

i struggled against everyone else's conception of what i was

Was it purposeful or just force of circumstance? The world wasn't really conspiring to drive me crazy; it was just accident that loving parents, concerned educators and healing doctors had precisely that effect. Like the single soldier who claims that it's everyone else who is out of step, and just as ineffectually, so I struggled against everyone else's conception of what I was and what I should become.

The first enemy was education. Longing to escape the rote and regimentation, I retreated into daydream and fantasy. What would have been accepted in a dull child was heresy in a bright one (and didn't they have my IQ score to blind them to seeing the very real--and confused--child)? What I needed was the opportunity to wander, to adventure, to question, and to learn--but there were no free schools then, and the city was far too dangerous a place to roam freely. The choices were narrow: conformity, which brought a pain that must be hidden, or rebellion, to be spared the pain of the classroom, but gain condemnation in return. If I had had the opportunity to grope toward what I sensed I needed, perhaps I might have found it, but there were no alternatives for children.

Sometimes I conformed, went to school and suffered, sometimes I rebelled, refused, and suffered.

Adolescence added the further torment of sex. In the repressive late '50's, a time of rigidly stereotyped sex-roles, I both

longed for and feared the attentions of boys, who were strangers, almost aliens. Once again, it seemed that any choice was only a choice of which pain I was to suffer.

My parents, only dimly sensing my agony (we did not speak of such things to one another), sent me to a psychiatrist. It seemed logical to them, loving me and wanting to ease my pain. It seemed logical to me as well, out of step for so many years, I now had powerful confirmation that the fault lay within me.

The choices were so limited. Continuing my education--voluntarily once high school was agonizingly completed, a job (and what kind of job for a woman, without a degree, with no training or experience), or salvation through love (and what an easy conclusion for a child of the '50's)?

In 1965, I married. Redemption, or so I thought, through the roles of wife and mother--at last, no longer out of step. In a few months I was pregnant, radiant, joyous, at last successful in a role. Then miscarriage --failure!--and collapse.

Again, a psychiatrist, this time a dispenser of magic pills. I came to his office, cried, was given a handful of multi-coloured goodies, went home, cried, and swallowed pills. He was puzzled that I was not "improving." He suggested hospitalization. Out of longing to end the pain (pain which I could not understand, for hadn't I--for once -- done everything right), I agreed.

In March, 1966. I signed myself into the psychiatric ward of Mt. Sinai Hospital, seeking warmth, support and psychotherapy. In a manner

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that would later become familiar, the hospital's first act was to change my medication. Now disoriented as well as depressed, I moved through the hospital's program of occupational and recreational "therapy." The first lesson to the mental patient, repeated in varying forms in every hospital I was ever in: Behave! Conform! Never directly stated, but all too clear. It was the lesson of the first 21 years of my life repeated, by an institution of force, this time, since I had failed to learn the lesson as taught by more benevolent institutions.

I had entered the hospital in an attempt to find relief for the pain of living, and found, instead, that any attempt to show this pain to my "healers," so they could understand and help me, was swiftly met with repression. A good patient was one who swallowed the medication, followed the hospital routine, and indicated a willingness to "cope" with the life circumstances that had brought about hospitalization in the first place. Breaking out of the prison, "rebellious," was a symptom of one's illness. Conformity was mental health.

Discharged after two-and-a-half weeks, I went home to my prison. There was no women's movement to help me to see that my cold and unrewarding marriage was a trap; I became convinced that since I saw it as a prison, I was still "crazy." So I tried to convince myself that I was lucky (didn't I have a "good" husband, a "nice" apartment?), and continued to cry.

The lesson was still unlearned. Despite all the authority figures who had failed in the past to entrust me with the secret of life (which I still believed they held and could

somehow be persuaded to part with), I now decided psychiatrists were the ones with the mystical "answer." Nothing in my experience had given me the confidence to seek it within myself, the lonely, the out-of-step, the sick one. I returned to the hospital, desperate to be "helped." They had "no room," turned me away, sent me in a police ambulance to Bellevue. Bellevue, childhood taunt, nightmare of the unknown, cold shiver in the dark. Was it once a hill, overlooking a beautiful expanse of water? An estate, perhaps, children playing on the lawn? The ugly buildings, crumbling, yet still strong, thick walls--but the name says that perhaps there was a time before the ugliness. I never saw it clearly; first, they took away my glasses.

Half-blind, I groped along the hallway to my bed, pointed out to me by a bored aide. I wanted her to lead me to it, I was afraid of falling or stumbling, but she only waved. It was night, beds everywhere, snores and moans. I tried to get up for a drink of water, was yelled back to bed.

