

Many People Labeled Mentally Ill Have Broken Hearts

A review of the film

Crooked Beauty

(2010)

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There is a small but growing reaction to the reductionist, biologically based explanations of human distress (see Adame & Knudson, 2007; Breggin, 2008; Watters, 2010; Whitaker, 2010). Former patients, calling themselves “psychiatric survivors,” form an integral part of this backlash (see Hornstein, 2009). Some have opened alternative facilities like “Soteria Alaska” based upon Loren Mosher’s (e.g., Mosher, Hendrix, & Fort, 2004) Soteria House, where he showed that people diagnosed with schizophrenia actually received better outcomes when treated without medication, a finding widely replicated in cross-cultural studies (Watters, 2010).

One of these alternative options for psychiatric survivors is the Icarus Project, an online community for people who desire a nonmedical explanation of their distress. Rather than suffering from mental disease, Icarus Project people believe that the experiences often labeled as “mad” actually are gifts that need cultivation and care (see <http://theicarusproject.net>).

The film *Crooked Beauty* is a brief but haunting account of Jacks McNamara, a founder of the Icarus Project. In a moving video, McNamara begins by first reciting some of

her poetry about the need for hope, the only time you see the narrator in the entire movie. As she describes her childhood, we learn that she was abused by an alcoholic mother and was not given proper nutrition. Not surprisingly, given these developmental traumas, she had experiences that would lead to serious psychological distress (and a bipolar disorder diagnosis). In one particularly poignant scene, she describes her parents interacting around the time of her first break. Her father keeps asking her mother if she could just say that she loves Jacks without qualifying it with a “but.” Revealingly, her mother could not do that.

At 19, McNamara was hospitalized. “They put me into a ward full of strangers. I wasn’t allowed to go outside; I wasn’t allowed to exercise or get fresh air.” In addition, she was treated “by doctors who were strangers to me, and I saw them for 10 minutes a day if I was lucky.” Much of the therapy was group therapy: “I had to sit in therapy rooms and talk about my innermost problems with people I never met before.” Not surprisingly, she wound up being “given a diagnosis and a bunch of pills.” Completely honest, she admits that a part of her wanted to believe that she had a brain disease, as such a conceptualization left her “off the hook as far as responsibility went.”

In what might be her angriest moment in the film, McNamara states, “No one ever told me when I started taking Zyprexa and lithium that, if I stopped them, I would have psychotic symptoms.” Too many mental health professionals seem to not understand that one consequence of taking psychotropic pills is that, should one stop taking them too abruptly, he or she is at risk for a psychotic reaction that is nothing more than the withdrawal process from the pills (Breggin, 2008; Whitaker, 2010). Rather than compassionately being with someone as he or she goes through this withdrawal, the typical reaction is to remedicate the client, compounding the damage. The net result is that the client can be condemned to a lifetime of medication, and many of them will shorten the client’s life span by as much as 20 years (Whitaker, 2010).

Fortunately, McNamara avoids that fate and, through the Icarus Project, has changed her understanding of herself. Rather than seeing herself as a mental patient (or even as a former mental patient), she describes herself as a person traumatized by life. In this part of the film, she poignantly states that “many people labeled ‘mentally ill’ have broken hearts” and that we would have “a lot less ‘mental illness’ if we had a language of compassion.” We need to remember, according to McNamara, that “life is sad and difficult and hard and, as you get close to knowing your heart, you find a lot of pain there.”

Although McNamara still struggles with mood fluctuations, she now uses them as a catalyst for creativity. As she says, “Any good poem has to have a balance between things that are beautiful and things that are dark.” In other words, both her highs and her lows can be used to further her poetic work.

McNamara recites some of her poems and places others on the screen in *Crooked Beauty*; in fact, the entire film can be seen as visual poetry. The narration coupled with the imagery of the film has a mesmerizing quality, and the 33 minutes of the film go by all too fast. Because the beginning of the film describes McNamara’s early family life in detail, it

would have made for a nice symmetry for the film to close with a more detailed description of her current life. Without receiving such a description, the viewer lacks a comprehensive picture of McNamara's transformation from a brain-disordered mental patient to a traumatized yet creative artist.

This minor critique notwithstanding, the film does a superb job of introducing the viewer to the Icarus Project's philosophical approach to psychological distress. Viewing extreme experiences as a creative gift might allow for the affirmation of the person dealing with such issues. In so doing, *Crooked Beauty* presents human distress as something other than the result of genetics or biochemistry. Further, this view contrasts with the view that relational distress causes mental illnesses (Karon & VandenBos, 1994; Silver, 1993). Perhaps we all can learn to speak a language of compassion with our fellow persons and take a step toward alleviating much of the suffering in the world (Leitner, 2010, in press). More information can be found at <http://www.crookedbeautythefilm.com>

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