

Reflections on a Seminar in Madness - Wally Stein

Wally Stein developed the seminar described in this paper while teaching in a Humanistic Psychology Department at West Georgia College in Carrollton, Georgia. Her background is in existential philosophy and phenomenology with a Ph.D. in philosophy from Northwestern University in 1963.

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My long-standing fascination with the paradoxes of sanity and madness has led me to conduct a Seminar in Madness at West Georgia College. I would like to share with you some of my reflections on this venture. I believe that it provides some hints for mental health for all of us.

I realize that there is already a basic paradox in this idea of a seminar in madness at all. Since a seminar is a place for rational discussion, and madness is by definition irrational, then how is a seminar in madness possible at all? Or, again, if madness is basically a painful and undesirable condition and if in a seminar we explore this condition experientially and allow it, are we not doing something basically harmful?

Recognizing these and other quandaries, I proceed by asking students to consider experiences of madness as human experiences and to explore the idea that all of us can contact enough madness in ourselves to provide a basis for understanding the madness of people traditionally labeled mad. I begin by sharing some of my own, fairly common, non-rational experiences like a commercial jingle that I can't get out of my head or nightmares I have had. I talk of thinking I see the face of someone with whom I am intensely involved among strangers and of feelings of social distance and unreality at a party. They usually relate to at least a few of these experiences and begin to share some of their own. I then ask them to read autobiographical accounts by people who have lived through madness. Some of these accounts are frighteningly close to what they themselves have experienced and they begin to wonder if they are mad. I assure them that such experiences are not really very unusual and that the mad person is only different by virtue of the fact that these mad experiences are central to his life and he cannot channel them into effective social functioning. Since the students are all functioning socially, as evidenced by their presence in the class, they can be assured that these are merely experiences that many human beings share.

Then we explore these experiences together and see what we have on hand, forgetting labels of appropriate and inappropriate, good and bad, right and wrong, or even sane and mad, and just express and describe them in depth. I structure and often participate in exercises designed to evoke such primal needs for nurturing as being fed and being held and rocked. Other exercises focus on feelings of omnipotence, rage at not getting everything we want, experiences of depersonalization in altered states

of bodily awareness, death and rebirth experiences, and especially feelings of alienation and of belonging nowhere. I continually challenge students to allow themselves to experience these often painful events, and to think like Freud that “nothing human is foreign to me.” I even quote texts to show them that sensitive writers in our time are very much aware of such experiences. When they are unwilling to participate in a particular exercise, I ask them to see what they can learn by focusing on this hesitancy itself. Thus, I do not push anyone to do anything that would make him or her especially uncomfortable, but I do gently encourage people to open themselves to new experiences. Students quickly become involved in the exercises. And as they uncover their own non-rational experiences, I link them to my own and ask others in the class to do so as well.

When they begin to feel safe, students often express an enthusiasm and excitement that threatens to carry them away or even to throw the seminar into chaos. Then I am very careful to distinguish between exploring madness together and actually going mad by withdrawing into our individual, incommunicable inner spaces and isolating ourselves.

Thus, when I begin to notice people letting go of more than they seem able to integrate, I deliberately stop the exercises for awhile and introduce them to theories of the dynamics of madness. I emphasize that, at the same time as each person’s experience is unique, such experience also can be seen in terms of general patterns. I ask them, for instance, to notice similarities and differences among their experiences as individuals in the classroom and between their experiences and the subjective accounts that they have read. People who have worked intensively and extensively with those who are mad have presented us with descriptions of general patterns that can guide us in understanding our experiences and in being with people who are experiencing the pain of madness. I see such reflection as an important part of the learning process and not just as art activity to fill in time until we can return to more important activities.

