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The Spiritual Gift of Madness: The Failure of Psychiatry and the Rise of the Mad Pride Movement. Seth Farber. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2012, 464 pages, \$21.95 softcover.

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Seth Farber's *The Spiritual Gift of Madness: The Failure of Psychiatry and the Rise of the Mad Pride Movement* is a lucidly written and masterful account of an area that is little understood and rarely researched. The book explores the link between madness and the urgent need for a movement of cultural renewal.

Farber is deeply worried about the state of the planet. Runaway climate change is looming and "there is not yet a sense of life and death urgency." Something is missing. Thinking people, who have been following the succession of scientific pronouncements over recent years about the need for immediate action to curb global warming, probably can't help but wonder why we're not already well on the way to solving the problem. Why can't we make some kind of binding global agreement that will avert the looming catastrophe? We know the polar ice caps are melting, we know sea levels are rising, we know it is carbon pollution from burning fossil fuels that is the main problem, we know that life on earth will soon become progressively more difficult for many species, particularly humans, and we know how to replace fossil fuel energy with renewable energy. So what's the problem? Why are we incapable of reaching a international carbon restriction agreement? Such an agreement would cause only minor inconvenience compared to the disruption of progressively worsening climate change. Why don't we listen to reason and why do we still procrastinate?

According to Farber, the political and cultural changes required to solve problems on this scale can't happen without the inspiration of "creatively maladjusted" people acting as catalysts. And these people are currently in very short supply. The shortage is due to an over-active and misguided mental health system. Psychiatrists, he argues, are disrupting a natural process of cultural renewal by capturing and neutralizing messianicminded people and treating them, often forcibly, with brain damaging drugs. Farber's theory is that mainstream societies follow their cultural trajectories, regardless of warnings about looming dangers, until they are shaken awake by mad men and women who finally persuade them to alter course. The intercession of a dose (or perhaps a demonstration) of madness provides a catalyst for social change and renewal.

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This theory might seem far-fetched at first glance. But this glance is just the way I'm presenting it. Farber is far more subtle and persuasive in the way he unfolds his view. The mental conditions he focuses most of his attention on are the ones psychiatrists call mania and schizophrenia. Who would deny the long associations these conditions have had with mysticism and the arts? And what are mystics and artists, after all, if not catalysts for cultural change?

The Spiritual Gift of Madness begins with a wonderful free-associated foreword by Kate Millett in which she relates anecdotes from her own "loony-bin" experience and recreates, with a short burst of brilliance, the feelings and moods of the long lamented 1960s. From there the book moves quickly into the first of a series of seven interviews. Transcripts of these interviews are scattered throughout the book and together they form the central core insomuch as they provide much of the evidence supporting the thesis.

The first of these interviews is with Peter Stastny. Introducing him, Farber says that since Loren Mosher's death in 2004 Stastny "has been the leading spokesperson for the patient self-help movement" and that he was a "founding member in 2005 of the International Network Toward Alternatives and Recovery (INTAR)." The interview gives Stastny an opportunity to discuss problems with psychiatric drug therapies and the faith he has in the ability of patients to help themselves and each other. The second interview is with David Oaks, director of the human rights and psychiatric survivor advocacy organization, Mind Freedom International (MFI). Farber and Oaks have an association that goes back to 1990 and some of Oaks' interesting personal experience with madness and psychiatry is discussed. Oaks believes that "we are all mad" and that madness is "just culturally relative." Other interviews are with three Mad Pride activists, Chaya Grossberg, Caty Simon, and Sascha DuBrul; former physician turned medical researcher and recovered mad person, Ed Whitney; and former mental patient, author, and psychospiritual healer, Paul Levy.

Interspersed among these interviews are chapters in which Farber discusses subjects raised in the interviews and various aspects of his theory. A number of these chapters have descriptive, self-revealing titles like, "Mental Patients' Liberation," "The Messianic or Postmodern Paradigm?," and "The Relationship of Mad Pride to Messianic Transformation."

To understand the rationale for the many parts of this book it is necessary to understand what Farber needs to prove in order to support his theory. Although the author's perception of a looming global catastrophe is the overall rationale for the book he doesn't feel the need to spend much time in delineating the nature of the problem. In fact, global warming only comes up for discussion in a couple of places and then only for a page or two at a time. The existence of the threat is taken for granted and doesn't require any further evidence from Farber.

