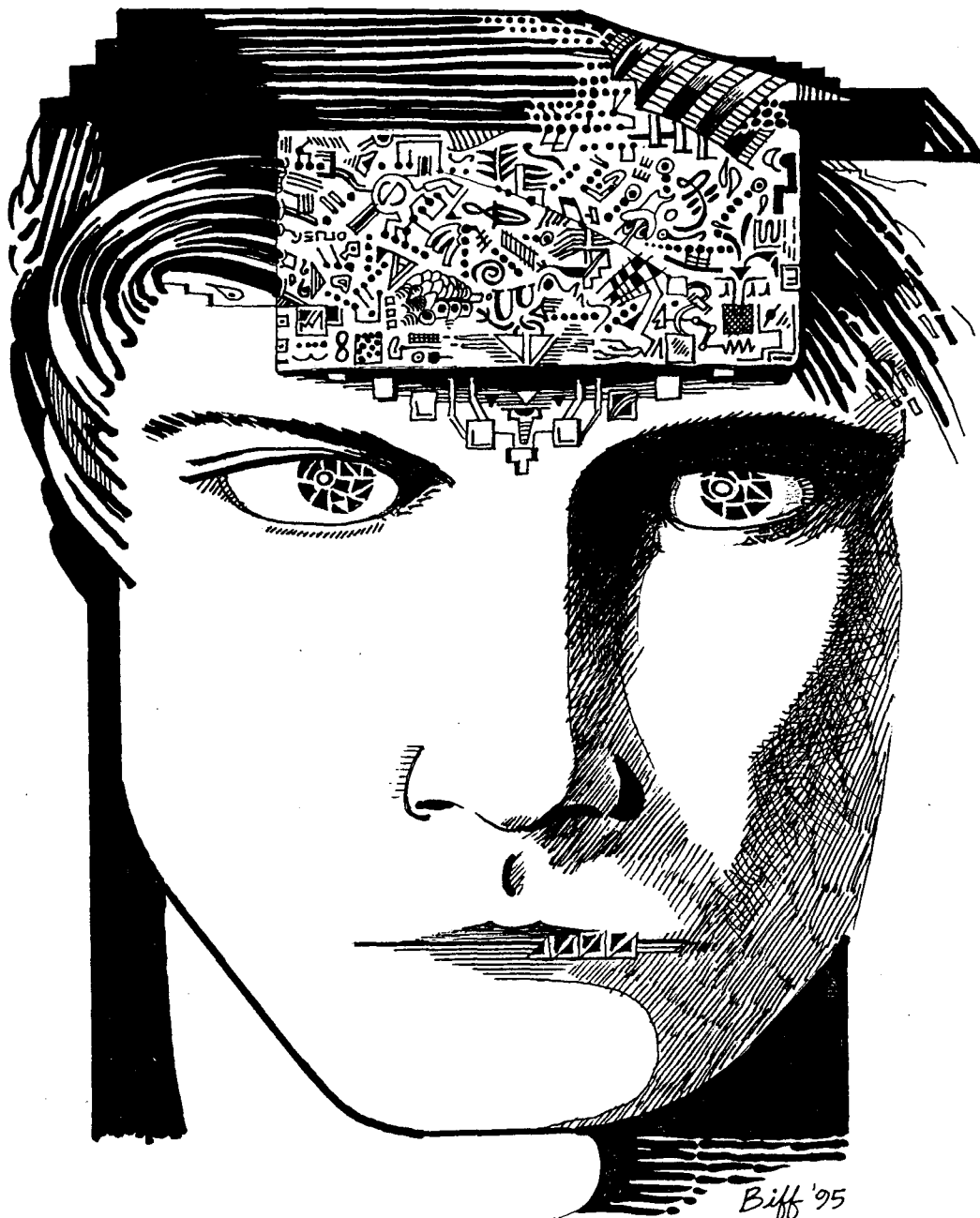


Spring, 1995

In A NutShell

A Publication of the MENTAL PATIENTS' ASSOCIATION



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The Origins of MPA

While most of our readers are aware of the services currently provided by the Mental Patients' Association, few are aware of the details of how our organization came about.

The following is a short excerpt from a presentation by M.P.A. Executive Director Barry Niles at The First Education Series hosted by the B.C. Chapter of the International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services.

While his address traced the history of consumer-driven services for mental

health clients generally, the following portion dealt specifically with the Vancouver Mental Patients' Association.

In 1971, a group of ex-mental patients in Vancouver called a public meeting to discuss dissatisfaction with the Mental Health system. The organizers had been patients together in a psychiatric day hospital, a supposedly progressive arrangement that treats patients during the day and allows them to go home in the evening and on weekends. The group did

not find the setup supportive as most crises frequently arose during the times staff were not available (evenings or weekends) and it was against the rules for patients to see one another or talk on the phone outside of the Hospital. One Monday, as the patients arrived on the ward, they learned that over the weekend one of the group had committed suicide. One immediate result of this news was the circulation of each other's phone numbers.

As time went on, some of the patients discovered that they were relying on these "illegal" phone calls far more than

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Barry Niles, MPA Executive Director, (on left) joins other speakers at Educational Seminar given by International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation

Gerald in the World

by Stanley Burfield

(A Prose Continuation of Stanley's
Poem of Last Issue)

Of all the people who live and work along Fourth Avenue, very few are well known. There's John Bishop of course, known far and wide for his apparently wonderful food. And then there's the hippie who sells his second-hand clothing on the sidewalk instead of in the store. But the one who's the most famous for his character, especially to the businesses of Fourth, is Gerald Budda.