I share my reflections on the value of theory with students and challenge them to engage themselves intellectually just as I have challenged them to engage themselves experientially. I point out that when people have found a way to order experiences of madness to their satisfaction, at least for the time being, they have a firm base for contacting those others who are experiencing madness and who are often unable to express what they are experiencing. They can imagine that the mad person confronting them is having an experience with a pattern like the one they have discovered. They can then use this fantasy to make interpretations or enter into the other’s world in a way that might be helpful - again being careful not to assume that the other’s experience is identical, but merely using the theory to facilitate contact.

To illustrate this last point, I refer to the work of Albert Honig (1972), who advocates direct confrontation of the unconscious, as in this small example:

Mary E. was the first patient I worked with closely. A fifteen-year old student, she called out on hearing footsteps in the hall, "Help, I can't see, I'm blind." I walked to her. She was shackled to an iron bed. "Eyes are like daggers," I said, and removed her shackles. She quieted down. "If you are blind," I continued, "you cannot kill. I will love you, protect you and feed you." The next day this patient expressed murderous hostility toward her foster mother and her real mother. On the third day she saw clearly and began to improve. In a month she was presented to the staff for discharge. (p. 4)

Honig assumed that his patient was angry, made interpretations of her blindness to that effect, and so made contact with her that was helpful.

In the seminar, when we have reflected for awhile on our experiences, we return to exploring madness. I notice whether I am bored, anxious, tired, depressed, hyperactive, overstimulated, and try to gauge similar responses in students to determine when to change activities to maintain the level of engagement I want. I agree with T. S. Eliot when he says that men cannot bear too much reality. But I am also convinced that the more reality we human beings can bear, the more internal and external stimuli we can allow ourselves to receive and integrate, the more fully and vitally we can live.

In this way my classroom becomes a place to balance rich emotional experience with explorations on a more abstract, theoretical plane. I have, I believe, created a laboratory in which people can allow into interpersonal awareness psychic events not usually acknowledged in our culture as even existing, or, if undeniably existing, are labeled unreal, senseless, undesirable, or mad. Again and again I see the clearest evidence for, as James (1902) puts it,

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. (p. 378)

John Weir Perry (1974) went further,

The fact of the matter is that in all at us, only a hairbreadth below the level of conscious rational functioning, there is quite another different view of the world and an altogether different way of growing to meet it. And that state of being . . . is considered mad and worthy only of banishment from the sane world of common sense. We find ourselves very fussy about allowing it to appear only on certain terms. (p. 6)

This form of consciousness that we call mad appears readily, for instance, when I ask students simply to describe in writing an interpersonal experience of some importance to them. As before, I ask them not to judge any part of the experience as good or bad or to theorize about why it happened. They are only to describe as concretely as they can in full detail everything that did happen. The student who carries out this assignment conscientiously usually discovers that there is a large area of non-rationality in his experience, that there are so many things that happened that he cannot even describe them all, and that he was not even aware of all that was in fact happening.

After I had conducted this seminar a number of times, I became aware that I was redefining with my students what we would accept as real. We were allowing a new and expanded culture to emerge among us! Because we explored whatever events presented themselves, related them to our own experiences, and tried not to judge or evaluate, we created a place where we felt free to share what we had never shared before and often had even blocked from our own personal awareness. As we recognized that these deep, private experiences that our society was labeling mad were experiences that many of us shared, we felt the excitement and exhilaration that come from the release of blocked energies. We became less afraid of what we had been calling madness and got in touch with new creative powers. I believe that in this seminar I have been helping to close the gap between inner experiences and outer expectations of what is a human experience. I am also helping to provide a form for these experiences that are allowed into interpersonal consciousness, a form that maintains the experiences as public and not just private events. Thus people realized that a great many of their hidden inner experiences were acceptable here and in fact shared and understood by many other people, and they began to contact suppressed energies and increased personal strength to confront creatively the tasks of their daily lives.

