

ATTACHMENTS LOST AND FOUND

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Overview of my Psychiatric Experiences

My story of being thrust into the mental health system began on the cold, dark morning of December 4, 1960. I was nineteen years old and had left Smith College after becoming very depressed halfway through my freshman year. In my sad and confused state of mind, I overdosed on Aspirin and my parents took me to the Massachusetts General Hospital, which commenced my three-year hellish odyssey through four different mental institutions.

After a short stay at Massachusetts General Hospital, I was transferred to Baldpate Hospital in Georgetown, Massachusetts, where I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. For eight weeks I was forced to undergo forty combined insulin coma/electroshock “treatments.” I went through them wide awake, without any anesthesia. It was violent and it was barbaric. One terrible morning, the young girl in the bed next to me died from the shocks they had given her. She was my fragile friend and fellow traveler on this dangerous journey. On many afternoons during this vulnerable time, an attendant sexually molested me. I did not cry; I did not dare tell anyone.

We teenagers were housed in a locked cement block in the woods behind the farmhouse/“hospital” where middle-aged women who suffered from alcohol abuse were also being treated. Quite simply, I was terrified the entire time I was in that hospital. I lost my innocence, I lost my self-esteem, I was crushed as flat as a pancake, and I am lucky to be alive to tell this story today.

From Baldpate, I was transferred directly to the Menninger Clinic in Kansas where I fully expressed my outrage at being locked up against my will. That anger caused me to stop talking for weeks, to burn a hole in my arm with cigarettes, and then to be shot up with Thorazine and locked into seclusion for many days, over and over, with nothing but a mattress on the floor. There, I cried and cried and cried.

When the Menninger staff told my parents they could do nothing more for me, I was sent to the Massachusetts Mental Health Center in Boston where I was immediately taken off the Thorazine. The side effects I was experiencing – a swollen tongue and a shuffling walk – disappeared. I remained there for another year, however, despite repeatedly trying to sign myself out every 30 days. My therapist there, a young resident doctor, sat endlessly mute, puffing on his pipe, while I sat opposite him in my own angry silence. He held all the power, and I felt withholding my voice was my only remaining choice for internal survival. As his final flattening blow, he sent me to Westborough State Hospital in Massachusetts in a locked black car with two elderly custodians guarding me. I was truly on my way to a lifetime of being locked up, and I could so easily have ended up tied to my chair like the elderly women I witnessed lining the bleak hallways there. If it were not for an incredibly kind friend, Bob (a lawyer who had also been locked up at Massachusetts Mental Health Center with me), who visited me every day at Westborough and who convinced my parents to sign me out, I might still be locked up – or, more likely, dead.

My Background

In addition to being very lucky, I have always felt that the loving relationships I had within my extended family contributed to my ability to survive the atrocities of the mental health system.

My wonderful grandparents and aunt lived nearby, and they showered me with adoring love and generosity from the moment I was born. The healing, long, lazy days of my summer youth were spent with them on the shores of Squam Lake in New Hampshire. Those summertimes, filled with joy and laughter and abandon, were idyllic; there, from a young age, I was given a caring and complete freedom to explore the woods and the lake with my many summer childhood friends. I believe these are the relationships and experiences which gave me internal strength and created a kernel of hope within me during the more difficult winter months and the much darker years of my hospitalizations. That hope is still within me today.

My parents were not so nurturing. I was born in 1941, during World War II, the eldest of three children. My mother cared for us at home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while my father was away in the war. When my father returned from the war, however, there was a great deal of frightening physical and verbal conflict between him and my younger brother. This continued throughout my childhood. I remember always feeling some measure of stress and anxiety from this, and my home never felt emotionally or physically safe for me.

My parents' relationship was loving, but in their traditional marriage my mother gave over her own life and whatever needs or aspirations she might have had to supporting my father, both at home and in his work. They led busy lives and were often out of town, once leaving me for three months when I was three months old and again leaving all three of us in the care of a nanny for three months when I was six. I missed my mother and wished she had been home to protect us from the nanny's harsh, even cruel, punishments. From this point on, I slipped into a cautious relationship with my parents. My refuge was with my grandparents and aunt and at school,

where I had many good friends and always received positive attention for my natural athletic abilities.

