

Peter Stastny and Peter Lehmann (Eds.)

# Alternatives Beyond Psychiatry

Preface by Robert Whitaker

Contributions by Volkmar Aderhold, Laurie Ahern, Birgitta Alakare, Karyn Baker, Ulrich Bartmann, Agnes Beier, Regina Bellion, Wilma Boevink, Pat Bracken, Stefan Bräunling, Ludger Bruckmann, Giuseppe Bucalo, Dorothea S. Buck-Zerchin, Sarah Carr, Tina Coldham, Bhargavi Davar, Anne Marie DiGiacomo, Constance Dollwet, Jeanne Dumont, Merinda Epstein, Sandra Escher, James B. Gottstein, Chris Hansen, Geoff Hardy, Petra Hartmann, Alfred Hausotter, Michael Herrick, Guy Holmes, Andrew Hughes, Theodor Itten, Maths Jespersion, Kristine Jones, Hannelore Klafki, Miriam Krücke, Peter Lehmann, Bruce E. Levine, Harold A. Maio, Rufus May, Shery Mead, Kate Millett, Maryse Mitchell-Brody, David W. Oaks, Peter Rippmann, Marius Romme, Marc Rufer, Gisela Sartori, Erich Schützendorf, Jaakko Seikkula, Andy Smith, Zoran Solomun, Peter Stastny, Chris Stevenson, Dan Taylor, Philip Thomas, Jan Wallcraft, David Webb, Uta Wehde, Scott Welsch, Salma Yasmeen, Laura Ziegler and Ursula Zingler

Translations by Christine Holzhausen, Katy E. McNally and Mary Murphy

Peter Lehmann Publishing · Berlin · Eugene · Shrewsbury · 2007

- May, R. (2004). Making sense of psychotic experiences and working towards recovery. In J. F. M. Gleeson, P. McGorry (Eds.), *Psychological interventions in early psychosis* (pp. 245-260). New York: John Wiley.
- Read, J., Moshier, L. R., & Bentall, R. (Eds.) (2004). *Models of madness: Psychological, social and biological approaches to schizophrenia*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (1989). Hearing voices. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 25(2), 209-216.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (Eds.) (1993a). *Accepting voices*. London: Mind Publications.
- Romme, M., Escher, S. (1993b). The new approach: A Dutch experiment. In M. Romme, & S. Escher (Eds.), *Accepting voices* (pp. 11-27). London: Mind Publications.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (1996). Empowering people who hear voices. In G. Haddock, & P. D. Slade (Eds.), *Cognitive behavioural interventions with psychotic disorders* (pp. 137-150). London: Routledge.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (2000). *Making sense of voices*. London: Mind Publications.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (2005). Stimmenhören bei Kindern und Jugendlichen. In S. Escher, *Making sense of psychotic experiences*. Thesis at the University of Maastricht.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (2006). Trauma and hearing voices. In W. Larkin, & T. Morrison (Eds.), *Understanding trauma and psychosis: New horizons for theory and therapy*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.
- Romme, M., & Escher, S. (2007). *Recovery from the distress with voices*. London: Mind Publications (in preparation).
- Tien, A. Y. (1991). Distributions of hallucination in the population. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 26, 287-292.
- van Os, J., Hanssen, M., Bijl, R. V., & Vollebergh, W. (2001). Prevalence of psychotic disorder and community level of psychotic symptoms: An urban-rural comparison. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 58, 663-668.

Maryse Mitchell-Brody

## The Icarus Project

### Dangerous Gifts, Iridescent Visions and Mad Community

The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences of “mental illness” rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. We are a net-

work of people living with experiences that are commonly labeled as bipolar or related madness. We believe we have dangerous gifts to be cultivated and taken care of, rather than a disease or disorder to be “cured” or “eliminated.” By joining together as individuals in communities, the intertwined threads of madness and creativity can inspire hope and transformation in a repressed and damaged world. Our participation in The Icarus Project helps us overcome alienation and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness (From our Vision Statement).

