

Psychiatry facing its subjects

Book proposal by

Peter Stastny & Jenny Logan

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I. Asylum is my mother

In 1973 I found myself demonstrating at the gates of the Steinhof, Vienna's famous Jugendstil mental hospital on a hill overlooking the city. We were moved by Italian Democratic Psychiatry rising up against its mental institutions and wanted to bring down these walls due to the inhumane conditions and treatments faced by our fellow citizens. Around thirty years later I was climbing up a steep staircase into an attic at Willard Psychiatric Center where we found a trove of suitcases taken from former patients at this institution, which was the end of the line for many New Yorkers.

In this chapter we will discuss the ramifications of mental asylums as places of refuge and damnation, where people were forcibly segregated from society and their kin just because they may have gone through periods of mental suffering or social alienation. In Italy families happily welcomed their long lost kin back into their homes after institutions began to shut down as a result of Democratic Psychiatry's reform, while the US continued its program of family extirpation. Once the state steps in, there is no turning back. Many people at Willard and also at Bronx State Hospital, where I worked for several years, had no other place to go, and had to wait for many years until the state could develop prosthetic housing for those bereft of family and friends.

The chapter will include an overview of the Willard Suitcase Project along with sketches several of its protagonists, some of which spent decades at the institution, even digging graves for their fellow inmates. Furthermore, based on the first research study we conducted on parental absence and long term hospitalization, it will shine a light on the various practices and life circumstances that lead to homelessness and institutionalization. Also, the chapter will include brief biographies of people who ostensibly preferred living in an institution, such as the Swiss writer Robert Walser and the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama.

II. Share Your Bounty: Empowerment and Cooptation

One day on the hospital ward that I was running, a patient came up with the idea of collecting leftover food and distributing it to homeless people. On his flight over from Jamaica he noticed how many passenger trays were being discarded and the same happened with untouched hospital trays. He carried the same name as the famous boxer Lenox Lewis and set off a new era in our view of psychiatric patients. The idea was picked up by other patients and a pair of rehab counselors, who made it possible for them to collect food and bring it down to the Bowery for distribution. Several years later they became their own non profit operating with federal funds

and distributing hundreds of pounds of food to homeless people all over the city. At the time, the National Institute of Mental Health had decided to promote "consumer-run projects" in 13 states and one of them was our "Share Your Bounty".

This section of the book will include an interview with Laura van Tosh, who was a co-author of a report on these 13 federally funded projects and had herself experienced homelessness and psychiatric hospitalization. Laura has been actively supporting peer-run projects in the decades hence and will provide an overview of the development of such projects in the US and around the world.

When I first attended a federally funded "Alternatives Conference" in Pittsburg around 1989, my views about psychiatric patients was completely transformed. More than 1000 people from all 50 states and territories gathered in a giant auditorium and one person after another stepped up to the dais to tell of their experiences before during and after their exposure to psychiatry. As far as I know, I might have been the only psychiatrist among them who was not also identified as a consumer/survivor of psychiatry. This began a lifelong search for different relationships to survivors beyond what I might have had to offer as a psychiatrist. It also brought me in touch with many activists outside of the four walls of Bronx State Hospital which we cracked wide open from the inside out and the outside in.

The chapter will rely on several published and unpublished reports on these developments as well on some other subsidiaries, such as a peer-directed supported housing program and a non-profit aiming to support expatriates in developing their own business ventures.

III. Paid work for survivors: The peer specialist revolution

William Brown, the director of Share Your Bounty, taught us that helping other people promoted and sustained his own recovery and should be applied widely. William said, "Before I landed at Bronx State I was preaching the gospel on Times Square, and now I get to reach out to people like me who don't have enough to eat." This led to the invention of "peer specialists, paid counselors who were open about their experiences inside the psychiatric system and who were willing to use these experiences in helping others still stuck in the system. Since then thousands have been hired in such positions, first in NYS and then across the world, where they could a living wage while supporting their peers. This development was widely welcomed by mental health service administrators, while quickly leading to the conundrum of being an advocate for peers versus complicit with the oppressive vagaries of the system.

This section will include interviews with Celia Brown, the first peer specialist to be hired by the NYS Office of Mental Health and several others who are critical of this development.

