

The Icarus Project: A Counter Narrative for Psychic Diversity

Sascha Altman DuBrul

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Abstract Over the past 12 years, I’ve had the good fortune of collaborating with others to create a project which challenges and complicates the dominant biopsychiatric model of mental illness. The Icarus Project, founded in 2002, not only critiqued the terms and practices central to the biopsychiatric model, it also inspired a new language and a new community for people struggling with mental health issues in the 21st century. The Icarus Project believes that humans are meaning makers, that meaning is created through developing intrapersonal and interpersonal narratives, and that these narratives are important sites of creativity, struggle, and growth. The Icarus counter narrative and the community it fostered has been invaluable for people around the world dealing with psychic diversity—particularly for people alienated by mainstream approaches. But, despite the numbers of people who have been inspired by this approach, the historical background of the Icarus Project is hard to find. It exists primarily in oral history, newspaper articles, unpublished or self-published Icarus documents, and in internet discussion forums. As the co-founder of the Icarus Project, I use this article to make my understanding of that history and its key documents more widely available.

Keywords Community-based practices · Consumer activism · Mad pride · Intrapersonal narrative · Interpersonal narrative · Cultural studies · Narrative power analysis · Alternative forms of mental health care · Biopsychiatry · Bipolar disorder

Emergence of the icarus project

In September of 2002, I wrote an article for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* that was read by thousands of people entitled “The Bipolar World” (DuBrul). It was about my personal struggles in the mental health system, the biopsychiatric model that dominates it, and my desire for a new way of looking at my diagnosis of “bipolar disorder.” I was 27 years old and had been writing stories and articles for years within my insular community of punks and anarchists, but this was the first time that my words had made it into a more mainstream publication. It was also the most personal article I had ever written with details about dramatic hospitalizations, psychotic delusions, and struggles with suicidal depression.

S. A. DuBrul (✉)

Silberman School of Social Work, 2180 Third Avenue at 119th Street New York, NY 10035, USA
e-mail: saschaicarus@gmail.com

I wrote about how at times I felt like the entire universe was crawling under my skin, and yet at other times, I felt as though I had been given a divine mission to save the world. Then I wrote about how the medications I was taking actually seemed to be helping me, but how distrustful I was of the medical model. I was concerned with how closely it seemed to be tied to the capitalist system and with how confusing and alienating the whole situation left me feeling. I ended the story by saying:

But I feel so alienated sometimes, even by the language I find coming out of my mouth or that I type out on the computer screen. Words like “disorder,” “disease,” and “dysfunction” just seem so very hollow and crude. I feel like I’m speaking a foreign and clinical language that is useful for navigating my way through the current system but doesn’t translate into my own internal vocabulary, where things are so much more fluid and complex...

In the end, what it comes down to for me is that I desperately feel the need to connect with other folks like myself so I can validate my experiences and not feel so damn alone in the world, so I can pass along the lessons I’ve learned to help make it easier for other people struggling like myself. By my nature and the way I was raised, I don’t trust mainstream medicine or corporate culture, but the fact that I’m sitting here writing this essay right now is proof that their drugs are helping me. And I’m looking for others out there with similar experiences.

Our society still seems to be in the early stages of the dialogue where you’re either “for” or “against” the mental health system. Like either you swallow the antidepressant ads on television as modern-day gospel and start giving your dog Prozac, or you’re convinced we’re living in Brave New World and all the psych drugs are just part of a big conspiracy to keep us from being self-reliant and realizing our true potential. I think it’s really about time we start carving some more of the middle ground with stories from outside the mainstream and creating a new language for ourselves that reflects all the complexity and brilliance that we hold inside. (DuBrul, Sascha Altman 2002)

Within 2 days of the article going to print, my inbox was filled with email from people who had read the story and related somehow to my words. I never would have imagined that my story would have resonated with so many others from different communities and lifestyles, and it was an incredibly empowering feeling. For the first time in my life, I learned the important lesson that when you are brave enough to tell your own story, other people often feel compelled to tell you their story as well. I learned about the liberatory power of speaking our personal truths and about the power of personal narratives to challenge the power of the dominant narrative.

