

Mind

Imagine

Pat Bracken and Phil Thomas on creativity, madness and meaning

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In the first three postpsychiatry articles in this series we have argued that what we call 'mental health' is not something that can be grasped fully through a language of models, therapies or treatments.

Issues such as social exclusion, the oppressive and inequitable treatment experienced by members of our black and minority ethnic communities, or the enormous influence of the pharmaceutical industry in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our emotions, are first and foremost political issues. Framing mental health in terms of our citizenship serves to foreground this reality. We believe that this analysis resonates with some key themes that have emerged from within the service user movement.

In the next three articles, we want to discuss three other important issues that have been highlighted by the user movement: creativity, spirituality and hope. Postpsychiatry is about getting beyond the thinking and practices of traditional psychiatry. It is about imagining how professionals (including doctors) can be of genuine help to those who experience states of madness, alienation and distress. We believe that the service user movement has started to show how this can be done.

Over the years, much has been written in the psychiatric literature about the relationship between madness and creativity. There is mounting evidence that great writers, artists and composers have had high levels of psychiatric disorder. The first point here is that psychiatry interprets the link between madness and creativity negatively, to indicate the 'flawed' nature of genius. The second point is that creativity is a fundamental aspect of all human lives, and is not the preserve of a small number of 'tortured geniuses' who write great music or paint great pictures. In portraying the link between madness and creativity in a negative way, psychiatry alienates us from something that matters to us all.

It is our creativity, our ability to dream, to imagine, to see the world from a different place, that brings madness back into the human fold. Art, writing and music unshackle us from the straightjacket of rational thought and liberate us from the world of facts. But what does it mean to be creative? Most of us will indeed think of great works of art, but true creativity is much wider than this, and is to be found in each and every one of us. It is found in the most basic aspects of human relationships: for example, in our ability to establish loving, caring relationships with others that bring meaning and purpose into our lives.

And what is it about us that makes this possible? It is our ability to imagine. Through our

imagination we are able to make the leap into the world of another person, to imagine what the world must be like through their eyes, to imagine how they might feel. This, in our view, is the most fundamental and important aspect of human creativity. But there is more. Through imagination, we can see the world and ourselves in a different light. Our ability to imagine the world in this way, and to communicate the vision we create through art, poetry, music and writing, links us into other people. Thus survivor writing, poetry and art has become a powerful means for communicating aspects of our worlds that are otherwise inexpressible. They offer a powerful way out of isolation, loneliness and despair.

Our ability to imagine and to create, whether it be art, music or loving relationships, liberates us from the tyranny of the material world. It does this not just in the sense of freeing ourselves from the discomforts of the physical world, but also in the sense of freeing ourselves from the values that have come to dominate that world: for example, the pressures to consume, to be engaged in a restless, incessant search for more and more material satisfaction. It also liberates us from oppressive social realities in which we are condemned to think the same, believe the same, see the same and act the same. Indeed, where there is oppression, there creativity finds its greatest value.

Groups like Mad Pride and Mad Women have pointed to the positive value of 'experiences from the edge'. They stress the importance of artistic efforts to communicate these experiences. We are very aware that being 'at the edge' can be frightening, lonely and painful. Framing mental health as being something to do with creativity will not take the pain away, but it can lessen the stigma of being there. Voices from the edge have always been important for human societies. In our next piece, we turn to the connection between mental health and the experience of spirituality.

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