Instead, the most urgent point for which strong evidence is provided is the argument that the psychiatric understanding of madness is misguided and that psychiatric treatments are harmful, both to individual patients and to the society at large. This is a constant theme throughout the book and is discussed, at least in part, in all the interviews. This point is necessary to establish early on because if readers were left in any doubt about the unwise habits of psychiatry it would be impossible to further persuade them that madness has spiritual gifts that are essential for collective human well-being.

What should we make of psychiatry? Is there any real science to it, or is it just an art — with all the foibles, jokes, hoaxes, and changing fashions that are essential to the nature of all the arts? Or is psychiatry political, a branch of social control — pest control — perhaps? If it is a true branch of medicine, as is claimed for it, why is it given coercive powers and routinely allowed to treat people against their will? And why do so many former patients complain that their forced treatment did them far

more harm than good? Other branches of medicine are bound by the iron rule of informed consent, why not psychiatry?

Farber repeatedly draws on the writings, opinions, and professional practices of three trenchant critics of mainstream psychiatry. Two of them, Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing, were leaders of the anti-psychiatry movement that began in the 1960s and which Szasz prolonged in his writing almost right up to his recent death. Peter Breggin, the third, doesn't really belong to the anti-psychiatry camp; his position is more specific. Breggin is not necessarily opposed to all psychiatry, he's just very strongly against bio-psychiatry. These three heroes of Farber's complement one another perfectly for his purpose. He needs to persuade readers that there is no such thing as mental illness (Szasz); that mad people are instead spiritually endowed and that any symptoms they might have of distress are just signs of difficulty in coming to terms with their spiritual gifts (Laing); and that normal bio-psychiatric interventions are brain-damaging (Breggin).

But persuading readers that psychiatry does more harm than good is only the beginning. The second leg of Farber's thesis concerns the nature of mad people themselves. After mad people have been rescued from psychiatry, Farber needs to demonstrate that they are up to the task he envisions for them by being both capable and willing to provide inspiration for social change. To establish this he singles out a branch of the psychiatric survivors movement, Mad Pride. Mad Pride exponents, he argues, differ from other former mental patient campaigners in that they are not so much concerned with patients' rights and human rights as with celebrating the experience of madness. The willingness to celebrate madness, it seems, is a pre-requisite for inspiring social change.

It is fairly apparent that in singling out the Mad Pride movement, as the contemporary vehicle for imminent global change and cultural renewal, Farber has stuck his neck out, perhaps a little too far. It would be different if he had argued in a more general way, as others have before him, that prophets and messianic figures, with apparent symptoms of mental disorders, have historically been identified with movements for religious renewal. Indeed, Farber does this himself in a number of places but mainly it is to give support for his faith in Mad Pride. He devotes a whole chapter to the theories of psychiatrists R.D. Laing and John Weir Perry who both developed therapeutic approaches that assumed mad people had spiritual gifts that should be nurtured. However, much of the focus of the book is directed towards an expectation that the fairly narrowly-based Mad Pride movement in the United States will be the soil from which the required messianic movement shoots.

It's clear that at the time Farber conceived and planned his book the Mad Pride movement showed more promise for the fulfillment of this expectation than has come to pass. Over time, Mad Pride seems to have lost a lot of its founding energy and vision. There is something of an air of disappointment in the way Farber contrasts his original enthusiasm for the movement to the way he saw it develop as he watched. His original enthusiasm came from his discovery of The Icarus Project in 2007. This is a web-based forum that publishes the views and writings of Mad Pride adherents. It was founded after a 2002 newspaper article by Sascha DuBrul brought DuBrul together with Ashley McNamara.

Although Mad Pride may not be the right place to look for the required activists, nevertheless, cultural change on a grand scale is still undeniably needed and the input of people with mad gifts may be a pre-requisite for it. Farber's underlying thesis may be sound but it seems to me that it is unlikely these mad catalysts of the future will identify with organizations of former psychiatric patients. The "creatively maladjusted" activists Farber anticipates are more likely to be people whose madness has gone

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undetected and who have somehow slipped through the psychiatric dragnet and by doing so have kept their minds intact and their brains undamaged.

The Spiritual Gift of Madness is definitely worth reading despite the apparent mismatch between Mad Pride activists and the reality of the challenges confronting creatively maladjusted people who want to jolt the world from its current condition of complacency. Mad Pride activists might have other, more personal, less high-minded, things on their minds but these, too, are worth knowing about. Read the book for the interviews and to hear Farber's cry from the wilderness and don't worry about some of the more doubtful details of his prophecy. We need to hear from prophets. But prophets should always be careful not to be too specific about how their prophecies might come to pass.

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