

WOMEN IN SPECIAL HOSPITALS

I was invited to attend a conference in Brighton, a charming seaport in southern England. I stayed with a couple who lived walking distance from the white cliffs of song writers that soar from the sea to the horizon. After returning to the States I spoke with a friend who told me the couple had been burglarized. I was furious.

How could anyone harm these wonderful fun loving people? I thought the thief, the enemy, the monster, should be beaten to a pulp and put away for life, maybe in a dank dungeon under the Northern line in East London. That would definitely satisfy my need for revenge.

Then my thoughts turned to the conference that was designed to address the needs of women who abuse their bodies by cutting and knawing at themselves. I learned that this had nothing to do with Sado-Masochism but was in a separate issue.

My understanding is that women privately cut their arms sometimes to the point of needing stitches and hospitalization. I am not a doctor but this would seem to be in the same category as masturbating or picking one's nose. The conference was organized by a group in Brighton called Threshold, an organization that represents half the population who use the National Health System, women.

Threshold is committed to providing a service which acknowledges that men and women have different needs. I wondered if this would be misunderstood. How can it be said, different but with equal rights. The reality is that women do not have a separate voice in the medical system. It is entirely run by men.

Women are put in mental facilities where they are routinely victimized by men, patients and doctors. (examples from papers) Every society is set up so that some benefit while others suffer. In England it is the class system. The strong belief in privilege from birth. I listened to the speech given by a young woman who was a long time "self abuser".

She admonished the audience made up primarily of health workers who, I assumed were not very caring of people who carve on their bodies. I also had trouble with this need for sympathy. When I asked the question what do the women do? I was told it wasn't very important because to tell would be to encourage voyeurism.

Okay so I was in a foreign country and I didn't know the difference between voyeurism, curiosity, and the need to educate. So I was only left to wonder when a woman missing parts of her hand with numerous scars spoke out against the medical model.

During the conference as well as the workshop I chose to attend I never heard people, specifically women, who self harm came from all walks of life, such as Princess Diana, who at one time was locked away in a spooky palace and tossed herself down stairs and made herself throw-up. The people I heard about were the disenfranchised, the poor and down trodden.

After the speeches I attended a workshop that was conducted by Jennifer McCabe a founding member of the organization W.I.S.H. an appropriate acronym for a group that helps women who are forced into psychiatric units. Women In Special Hospitals, as the group is known goes into the hospitals and interviews women patients to assess their complaints and needs. It then does what ever is possible to help the women.

WISH was started by an art teacher, Prue Stevenson, who taught art in the prison psychiatric unit at Holloway. She was concerned because many of the women, most very young, some under 20 years of age, were being sent to Special Hospitals.

The young women were often confined to hospitals without a time limit. They were sent to these hospitals because they abused themselves by self injury such as cutting their arms and ripping at their bodies. Prue Stevenson was trained as a painter, illustrator and printmaker. She taught art to women in Holloway prison and worked closely with the women in the psychiatric unit, which was part of the prison.

According to, INSIDERS a book she co-authored with Una Padel , the majority of women who are imprisoned are so because of petty crimes or crimes that did not involve violence against others. Some were incarcerated for not paying imposed fines such as for prostitution or not having a license for their televisions - "Or for a multitude of other offenses not deemed to warrant a prison sentence ..." It seems that two thirds of the women held, pending trial, are released after their trials.

Women are put in prison while waiting to go on trial. At this time they are assumed innocent until proven guilty.

However, they are given no special considerations. While they await trial they may lose their job, their possessions may be stolen and they must learn to live in the prison environment. "Prison life: the lack of privacy; primitive sanitation ...long hours confined in a small space; poor food; frequent strip searches...the loss of virtually all rights and complete lack of power to make even basic decisions."

The psychologically and physically ill are treated with little care and less sympathy. Isolation from the outside community is profound.

"The prison staff can be homophobic to the point of cruelty. Sexual relationships are (forbidden) and even the casual linking of arms and affectionate embraces are not tolerated."

So whether or not you are convicted of a crime and regardless of what that crime is you will be there with the rest of them, the disenfranchised, the forgotten, the despised. You may be given a book of standard rules.

This is fortunate if you read English well. The book tells you what you will be punished for while incarcerated. There are obvious rules such as not attacking a prison guard and others that restrict speech or forbidding foul language. And just in case you thought you understood all the rules there is a special one which is about.....

"Offending against good order and discipline."

So here you are locked up for a crime you didn't commit, maybe a crime you wouldn't have dreamt of committing - or you forgot to pay your TV license .

(In England it cost a fee to have a television.)

You are awaiting a court hearing and you are in a frightening and impossible situation. So now the House of Lords has passed a no trespassing law which I understand includes Common Land. With this in mind I would like to fabricate a story about a possible victim of the new government law.

