

Shredding Labels for the Mentally Ill

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This week we've got a note from the Mental Patients Advocacy Coalition in Ithaca, and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, announcing that on Bastille Day, July 14, they will be holding an event designed to combat the stigma of mental illness. Spokesperson and advocate Larry Roberts invites people to write the labels they've been hurt with, or that other people have used on people with mental illness, and shred those labels in a physical and symbolic act. We no longer shun and stigmatize people with leprosy or HIV. Now that the biological and experiential underpinnings of mental illness are better understood there is no more justification for treating mental illness as a moral choice than there is for saying people get cancer on purpose. However, studies show that cultural attitudes toward mental illness haven't improved much in the last twenty years. People with clinical depression are still expected to "pull yourself together" and those with schizophrenia are stereotyped as violent and dangerous, even though few of them are. (Psychiatrists who work with truly dangerous people say that sociopaths are no more "crazy" than anyone else: they just don't care about other people.)

This week we also news from Seneca County that a bill has been introduced in the State Senate to allow the release of the names of patients of the state mental hospitals, at least those who died more than fifty years ago (1962). The Willard Memorial Project, a group of concerned citizens in Seneca County, has been working for some years to put names on the graves of the patients buried in Willard Cemetery. This legislation, if it passes, will be a major victory for the project. Until recently, the cemetery itself wasn't even marked by a sign. Visitors to the cemetery, which looks more like a slightly uneven field than a cemetery, could find the graves of veterans since the US government provided headstones; they could also find the section for the Jewish patients, which was marked. However, over 5,700 of the almost 6000 patients interred between the years Willard opened (1869) and when the last patient was buried there (2000) have no markers on their graves at all.

The names had not been released by New York State because they were classified as medical information. It is also probably true that the names were kept confidential to protect the patients and their families from the stigma associated with mental illness. People continue to be ashamed of mental illness; admitting you have a mental illness may prevent you from getting a job or signing a lease, and family members are not immune from the shame attaching to a loved one with mental illness. Studies show that family members will hide the fact of a loved one's mental illness, even from friends and other family members, because they rightly fear that such information will compromise them.

Therefore, the unmarked graves of the patients in Willard Cemetery (also in the Union Free cemetery in Ovid and Holy Cross cemetery) consign their names to obscurity. Their identities are forever occluded by the illness that put them in the hospital. It may have been Alzheimer's or epilepsy or post-partum depression, as the Willard Memorial Project members point out. It could have been almost anything, and it could have happened to you or me.

Putting their own real names on their graves would go a long way toward restoring these patients' dignity and their identity as members of the human race. On Bastille Day, shred a label- and put a person's name in its place.

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