

Fragments from an Autobiography

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Tom Szasz once said to me that if I want to learn about psychiatry, I should not read Freud but rather Mark Twain and Dostoyevsky. I suggest that, for whatever reason, one must read Szasz. Playing on one of Szasz's chapter titles, he is psychiatry's hope *just because he is the internal enemy* and because psychiatry is its own enemy. Apparently Szasz is one of the few people who truly understands this. Too many scholars appear afraid and intimidated by critics, their professions, their shadows, and other ghosts. There is a joylessness, an everyday ennui, a gray preciseness in our literature; and it is suffocating us, advancing neither science nor mankind.

Exclude Szasz.

With power and wit this many-sided literary man, in a field where literary talent and scholarship are infrequently found together, deals with institutional psychiatry and his critics with dispatch if not gentility. Apparently it matters not whether he is alone fighting dragons or is supported and encouraged by those within and outside the system. As Szasz once asked me, "If one person claims that two plus two equals eight, and

another that two plus two equals six, is it, then, reasonable for the thoughtful man to conclude that two plus two equals seven? If it isn't, then why do we behave as if compromise is always correct and the majority is collectively more intelligent than any minority?"

Creating a New Language

This man, who taught me that modern wars are not fought for territories but for the control of the language, helped me to see that the language of psychiatry is a significant antecedent to its practices. Szasz's greatest contribution is his compelling argument for the creation of a new language and new metaphors and possibly even a new-old view of human beings, their natural rights, and inalienable freedoms. If I continue to worry because I have never won even part of an argument with this man because he always has an answer to every doubt and every rebuttal, I must also remember that he is a truly singular figure who resists conventional solutions and responses; who seems to believe that the purpose of the masses is to take excellent people, break them down, and destroy them; who believes that mediocrity is the consequence of our educational enterprise; who believes that the masses are a much greater threat to excellence than any king, president, or pope ever was (Blatt 1972).

Tom Szasz disputes the wisdom of Rousseau's famous aphorism, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in

¹As the title of this column implies, I plan to write an irregular personal column devoted to examining my beliefs, hopefully promoting worthwhile ones and exposing the others. This is an excerpt from a book in progress, *Unmailed Letters*.

chains." Szasz concludes "...if freedom is the ability to make uncoerced choices, then man is born in chains. And the challenge of his life is liberation." (*Ideology and Insanity*, New York: Anchor Books, 1970, p. 1)

Enchained Yet Free

Here I stand with Rousseau while in sympathy with Szasz. Man is never so free spiritually and so enchained physically as during prenatal life and infancy. Even before its severing, the umbilical cord represents physical dependency and the most intimate interrelatedness. It is not possible for the expectant mother to deprive her unborn child. It is not possible for the totality of that unborn child's universe to ignore or coerce him. He is enchained, yet he is free. Although he can be destroyed with ease, his spirit will not be contained.

Man is born a human and free spirit. As he lives and as life overwhelms and envelops him, basic anxiety accrues. Neuroticisms beget neuroticisms, these beget disabilities, and these beget handicaps.

If freedom is in the mind and in the soul, then a man in fetters may be as free as he whose castle is his prison (Blatt 1973).

Unite on Ideas

What is the promise for people? What are we, and what must we become? We have seen the views of monoliths from behind windows to nothing, and we are not pleased. Therefore we wonder what our people have become—and what we must now do. The answer is as plain as it is complicated, clear as it is opaque.

We must create an organization that earlier reformers would join if they were here today. We must unite not about specific task orientations but about powerful ideologies, not about special means but about a consensus of humanistic ends, not about silly slogans thoughtlessly chanted but about the infinite perspectives of a complex dilemma. We must describe and understand the subtle as well as the flagrant, the ennui as well as the flailing arms and diffuse growth, and pandemonium as an extension of the best-managed model institution. We must act as if Itard, Howe, Dorothea Dix, Helen Keller, and Emil Kraepelin are our judges (Blatt 1975).

In June 1976 I began a year as the president of the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD). I did what most AAMD presidents do—participate in

several regional and state programs, answer and make many telephone calls, write lots of letters, and attend meetings. Out of that came some good hopefully and some bad probably, the latter to be left to your knowledge or imagination.