We will call our friend, Jillie , who has joined the New Age Travelers. She is between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two. Her family emigrated to England from a tiny country that has a language known by few people outside.

Jillie is not allowed to use a telephone. Her mail is censored so the mail she receives from relatives is left in a staffers office until someone can translate them. Why is anyone's guess. Who knows it may have instructions on how to build a nuclear devise.

On visiting day she must not hug her mother and she watches as the staff tell mother's in the room not to hold their children. According to license I read at WISH a mother can be punished for putting her baby in a sling, or for wanting to lie down and nurse him.

So women who may or may not be guilty of crimes such as trespassing or not paying license fees are confined as though guilty. Their children are also punished. If a mother is lucky enough to be in a prison that allows her to have her child with her, she may be subjected to the archaic pedagogy of the staff.

Let's say Jillie is not very attractive. This in itself would appear to add her difficulties, as well as her inability to communicated well in English or maybe she is simply not very bright. This will all add to limiting her ability to cope in prison. The staff, after all are a reflection of society as a whole. Jillie begins to feel trapped. She feels like an animal and curls up like a dog that's being kicked. She scratches her skin and pulls out her own hair like monkeys in a laboratory would. She bites into her arms until they bleed. She removed and sent to a psycriatic facility to get help.

But instead of help she is placed in a worse situation. She sees the psychiatrist for five minutes, long enough to get medications proscribed. She is the only woman on a ward with ten or fifteen men. The majority of the nurses are men. She is sexually abused but no one will believe her because she is crazy. The one staff member who threatens to tell has a rock thrown though his window and is physically threatened. If Jillie was molested as a child this could put her over the edge and she will end up staying in the hospital for years.

From information I gathered, there were at one time separate male and female sections of

mental hospitals. When I ask Mr. Keith Yoxall, an adult health manager, why women were put in these impossible situations where they were threatened and sometime raped by men he indicated it was cost effective.

Â Â Â When I asked if he understood a young woman who may have been from an abusive home being put in the same locked facility with men who offended against women he tried to assure me. He seemed to believe this himself and that is that men who offend, batter, rape, molest women only do this to certain women.

They would not hurt just any woman. Well now, isn't that just too comforting! Offenders are locked in with one woman who is completely dependent on people like Mr. Yoxall for her well being. Mr. Yoxall, who I might add was very personable, said there were no women psychiatrist in high ranking positions in the national health. This is why the reality expressed is that men need to be around women to prove they are safe enough to place back into society.

Kimberley Andrews was sent to Broadmoor when she overdosed on heroin. The first thing that the institution did , was take her leg supports away so she was left to "shuffle around on her posterior." WISH represents the women in the psychiatric hospitals, Broadmoor, Rampton and Ashworth. They also represent Prison Psychiatric Units which have the extreme forms of psychiatric confinement. These are top security facilities with high-walls and locked doors.

There are no limits as to the length of time the government can hold people in these facilities, even if their "crimes" were self induced.

Moira Potier, Principal Clinical Psychologist working with women in Ashworth for four years echoes what patients and ex-patients say about the treatment of women in conditions of maximum security, "It is a matter of experience that the institution often re-enacts the dynamics of the abusive histories common to the majority of the women held here.

Women are dominated, depersonalized, infantilized." What is going on is that approximately \$50,000 a year is spent on each woman who is incarcerated in a special hospital.

I wonder how much is actually spent on her, for her. How much is used to fatten up the pockets of those in charge of the Trusts and administrators. I wonder what would have happened to these women had they been given \$50,000 for the time they put in being incarcerated?

Let's face it, when it comes to money, the disenfranchised are the excuse and rarely the beneficiaries of funds earmarked for them. Men who are in psychiatric facilities engage in more violent and fear- inducing behavior than women. Women are two to three times more likely to receive ECT than men with out their consent.

Â Â Â Minority women and older women are more likely to receive ECT and less likely to receive counseling. Women are more likely than men to die while in psychiatric care and their deaths are more prolonged and distressed.

I don't know whether to be happy or gloomy about the bad people getting locked up. After the conference I wasn't sure who the bad people were. Locking someone up is definitely not the end of the story.

If someone was apprehended for burglarizing my friends' home would I really feel better? What if it was the wrong person? Since only a few things were taken, what if it was done on a dare by a teenager? Or perhaps it was someone who was homeless - a non-person. Nope. I would feel better if we lived in a fair world where money was not the only thing that defined someone's worth.

I left England feeling as though I'd left the home of favorite cousins. This Island with its ancient traditions and social hierarchies and where there is a royal family that considers the populous its subjects - where the Emperor has no clothes on plays itself out to the fullest, Where individuals are allowed to have a completely unreadable attitude of superiority based solely on birth. A place where if a member of the royal family sneezes the country gets the flu.