One of the people who initially wrote to me with a particularly compelling story was a person named Jacks McNamara. We began corresponding over email, met shortly thereafter, and within the span of an evening and a morning decided to create a place for people like us who had been through the mental health system and were diagnosed with bipolar disorder to tell their stories. We started with a website, calling it the Icarus Project. Shortly after meeting, we wrote an initial vision statement:

As the ancient Greek myth is told, the young boy Icarus and his inventor father Daedalus were imprisoned in a maze on an island and trying to escape. Daedalus was crafty and made them both pairs of wings built carefully out of wax and feathers, but warned Icarus not to fly too close to the blazing sun or his wings would fall to pieces. Icarus, being young and foolish, was so intoxicated with his new ability to fly that he soared too high,

the delicate wings melted and burned, and he fell into the deep blue ocean and drowned. For countless generations, the story of Icarus' wings has served to remind us that we are humans rather than gods, and that sometimes the most incredible of gifts can also be the most dangerous.

The Icarus Project was created in the beginning of the 21st century by a group of people diagnosed in the contemporary language as Bipolar or Manic-Depressive. Defining ourselves outside convention we see our condition as a dangerous gift to be cultivated and taken care of rather than as a disease or disorder needing to be 'cured.' With this double edged blessing we have the ability to fly to places of great vision and creativity, but like the boy Icarus, we also have the potential to fly dangerously close to the sun—into realms of delusion and psychosis—and crash in a blaze of fire and confusion. At our heights we may find ourselves capable of creating music, art, words, and inventions which touch people's souls and change the course of history. At our depths we may end up alienated and alone, incarcerated in psychiatric institutions, or dead by our own hands.

Despite these risks, we recognize the intertwined threads of madness and creativity as tools of inspiration and hope in this repressed and damaged society. We understand that we are members of a group that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history, but has also been responsible for some of its most brilliant creations. And we are proud.

While many of us use mood-stabilizing drugs like Lithium to regulate and dampen the extremes of our manias and the hopeless depths of our depressions, others among us have learned how to control the mercurial nature of our moods through diet, exercise, and spiritual focus. Many of us make use of non-Western practices such as Chinese medicine, Yoga, and meditation. Often we find that we can handle ourselves better when we channel our tremendous energy into creation: some of us paint murals and write books, some of us convert diesel cars to run on vegetable oil and make gardens that are nourished with the waste water from our showers. In our own ways we're all struggling to create full and independent lives for ourselves where the ultimate goal is not just to survive, but to thrive. Despite the effort necessary just to stay balanced and grounded, we intend to make the world we live on better, more beautiful, and way more interesting.

The Icarus Project Website is a place for people struggling with Manic-Depression outside the mainstream to connect and build an alternative support network. We hope to learn from each others' mistakes and victories, stories and art, and create a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences of this "disorder" rather than trying to fit our lives into the reductionist framework offered by the current mental health establishment. We would like this site to become a place that helps people like us feel less alienated, and allows us, both as individuals and as a community, to tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness. (The Icarus Project 2002)

Thus, very early on in our work together, Jacks and I developed a counter narrative to the dominant biopsychiatric narrative. We spoke clearly of our desire not for a reduction of stigma or a cure for our disease but for a new culture and language of mental health. We considered the mainstream narrative to be a reductionist framework offered by the current mental health establishment, and we emphasized our desire to step outside that framework and into new territory.

We talked about our biodiesel cars and graywater systems, which represented our counter-cultural values and alternative knowledge; our stories about painting murals and writing books

highlighted the role art and creativity would play in shaping our work. Our narrative, which recognized both lithium and yoga as equally valid means to handling our sensitivities, opened up a much needed space in the dialog about self-care and mental health. We recognized the intertwined threads of madness and creativity as tools of inspiration and hope in a repressed and damaged society. We linked madness and creativity, speaking of them as “tools of inspiration.” Even more powerfully, we flipped the script and pointed our fingers back at the society in which we were raised. Furthermore, we expressed an understanding that we are members of a group that has been misunderstood and persecuted throughout history but that has also been responsible for some of its most brilliant creations. It was a powerful beginning.

Narrative strands of our new story

Before going further with the Icarus Story, let me step back to provide some context. Our response to the label “bipolar” was not a “normal” response, which is why the Icarus Project brought a new perspective to psychic diversity. To create this perspective, we drew inspiration from many social movements and subcultural communities that came before us. So even though our response was unusual, it did not arise in a vacuum. In creating the Icarus Project, we wove together the ideas and practices in these movements to imagine a powerful new counter narrative to the dominant mental health narrative that went beyond a questioning of the language around “bipolar” and critiqued the system itself. A review of our cultural, social, and political roots places our work in a larger context and adds to the richness and depth of the Icarus Project as a whole. It also articulates the world views and ways of life from which Icarus emerged. These worldviews are not in the mainstream, they are not “normal,” but they have a long history of solidarity behind them. Although there are surely more, I have identified eight social, political, cultural, and ecological movements that most notably inspired the Icarus Project. Some of these movements were very conscious to us, some were just part of the cultural background in which we lived.