I first encountered Gerald many years ago. Linda and I were sitting in a restaurant minding our own business when suddenly there was a white blur in the doorway. In the worried hush around us, customers with food crammed into their mouths froze as they were bombarded with pronouncements about Christ and judgement day by someone wearing the robes of ancient Palestine. Within seconds, the intruder swirled around and left. Jaws loosened and life carried on.

Since then, I've been warned about Gerald by other store owners, been told he's a paranoid schizophrenic, that he likes to throw chairs through store windows when he feels slighted, that he's consequently been banned many times from the street but always to no avail. And I've caught him stealing flowers from our display, watched him accost innocent civilians just to tell them what was

going through his mind at that instant, seen a miraculous recovery spurred on by the then owner of the Cafe Creme who gave him a job and housing providing he took his medication regularly, then watched him revert to 'normal', and wondered about him and his life.

Well, it turns out Gerald loves flowers, probably more than most of our customers do. He used to pick them wherever he could, to give to people he liked, especially his many women friends, but then he started buying them from us and we got to know each other. So now, when he's not in Riverview (mental hospital), or, more often, jail, he stops in to visit.

For instance, one wet day I was sitting at a sidewalk table outside Antonio's Bakery next door, and Gerald plunked down in the opposite chair. Among other things, he mentioned that few people ever see their own insignificance in the world, because few can see beyond themselves and be awestruck by the world around them. I was astonished by his perceptivity. Growing up in the country and spending a lot of time on outdoor adventures, this was an old revelation I carried with me. But Gerald? Supposedly insane? I expected this from only the sanest people! Then, without

stopping, he informed me of certain spots on the sidewalk on Fourth where time is not the same as elsewhere. For instance, when standing in such a spot, one's watch may read 6 o'clock, but in reality, it's, say, 4 o'clock. Gerald said you have to be very sensitive to feel it. That it's some kind of a space/time thing. I wasn't going to argue with him because I thought I remembered reading somewhere that schizophrenia could simply be a case of extreme sensitivity, that that could explain the symptoms. We babbled on in the cool air, and then he pointed out the rays of sunlight that were then sliding down through the first hole in the clouds, and how wonderful that they could so quickly lift spirits. Like Gerald on the street, I have too often been caught out in very depressing weather with no relief in sight, alone and in despair, so I knew what he meant. He said everyone feels this, so I should write a poem about it. Yes, he was right, and, later, as I thought about it, a feeling slowly formed that Gerald himself was important to it. Thus "Gerald in the World" (the poem appeared in the Winter NutShell/95). I wasn't sure how he would respond to it, and was relieved when he said the description was perfect.

The poem eventually sparked Gerald's enthusiasm about poetry in general. One day he raced in, grabbed a pen and paper, and dashed down his own first poem, composed while walking. I don't

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A Profile of Joy by Carol Swan

Don't blame yourself for feeling down. Depression is an illness like any other and you can get treatment.

That's what Joy Moffat finally learned at the age of 49 after years of battling her chronic blues.

After a doctor prescribed one of the medications now available to treat depression, Moffat felt transformed.

"Things are under control now," she says while preparing dinner at her home in Dawson Creek. "In the past, sometimes I couldn't get out of bed for weeks. I have no difficulties like that now."

Today Moffat helps others learn more about mental illnesses. She began a support group for people with depression and other mood disorders two years ago this May. And she talks about her illness to anyone who'll listen.

"There's a definite need in our society for more understanding of mental illness," says Moffat. "It should be far more open."

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), about 30% of British Columbians will experience some kind of mental or emotional disturbance in their lifetime. Each year, about 20,000 people in B.C. receive psychiatric care.

Moffat's illness, depres-

sion, is one of the most common mental illnesses. The CMHA estimates three million Canadians will experience depression during their lives, yet only one-third will seek treatment.

While everyone has bad days, mental health experts say that if the following symptoms persist, clinical depression may be present:

- feelings of sadness, helplessness or irritability;
- a noticeable change of appetite that brings about a significant gain or loss of weight;
- problems sleeping or waking;
- sudden loss of interest in activities once enjoyed;
- fatigue;
- feelings of worthlessness and guilt;
- complaints of aches or pains for which there is no medical explanation;
- thoughts of suicide.

Some experts believe that clinical depression is the underlying cause of the majority of suicides in Canada. Moffat attempted suicide twice before she sought treatment.

When people do get help, though, almost everyone recovers.

But even family doctors may not recognize the signs of depression. The lack of trained psychiatrists in Northern commu-

nities worsens the problem.

When Moffat was first diagnosed, Dawson Creek didn't even have a psychiatrist. She and her family doctor had to work out treatments on their own.

Seeing her problem as an illness was one of the first steps to recovery. But when she tried to find out more information she couldn't.

Her search led her to the Mood Disorder Association (MDA) in Vancouver. Staff there encouraged her to start a support group in Dawson Creek. She now shares experiences and the latest videos and books on depression with about 10 people who gather monthly in her home.

The MDA is one of the more than twenty members of the B.C. Mental Health Communications Council. One of the goals of the council is to inform British Columbians about mental health issues and services.

"Being well has been so important," says Moffat. "So many people are held back by their own feelings or they're afraid their families and friends won't understand. They need to get on to getting well."