Despite what might appear to have been a certain degree of resilience gifted to me from those nurturing summers, my relationship with my immediate family was severely tested during and after my hospitalizations. Wearing my favorite red dress, I rode out in silence to Baldpate Hospital in the front seat between my parents. I had been told I was going to a sanitarium. I thought that I must be suffering from tuberculosis, and from the moment of realizing where I was, when they took away my belt, I felt abandoned and completely frightened. After the electroshocks began, I could not imagine how my parents would allow me to be so brutalized, and why they were not coming to rescue me. While at the Menninger Clinic, I remember lying in seclusion for days and days and days and crying endlessly for my mother, in desperation for having been abandoned into these supposed “healing” prisons of violence. I suspect that some of my sorrow and desperation was the reliving of her absences during my early childhood. And, although my mother did visit me occasionally over the course of the three years, all of my energy went into struggling to survive within that violent medical war zone, and I became further and further isolated from thoughts of my family and whatever small intimacies we might previously have shared.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for where I found myself. And, as I learned, my world quickly centered entirely around the hospital ward, my fellow patients, and the doctors and nurses who may have thought they were helping, but who were, in fact, hurting us all. They were crushing us both emotionally and physically. In this process, I ended up learning a complex set

of behaviors which called upon my use of silence, anger, and self-abuse to maintain that small kernel of hope within my soul. These sometimes unconscious and out-of-my-control choices did not always serve me well, and when all else failed, and when I became too exhausted, I would slip into the deepest of sorrows (in seclusion and restraints and heavily medicated). But I was alive, and survival was almost always my primary goal from the minute my roommate was killed by the shocks. There was simply no room for my family on this dangerous and lonely journey.

After finally landing in Westborough State Hospital, I spent my days making and remaking my bed in the darkness at 6am so the nurses could bounce a quarter on it, scraping garbage along with other patients in the kitchen, trying to console the elderly women tied to their chairs, and nervously sitting in the dayroom waiting for my heroic and dear friend, Bob, to arrive in the early evenings. Then, one cold morning, while I was scraping, a nurse told me she was taking me to Dr. Sharp. I had no idea who he was or what was about to happen. She led me through corridors to a huge office where I was presented to Dr. Morris L. Sharp, superintendent, *and* to my parents. I was completely dumbfounded and very nervous about where they might be planning to send me next – perhaps for brain surgery, a lobotomy? I trusted no one. Dr. Sharp explained that he would give me permission to go home if I met his conditions. First, I had to promise to go to secretarial school, starting on Monday, two days later, and second, I had to return to see him every Saturday morning. Although I felt simultaneously trapped and relieved and betrayed, I would have agreed to almost anything to regain my freedom. At last my parents had finally rescued me – and again, sitting silently between them, I rode home to begin the rest of my life.

Although my transition from hospital to home was incredibly liberating (I was out and free to breathe or eat or sleep or walk whenever I wished), it was also very difficult. Everything looked too bright and the everyday sounds were too loud. It seemed as if I were living in a parallel universe to that of everyone around me. I went through all of the motions of daily life. I ate, I slept, and I went to secretarial school and learned to type 120 words per minute (this was my mother's dream for me as she had been my father's secretary before they were married).

On Saturdays my parents drove me back out to Westborough to see the frightening Dr. Sharp. I told him only what I thought would keep me free: facts of going to school, nothing at all personal. I walked through my fragile little life on tiptoe feeling as though a scarlet letter were stitched upon my breast for all to see: "S" for schizophrenic. The fear that I might make one misstep and end up in the hospital again controlled all of my behavior. I was shattered, but I was a model of good behavior. To their credit, my parents were kind. My father drove me to school, my mother cooked dinner. But at home we were all walking on eggshells; no one ever mentioned a word about where I had been or what it had been like for me or for them. No one. Myself included. This is true to this very day, forty-six years later. I have simply never been willing to go into that black hole which is full of so much deep hurt and anger. Sometimes, it really is better to leave dark nightmares in the provinces of dreamy sleep.