Anarchism

For nearly three centuries, anarchists were at the forefront of contending undemocratic, unaccountable forms of power. From the Spanish Civil War to the 1960s counterculture, anarchist ideas and actions have played an important role in political and social movements (Marshall 2010). Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, there has been a resurgence in anarchist organizing, most notably during the protests against the World Trade Organization in the streets of Seattle 1999 (Graeber 2002). Many early Icarus participants identified with the anarchist political tradition and its emphasis on prefigurative political ideals, mutual aid, and direct action. Our original organizing vision was based on Food Not Bombs (Butler and McHenry 2002), an anarchist project which began as part of the anti-nuclear movement and is a type of direct action and mutual aid: acquiring free food, cooking it as a group, and serving it in a public place.

Anti-psychiatry

Though we did not fully understand it in the early days, we were walking in the footsteps of a large body of knowledge and thought from the 1960s, grouped under the category of *Anti-Psychiatry* (Cooper 1967). Anti-psychiatry is a term used to refer to a configuration of groups and theoretical constructs that question the fundamental assumptions and practices of

psychiatry, such as its claim that it achieves universal, scientific objectivity. In the United States, the body of ideas known as anti-psychiatry were passed down and put into practice in what became known as the Psychiatric Survivors Movement by organizations such as Mindfreedom International based in Eugene, Oregon (Glasser 2008). While the Icarus Project had much in common with this project, we tended to have a more nuanced relationship to psychiatric medications than many in the survivor movement. Also, we were younger than most in the survivor movement and had never experienced long-term hospitalizations or institutionalization. That set us apart and made us more appealing to many of our generation who had emergency room and short-term hospital run-ins with the psychiatric establishment typical of today.

Permaculture/sustainable ecology

From the beginning, the vision and spirit of the Icarus Project drew a great deal of inspiration from the worlds of sustainable agriculture and the body of knowledge collectively referred to as *Permaculture* (Mollison 1997). Within the first months of its formation, both Jacks and I were working on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, understanding that our sensitivities (labeled by society as “bipolar disorder”) could be kept in check by keeping close to the earth and prioritizing the cultivation of food in a community context. Both an economic farming model and an international movement, CSA re-prioritizes the relationship between farmers, the food that they grow and the families that consume their products. Icarus has always had a culture that prioritizes and celebrates food. Many of the most powerful metaphors in the Icarus Project are drawn from ecology and sustainable agriculture: from roots and seeds to the comparison of monoculture fields with monocultures of the mind.

Permaculture refers to a set of principles for developing sustainable human systems by mimicking systems that occur in nature (Mollison 1997). Among the useful ideas in permaculture are: using and valuing diversity, using small and slow solutions; integrating rather than segregating, understanding the important relationship between the wild and the cultivated, understanding that the problem holds the keys to the solution, catching and storing energy, and stepping back to observe patterns in nature and society. Like the Icarus Project, Permaculture has gone from a set of ideas and principles gathered from a diverse group of people and places to an action oriented international signifier for a thriving movement.

LGBTQ movement

The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer (LGTBQ) movement is large and diverse; within it there is an incredible amount of outsider and resistance stories that have inspired the work of the Icarus Project. The watershed event for both the radical and mainstream LGBTQ community was the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City where, for the first time, an LGBTQ community publicly reacted militantly in the face of oppression in a way that was widely reported (Duberman 1994). Until 1973 homosexuality was on the American Psychiatric Association’s official list of mental disorders. (Bayer 1987). In the 1980s, an organization called ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) coordinated an incredibly successful campaign to raise awareness about government complicity in the AIDS crisis and build a successful movement based around direct action activist culture and queer identity (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002). Icarus has drawn a lot of inspiration from the success of the radical portions of the Queer Pride movement.