### Psych Wards and Storytelling: The Early Years

When Sascha DuBrul, a founding member of the Icarus Project, experienced his first manic episode in 1993, at the age of 18, he was institutionalized and informed that he had a disease called “Bipolar I with Psychotic Features.” This “illness,” he was informed, would require that he remain on psychiatric drugs for the rest of his life or face the terrible consequences of his overactive and dysfunctional mind. In 2002, shortly after the suicide of a dear friend with a similar diagnosis, he wrote a piece on his own particular experience of madness. In the article, published in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, he asserted that he was “... part of a group of people that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history, but meanwhile has been responsible for some of the most brilliant of history’s creations.”

He emphasized the need to create a middle ground between the approaches of the psychiatric-pharmaceutical complex and those who would deny the existence of madness altogether.

Little did he know at the time that this article would jumpstart a project that would do exactly that. Among the dozens of heartfelt stories that he received in response was one from Ashley McNamara, who had experienced some of her most creative moments at her most “manic,” and was struggling with many of the same issues. The two began corresponding and soon met in person. They realized that what was so powerful about the article in the *Bay Guardian* was that by telling the story of one man’s experience of madness, so many others came forth to tell their own, surprised and empowered by the simple revelation that they were not alone. At the time, both Ashley and Sa-

scha were full of the energy and creativity that is often pathologized as mania, and from these brilliant sparks, the Icarus Project was born.

### Icarus Rising: The Myth and the Movement

Our organization's name comes from yet another story: the archetypal myth of the boy Icarus. His father, Daedalus was a master craftsman who along with his son, was imprisoned in a Labyrinth of his own creation. From wax and feathers, the loving father constructed a set of wings so that his child might escape their prison. He warned Icarus not to fly too low, lest the feathers get wet, and not to fly too high, lest the wax melt in the sun's rays. Icarus, with the impetuosity and ignorance of youth, paid no heed to his father's warning and approaches the sun, only to have his wings dissolve and tumble to his death in the Aegean Sea.

Icarus' wings were a dangerous gift. If used correctly, they could have borne him to freedom, but without proper care, they were his undoing. We at the Icarus Project believe that we too possess a dangerous gift: our madness. We recognize, having experienced both the emotional suffering of depression and suicidal thoughts and the uncertainty and burnout of mania, that our minds and indeed lives are sensitive and deserving of special care. However, we have also experienced the brilliance that is often a hallmark of our heightened sensitivity, and we are committed to learning how to navigate the space between the burning light and the tremulous depths, to find healing modalities that allow us to coast our way towards the liberation that our madness may also entail.

Sascha and Ashley took this story and turned it into the allegorical inspiration for the ideas that they would soon begin to make manifest. They decided to construct a website replete with articles, resources, artwork, and most importantly, forums where people from all over the world could meet to discuss their own experiences of madness, ones that didn't necessarily coalesce with the psychiatric mainstream. The website [www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net) grew rapidly to include thousands of members, sharing their stories, offering support to each other, giving advice, and creating a community unlike any that had ever existed before.

In the fall of 2003, Sascha and Ashley received a grant to write a book based upon their experiences and those of site members. The volume, entitled *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness: A Reader and Roadmap of Bipolar Worlds* (published by The Icarus Project, 2004) is currently (August 2007) in its 5<sup>th</sup> printing and has been an invaluable resource for bringing our message into communities. Shortly after printing, with the help of connections, inspiration, and much hard work, the organization that started with a mission statement written by two manic people sitting in a tree suddenly found itself with substantially increased resources at its disposal. With the expansion of finances came the introduction of several others to form a national organizing collective, from which they began to develop and disseminate a radical community-based model of mental health peer support.

### Dangerous Gifts and Wounded Healers: What We Think, What We Do and Why It Works

What is it about the approaches of the Icarus Project that's helped us to become so successful? Perhaps the most readily apparent answer is that we appeal to youth in ways that many other organizations don't, as evidenced by the fact that people under the age of 30 comprise the vast majority of our project. Many mainstream mental health establishments, with their drab institutional settings, heavily medicated members, and patronizing staff, have little that would appeal to some people, especially those who identify with countercultural movements. Indeed, who wants to be told that they have a brain disease? With our emphasis on creativity, inspiration, alternative healing modalities, radical egalitarianism, and a commitment to self-determination, we attract many who have been alienated by other approaches.