UnderDog by Jim Gifford



Today was gorgeous. This morning, under sun and blue skies, I drove in to Vancouver for an editorial meeting. On my return to Crescent Beach, on O'Hara Lane, I caught sight of our decorative butterfly on the railing. Home, I parked the car and entered the house.

In the den, visiting Mom, was my friend Helen. They were passing the time. The two of us decided to hit the beach for a stroll. We were ambling along, talking about this and that, when there it was: Death.

On the beach, by the seawall, past the pier, peacefully, lay a seagull, still to the world. We paused, reflected, gave silent blessing, and moved towards Blackie's Spit. Yet that moment caught the attention of my contemplative eye.

Death is a part of life, its flip side. Without this mysterious finality, our lives would lose their immediacy and poignancy. Deep meaning and joie de vivre come out of acceptance and reconciliation with our personal mortality. Fear of death means fear of life.

I was touched by the tragic passing of friends early in my years. At eighteen, the loss of Rick Turner, Jim Steele, and Robin Asselstine, in three car accidents, was mortifying. I struggled on, getting a Bachelor of Arts degree at UBC, then attending Law School, but, in the process, and aftermath, having a series of emotional and mental breakdowns.

A pallbearer at John's funeral, I vividly recall the words of the minister: 'You must carry the torch for these fallen young men'.

I began to intensely question the who, what, where, when, why, and how of our short existence and end on this planet. In the next few years, the deaths, by car and motorcycle accidents, of Danny Adams and Tommy Steele, added fuel to the fire.

The struggles, toil and trial surrounding my last twenty-five years are now understood by me and resolved. In February, I had a

transformative dream. Thousands of Monarch butterflies, symbolic of change and metamorphosis, burst out of the Tree of Life like the explosion of a star.

We are stars; actors; players on the stage of Life, and perhaps when we die we return to stardust, our Home in the Heavens, the Inward Ideal.

Between dust and dust, we may live at the end of time and space, centred serenely in the Here and Now.

Wouldn't that be gorgeous!



Living

The great things of life are not the exceptional things, but the beautys of every day which we do not stop to notice.

Auguste Rodin

Minute Particulars

by Andrew Feldmar

At the end of March, I was asked to do an intensive family therapy session in a town in Hungary. The so-called "Identified Patient" was a twenty-one year old girl who had spent the last seven years mostly in a dilapidated mental hospital, diagnosed schizophrenic. Her older brother (by six years) has become very successful financially in the past few years, he is now considered wealthy. The parents are both academics, each teaches at a university. A young psychiatrist accompanied me to this town from Budapest, both to act as my co-therapist and to learn from me. We agreed to spend three days with the family, talking in various configurations, having meals together, getting to know each other. Jano, the brother, signed his sister out of the hospital the day before we arrived. He took her to his house and suddenly decided that he knew how to cure her by a regimen of physical exercise and good food and a military kind of discipline. Eva, the psychiatrist, and I moved back and forth between the parents' home and the son's house until the last day, when we could meet with the entire family in one place. Eva

had a very deep, sensitive rapport with Sue, the daughter. When only Sue, Eva, and I were together, walking by a small stream through a forest, slowly, quietly, giggling at times, Sue said things like "My brother is not my brother". Or, "I am pregnant because Jano injected me with a syringe". Back at the house, Sue played the piano with feeling for over an hour, until Jano arrived and insisted that she stop her "compulsive" playing.

The trouble began when Sue was fourteen at her confirmation, in church. Just before the end of the ceremony she bolted, called her parents vile names, and ran outside, shaking, trembling. Up until shortly before then, Sue was a very good girl, mother's pride and joy. Jano was always trouble, can't tell him anything, always rebelled. He drove his large, American car at breakneck speed, telling me how it was all a matter of will.

Eva and I agreed that the parents, for their own understandable reasons, were very controlling and raised their children as if they were marionettes. Jano rebelled by becoming even more controlling than his parents were, saying, "If control is the game, I'll

control everybody, and nobody will control me!" In his milieu, in a new free market economy, this means success. Sue rebelled by cutting the strings and collapsing, having no will of her own, allowing others to decide her fate, taking medications, being trained for the back wards of mental hospitals. We also thought that something sexual might have taken place between Jano and Sue when they were 10 and 16, or thereabouts. Sue couldn't talk about it to anyone and felt guilty, sinful during her confirmation, couldn't go through with it.

We told the family that Sue could find herself if she could live in an asylum, a safe house of true hospitality, such as R.D. Laing used to dream of. Where no one would presume to know better what was good for her than she did, where she could get up when she wanted to, sleep when she wanted to, in short where her autorythmia would be respected. Where she could tell her truth without retribution and where she could play music without being accused of pathology.

The good news is that Sue is still out of hospital, that Jano promised to rent a house in Budapest, where Eva can start an asylum with Sue as the first resident. The bad news is that, of course, he wants to control Eva. She is now negotiating for that house and funds with no strings attached. I hope she succeeds: I tried to set up just such a place here, in Vancouver for almost 20 years now. There were always lots of strings attached.



Branches Over the Wall: Identity and Mental Illness

by Dennis Strashok

There is a great and common problem to those who have experienced mental illness and hospitalizations in their lives. They become fragmented in their personality and lose a sense of personal identity and belonging to themselves and others.