What we have in common is the focus on personal politics, looking at a marginalized identity and reclaiming it as a point of pride. Icarus members’ common shouts of “mad pride”

(Glasser 2008) have much in common with the loud and vibrant articulation of gay pride or queer pride. It helps that many of the early (and contemporary) Icarus organizers identify as some shade of queer. At the heart of our connection is the utilization of pride around an oppressed identity to inspire political action and the understanding that when we stop being afraid of being exposed for a shamed identity, there is nothing that can stop us.

Harm reduction

The harm reduction movement is centered in the experiences of drug users, sex workers, people involved in street economies, and criminalized communities. There are many ways to frame the war on drugs in the United States and many ideological angles from which to view it; one angle is that it has been a massive and successful propaganda exercise to demonize drug users and destabilize Black and brown communities. Drug users are first criminalized for using outlawed substances, and then, as a result of how they must obtain drugs, forced to engage in additional criminal behavior in order to maintain their habits and addictions. Thus, a drug user becomes a deviant - a transgressor who is incompetent and selfish, destined for jails, institutions or death. The message is that drug users do not care about their own health, the health of their friends or colleagues and certainly not the greater public health. The harm reduction movement challenges these ideas.

At the core of the harm reduction movement is the belief that everyone has the right to determine the circumstances of his or her own life, including care (Inciardi & Harrison 2000). This principle is also at the core of the Icarus Project. Early in our visioning, we embraced the complexities of our individual members' relationship to psychiatric medications, use of recreational substances, life style choices and outsider identities. One of our first website forums was titled "Give Me Lithium or Give Me Meth," and it was a place to share stories about members relationships to illegal drugs. The Icarus Project embraced the spirit of the harm reduction movement in its publishing of the *Harm Reduction Guide to Coming Off Psychiatric Drugs* (Hall 2007), which gathered the best information and valuable lessons we could find about reducing and coming off of psychiatric medication.

Global justice movement

From the beginning, the Icarus Project viewed itself in terms of a larger political context, as one part of a struggle for mutual liberation. The Global Justice Movement describes the loose collection of individuals and groups—often referred to as a movement of movements—placing a significant emphasis on transnational solidarity uniting activists in the global South and global North. Usually traced historically to the Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas, Mexico on January 1, 1994, the Global Justice Movement is an anti-capitalist movement that weaves together the struggles of many movements, including an emphasis on grassroots organizing, popular education, and strong critique of capitalism (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). Our original web designer was from Indymedia, one of the key online activist networks in the early part of the 21st century and a hub of the Global Justice Movement. Not long after we published our first book, *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness*, we learned that it was being read widely in the Zapatista activist community of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.

Counterculture

In 1968, Theodore Roszak coined the term "counterculture" to refer to the intersection of Vietnam War protesters, dropouts, and rebels of various stripes who had an effect on the larger

dominant culture (1968). In the 1960s, the counterculture was strong in numbers and cultural influence. Today, many of the most powerful ideas have either been co-opted in the service of capitalism or marginalized. Countercultural ideas are transmitted through music and art, and they offer creative ways of disseminating ideas, connecting with allies and realizing goals. The following is a brief mention of some of the countercultures that have inspired the Icarus Project via their ideologies, practices, approaches and goals.

The *Beat Generation* is a term used to describe a group of American post-WWII writers who came to prominence in the 1950s, as well as the cultural phenomena that they both documented and inspired (Charters 2003). Central elements of Beat culture included experimentation with drugs and alternative forms of sexuality, an interest in Eastern religion, a rejection of materialism, and the idealizing of exuberant means of expression and being (Charters 2003). *Howl*, written by Allen Ginsburg in 1956, chronicles the repressive culture of America in the 1950s. It reads as a transmission from an earlier time in a language that has clearly influenced the nature of our modern slang-filled English. *Howl* was dedicated to Carl Solomon, whom Ginsburg befriended in a Rockland County psychiatric hospital. The following excerpt captures an aspect of the Beat culture that has influenced the Icarus Project in major ways: “I’m with you in Rockland/where there are twenty five thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale...” (Ginsburg 1956, 18) The weaving together of madness and the history of leftist politics is familiar. The words are not mainstream but are transmissions from the underground to the underground—now in the mainstream for everyone to see.

Jack Kerouac was the archetypal beat writer – the explorer of the open roads of America. One of the most famous quotes from his influential book *On the Road* articulates the feeling of the Beats and their relationship to the “mad”:

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!” (1957, 21)

We consciously resurrected this Beat language in the Icarus Project, referring affectionately to one another as “mad ones,” the nod to earlier times and cultures that contributed to the artistic foundation of our project.

