

THE GULF BETWEEN THE STUDY AND EXPERIENCE OF “MENTAL ILLNESS”

By Lanny Beckman

In 1964 my fourth-year abnormal psychology class went on a field trip to Riverview Mental Hospital, a turn-of-the-century madhouse on the outskirts of Vancouver that still held thousands of patients. A typical ward had thirty-foot ceilings and contained fifty beds, each separated by a few feet. There we observed inmates with the common diagnoses of depression, manic-depression and

schizophrenia. The Jack Nicholson movie “Cuckoo’s Nest” was still a decade away.

Two years after the tour, for the first time in my life, I was myself a psychiatric inmate, in a similarly ancient mental institution in an American city where I had been a graduate student in psychology. Like Riverview, this county hospital seemed designed by a sadistic architect.

My state of mind was so astonishingly different from anything I had previously experienced- or could have imagined experiencing- that even now I have no adequate language to describe it. And my diagnosis was simple depression, the least exotic, and least stigmatized, of what are called the “major mental illnesses.”

When I thought back to the abnormal psychology course and the Riverview tour, I was struck by how little they had taught me- in texts or in the flesh- about the lives of those burdened with this kind of suffering. Worse, what I learned had actually inhibited understanding. The objectification of suffering, at worst in the form of facts to be recounted on multiple-choice tests, would have been comical were it not. My grade in the course was 98 per cent.

This was, and I’m afraid still is, the kind of miseducation that produces mental health professionals. The minority of this group who are good at their jobs are so despite their



FIGURE 1: LANNY BECKMAN, FRONT PORCH, YORK STREET COMMUNE - CIRCA. 1968

training. It is all but impossible to teach compassion and wisdom; and rich life experience can only be selected for, not taught. Therapists are more born than made, and when they are made, the making takes place outside the classroom.

After being discharged from the hospital, I enrolled in a psychiatric day program. I was visited there by a friend and fellow graduate student who joined me for lunch one day. We made small talk and she filled me in on department gossip.

When we finished eating, she gave me a hard look and said, "What are you doing here? Why don't you leave? Just come with me and we'll walk away from this place, now. You don't have to be here." She said this with full compassion and no comprehension. If this scene had occurred six months earlier, with the roles reversed, I might have said the same to her.

My friend was kindly trying to rescue me from *otherness*. Superficially, from the otherness of being outside the Club of Psychologists, which we were both on the threshold of joining as full members. But more profoundly, her concern was the otherness- the *stigma*- of mental illness. Bearing the label "patient," I was not just outside the Club, but somehow antithetical to it. Crudely, the groups at issue here were Us and Them.

I never did join the Psychology Club. In fact, I went on to found an organization of Them. The year was 1970 and I had started a radical organization of ex-mental patients in Vancouver called the Mental Patients Association. MPA was not a 12-step program and it was very definitely *not* meant to be anonymous. This was a time when I felt a moral obligation to

wash my dirty linen in public, as I've done here.

Shame hid in closets and, in the spirit of the times, whole groups were coming out of closets, some defiantly and proudly (gays), some just defiantly (us). Hence the dirty linen.

But the spirit of the times changed, and the public telling of shameful, personal truths was normalized, trivialized and commercialized by the Oprahfication of popular culture. The



FIGURE 2- MPA EARLY MEETING 1973 LANNY, BARB B, STAN P

personal, it turned out, need not be political; it can simply be lucrative exhibitionism. I left the mental health field, and for decades I was happy to keep my private life to myself.

Historian Megan Davies contacted me two years ago to discuss her interest in the Mental Patients Association. I was reluctant to cooperate with her in revisiting such a distant past. This paper- dirty linen and all- shows who won.

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