

She was in her late fifties, and she had been in treatment in the mental health system since her mid-twenties. Diagnosed with depression, with psychosis, with schizophrenia, with bi-polar illness. Each therapist in a long succession had found a different diagnosis, and each doctor had found a different medication. This day it was a group therapy session. Someone asked her how she was doing, but she answered, "I could write a book about my life." Someone asked, "What would the title be?" And she said, "My Battle Against Mental Health?" One of the therapists said, "You mean your battle for mental health, don't you?" After a long thoughtful pause, she said, "No".



I have these tiny white scars all over my hands and up my forearms. They lay in all directions, the shortest being just a white dot and the longest being almost an inch. If I tighten my hand into a fist they become very prominent. In some lights they even glow. I was on a home visit. An elderly woman had been in a more or less catatonic state for several hours and her family had called our crisis line. She was all dressed up in a heavy wool coat in the middle of summer. She was all dressed up an unable to move, just standing in the same place unmoving, unseeing. My partner and I arranged to take her to a hospital, a mental health unit that had a good reputation for working with older patients with senile dementia—Alzheimer's was still a relatively new concept at the time. We called for transportation assistance from a city ambulance. They came, but they would not help because it was clearly a mental health situation to them and out of their responsibility. If we got her in and then out, they would transport her. She couldn't connect, couldn't move. Against practice I picked her up and carried her to the ambulance. Once she was in the hospital and we had filled out all the paperwork and answered all the questions, we went back to our office. Later we got a call from the hospital, "did anyone touch her?" "I did." "She has scabies—you need to come in for treatment". Little mites that burrow under the skin and leave their eggs and form little white trails everywhere they go. It took a long time to get rid of them, and the scars are still fresh as the day they appeared almost thirty years ago.



Bob wandered around the center. He had been depressed for years. Standing in one spot cutting hair year after year, talking all the little meaningless talk that barbers talk, and then when he retired he ended up at our mental health center. How are you doing today Bob? "Wuh, wuh, well, I dunno. I, I, I feel like I'm full of shit". "How full, Bob?" "Oh, up to here (as he places his hand just below his throat)". Bob was about to be tired of talking.



We had a wonderful retired Social Worker who did volunteer work at our geriatric mental health center. She had worked on inpatient services most of her career. She was smart and savvy too, and often gave us young hip therapists insights about our clients we had totally missed. But the doctor was always looking for signs of her slipping, not sure why, it was just one of those things. One day we were looking at some crafts that our most severely disabled schizophrenic clients were doing. One lady had pressed a large leaf into clay and then it had been fired; it was a nice plate with the leaf image. Mary says, oh it looks just like the leaves of the Ampihuasca Blanca plant that grows only in the Amazon Rainforest. And the doctor suspecting some sort of lapse of reality says in his most condescending way, Oh, and have you been to the Amazon? And Mary in her most patient way says to him, no, but I have been to the Arboretum. And winks at the rest of us.