Punk rock

As one of the founders of the Icarus Project, I can safely say that the culture of punk rock held a critical and important role in our project’s tone and vision. Emerging in the 1970s in London and New York before spreading to cities over the globe, punk rock was initially a reaction to the sterile conformity of commercial rock and roll and disco culture. It inspired a lot of creative protest music during the Reagan and Thatcher era of the 1980s. An emphasis on questioning authority, rebellious distrust of government, and an anti-materialistic DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic. The British version of punk had direct influences from the Situationists, a clever revolutionary student movement from the 1960s in Paris (Marcus 1989). The Situationists were proto-punks, inspired by the ideas of breaking down barriers imposed by modern capitalist society and creating “situations” where new visions might emerge. Woven into the ideology of punk is an understanding that society is sick and that acting crazy is totally natural. Growing up immersed in the punk scene in New York in the 1990s, I learned how to be proud of sometimes feeling crazy and, if anything, learned to revel in it while celebrating difference and nonconformity.

The story of punk, and of countercultures generally, are useful in explaining an important aspect of the cultural vision and strategy of the Icarus Project. In 1994, punk went through a revival in the mainstream with the rise in popularity of bands like Nirvana and Green Day. I watched the subculture in which I had been immersed suddenly become currency for mass culture with both positive and negative results. One positive result was that more people had the opportunity to be exposed to the alternative political and social messages by which punk rock music is characterized. On the negative side, capitalist consumer culture's process of marketing a product required that many of the themes of social change be toned down or altogether removed from the music (Frank 1997). As a result, the counternarrative associated with punk rock culture was somewhat diluted. For Icarus, this history meant that important cultural work can start in the underground, but at the same time, this work can easily become co-opted.

Navigating the space between brilliance and madness

Pulling these many strands together, the Icarus Project initially focused on the identity narratives of bipolar disorder, and much of our language was geared towards radical political activists. But it quickly became clear that our message was reaching people outside of the counterculture from which we were born. Shortly after the website went live in November 2002, I embarked on a cross-country tour in a beat-up 1982 Toyota pickup truck, facilitating workshops in community spaces and collective house kitchens. I had never organized mental health discussions, but I had facilitated a lot of meetings and taught permaculture and seed saving workshops. I was used to public speaking and creating space for dialog, but nothing like this. I started with a basic set of questions which evolved into some incredible discussions.

An example of the way in which we used our words to carve out a space in the psychic architecture of the community around us is illustrated in the following passage, an excerpt from the original flier used to advertise the meetings and gatherings of the Icarus Project:

Walking the edge of insanity

Navigating the world of mental health as a radical in the 21st century

As creative folks skeptical of the conventional social system, what does it mean within our extended community for someone to be “mentally ill” or struggling with traditional labels such as “clinical depression,” “bipolar disorder,” or “schizophrenia?” How helpful is the modern psychiatric paradigm that revolves around medicine and mental disorders and how much of it is really just a function of powerful pharmaceutical corporations, public funding cuts, and a society that equates productivity with health? Are there other frameworks for understanding what it means to be “crazy?” Are there alternative ways to heal? How do we begin the process?

Chances are pretty high that if you're reading this, you or someone you care about has been grappling with these questions for years. Come join an open discussion and learn more about The Icarus Project, a radical support network by and for people struggling with the dangerous gifts commonly labeled as mental illnesses. The Icarus Project envisions a new culture and language that resonates with our actual experiences rather than trying to fit our lives into a conventional framework. By joining together as individuals and as a community, we hope to create space where the intertwined threads of madness and creativity can inspire hope and transformation in a repressed and damaged world. (The Icarus Project 2006)

The following season, Jacks and I were both apprenticing on organic farms, she in California and me in the Hudson Valley of New York. The Icarus Project website was up and running, and a virtual community began to evolve around the discussion forums. We were attracting interesting people, creating discussion forums with names like “*Alternate Dimensions or Psychotic Delusions*” and “*Experiencing Madness and Extreme States*.” There was no place else where people who used psych meds and people who did not, people who identified with diagnostic categories and people who did not, could all talk with each other and share stories. Because of the outreach in the anarchist and activist community, there was a high percentage of creative people with a radical political analysis. And with the (seeming) anonymity of the Internet, people felt comfortable being honest and sharing intimate stories about their lives. Our website served as a refuge for a diverse group of people who were learning the ways in which new narratives could be woven about their lives.