One of the reasons that this happens is because, at first, unaware that there was anything amiss with their lives, many were seeking a freedom and awareness of identity that was soon categorized to be mental illness. They were told "You are not acceptable and we must change you so that you are acceptable." Yet, for many of us, there was no perception on our parts that anything was wrong. Many of us believed that we had entered a more real and higher state of consciousness.

I remember the first time that I was hospitalized for mental illness. The psychiatrist told me flat-out, "You will be on medication for the rest of your life." I still don't understand how he could come to such a judgement only after a few short interviews, but for the next few years that was the issue that caused me continually to come into conflict with the psychiatric community. I found it dif-

ficult to make the adjustment in my identity to being a life-long mental patient.

The hospitalizations tend to disrupt the flow and continuum of our lives. Most people see themselves as whole individuals progressing from day-to-day from one degree of growth to the next. But, when a person has their flow disrupted by hospitalizations for mental illness, it takes a long time to get back to that sense of continuum.

Often times, I see myself as a vessel that was meant to be useful for many purposes, but is now in a state of brokenness or disarray. My prayer is that God will take this broken vessel and

restore it so that it may once again be useful. As I grow from day-to-day and put my last hospitalization behind me, I find the opportunities and chances to be useful increasing and I also find that I am better able to contribute to the society around me.

May we all, as mental patients, find the grace and purpose in our lives to feel complete and whole despite the fragmenting experiences that we have been through. May our lives express something unique and purposeful to the community around us and may we find our wholeness, once again, to manifest life and truth to those around us.



Laughs with Lewry

Two psychiatrists passed each other.

One said, "You're feeling fine, how am I doing?"



Soul of My City

by Sam Roddan

For each of us, the soul of a city springs from memories, myths and legends. Dying ghosts become a kaleidoscope of images. All but forgotten sounds, sights, voices, tastes, and smells revive, breathe life, into an ancient landscape.

But who wants to exhume the "good old days" in the '30s as they ticked by in the East End of Vancouver? Nothing "good", as I remember, about being a Hunger Marcher, or a "tin canner" heading up Hastings for another speech by Harold Winch on the Powell Street grounds.

Or who wants to step again around the drunks asleep in the dark lanes behind the old Empress Theater or on the steps of that Mission Church at Gore? Nothing sweet about the sickly odour of canned heat from empty sterno cans. Or the sour smell of stale beer drifting down the lane behind the Regent Hotel.

Or who wants to remember the soggy shoe smells, damp clothing stench in the Reading Room in the old Carnegie Library?

But there are good things that can have a miraculous rebirth in memory. The rich blast from the whistle of a North Van Ferry as it pulls from the dock at the foot of Columbia. The pier-

ing berthing cry from a West Van Ferry. The big bass drum of the Salvation Army Band at Carrall. The irreverent rattle of the Inter-Urbans pulling out from the B.C. Electric. The "EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!" shouts of the newsboys pedalling the last of their News Heralds.

Or it might be the sirens and bells from No. 1 Fire Hall on Cordova, sharp policeman's whistles. And in between the lulls, the pleas of a street preacher warming up outside Woodward's, the cries of a Junk man along Jackson, and the ice cream man with his bells and organ near Strathcona School.

And there are very special smells that wafted around street corners. The sharp odour of oakum and tar drifting up from the docks, crisping pancake smells from the White Lunch, Attar of Rose and Lavender from the ladies "in waiting" along Prior, the fried chicken perfumes from Rose's Chicken Inn on Keefer, Macaroni Joe's, a logger's delight, for everything from cheap wine to rum, gin and whiskey.

And always something persistent - an inexplicable life-force - in the green ivy crawling up the stark granite walls of the City Gaol on Cordova, the rusty tin

cans filled with red geraniums on window ledges, here and there clean white curtains, fragile banners of hope.

Forgotten ghosts haunt quiet little islands in the backwaters of drab streets below Hastings overgrown with lilacs, the fragrance of snowballs, azaleas, and bright rhododendrons.

But always the unpredictable contradictions...

On the street the steaming balls of horse manure from beast of burden, Ridley's horse drawn ice carts, milk wagons, roll against the curbs. Pungent perfumes redolent of green pastures, distant farms, Saskatchewan, far off homelands, enlarge the spirit, stir up the heart.



Consumerism

Things are in the saddle and rule mankind.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

My Brain is Like a Frying Pan

by Al Todd

My brain is like a frying pan
sizzling with many colors.
Words spin out like nebula
crossing space.

Noah defied Satan for forty days
but I need years, decades
to find out why
Lucifer fell.

No doubt the answer lies
within my heart,
but anger rides me:
I seek evil gods
who will end my suffering
in a cataclysm of grief
so that, like a phoenix,
I can rise
sideways
towards Christ.

On Being Cured of Psychotic Behaviour No. 3

by Al Todd

My mind is like a sheet of glass
wiped clean
I breathe on it and
a lake appears.
I breathe again
and see
monks
walking in prayer
on its surface.

Insanity is a bottomless pit
I fall into
until I am ready to accept
reality.

Each person I love
lifts me up.

I shall grow wings
and fly into the sun.

Pastoral Reflections: Looking for the Perfect Match

by Rev. John Ballard
Kits Bible Church
1415 Maple St., Vcr. B.C.

In early childhood, we are convinced that Mom and Dad are perfect. "My Mom can cook better than your Mom," chirped a four-year old. "My Dad is stronger than your Dad," boasted five-year old Joey.

