

Ark of Healing, Ark of Resistance!

[Naomi Pinson](#), Cambridge, 2010

"If we were logical we would resign ourselves to the evidence that our fate is beyond knowledge, that every conjecture is arbitrary and demonstrably devoid of foundation."

Our fate is beyond knowledge,

Our sorrow beyond dreams.

We come here unwanted,

And leave here unseen.

Leafing through my old copy of "Survival in Auschwitz" I found that I had written this rhyme in the margins of the book, beside the above quote. Further on I had scribbled about my own incarceration in a state hospital. I can just make out that I was comparing the experiences depicted by the author, an inmate of a concentration camp, to those of my own. Hidden in the margins, scribbled, faded, a product of a blighted and frightened conscience, mine own, mine.

Throughout my teens and on I have looked to the writings of the holocaust for something, for something relevant to the experience of myself. What was I looking for? For my own strength in the face of the unendurably enduring inhumanity of child abuse and neglect? Domestic violence? Rape by, not a stranger, but by a husband? Incarceration in Institutions, private and public, yea. Who and how, did they, had they, survived? And who were those who did not survive, what is my relation to these, who will not "recover," who are still, always, indelibly mine?

The second line of the poem, ironically enough, turned out to be the title of a play/memoir by the child of a Nazi mother, Peter Handke. This mother, when her spirit awoke to the reality of her Fuhrer's Germany, chose death, chose suicide, rather than to confront her demons, rather than to attempt to live with her choices.

The experience of mental patients, especially those of us who have experienced being locked down, although I believe that institutions are less about physical boundaries than they are about mental ones, are hard to articulate, harder to share. Positive psychology would have us not share it at all, while the defuse nature of our "identities" before, during and after, leads not to this. The Lost, the Musulman, and Musulweiber, have no voice, and yet exist, and it would seem, exist in multitudes. Those too, on the streets of America, who have rejected the mental health authority at the risk, and at the loss of their very humanity, inspire me not to speak out, but rather to cry out, to shout out, to rage!

What prompted me immediately was listening to a talk given by Harry Belafonte. The context of his speech concerned the evolution of Pan Africanism, the development and preservation of African identity in the Diasporas, and his concern too, how oppression

was shaping the dialogue even in that space, even then, and calling the tunes, too. What leapt out at me during that talk was the closeness between oppressions, the parallels in experiences, the ways in which identities are forged or shattered by such experiences. How they appear and disappear, on what landscapes, timeandspacescapes, ideoscapes shall they perform their lives, their deaths and what meanings shall these have to us?

And so I began to write at first my paraphrase, and then to reach beyond of his talk, applying it to the situation of the Labeled Person, the Locked person, the Person, though utterly subhumanized, under the thumb of the Ubermench, the normal one, Mental Health Authority, who must, after a fashion, go on, does go on. Thus otherized, one does go on after a fashion, through the revolving door of the hospital, through the hospital in the community, through the shelter door, sometimes to death on the street, in the asylum, in the still, barren room of the group home, the nursing home, the rest home. What of their experiences? After all, for almost four years, and recently, in the persona of a "Human Rights Officer" I got to know them, up close and personal, as well as having been one of "them" long, long ago. Though it seems like only yesterday.

The languages, the beliefs, the myths in which we all dwell constitute the Institution. The Institution is a product of our minds even more than any purely physical site. In our disconnect, engineered by those who call themselves "well," it is the stories that we tell one another in which we create and preserve our reality.

When speaking among ourselves our communications are often covert, almost silenced. Thus, a whole language of meaning can and is inferred in a look, a gesture, a way of walking, a posture one assumes at a particular time of day, a way one can be seen to hold her or himself in a particular light, in semi-darkness, behind an almost closed door, until we can no longer.