After a generous and serendipitous donation (from a wealthy woman whose daughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder) in the winter of 2003, Jacks and I reunited and spent two intense months compiling the writings of people on the website with our own writings into a book that we self-published under the title: *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness – A Reader and Roadmap of Bipolar World*. Here is a passage from the introduction:

The two people putting together this reader you hold in your hands have been diagnosed with “Bipolar Disorder,” the most recent medical language for what was once known as Manic Depression. It is considered a disease of the mind. The statistics are that 6 million people in the United States have some form of the disorder, and that 1 out of 5 people left untreated will eventually kill themselves. But this “illness” is more than a bunch of statistics, or a set of symptoms. For those of us who live with this awkward label, the phenomenon it describes is something fluid and hard to pin down, yet none of us can escape its effects on our lives. We share common patterns and eerily common stories, some devastating and some inspiring—and so few of them have actually been mapped...

In this little book we’ve assembled an atlas of maps, back and forth through the subconscious and consciousness, from hospital waiting rooms to collective house kitchens, from the desert to the supermarket. The pages we are giving to you chart some of the underground tunnels beneath the mainstream medical model of treatment, tunnels carved by brave and visionary people before us, and tunnels we’re helping to carve ourselves with our friends. They go beyond three dimensions. They are maps made up of ideas and stories and examples from many people’s lives. They are maps of our souls as well as the world outside. Some of these maps will help you to navigate through the existing architecture of the mental health establishment; some of them might help you figure out for yourself where you stand in relation to the larger ecosystem of the earth and the people who inhabit it.

After this publication, The Icarus Project grew in earnest. Our website became increasingly well know; our book was in its third printing; and we had completed three incredibly successful tours. Our Icarus discourse of dangerous gifts was becoming audible among the larger community around us, despite our subcultural backgrounds and unorthodox messages, we were onto something that people found compelling. We had tapped into a desperate need for a more creative look at mental health and wellness. The biopsychiatric model, though incredibly profitable for some, left many of us out in the cold as far as understanding our mental health issues and how they related to the rest of the world.

Through contacts in the non-profit funding world, Jacks and I met with Anthony Wood, Executive Director of the Ittleson Foundation, and talked over ideas for a proposal to partner with an older, more established organization in New York named Fountain House to do outreach on college campuses. A radical mental health organization when it was founded in

the 1940s, Fountain House became the parent of an international network of mental health Clubhouses (the International Center for Clubhouse Development.) Like most mental health agencies, Fountain House uses the traditional language of mental illness, but also, like most mental health agencies, they were desperate for ideas that could attract young people. Below is a section from our proposal to the Ittleson Foundation:

Community support is a vitally important part of the healing process no matter what form of treatment an individual chooses. While there are numerous conventional support structures available for adults, family members, and those who are comfortable with the medical model of mental illness, there are very few peer-based support structures created by and for young and creative populations. Most of the support structures currently available in this country have been established by institutions, mental health professionals, and large bureaucratic organizations like NAMI, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. While these groups have indubitably helped thousands of people suffering from mental illness, they have also alienated countless individuals who do not "identify with the conventional paradigm of the "mental health consumer." The majority of our members have indicated that they did not consider any of the participants in traditional support groups to be their peers, and subsequently felt even more alone in their struggles to understand the extremes of their experience.

Traditional support organizations frequently speak in terms of "psychiatric disability," "disease," and "eradicating mental illness" (the first objective in NAMI's mission statement). The members of The Icarus Project, by contrast, have consistently expressed that our project – with its unique conception of mental illness as a potential gift of great vision, creativity, and compassion that must be harnessed and respected, as well as an incredible hardship – is one of the only places where they can find meaningful support from true peers. The archetype of the mythical Icarus, who uses the gift of wings to fly to places of incredible beauty but crashes after recklessly flying too close to the sun, has proven a much more resonant metaphor for our members' extremes of experience than the paradigm of disease...(The Icarus Project 2004)