Our philosophy of autonomy, which stems from anarchist organizing principles, leads us to assert that individuals should be free to define their own standards of mental wellness. This belief facilitates the involvement of many diverse identifications and individuals within our movement, from those who use DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) labels to those who eschew them completely, from folks on psych meds to those who engage in alternative wellness practices, such as Reiki, yoga, meditation, movement therapies, and acupuncture. We also have room for those who

wish to explore the long-acknowledged link between spirituality and madness with shamanic traditions or other sacred modes. For us, a key component of our work is reclaiming our right to self-definition, choosing how we each reckon and work with our madness. That said, many of us have found that when we cease to see our psychic pain and sensitivities as diseases, that labels like “madness” and “crazy” suddenly become imbued with new, more positive nuances. Instead of serving to further remind us of our difference and thus sickness, we can reclaim these words and make them terms of endearment or even of positive identification, much like the gay pride movement has adopted the word “queer.”

So when we talk about madness as a word that we use as an indicator of pride, what are we proud of? Creativity, empathy, energy, sensitivity, revolutionary visions, compassion, and insight, to name just a few.

A common thread through all of our work is our emphasis on creativity and beauty. A widely acknowledged corollary of madness is inspiration and talent; however, this madness is often portrayed as a tragic illness that robbed the world of works of cultural value. We assert that this madness is an intrinsic part of the artistic spirit; indeed, many of us have noted that when we choose to go on psychiatric drugs, we often lose some of our creative fire. As a network of local communities, we help each other to create art, words, movements and minds that balance that creative fire with emotional well-being.

Creativity has long been at the fore of our work and is central to our understanding of dangerous gifts. Founding member AshleyMcNamara is a gifted visual artist; her paintings, drawings and graphic work are essential to our design sensibility. Ashley, like many others gifted with madness, has long asserted that her ability and inspiration often seem to be heightened when she experiences what some might label mania. Others among our membership are visionary writers, gifted poets, skilled web designers and soul-shaking musicians. We try to incorporate these gifts into the work that we do: as design elements on the web, articles in our publications, pieces in our art shows, performances at our events, and much more. However, our definition of creativity extends well beyond the traditional boundaries of the arts. We see the acts of organizing and support and facilitation and essentially all that we do

as works of construction. When we take our radical mad visions and manifest them into our realities, we create a world worth living in. By working together on collective projects as individual artists, we not only have an added impetus to create but ideally a safety net to catch us if the fire burns too bright.

Those of us who experience madness might also describe ourselves as possessing “exquisite nervous systems.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say that perhaps we are more sensitive than the general population, which allows us to take in more, to think more rapidly, and to perceive relationships, connections and details that others may not notice or consider to be of little consequence. Some would, and do, consider these heightened kinds of awareness to be indicators of mental illness. Labels like delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, hysteria, and anxiety are often put upon these sensitivities without regard for the additional harm that having one’s functioning pathologized might inflict. People may find their minds creating scenarios or emotions that could be dangerous or unfavorable, but except in extreme crises when designated support people might intervene, it should be left up to the individual to determine when this is the case. In either case, it is precisely these sensitivities that allow us to be in tune with our inspirations and very often to act as pillars of support for others with similar experiences.

Having experienced extreme mental states and considerable emotional suffering, many participants in the Icarus Project have the opportunity to transform this trauma into a force for good. We call ourselves wounded healers, because we not only build upon past experiences and insights as we struggle for mental wellbeing, but may do the same for others who find themselves in need of guidance, support, or the simple affirmation that they are not alone. Of course, this is one of the foundational premises of peer support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, from which we have drawn considerable inspiration. In our experience, those who are best equipped to do the work of supporting others in healing their psychic pain have been there themselves.

1 This phrase was coined by Gloria Mitchell, Ph.D., a practicing clinical psychologist and the author’s tremendously perceptive and exceptionally supportive mother.

One of the ways in which the radical politics of the organizers of the Icarus Project come to bear on our philosophy is in our critique of monolithic culture and our emphasis on broad-based diversity. The dominant ethos of the cultural climate in the USA is an emphasis on sameness. Many of our “leaders” push programs and policies geared towards streamlining and homogenizing our world, from the way that we eat, to the way that we learn, to the very ways in which we think and feel about the lives that we lead. It is worth noting that American society does encourage a sort of superficial multiculturalism. However, this acceptance is contingent upon people’s fulfillment of certain socioeconomic functions: as consumers or capitalists, and thereby preservers of the status quo. One need only look to the sprawling subdevelopments of suburbia or the vast fields of genetically engineered corn for easy examples of this burgeoning trend. Some would defend these developments as indicators of stability and safety. However, a crop sown in the same field year after year is much more susceptible to disease and destruction than if it were interspersed with other varieties or species. We believe that the psychological ecosystems of our culture work in much the same way. Diversity is essential to the wellness of a society. If we fail to think critically about the ways in which we live, and to continually explore alternatives, then we can only fall prey to the lethargy and xenophobia that are the corollaries of such an approach.