AAMD A Major Voice

Certain events during that year have convinced me that a major, socially incorruptible and politically unapproachable voice is needed in our field. The American Association on Mental Deficiency can be that voice. I truly believe that AAMD could do no greater good for society than to choose that sometimes unappreciated role. More than ever before, there must be a group who can be counted on to try to tell the truth, not to always be right but to always be honest. There must be a group that is smart enough to know that believing in anything in this ambiguous world is dangerous and can be foolish, while it has character enough to nevertheless hold principles that it lives by.

AAMD should be the voice that can be trusted. If we accept that role we must earn that lofty but burdensome position (Report to the Council, AAMD, May 1977).

The burden of that honesty was mine when I presented my presidential address to AAMD in May 1977. The address was both a talk and a slide show—a family album, more than 10 years after *Christmas in Purgatory*. The substance of the talk follows.

Familial Protection

This presentation is an indiscretion, and there are many who will be angry with us for committing it because no family likes its sordid side brought into public view. The sordid side of ordinary families can remain hidden—to reveal it is often even more sordid. There are other kinds of families—families like the Pentagon or the Nixon White House. To reveal their secrets can sometimes become not just permissible but necessary. A family of this latter kind is the large group of men and women who have protected the hidden world of mental retardation from public scrutiny. It is a family, that has—whether wittingly or unwittingly, by deception or self-deception—succeeded in preventing thousands of mentally retarded people from participating in the entitlements of their citizenship.

The family knows things that we have not been telling the world about—important things, more important

than the Pentagon Papers, which were about senseless war and unnatural deaths.

And who is this family? It is all of those who work or say they work with the problems of retarded people in institutionalized settings. It is the supervisors and superintendents and commissioners. It is the professional societies such as the American Association on Mental Deficiency and the Council for Exceptional Children. The family includes government agencies such as the National Institute on Mental Health and the Office of Education, even groups like the Association for Retarded Citizens. From the attendants who show up for an impossible job every day to prestigious professionals who often do not show up at all the family consists of everyone who should know better than to permit that hidden world to continue. And the academic community, which legitimates it all by issuing so-called credentials and generating so-called expertise, is also part of the family. Many readers are probably members, as are two of the three of us who worked on this study.

Family Preserves Human Abuse

In spite of professed intentions, ideals, and commitments to reform, the family has acted to preserve the most abhorrent abuse of human beings. To some extent this has been done through concealment and secrecy. Ten years ago one could visit institutions only by stealth or arm-twisting or string-pulling. Ten years ago the only photographs we could get had to be taken with a concealed camera. The barricades of rules and restrictions are less formidable today, but they still exist. Institutions are still hard to get into, and taking photographs is still very difficult for anyone and next to impossible for most people. And the family does not want to see publicized pictures finally obtained.

Hypnotic Humanitarian Language

More impenetrable and sinister than overt secrecy is the misleading publicity with which the family defends its dominions. The hypnotic language of humanitarian concern encapsulates the victims of institutionalization and seals off their world from examination or understanding or hope.

We are used to condemning this kind of practice when we discover it somewhere else. For example, if the Soviet Union locks up political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals on the pretext of looking after their mental

health, we are quick enough to protest. Yet in our own institutions for retarded people thousands of Americans continue to be locked up on the pretext of receiving care, training, and education, and we continue to speak as though the pretext were reality. We call for more money and resources to implement the pretext rather than confess it was all a terrible mistake.

Unhappy Family

If there is hope in what we have learned in our examination of institutionalization, it is not in any improvement of institutional life; imprisonment and segregation can be made more comfortable, but they can never be made into freedom or participation. The only hopeful sign is that, while ten years ago and for generations those institutions were run by one happy family, today they are run by one unhappy family. If it must become unhappier still before it changes its ways, then we are willing to contribute to the family's unhappiness with our report.

As we did 10 years ago, we have revealed some of America's papers, a family's papers. We feel no guilt because we show you papers from the guardians of a closed society that professes any decent society should be open. As you will see, everything has changed during the decade between purgatory and today. As you will see, nothing is changed (Blatt 1977).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Burton Blatt is dean of School of Education and centennial professor at Syracuse University. He received his doctorate degree in special education from Pennsylvania State University in 1956. He has taught the mentally retarded in New York City, has served as professor of special education and later as chairman of that department at Southern Connecticut State College, and has served as chairman of the Special Education Department at Boston University. Dr. Blatt has published widely, and he has served as consultant to federal agencies, state departments of education and mental retardation, publishers, associations for retarded citizens, universities, and related organizations in New York, New England, and other sections of the United States. Address reprint requests to Syracuse University, 150 Marshall St., Syracuse, N.Y. 13210.

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