Since we have consistently found that we are held to a much higher standard than those of others, others who are "well," who designate themselves as "normal," empathic communication between us is always an act of resistance. This is all the truer since our destruction is all but assured by those who cannot permit themselves to see us as we really are. Such communications, communications often conveyed in the manner described above, create a bulwark between our complete destruction and our ultimate survival. A bulwark, but not an escape, for escape is impossible.

At every juncture we are vulnerable, not only to the vicissitudes of poverty that our labels all but guarantee, but to those of psychiatrized language, a language which describes to us and ascribes for us meaning to our very experience of self and other. The meaning of this language is the construction of our prison: we are not allowed to leave. We can only rail against it, only rebel, until nothing of self is left.

As with other oppressed and stigmatized peoples we daily bear the weight of traumatization through labeling, through first prejudice and then discrimination that these psychiatric practices create. Today we can chose to stand with others who have been

oppressed, but the question is, do they stand with us as well? Our condition, after all, transcends all category, race, religion, age, dis/ability, education and social class. All are eligible, although it turns out that some are more eligible than others. Though among even these groups, we are more often than not seen as "other" and thus rejected and marginalized among and between them.

Yet, despite and because of these mechanisms of stereotypy, of sub and super humanization, we are a people, have become a people. We are a people still in the process of becoming, and we are a people creating ourselves beyond the grip of stereotypy, oftentimes utilizing it as our weapon, sometimes recognizing it as our only weapon.. In our diversity, our richness of culture and experience is the source, the fountain of all of our strength, our undeniable humanity, though it is more often denied than not.

Because of our experience, because of our label, our characterization as nuts, looneys, batty, retards etc. we can appear to other people to be a monolith. And we are monolithic in this sense: We are a people who bear witness, though still we are bound, though still we struggle in the chains of our madness, though still we are marked with the stigmata of madness.

Confined this way, told that all our thought, all our speech is wrong, delusional, confused, how shall we find our voice? How shall we survive this totalizing environment? As with all who are stereotyped, part of our experience revolves around extremes of expectations, of images, of myths about who we are and what we are capable of being/doing. Perceptions of society ricochet from the sacred to the profane, echoing images in other oppressed groups. The virgin/whore dichotomy that women find themselves in; the noble savage/verses the savage primitive one that is laid on Peoples of African decent and indeed, on indigenous peoples where ever they survive; the Smart vs. the Cunning Jew; the Spiritual Sufi, vs. the Axis of Evil Arab; the Patch Adams or the Silencer of the Lambetts. Yes, we are ALL quite apparently in need of correction through the invariability of the White Man's Burden

We have ourselves been at times seduced by these images and expectations: thus we have the phenomena of "consumer" gurus, of those who style themselves as wise fools! We have at times gotten ourselves stuck on that carnival rollercoaster of over and under valuation. Yes! That one, the one that invites, prepares the stage for subsequent abuses. But always among us are those who see, and who will always see the parody, the trap, the obscenity of this. To the extent that any of us allows ourselves to be seduced by this, this is the extent to which our movement will be victimized by the very same. For this is what they "know" about us, what they use against us in every instance, "they" too being human, they too speaking and telling a different story. That story is the one in which our humanity perishes, the one in which we become captives daily.

Who controls this Humanity? Who controls this, our very way of Knowing? The experiencing of our wants and needs as "sick," the making of the "sick" self? And what shall countervail it? What?! In the face of these masks, these bars, these prisons, these

vaults of inner loneliness, how shall we be able to construct, never mind, tell our story? The story of a "self" we may no longer recognize, when the language of self is itself stolen, perverted? What language shall we use, construct, for the recovery of our humanity? And how shall we, who have such need to be heard, whose voices have been so consistently silenced, hear one another above the clamor? The clamor, sometimes babble, of speech that contains, nay, that spills over into shock, into horror and loss?

"Language is as vital to the physician's art as the stethoscope or the scalpel. The doctor begins by examining the words of his patient to determine their clinical significance...Of all the words the doctor uses, the name he gives the illness has the greatest weight. It forms the foundation of all subsequent discussion...with a name the patient can construct an explanation of his illness not only for others but for himself. The name of the illness becomes a part of the identity of the sufferer.. the name can also provide instant community.