For example, I asked the students to fantasize what it would be like to them personally to go mad. How would they feel and how would people around them be responding to them? Then they were to fantasize what happened to them next. When they had finished fantasizing, I asked them to share their fantasies in small groups just to see what ideas and feelings had merged. The next day I asked any students, who were willing, to share their fantasies with all of us. Karen told us that she had fantasized herself as dancing about and immensely enjoying the spontaneous flow of her life. Then she saw people around her stopping her and heard them telling her that it was not good to dance like that, that it was a waste of time, and that she looked silly and childish. In response to the people, she stopped dancing and became frightened and withdrawn. She began to feel frozen and paralyzed. Here the fantasy ended.

I asked her to share her fantasy again, but this time to do it by using her body instead of words. She found this very difficult to do, but soon she moved a little, though very stiffly. I then asked her to try dancing her fantasy for the class. I knew that she was a trained dancer and thought she might be able to use this mode to explore her experiences more fully and to communicate them to us. Slowly, she began to melt and was soon dancing triumphantly among us. I then asked her to choose a partner and to dance with him or her. She did this, and the dance changed from spontaneous exuberance to stylized interchange. The partners were clearly responding to each other.

She reported that she felt a tremendous release of energy in expressing herself and shared with us the fact that she had given up dancing but now felt the urge to begin again. She did in fact do so and continues to do so. It seems clear to me that, because we did not stop her from expressing herself as had the people in her fantasy, but rejoiced in her liveliness and joined with her, she felt safe to let her life flow again among us and free to express herself publicly. She also reported that, after contacting this

energy to dance, she was able to contact what she was feeling, and so her own vitality, much more easily in general.

Karen was by no means mad by any of our usual standards. She was functioning very competently. However, there was a part of her vitality to which she did not have access. When she found this access, she became stronger and even more competent in many areas of her life, quite literally able to make a cultural contribution.

Our basic topic is promoting mental health. The more we got in touch with and were willing to share things about ourselves that our society was labeling mad, the stronger, more competent, and saner we became. These seminars, whose subject is madness, are actually, I believe, seminars in soundness. Such is the paradox of madness!

I believe that the more that people can allow themselves to experience and to express their non-rational experiences, the less they are in danger of going mad. I emphasize again, however, that such explorations must always be within the limits of the amount of reality they can tolerate. When anxiety becomes too high, the explorations become counter-productive, and the person finds that he must increase his defenses rather than relaxing them.

Let me just enumerate some results of this seminar that seem to me to be useful for promoting the mental health of the individual and for creating a community that fosters mental health and personal strength.

1. In a safe environment people can allow experiences into consciousness and expression that might otherwise constrict their lives to the point where they are unable to continue functioning and come to the attention of the mental health system.
2. People contact each other on a deep level as they share these experiences and respond to what others share. This sharing creates strong bonds among the participants and a sense of community that satisfies a pervasive need of our time for personally meaningful social contact. They feel less isolated and more like members of a human community.
3. People gain enough understanding of madness to help them to deal with their fears of it in others. Thus, they feel less need to put a great physical and psychological distance between themselves and people who are actively psychotic. They recognize that with good will they can accept the truth of the adage that we are all more simply human than otherwise. They learn, too, on an experiential level what Ernest Keen (1972) says in *Psychology and the New Consciousness*,
When we stop seeking to push back the frontiers of knowledge to find the truth about man, and when we begin instead to combat self-deception so as to recognize the truth of man, our sense of evil is not applied like a label to this or that, nor is it a region in which some things (persons, psychotics) are

included and others (ourselves) are excluded. The truth of man is the truth of psychosis, of our scapegoating psychotics, of our inability to recognize the truth even as we live it. The truth of man is the presence of evil, but also that he (we) would rather not be in the truth. To recognize this is to be in the truth, and to be in the truth does not motivate self-righteous or paternalistic attempts to change others. (p. 134)

In a way, students discover that the real madness is for one person arrogantly to proclaim himself more worthwhile as a person and superior to another because he is sane and not mad.