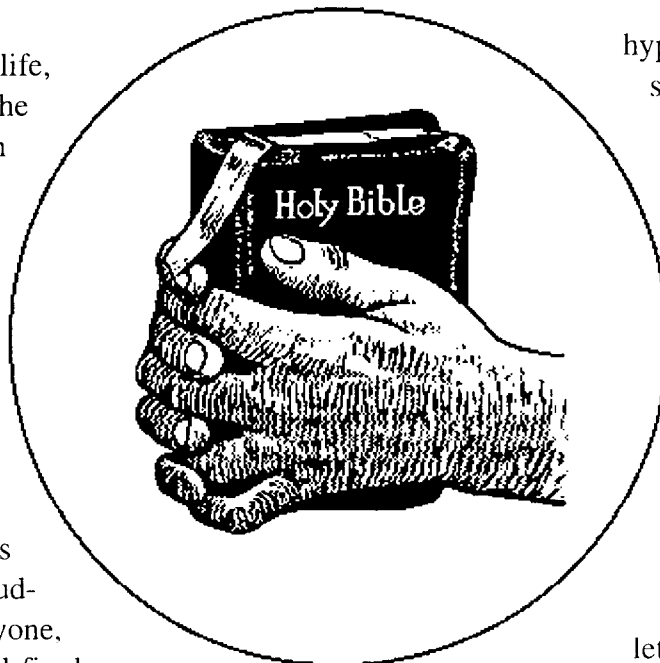
In the first phase of life, we idolize and adore. The same is true in the falling in love phase in relationships as well as in the enthusiasm of new Christians.

"The way our church does it is the only right way," asserts Joe, a 'baby' Christian. "The way we worship is the only way to worship."

When there comes the inevitable falling out, suddenly Joe is telling everyone, "That church is not as all-fired good as I thought it was. In fact, I don't think there's much good about it at all." so Joe leaves, in search once again for that elusive ideal, the perfect church.

But is there such a thing as the perfect church? One that's free from all stress and strife. Most assuredly there is not. Neither was there ever intended to be.

The church, far from being a model of perfection to the world, has always been less than perfect. Its founder never intended it to be an institution for perfect people



but a therapeutic centre for broken people. In fact, the only way you can get into Christianity is to stand up and tell people how messed up you are.

Join any other organization (other than AA) and they want your pedigree and background. Not so with the church. In the

church you have to admit that you are a sinner and you need God's help and forgiveness.

Some people say, "I don't go to church because there are too many hypocrites." I'd like to respond by saying hypocrites are everywhere even within.

A hypocrite is a pretender; we tend to all play that game at times. Just think of your latest fight with your partner — when the phone rang. You answered it so nicely, pretending everything was peachy keen when it wasn't.

Jesus had a lot to say about hypocrisy and how we need to stop pretending. So don't let hypocrites keep you out of the church, there's lots of sincere people there as well. You wouldn't stop purchasing automobiles because of a few crooked car salesmen.

No, the church is a hospital for bruised and broken people. Since no perfect church exists made up of perfect people.

let's cease looking for that church and love the church we are in. If you don't have a church, seek one out this Sunday and start growing spiritually.



Gerald in the World

(Continued from page 2)

know what I was expecting, I suppose something either too juvenile or too bizarre. I was stunned when I read it. This is far, far better than a first poem has a right to be. I would be proud to have written it myself. And it's simply a description of an extremely smoggy day on the street! Notice, again, that desire for the sun.

It Took a Month to Make a Day

L.A. smog next to the morgue,
Sunscream of the Lust Days of
summer.

It became stale like
the coffee in the mugs,
and the faces of the People
began to fill the Blanks
in my Mind
and For a while the
Nife dug too long.
And I began to realize
Eye Can't Take it Anymore -
Asleep I awoke and relief
The beauty of it,
And felt
it took a Month
to Make a Day.

Gerald Budda

Once, Gerald gave me a copy of the proceedings of one of his court cases, dated 1984, concerning the twelfth time he had broken his parole ban from Fourth Avenue. A court worker, in trying

to explain this to the judge, said that 4th is his "psychological" home. Makes sense. People who live on the street are those who don't feel welcome in the buildings of the city. But the street has accepted them, so they've learned to live there and enjoy it. To them, the places that other people inhabit are like the wilderness is to a farmer - it's not worth noticing. On the street they can find places of shelter, sources of food, companionship, entertainment. They may even grab one of my poems as they walk by. The street they live on is their home, in all the ways that our apartments are ours. It's not their *neighbourhood*, it's their *home*. The sidewalks, the cheap cafes, the alleys, the vacant places, the people, the flowers whether wild or planted, the institutions that help them get by, the police, the suited transients with spare change, all are part of their home. And, as Gerald pointed out, the deep, blue ceiling of the sky itself, in fact all of Mother Nature, also is a big part of their home and of their lives, enjoying it, surviving it. Most street peoples' lives aren't nearly as bleak and despairing as one would expect. Like all of us, they've found, and learned to enjoy the precious good things and strive to avoid the bad. So it's not necessary to avoid them like the plague. Being nice won't turn them

into leeches. They already have a home they're comfortable in, and a life. The main difference between them and us, it seems to me, is drive. We drive ourselves into the future, and so live anxious fantasy lives. They are driven into the present.

