

HUMAN HANDIWORK: THE ARTS AS ALTERNATIVE

by Sally Clay

*i'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance*

— e. e. cummings

Some years ago, my self-help group in Maine published a book of poetry. Professionally printed, and bound with an attractive cover, it contained poems from our writing group, some by experienced writers and others by new poets. Most of the poems dealt with the experience of extreme mental states or abuses in the mental health system. All were readable—at the least, they were honest expressions of deep feeling, and the best of them shone with the fire of original insight.

We were pleased to learn that the daily newspaper was publishing a review of our book. The reviewer was a local writer whom we knew to be psychiatrically labeled, like us. Naturally we assumed that his review would be favorable, or at least sympathetic. To our surprise, however, he panned the book. He adopted a patronizing tone, presenting himself as a professional with the unpleasant task of writing about poems written not by legitimate writers but by mental patients. He scarcely acknowledged the originality of our inspiration, or the urgency of our cause. The best he could say of our poems was that they were “good therapy” for the mental patients who wrote them.

That is why I am suspicious of the idea of the arts as alternative to psychiatric treatment. Everyone agrees that art is healing and empowering. But when creative expression is regarded as treatment, it is discounted as art. Ezra Pound, for example, was committed for 12 years to a mental hospital in Washington, D.C., largely for political reasons. He continued to write, but because his poems could be regarded as the rantings of a madman, they could also be dismissed and trivialized. When art itself is not taken seriously, art as therapy is no threat to psychiatry. The creative expression of mental patients is often accorded as much importance as the scribbling of a child, a primitive hand stenciled in poster paint and taped on the schoolroom wall.

Recent discoveries of caves in southern France reveal paintings 20,000 years old of graceful deer and other stylized animals. On the wall next to these is the mark of the artist: a human hand stenciled in red ochre, just like the kind we used to make ourselves in kindergarten. Even older than

the European cave paintings is the rock art in Kakadu National Park in Australia, where 40,000 years ago ancient artists also left handprints as their signature.

Art is ancient. It takes the raw materials of our world—the soil, the sienna, the drama, the dreams—and paints or shapes them until they uplift or inspire us. Art bears the mark of the human hand; it is the signature of the human spirit and the harbinger of new consciousness. The evolution of our species can be measured through our art, through the reverence for our world and our kind that art reveals. It has only been during the last century and a half, during our so-called industrial age, that human handiwork has been replaced by technology. After 40,000 years of evolution, institutions now supplant community, and cold formula usurps the healing power of art.

Art takes human anguish, yearning, and vision, and transforms them into the realm of the sacred. Psychiatry takes the same human materials and calls them ugly. Rather than transforming human experience into a medium for pleasure or growth, psychiatry excises what it does not understand and extols the static and the stagnant. If psychiatry had existed in prehistoric times, it is safe to assume that there might never have been any evolution of human consciousness.

For example, if Vincent Van Gogh had been born in 1953 instead of 1853, he probably would have been institutionalized at an early age and treated with psychiatric drugs. Almost certainly he would never have painted “The Starry Night.” Handel wrote “The Messiah” in less than two weeks—would this have been possible if he, too, had been treated for his manic excess?

To trivialize the art of mental patients is nothing less than a threat to humanity. Art that expresses the insights of altered states of consciousness and that protests oppression and injustice is, and always has been, at the cutting edge of human evolution. It is healing not just for the artist but for the rest of society as well. Mental hospitals and other impersonal institutions are inventions of the industrial age, themselves aberrations in 40,000 years of human consciousness. Such institutions are built to contain the loneliness and the fears of our age, and to hide away unwanted voices and visions.

To call the arts an alternative to psychiatric treatment is like calling the family an alternative to an orphanage. Art and the family are ancient expressions of human needs and aspirations. Euphoria, suffering, and altered states of consciousness all have their sanctuary and their expression within these ancient traditions. But these and other traditions are now in jeopardy. It is psychiatry that presents itself as an alternative to art, not the other way around.

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