Because I limit myself in the classroom as indicated, I find I do not need to be particularly selective about what students I admit to my classes, nor do I systematically exclude those “too fragile” to benefit from my style of education. Students do a good job in self-selection, so that my seminars have over the years attracted more and more of the kind of students I work with most comfortably. Also, I believe I support the defenses of a student who clearly needs not to change at that time. My teaching has its dangers, as any new venture does, but its rewards have been worth the risk. I find it involves a special kind of courage that is analogous to engaging in physical adventures with their accompanying excitement in confronting the unknown and surprising. I do not necessarily recommend that others do as I am doing. I recommend, instead, that they consider the values implied here and, if they find them as important as I do, consider how they may implement them using their own personal styles in accordance with their own needs.

Our culture has demanded that we restrict our consciousness to a rational consciousness that uses natural science and formal logic as its model. We are to see the world in a linear fashion - and in no other way. Thus, should we feel ambivalent, experience ambiguity, confusion, disorder, or paradox, we are told that we are not really experiencing these events, that they are an illusion and do not really exist. In this way our experiences are invalidated, and we are told that we have lost our minds. When we accept that there is something wrong with us if we feel the way we do (or, in extreme cases, if we feel at all!), we hide these parts of ourselves from ourselves and especially from others. We present others with a phony persona that we believe more nearly fits the image of what society says is sane. Because physical things can more easily be dealt with in linear, scientific terms, we put our energies into acquiring and manipulating them and withdraw from significant contact with other people. Nowadays many of us are discovering that relating to physical things predominantly does not provide us with continuing satisfaction in living. As we become aware of the actual emptiness of our lives, we realize how isolated from others we are, and we experience the pain of meaninglessness. We recognize that we are powerless interpersonally and do not know how to be with people in a satisfying way, i.e., how to feel powerful in relation to them in a way that does not reduce people to things to be manipulated. And we are indeed powerless, because we have hidden much of our real power from ourselves and do not have our personal strength at our disposal. For some of us this pain of isolation becomes so unbearable that we feel overwhelming anxiety. If all adaptive ways of dealing with our anxiety over isolation fail us, we

may finally go mad by moving into a fantasy world filled with symbolic satisfactions that substitute for real ones at least enough to keep our anxiety somewhat under control. As Perry (1974) says:
The schizophrenic “disorder” lies . . . in the ego, which suffers from a constricted consciousness that has been educated out of its needed contact with the natural elements of the psychic life, both emotion and image. (p. 11)

I see the current counterculture and the humanistic movement in psychology as a beginning at rewriting our cultural myth to include more of our experiences. People involved in this counterculture are interested in parapsychological events, mystical states, questions of death and immortality, unusual bodily states, and altered states of consciousness in general. They allow some of these non-rational events to emerge into their consciousness once more and to become an accepted part of the general consciousness. They practice various forms of meditation and yoga, study the occult disciplines and oriental philosophies, and in general insist that the non-rational is a real part of human psychic life whether it is amenable to objective, scientific study or not. As they share these experiences and study what people in other times and places have said about them, they regain the ground of their common consciousness and so the roots of the community that they (and we as a society) have lost. They feel free to drop their phony fronts, because the expectations of this new culture more nearly fit how they experience themselves.

As they again contact the psychic energy bound to these non-rational experiences, people feel more powerful and begin to find ways to use their energy to transform the social world in other words. Their inner and outer myths are more closely matching each other, and these people feel more and more at home in the world. Our natural community is beginning to be restored.

Let me conclude this presentation by sharing with you a personal experience that I believe illustrates how the acceptance of psychic pain by a community can help the sufferer find the strength to deal with it and not to go mad or otherwise avoid this pain. Because I was able to stay in contact with my experiences and to share them with those around me who could accept them, I believe that I was able to avoid psychiatric treatment.

Several years ago a young man who was my student and also sharing with me the house I had just bought was suddenly killed in an auto accident outside my house. George’s death was particularly tragic for me, because we were just beginning to realize a beautiful dream together. A few days before the accident he had told me that he was one of the people who loved me. When I saw him lying there on the ground dead, I recall saying, “I can’t handle this.”