Near the end of the court transcript, Gerald, who is defending himself, attempts to tell the judge why he is so often abused. *The Accused*: "Because they know I'm harmless. I'm just a conversation. I mean, I sit here and I look at all these reports here, and you're a psychiatric inmate — people who have been in mental institutions are your most discriminated people in society. They are always telling you what to do and how to do it. They treat you like a little baby. So you have to go in, get comfortable, and then you can find out what you can get away with and —" *The Court*: "Have you figured that out for my court yet?" Just a while ago, Gerald got out of jail, he told me that, among other things, the police had mad him sleep naked on a concrete cell floor. Who would believe him? Or care?

There's something about Gerald I admire. Maybe it's how different he is. Unlike me, he doesn't hesitate a second to talk to complete strangers. He doesn't care what people think. Yet everybody wants to cure him. No dice. It's obvious Gerald is enjoying his life just as it is. In the middle of the

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Gerald in the World

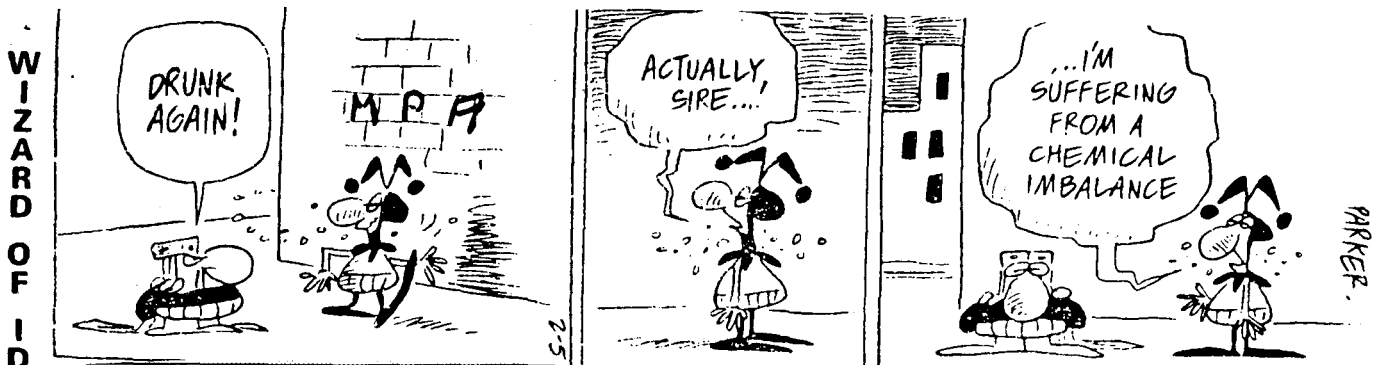
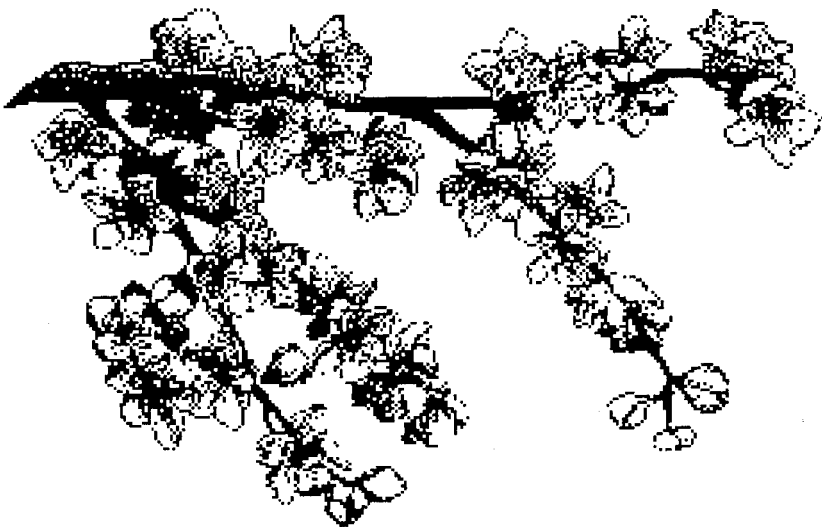
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trial, he interrupted to tell the judge he was "flashing on a pencil sharpener", and he informed His Honour that he'd taken LSD earlier. The judge asked if he wanted a recess to see a doctor. Gerald said no. This is his life. He has a whole retinue of strange drugs he uses at odd times to change his world, his self, in certain ways. But it's him. And when he's in the schizophrenic mindstate, that's him.

When he's not, that's him too. He knows himself and enjoys himself. Another thing: occasionally, some upstart business owner, who is of course new to Fourth Avenue compared to Gerald, will insult him by, say, tossing him out. But Gerald doesn't just slink off into the shadows. He defends himself. Maybe with a chair through a window. Or at least a good splash of coffee. All the while knowing the

punishment he's in for! And another thing: as much as he's been abused by society (most of his adult life), he never hurts anybody himself. And now Gerald tells me he's turned all the jails into monasteries! He says they're good places to think about yourself. Few distractions.

It sure makes you think. Most of us are desperate to be something better, more acceptable, than we think we are. and so we throw our real lives away. We're buried in a morass of fear and despair, and our days consist of seeking rewards, avoiding punishments (few of which compare to Gerald's), and satisfying cravings in order to fill our emptiness. It's certainly true for me at any rate. But Gerald is like my sports hero, John McEnroe, the tennis brat. Both are far too real for most people. They're who we really are but are too afraid to admit, even to ourselves.