My parents, horrified, made inquiries, pulled strings, with money they didn't have had me transferred to Gracie Square Hospital, a place where rich alcoholics dried out and rich psychotics were zapped at \$50 a shock. Terrified, having seen the price of disobedience (for I had defied the psychiatrists by not resuming my role), I tried hard now to be "good." The carpeted floors and pastel walls showed me one of my choices; the vacant stares and shuffling gaits of the patients returning each morn-

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ing from the shock room showed the other. Again, the lesson: Conformity, or punishment!

Why was I so convinced there was some secret, if only I could persuade them to share it with me, that I was led continually back to the hospital and closer to danger? I watched, uncomprehending, how "normal" people moved without effort through the routines that seemed to me so deadly and stifling, and was sure that there must be a secret, which they shared, and from which I was excluded. Again and again, I risked the punishment of drugs, the threats of shock and continued confinement, desperate to find a way to continue to live. In the meaningless rituals of life, I saw only death. And I wanted to live.

I know now that my terror had a very real basis--it was not "crazy" at all, but a confirmation of my sanity. The rituals were meaningless, such "life" was truly death. Having moved all my life from role to role, sometimes dragged, sometimes all too willingly, I was making a desperate attempt to truly live for the first time. I was struggling to be born. And struggling alone--I was being forced towards death rather than life.

But, back then, convinced of my weakness, wrongness, and craziness, I could not believe that the answer lay within me. No one was trying to tell me of my strength; calling me crazy was confirmation that I was weak and powerless. If there had been someone to say, "Yes, go on, feel it, see it through to the end..."? (But this was not to happen for years.)

I left the shock shop unshocked. (How incredibly

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lucky I was! Patient in six hospitals, suffering from "depression" --the--prime "indication" for shock, then labelled with the stigmatizing diagnoses of catatonic or chronic schizophrenia, and never "treated" with the wires and switches of ECT! How did I escape?) Terror had me truly immobilized by now. A move in any direction seemed certain to bring death or destruction. Start "functioning" again in a marriage in which I already defined myself as a failure? Or leave it and go back to--what? Or follow the vague stirrings of a mind I had been convinced was crazy? The only way to stay alive was to do nothing.

I turned again to the wisdom of my psychiatrist. Surely, somewhere, he had the answer. If only I would be good (but it didn't seem I was ever good enough), he would reveal to me the secret of life, the secret of normality. The

next psychiatric "treatment" for me was the structured environment: a hospital where every moment of the patient's day was regulated with "therapeutic" purpose. It sounded like a way of staying alive.

But Hillside Hospital was a farce. Unknowing or uncaring of my fear of the death I thought was imminent, the staff proceeded to process me through its routine. The "structured environment" prescribed that I could make no phone calls or see no visitors until I "earned" those privileges, that I could not step out of the confines of my "cottage" without a staff member, that I must participate in the daily program that combined the worst features of school and summer camp. The fact that all these requirements and prohibitions terrified me concerned no one; it was something I must do, it was

my therapy. I was facing the terror of my own death, and they wanted me to mold clay. I was taken into an expensively equipped wood-working shop and asked to guide a board past a moving saw--I screamed and fled in terror of slicing off an arm--I was uncooperative.

I now became desperate to leave the place I had been so eager to enter. (The procedure had been as complex and harrowing as a college admission.) My action had been toward life; instead, it seemed they were trying to crush the last bits of life in me. I used every means I could think of to convince them to let me leave: screams, tears, punches, logical argument. They could easily have "shipped" me. ("Shipped" was hospital slang for being committed to a state hospital.) Instead, they released me.

I was out in the dangerous world again. I slit my wrists. I entered the psychiatric ward of Montefiore Hospital. I was trying to stay alive.

I needed time, safety and support. For awhile, I was given at least the time and the safety. I began to breathe a little more easily, perhaps my death was not imminent after all. But psychiatry is never content to do nothing, to let time be the healer. I was put on tranquilizers again. I protested, argued, begged, and finally resorted to hiding the pills in my mouth and spitting them in the toilet. Uncooperative again. My safe place was no longer safe; I al-

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ready knew that drugs bent my mind and increased the feeling that something awful was about to happen. I begged to be released. "No, you're too sick." I longed for someplace safe, quiet, warm, where I could grow whole again. Suddenly, doors that had been open were locked; I was forbidden to go outside even escorted. Panic--I knew that unless I found the mythical "safe place" I would die. Panic--I pounded at the locked door and screamed my desperation.

Uncooperative patients are punished. I was committed to Rockland State Hospital.

The lesson finally learned. Freedom was an illusion. Only cooperation brought life. That life seemed like a living death was a cruel joke. But it was better than the punishment of confinement and de-personalization. I promised to be "good." There was no escape.

But first I had to be sent to the state hospital, bear the indignities to mind and body, prove that I was truly docile, broken, "cured." Only then could I be set free, confirmed in the belief that to walk endlessly through the motions of a living death was truly life, happiness and health.

It would be years before I would once again risk the struggle of being born.

-Judi Chamberlin

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