As such, we view a diverse psychological climate to be not only a tolerable but a necessary component of a healthy culture. Rather than simply medicating children who demonstrate an unwillingness to participate in a traditional classroom environment, perhaps we should see these children as sources of insight and inspiration into the development of new teaching modalities. Similarly, we see individuals who experience depression as a sort of indicator species for the health of our ecosystem as a whole; there is much in our world to be angry, anxious and sad about. Rather than simply learn how to cope with and function in a society that obviously needs changing, we also choose to explore means by which we might make the world we live in a place where we can truly be happy and fulfilled. We believe that community-based organizing around these issues can in fact itself be a means of ad-



dressing psychological suffering. What better way to cope with a world that is obviously insane than to work together to change that reality?

### Activism as Healing Modality: The Organizing Philosophy of the Icarus Project

Over the past year and a half, the Icarus Project has expanded well beyond the radical media and web-based project that it was at its inception over four years ago.<sup>1</sup> Regular Icarus Project meetings currently occur in Minneapolis, New York City, Philadelphia and Portland, Oregon, and other allied groups include the Freedom Center of Northampton, MA, the Chicago Mad Tea Party, and the Bay Area Radical Mental Health Collective. Many of the meetings incorporate elements from both peer support and activist circles. One meeting format that some groups use allows an hour for inward support followed by an hour of outward action. In the first hour, members can share their experiences in a safe space, where we cultivate our powers as wounded healers, learn effective communication skills, and explore what it means to be mentally healthy outside of the mainstream. This process not only enables individuals to better equip themselves to address their mental health issues but also builds community through the identification of common ground and experiences. A foundational effort of our work is to connect people who previously had felt isolated from and alienated by traditional approaches to mental health, and inner support sessions are a key part of this endeavor.

From there, our meetings move into an hour or so of outward action. Many of us who come from an activist background found traditional meetings to be draining and disempowering; a common critique is that they emulate and reproduce the stress and trauma of the world that they intend to change. Icarus meetings attempt to dismantle this paradigm—we first build communal empathy via inward support before moving on to strategic organizing. Much of what we are working for is in fact this feeling of community. In a world that is so divisive and so encouraging of isolation, community itself is a revolution-

1 Address: The Icarus Project, c/o Fountain House, 425 W. 47<sup>th</sup> St., New York, NY 10036, USA, [info@theicarusproject.net](mailto:info@theicarusproject.net), [www.theicarusproject.net](http://www.theicarusproject.net)

ary concept. Our organizing work consists primarily of extending this base of support. This includes outreach, the development of new materials, the expansion of our website, and the production of cultural and fundraising efforts such as art shows, concerts and other events. Our most recent publication is the first edition of our support manual, which provides ideas and suggestions for building workshops and groups, and is appropriately entitled *Friends Make the Best Medicine: A Guide to Creating Community Mental Health Support Networks*. Another important dimension to our organizing work is that we aim to develop relationships with groups that do complementary work. From other activist groups to alternative healers to academics involved in the post-psychiatry movement, we recognize that this diversity of approaches and skills can only strengthen our broad base of community-support into a multifaceted culture that truly offers an alternative to the psychiatric mainstream.

Icarus offers a place where people who locate themselves outside of this homogenous mainstream can come together and build a new culture of mutual support and iridescent psychological diversity. As Icarus Project organizer and performer extraordinaire Bonfire Madigan Shive says, “We are our own safety nets: we weave together” (2006). The Icarus Project’s web-weaving work of cultural transformation gives us a newfound identity of proud mad ones, it allows us to find connections where previously there was isolation, and it creates the space for us to come together around our pain while building a world that reflects the gorgeous alternative visions that so many of us harbor in our dangerously gifted minds.

## Sources

- DuBrul, A. S. (2002). Bipolar World. *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, September.
- Shive, M. B. (2006, January). Personal communication.