Jerome Groopman

And, if the name IS the person, and IS pejorative, what then?

Prejudice against mad people is the gateway prejudice, as marijuana has been said to be the gateway drug, leading to use of other illegal drugs. Even very tiny children talk of "nutcases," "crackpots," and "retards". Even and perhaps especially, when these are grandma, sister and brother, father, mother. Most children are no longer taught or allowed racial or religious epithets. But we are fair game. And so the child evolving into adulthood understands the peril, understands a choice has been made.

Within these widespread socially sanctioned prejudices first our thought and then our very identity becomes appropriated and devalued. Our history, which set the stage for the largest and most horrific of all European attempts at genocide, goes unnoticed and unexamined. We are cuing up again for such treatment in the bioethical "arguments" of today, in the denial of basic human needs today, in the loss of social structures that provide hope and a way out.

This is evident too in psychosocial language that, even while it purports to heal, diminishes us. We are told by the mental health authority that we "need" to get a "valued social role" as if being the means of the mental health authorities paycheck is not enough, or as if, just being alive is not enough, or as if there were really affordable housing and/or accessible training programs or higher education readily available to us, were we just to "chose" them. We are enjoined by luminaries such as Marsha Linnehan to get "a life worth living" in language perilously close to the language coined by Hitler, "Life unworthy of life". A few, like other middleman minorities, embrace the role of kapo. These are allowed to succeed, to the degree, the job, the housing that others are denied. Thus they further displace us and marginalize us. They have "recovered." They are all right, why are we not? Ah, it must be our lack of resilience! This "explains" it all, as the Jews lack of willingness to work "explained" the state he can to in concentration camp.

All of this is meant as "therapy." And it is! Death therapy for the soul. Hate speech employed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the bible of psychiatry, and its ideological twin, the International Code of Diagnoses used in Europe, enjoins others to hate us, to look down on us and see us as "other" than human. Such prejudices have been raised to the level of "science" as were the superstitions of eugenics in racism and Anti-Semitism not so long ago. The prejudice is not confined to this pseudo medicalization though, but similarly to the way Muslims/middle-easterners are labeled today, we are destroyed through the character assassination of being labeled "personality disordered." This is particularly true if you are also female and black, and fight back. It could not be much clearer that even should you be one of the tiny few who "recover" from all this, you will always be suspect, always be at a disadvantage. For all people receiving such labels, any psychiatric label, are subject to the law too: Anyone with a diagnosis is at far greater risk than others of having civil rights completely abrogated. So, as with other forms of prejudice, the prejudice comes in the naming, in attitudes created and maintained in naming, discrimination, it's active brother, comes in the form of loss of rights.

Beyond this, also consistent with the systematic ways of other oppressions, we are enjoined that only our acceptance of this "treatment" will signify that we are on the road to "recovery." Only then may we "recover," to the limits set by the totalizing environment of the mental health authority, only then may we marginally join the ranks of the Ubermench. For ever present is that threat, the threat that close on the heels of prejudice comes discrimination. This, the ultimate weapon of this, is in the form of "voluntary" conditional commitment. The "voluntary" is that as you seek help, as you enter the locked situation, the ward, the unit of the mental hospital you become subjected to the threat of the 'conditional.' The "conditional" is that they'll let you out and not move on to "involuntary" commitment if you are nice and seem to "comply." If you comply completely you are more likely to be spared forced treatment in the form of medication "guardianship" and "representative" payeeship." But no matter how much you "comply," or give in to coercion, you will never be free of the threat of the usurpation of your civic being, This goes on and on. It is a life sentence, described by labeling theorists as a "social death sentence."

What is left after this? What is left, once one is lying on the bottom? Who are we indeed, in the Institution, in our families, in our communities, once this has occurred?

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