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About Sylvia by Cathy Batten

(Reprinted from 'In A NutShell 'of March, 1983)

I first met Sylvia on the night in 1960 when a man I had thought was my boy-friend invited the two of us, simultaneously, to the same event. Such a meeting promises badly. Yet, after wanting to scratch Sylvia's eyes out for about fifteen minutes, abruptly I fell under her spell. I was notorious for picking up lame ducks, and most people would have thought Sylvia was another of them, for she had a severe curvature of the spine, and viewed objectively, was both pitiable and grotesque. But, in fact, I was fascinated by her. She had emerald-green eyes with very long lashes, and was wearing gold-flecked nail polish and a very feminine white-and-purple dress that didn't quite fit her. Her conversation, also, had a certain zing. She was famous for malapropisms, and on that evening produced a couple of beauties: "My favourite Canadian novel is Earle Birney's *Down the Long Turvey*," "I know my speech is careless, but when I write I'm an absolute pendant." I didn't notice that Sylvia could not hold her attention to a subject for more than five minutes at a time, or that — despite questions she fired at me for shock value, such as, "Are you a virgin?" — her interest on me was minimal.

By a week later, Sylvia and I were inseparable. I was impressed by her accomplishments;

she was, she told me, a budding journalist, a writer, and had possessed a proud total of not less than 17 boy friends. Even then, I didn't quite believe that, especially as the boy-friend stories were highly confused and conflicting. But I accepted the glamour Sylvia wore around her life. It was less pleasant when she tried to present me as a girl friend to her brother Joseph, a pathetic but frightful young man with limp hands and a voice like wilting lettuce. But I remained hectically enchanted by her until the weekend she spent with me at the residence I was living in at the University of Washington. It was a nightmare. Sylvia was plainly having a breakdown, and she was determined to take anyone else she could find down in the smash with her. After a weekend during which she burst into groups of strangers, wandered up to men on campus to ask them to take her out, and spent the intervals screaming at me and telling me how sick I was, I was almost relieved when some kind "friends" introduced her to a man with the same handicap she had — and, to my mind, quite an unpleasant character. At least, it got her off my hands.

That fall, when we were both living in Vancouver, I received Sunday visitations from Sylvia. These I accepted, because I was sorry for her (or did a little of

the old enchantment still remain?). In any case, she wouldn't leave me alone. I met her mother, and discovered that she regarded Sylvia and Joseph as perfectly normal five-year olds, and could not be bothered even to deal with their physical welfare. Her food was incredibly bad, and her choice of clothes for Sylvia was hard to take seriously.

Before long, Sylvia was in Riverview. She was not unhappy there; her physical health improved, and she was able to play endless games of bridge. Her scatty suicide attempts (one night she phoned me up to complain that she intended to drown herself in the ocean, but it was raining and she couldn't find her umbrella) were held in check for a time. Not long after, I left Vancouver for two years and heard from Sylvia only by way of extraordinary letters, in the most unreadable script I have ever seen.

Sylvia managed a year in a journalism school, but cracked up again after a stint on the short-lived Vancouver Times. I was too shaky myself at the time to pay much attention to her, and so lost track of her for two or three years. Then — the Renaissance. Sylvia completed a year of teacher training, and became a school librarian in the North West Territories. To my amazement, she continued in this work for four years, supporting her whole family. I dismissed her from my mind. She was all

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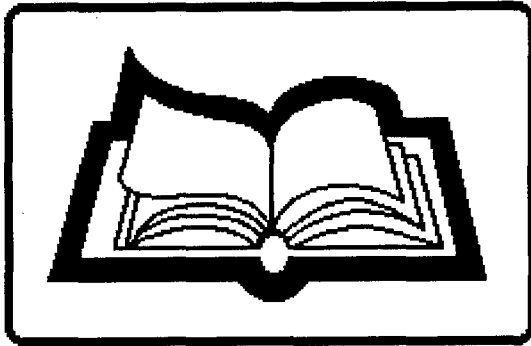
Bookworm:

Thoughts Without A Thinker

by Mark Epstein, M.D.

BasicBooks, 1995

Reviewed by Andrew Feldmar



Jung wrote, in 1931, "When I began my life-work in the practice of psychiatry and psychotherapy, I was completely ignorant of Chinese philosophy, and it is only later that my professional experiences have shown me that in my technique, I had been unconsciously led along that secret way which for centuries has been the preoccupation of the best minds of the East".

In 1961, Alan Watts published Psychotherapy East & West, a book that has meant a great deal to me even before I got interested in psychology. Watts saw clearly that the ego is a social fiction. "Sickness and death may be painful, indeed, but what makes them problematic is that they are shameful to the ego", wrote Watts. The theme is liberation.

Mark Epstein's book examines psychotherapy from a Buddhist perspective. Eastern spiritu-

ality can enhance Western psychology, and Western psychotherapy can be of benefit to meditators. When the same ideas surface over and over again throughout the decades, yet the mainstream remains unaffected, one suspects re-

sistance, denial, repression, i.e., massive defensiveness. What is so dangerous? Perhaps the effectiveness of a mixture of the best the East and West can do to alleviate suffering. If suffering is the prison we are used to, liberation might be frightening and onerous. Neither therapy, nor meditation alone is likely to do the trick, so one can play with either for years without having to make major changes in one's life. Together, meditation and therapy can create an identity crisis which involves a lot of pain and suffering, mostly grieving and mourning for what we have lost out on that will never be compensated.