After several months of living at home and going to secretarial school, I was able to find an apartment with roommates and a job. Although I was still angry at my parents for having locked me up, I was not able to express my feelings openly and needed to be away from them. I have heard it said that my family's decision to lock me up is what families did back in the 1960s and

earlier. The fact is, this is not what all families did with their depressed or rebellious children. Some, like David Oaks, were rescued. His mother traveled far to demand his freedom from a psychiatric hospital. And I have heard other stories like his. Probably in part because my family did not fight to rescue me and find a more compassionate form of help, my relationships within my family became more and more distant. I needed that distance.

Looking back, I cannot imagine how I lived through that time. I remember simply putting one foot in front of the other, taking tiny baby steps towards being more fully in a life of my own. I became even more self-conscious when, because of the electroshocks, my front teeth turned brown and finally fell out while I was eating a sandwich. It was embarrassing; I felt no one would love me. Getting my front teeth replaced helped significantly. I told very few people about where I had spent the last few years; even so, I was to learn a lot more about the pain of discrimination. One of my roommates heard that I had been in a mental hospital, and she was so frightened that she moved out the very next day. That hurt. At the same time, I was also becoming close to a seemingly nice boyfriend who was a medical student. He also became aware through friends that I had been locked up. He asked me directly if this were true; I told him it was. He left that evening and never called again. Those experiences caused me to be much more cautious about sharing myself with others.

Fortunately, at about this time I was referred to a wonderful new therapist, Dr. Lee Macht. He was completely different from any of the doctors who had previously sat mute with me. He smiled, he had a sparkle in his eye, and he saved my life in all possible ways. He told me that he did not think I had ever been “crazy.” He told me that he thought I had been behaving

understandably in self-defensive ways to protect myself in what he described as my own “private holocaust.” He encouraged me to go back to college, helped me write my college essay, and wrote a recommendation for me. He was the first person truly to listen to me. He believed in me; he gave me back that kernel of hope which had been almost totally crushed. Later, he also encouraged me to write about my experiences for the newspaper. Quite simply, he was a warm, gentle and encouraging mother to me.

With his support, I blossomed. I made friends and I graduated from college. During this time, I also married, and my husband and I shared in the raising of our four wonderful children. After twelve years, however, our marriage ended, and I became a full-time single parent. Also, with joy and disbelief, at this time I also met my true fellow travelers – courageous members of the Mental Patients Liberation Front in Boston. In addition to Dr. Lee Macht and my children, the members of this organization turned out to be the people who further positively changed my life. We shared a language and a set of feelings similar to those described by Holocaust survivors and veterans of combat battle units. This connection to people who had traveled my same path through violent hospitalizations gave me confidence, encouraged me again to tell my story to educate and try to prevent others from going through similar experiences.

It is important for families to recognize that once their family member has been so violated, and he or she has not been protected or rescued from those inhumanities, it is very difficult ever to regain any real sense of trust. Perhaps if my parents had been more genuinely nurturing, if all in our family had received caring support during my youth, we might have had a chance to become closer. I suspect that my hospitalization was simply the last straw in a series of smaller childhood

leavings, insensitivities, and lapses in parental judgment to which I responded by turning elsewhere for love and care. For me, this turned out to be a necessary and healing choice. I have been strong, happy, and healthy for a long, long time – forty-six years.

Today, as I write this, my father is no longer living; towards the end of his long life we made a gentle and silent peace. My sister and I visit with my mother and show her the kindnesses which very elderly mothers deserve in spite of her earlier choices in regard to my care. I, myself, am happy and healthy and lead a full and active life. Along with my dear children and grandchildren, and many wonderful close friends, my family also includes my spirited and generous fellow travelers. Together we speak the political language of survival.