IV. Piercing the page: recognition and dialogue

“One wonders whether the elusive qualities of suffering are sufficiently fluid and perdurable to make their way through the meanderings of the analyst's mind into his writings, thereby affirming a living stronghold for the patient-as-author in the text. Suffering and empathy, these Janusian twins, neither existing without the other-can they indeed establish this supreme channel of authenticity, extending from the dreams of one to the writings of another?”

Peter Stastny, Piercing the page. In: Norman Cantor and Nathalia King, Eds., Notebooks on Cultural Analysis, Vol. 3, p. 168-198, Duke University Press, 1986.

As all these remarkable developments occurred, it became apparent that I was much less focused on people's emotional problems, their so called mental disorder, and even their suffering, but rather emphasized their achievements and their social and economic independence. At the same time I was also engaged in psychotherapy with other clients on an outpatient basis, including students from the adjacent medical school. One of them taught me the important lesson that understanding each other must be a two way street and the position of therapist/psychiatrist is contingent upon the willingness of the other person to open up and trust them. One medical student who sought help made it very clear that such trust was not a given, and that her "no must stand". She came in and stayed at the far corner of the office, even cowered, screaming for the entire session. The screams were piercing, audible all the way down the corridor, but protected her from any advances she might have feared. This led me to explore the deeper intricacies of such communications and the impossibility to render them faithfully in any notes or case reports I was asked to produce.

V. Madness, the Absence of Work?

Perhaps some day we will no longer really know what madness was. Its face will have closed upon itself, no longer allowing us to decipher the traces it may have left behind. Will these traces themselves have become anything to the unknowing gaze but simple black marks? Or will they at the most have become part of the configurations that we others now cannot sketch, but that in the future would constitute the indispensable grids through which we and our culture become legible?

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Madness, the lyrical halo of illness, continues to extinguish itself. And at a distance from pathology, from the vicinity where language folds in upon itself still saying nothing, an experience is about to be born where our thought is headed. This imminence, already visible but absolutely empty, remains to be named.

These bookends from Foucault's postscript to the second French edition of "Histoire de la Folie" (1972) which my friend Denis Sengel and I translated for the first time into English (1995), appear as a premonition to developments that have since been given a multitude of names, all coined by persons who say they themselves have experienced madness and who are turning themselves into authors of their own stories, if not their fate.

Such "subjects" are' essentially absent from Foucault's grand oeuvre and have yet to be fully appreciated by historians and psychiatrists alike. Yet Foucault knew that something like this would be coming, even if it took another 10 years for Judi Chamberlin's "On Our Own" to appear as the text that marked the transition from the objectification of people with such experiences to mad subjects writing their own histories.

As we were still stuck within the walls of an asylum, albeit now considerably more permeable, we began to realize that these new forms of subjectivities demanded a complete reframing of the psychiatric gaze, as it had been so dramatically laid bare in Robert Wiseman's seminal documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967).

VI. The Nerve! – documentary film as a tool of liberation?

While enabling institutionalized individuals to take charge of their lives and provide help and support to their peers might be revolutionary in its social scope, this rarely reaches the depth of personal experience and interpretation that emerges around such social empowerment and role reversal. That is why documentary film appeared in the mid-nineties as an essential representational form that could enable persons with experiences of madness and institutionalization to articulate their own perspectives, even if the production process remained in the hands of a filmmaker/psychiatrist and his crew.

Beginning with "Nerve" (1995), a portrait of four activists/survivors from New York and Vienna, Austria, followed by "In the House" (1996) a collaboration with three hospitalized adolescents, and "Coney Island, New York, 1998", self-directed vignettes by residents of adult homes for persons with psychosocial disabilities, we attempted to push the envelope of representation towards a freer and more egalitarian collaboration with people currently or formerly banished from society. The fact that these films, as collaboratively as they might have been produced still represented the vision of a psychiatrist and a cinematographer cannot be denied.

VII. Reimagining or abandoning psychiatry

As a result I took to reflect more about the various positions a psychiatrist and filmmaker might take via-a-vis his subjects either through a camera lens or through the roles of prescriber, psychotherapist, collaborator, co-militant and friend. Ethical questions such as involuntary treatment and whose really in charge of putting pills in their mouth and being injected with powerful mind altering drugs emerged as center stage in this search. Using articles written in the 90 and early 2000 this chapter will explore to what extent it might be possible to enhance and equalize the power of the patient in relation to the psychiatrist.

Finally the book arrives at a point where humane and inclusive mental health supports become imaginable, albeit the dominant systems still remains entangled in its more reductive and dehumanizing practices.

