of physical symptoms that produce a general slowing and deadening of bodily functions. A depressive person sleeps less, and the nighttime becomes a dreaded chore that one can never achieve properly. One never gets out of bed; better sleep, if one can, since one can't do anything else. Interest in life and activities declines. Thinking itself is difficult; concentration is shot; it's hard enough to focus on three consecutive thoughts, much less read an entire book. Energy is low; constant fatigue, inexplicable and unyielding, wears one down. Food loses its taste. Or to feel better, one might eat more, perhaps to stave off boredom. The body moves slowly, falling to the declining rhythm of one's thoughts. Or one paces anxiously, unable to relax. One feels that everything is one's own fault; guilty, remorseful thoughts recur over and over. For some depressives, suicide can seem like the only way out of this morass; about 10% take their own lives.

"Depression is a terrifying experience," one of his patients tells him, "knowing that somebody is going to kill you, and that person is *you*." This gets at something that only true depressives know: once you've thought of killing yourself, the thought, even when it goes away for long periods, is never the stranger it should be.

How do we reconcile this morass with the idea that madness can generate a sort of genius, much less more modest increases in performance or happiness? I have written before that I think [depression itself is not terribly adaptive](#) but is rather just one result, distinctly a downside result, of a broader sensitivity that can be an asset. Such sensitivity can open the door to depression, but it can also generate traits ranging from empathy to the appreciation of pleasures that generate happiness, from the hard-won exuberant agony of Mozart or Led Zeppelin to the unpracticed glittering beauty of one's children.

To this Ghaemi offers to add some direct upsides of depression and mania — and convinces me against my prejudices.

First, he argues that the long dark struggles with the black dog, as Samuel Johnson called depression, can generate the resilience, determination, and ruthless focus needed to counter external challenges. Thus Winston Churchill, for instance, found the strength to rally a nation against the threat of Nazi Germany. Churchill struggled long and mortally with depression. At times he prayed daily for death. He learned to stand vigilant against the the opportunities that life offers for escape. From Ghaemi:

He had thoughts of killing himself. "I don't like standing at the edge of the platform when an express train is passing through," he told his doctor. "I like to stand right back and if possible get a pillar between me and the train. I don't like to stand by the side of the ship and looked down into the water. A second's action would end everything."

After the war, when he'd lost re-election and had to leave 10 Downing Street, he complained about the balcony of his new flat.

"I don't like sleeping near a precipice like that," he said. "I've no desire to quit the world, but thoughts, desperate thoughts, come into the head."

Ghaemi argues that enduring such times can spawn a paradoxical resilience: Depression, though it can drive to his knees a person amid seemingly happy circumstance, as it did Churchill at an early career peak around 1930, can generate such a talent for enduring murky darkness that the sufferer can enthusiastically attack even so enormous a problem as Nazi Germany — grateful to face a challenge both external and relatively coherent. To Churchill, in short, Hitler and his armies were nothing compared to the black dog. To win you had only refuse to succumb. This is partly what Churchill meant when he said, "If you find yourself going through hell – keep going."

Thus vulnerability can generate resilience. Ghaemi also argues that depression can help increase one's sense of empathy. I resisted this at first. It has long seemed to me that empathy too is part of [the sensitivity to experience](#) that can open the door to depression, rather than depression's by-product. Ghaemi makes me reconsider. He does so

mainly through his description of how Sherman conceived, framed, and explained his decision not just to sack the city of Atlanta, but to tell the South and Atlanta that that was exactly his plan.

This too seems paradoxical. How can a decision to sack a city and destroy an entire region's infrastructure be a sign of empathy? Sherman's decision can seem sociopathic – the work of a mind that understands others' suffering only so he can exploit it. Yet it's hard to square such a view of Sherman with the extraordinary letter that Ghaemi excerpts in his book. This letter Sherman wrote, publicly, to the mayor of Atlanta when the mayor had objected to Sherman's announced intention to destroy the city.

Gentlemen:

... You might as well appeal against the thunder-storm as against these terrible hardships of war. They are inevitable, and the only way the people of Atlanta can hope once more to live in peace and quiet at home, is to stop the war; which can only be done by admitting that it began in error and is perpetuated in pride.

We don't want your negroes, or your horses, or your houses, or your lands, or anything you have, but we do want and will have a just obedience to the laws of the United States. That we will have, and, if it involves the destruction of your improvements, we cannot help it...

I myself have seen in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, hundreds and thousands of women and children fleeing from your armies and desperadoes, hungry and with bleeding feet. In Memphis, Vicksburg, and Mississippi, we find thousands upon thousands of the families of rebel soldiers left on our hands, and who we could not see starve. Now that war comes home to you, you feel very different. You deprecate its horrors, but did not feel them when you sent carloads of soldiers and ammunitions, and moulded shells and shot, to carry war into Kentucky and Tennessee, to desolate the homes of hundreds and thousands of good people who only asked to live in peace at their old homes and under the Government of their inheritance....

But, my dear Sirs, when peace does come, you may call on me for any thing. Then will I share with you the last cracker, and work with you to shield your homes and families against danger from every quarter.

Now you must go, and take with you the old and feeble, feed and nourish them, and build for them, amid quiet places, proper habitations to shield them against the weather until the mad passions of men cool down, and allow them in peace once more to settle their old homes at Atlanta.

Yours in haste,

W. T. Sherman, Maj.-Gen., commanding

By any measure, an extraordinary letter. "Yours in haste" is quite a touch; a hint of ruthlessness. Yet you cannot read the whole letter and maintain that Sherman did not understand suffering: those bleeding feet, the last cracker, the starving families of rebel soldiers fed, do not appear to the sociopathic mind.

Ghaemi believes that Sherman's empathy arises partly from his struggles with bipolar disorder, or manic depression. Sherman wrote this letter in the spring of 1864, and throughout his march to and through Georgia and South Carolina, then north to squeeze Lee's army between his and Grant's, forcing Lee's surrender, he reportedly worked at a pitch of energy and confidence, sleeping little, talking much, his legs in motion even when he sat and talked, "his stockinged feet," as one account had it, "dart[ing] in and out of their slippers." This is the sort of sustained but controlled mania, of bounteous energy and unshakeable confidence, uniquely conducive to completing a great work. And as a work of war, his march qualifies.

Three years earlier, though, when his first military campaign had gone badly, Sherman had become so depressed and unhinged that he was relieved of duty. Only appeals to Lincoln — a man once chewed raw by the black dog — won his return. In such dark stretches, Ghaemi argues, Sherman forged the strength to conceive and sustain the sort of boldly committed campaign needed to crush the South. He was allowed to by a

president and another general, Grant, who understood the depths from which he had risen.

If you felt like being pithy, you could say one sort of insanity started the Civil War, and another sort of madness won it. Pith, of course, lies beneath endlessly complicated layers that both obscures and gives it form. Even the most elemental trait's value and expression depends on context and environment. And context and environment, at least for the sentient, memory-laden creatures we are privileged to be, contains always the remembered past and imagined future.

It's hard amid such complexity to draw clear lines and distinctions. Ghaemi may draw some of these lines boldly. But even as he does so, he paints the complexity whole.