A few days after the accident some seventy people associated with the College were present at a memorial service for George at my house. During this service, I became enraged and began shouting insults at the priest who was conducting the service. Terrified at the force of my feelings and ashamed of

my behavior, I panicked and fled the gathering convinced that I had to get out of there. Some of my friends came after me. They held me and said that they appreciated me for the depth and intensity of my feelings and that it was quite appropriate and all right to be enraged. When I had calmed myself a little, they led me back to the others. Apparently, my outburst had put an end to the service, but no one seemed to be very shocked by my behavior or to be avoiding me. In fact, one person whom I respected highly even complimented me for having been so honest. I began to relax, to be less afraid that I was going mad, and the confusion of my feelings lessened for a moment. I was able to recall some things I had been reading about rage as part of the grieving process, realized that I was indeed grieving, and that I was simply experiencing what people frequently express in deep grief.

During the next few weeks my friends took turns staying with me so I would not have to be in the house alone. I shared my anguish with them as I experienced it. They shared their memories of George with me and their own sense of loss at his death. During those days I felt very close to those people and a need to stay among them where it had all happened. It became very important to me to share my pain with them and to let events take their course rather than to escape anything. In fact, I felt cradled and comforted in this place and had no desire to leave. I was somehow finding the strength to bear the pain of my loss, a pain that originally I had been convinced I couldn't handle. I was able to bear this pain because those around me assured me that it was okay to feel whatever I was feeling and were willing to stay with me and share some of their own pain. I did not have to hide from them or from myself. We were able to keep in contact with our natural community and this contact sustained us through the difficult time.

It was a full year before I felt that I had entirely let go of the dream that I had begun to realize with George. Then I could begin to build new hopes and to risk realizing them in the world. I found myself stronger than I had ever been and realized that I had been able to live through my pain in a way that enhanced my life rather than constricting it.

Soren Kierkegaard says that we can get at the truth by sinking so deeply into reality that we cannot sink deeper. With him, I am proposing to you today a renewed subjectivity instead of the predominating objectivity for finding this truth by which we can live together. I believe that the basis of hope is in the statement, "I hope in you for us." And so I hope that these reflections will find a response in you that enhances all our lives together.

References

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Comment by Carl A. Whitaker

Dr. Stein's commentary on her *Seminar in Madness* is an unusual piece of work and needs to be given proper recognition. Her procedure is obviously very personal, very carefully stimulated, and very carefully controlled. She gives me the chance to talk about the four different kinds of craziness.

The patients we see in the state hospital are usually ones who are *driven crazy*. That is, they have been driven outside their family, thus outside the culture, and are suffering from malignant isolation and the necessity of constructing an internal culture which substitutes for the interpersonal one most of us get nourishment from.

A second kind of craziness is not such a malignant isolation but is *going crazy*. Going crazy is the process which takes place between two people who trust each other. Usually it's between a therapist and patient; the patient wanting the opportunity to be acultural, to break his programmed organizational structure and, having discovered a therapist who identifies closely with him, can have a therapeutic psychosis just like the therapeutic neuroses that have been talked about for so many years. Going crazy, of course, also takes place with drugs, with sexual excitement, with the common process of going out of your head in a fight, or with a two-person or multi-person loss of the usual control systems, either with or without alcohol, with or without music, isolation from the usual cultural physical setting, etc.

Thirdly, there's a category of people called *acting crazy*. Acting crazy is a kind of apparent craziness that's used as an avoidance of beingness by those people who have once been crazy and, thereby, can regress in the service of an interpersonal setting either out of anxiety or out of the identification with some other person, frequently a member of the intimate family who needs them to be crazy so that he may be protected from his phobia about craziness.

Fourthly, there is the *quasi-* or *pseudo-craziness* that is possible for any of us and usually called eccentricities, clowning, playing, being silly, or in some other way breaking out of the linear thinking and the customary constrictions of our interpersonal living process.