Epstein writes lucidly and simply so that even those with no experiences with either therapy or meditation will understand his enthusiasm for both and will feel encouraged to investigate for themselves. Although the book ad-

dresses difficult concepts (self, emptiness, transference, bare attention, repetition), the author writes from personal experience as patient, meditator, and therapist, giving many lucid examples, telling many spellbinding stories.

The Dalai Lama, who wrote a foreword to this book, at the first cross-cultural meetings of Eastern masters and Western therapists, was incredulous at the notion of "low self-esteem" that he kept hearing about. In Tibet, a positive sense of self is assumed, supported by a web of family, hierarchy, caste, and other group expectations. The Eastern self is enmeshed, longing for privacy, fearing ultimate separateness; the Western self is an estranged one, vulnerable to feelings of alienation, longing, emptiness, and unworthiness.

"Meditation is not just about creating states of well-being; it is about destroying the belief in an inherently existent self", writes Epstein. What does this mean? Liberation consists in realizing (not just thinking or knowing) that I am a flowing, transitory stream of experience and that there is NO experiencer. Self is a fiction. Just because there are thoughts, doesn't mean that there is a thinker. Paradoxically, the more I accept how much at sea I really am, the more I can renounce my addiction to illusions of certainty, the more I attain the purpose of life, which is to be happy.



About Sylvia

(Continued from page 13)

right. She was a good deal more all right than I was. And she was far enough away not to take up my time.

Last summer Sylvia, en route to Inuvik, had a stopover in Vancouver. She came to my place and talked non-stop for three hours. (Only on the doorstep did she remember to ask, "Are you doing all right?") I was compelled to feel respect for Sylvia, who was tiny and frail, for holding a full-time job, something I was unable to do. And yet I was saddened to find that as she had become more "normal", she had also become less interesting. Or had it been only my imagination that she ever was interesting? As usual after a visit from Sylvia, I was exhausted for the rest of the day.

Just before Christmas I received a notice of Sylvia's death, from Joseph. Being Joseph, he did not explain what happened to her or give any return address — just a statement that he and his mother "fully believed she was still alive, somewhere." so I may never know what happened to Sylvia.

I had often thought that death would be the best thing that could happen to Sylvia. Her handicap, her physical frailty, her wildly askew mind and her endless false starts, all made me think this. But now — I don't know. I think she was happy, in the last year before she died. Maybe it wouldn't have lasted. Maybe she was lucky to die when she did.

Saddest of all, except for

her family. nobody will miss Sylvia very much. She could inspire pity, amusement, even fascination, but not love. Her mind has flashes of brilliance; I remember a strange little story she wrote, called "Please Notice a Nearly Nun." But her handicap was so painful to live with — and no wonder — that she lived much of the time in an imaginary world; and it is hard to try to obey the rules of someone else's fantasy.

Her family think she is "still alive, somewhere." I don't know whether or not that is true. But I do know that only an eternity of real life could compensate for the half-life to which Sylvia was condemned.



The Origins of MPA

(Continued from page 1)

the therapy they were receiving during the hospital hours, and they began to talk about the kinds of "help" that were truly useful. By the time they were all released from the hospital they felt that their informal network was **the one** form of real support they had. They decided to try and find more people who had similar feelings about psychiatric treat-

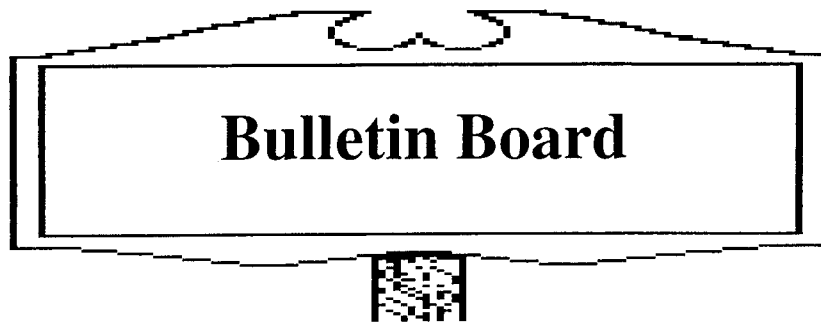
ment and to discuss, with this larger group, what could be done.

The meeting was a success, more than 75 people came to the meeting, most of them ex-patients. Out of the enthusiasm of finding one another and sharing similar feelings, they decided to immediately provide services that they had been unable to find through

mental health agencies. Someone offered the use of his house and soon the group found itself operating a drop-in centre. The question of what to call the group arose and they decide on the straightfoward - Mental Patients' Association.

The origins of the M.P.A. clearly show the process of consciousness raising at work.





“Moments”

“Moments”, recently published, is a collection of stories by consumers in British Columbia about special experiences in their life journey while working towards mental health.

It is available through the Canadian Mental Health Association, B.C. Division, 405 - 611 Alexander St., Vancouver, B.C., V6A 1E1, phone: (604) 254-3211.

Harry Cragg Memorial Baseball Game and Picnic

A reminder that the Annual Harry Cragg Memorial Baseball Game and Picnic will be held again this summer. For information, please contact the MPA at 738-2811 (office) or 738-1422 (Community Resource Centre).

Freebies:

For those in need: Free clothing; Dishes

Choose from a variety of donations

At Community Resource Centre, 1731 W. 4th Ave., Monday to Friday,
9 am to 9 pm on request.