The day we found out we had received the grant from Ittleson, we were hanging the first Icarus Project art show at a radical community center/art gallery on the Lower East Side of New York known as ABC No Rio. It was surreal; not only were they giving us \$80,000 to work on our dream project, but we had also stepped suddenly into a world of legitimacy to which we never expected to gain access. Within 6 months of receiving the grant, we recruited a handful of amazing organizers, collectivized our organization, and revised our mission and vision statements to reflect our evolving political and social analysis. In short, this was the statement, not just of a non-profit but of an aspiring movement:

Icarus project mission statement (2005)

OUR MISSION

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 network of people living with and/or affected by experiences that are often diagnosed and labeled as psychiatric conditions. We believe these experiences are dangerous gifts needing cultivation and care, rather than diseases or disorders. By joining together as individuals and as a community, the intertwined threads of madness, creativity, and collaboration can inspire hope and transformation in an oppressive and damaged world. Participation in The Icarus Project helps us overcome alienation and tap into the true potential that lies between brilliance and madness.

OUR VISION

Together, we seek new space and freedom for extreme states of consciousness. We support alternatives to the medical model and acknowledge the traumatic legacy of psychiatric abuse. We recognize that we all live in a crazy world, and believe that sensitivities, visions, and inspirations are not necessarily symptoms of illness. Sometimes breakdown can be the entrance to breakthrough. We call for more options in understanding and treating emotional distress, and we advocate for everyone, regardless of income, to have access to these choices. We respect diversity and embrace harm-reduction and self-determination in treatment decisions. Everyone is welcome, whether they support the use of psychiatric drugs or not, and whether they identify with diagnostic categories or not. To ensure we remain honest and untamed, we do not accept funding from pharmaceutical companies. We invite anyone who shares the Icarus vision and principles to join us, and choose “The Icarus Project” or any other name for the independent efforts that inspire them.

OUR PRINCIPLES

Beyond the medical model While we respect whatever treatment decisions people make, we challenge standard definitions of psychic difference as essentially diseased, disordered, broken, faulty, and existing within the bounds of DSM-IV diagnosis. We are exploring unknown territory and don’t steer by the default maps outlined by docs and pharma companies. We’re making new maps.

Educating ourselves about alternatives A lot of what the media, medical establishment, and institutions tell us about “mental illness,” psych drugs, and how we have to live our lives is just not true. We educate ourselves and each other. We question what we hear on TV and read in doctor’s office brochures. We explore holistic and spiritual approaches to handling our extreme states of consciousness. We learn as much as we can about any medical treatments, and encourage each other to make informed choices. Icarus is a sanctuary for people thinking outside the mainstream and creating their own definitions of health and wellness.

Balancing wellness and action Icarus is a place for supporting each other in practicing real self-care. This includes but is not limited to: making sure we don’t neglect our personal basics like food, rest, exercise, and community; encouraging each other to commit to the amount of work we can actually do, and not push ourselves past our limits; and challenging ourselves to find daily routines and projects that help us live out our dreams and have enough structure to get by.

Access We don’t need more alternatives that only rich people can afford. All Icarus gatherings follow the policy that ‘no one is turned away for lack of funds.’ We work to create options and choices that are available to all.

Non judgment and respect for diversity We welcome people who support psych drugs and people who do not, as well as people who use diagnostic labels and people who do not identify with those terms. We do not exclude people on the basis of politics, lifestyle choice, diagnostic history, recreational drug use, “criminal” behavior, or other outsider identities. We all have a lot to learn from each other, so we respect each others’ choices. While the current social system and medical model have the tendency to divide us, we want our understanding of and experiences with madness to unite us.

Non-hierarchy and anti-oppression Local groups need to be anti-authoritarian, inclusive, and working against racism/classism/sexism/homophobia and other oppressions. As a radical mental health support network, our affiliated groups create safe and challenging spaces where oppressive behavior is not tolerated.

Nonviolence We believe that we will bring about lasting change in the world through dialogue, compassionate listening, mutual aid, and grassroots networks of support. We hope these approaches contribute to forming viable alternatives to the current system of government, bureaucracy, domination, and corporate culture.

Transparency We believe in public access to information about how we are making decisions, spending money, distributing responsibility, and otherwise delegating the work of organizing together. (The Icarus Project, 2005) These are revolutionary words and acknowledge our relationship to history and our debt to the movements and cultural workers that have come before us. These words put us outside all the other organizations working in our field, affirming to everyone our radical stance in the true meaning of radical: from the roots to the extremes. No one else in the field of mental health was talking about non-hierarchy and transparency in this way. We were bringing the radical narratives and models into the door of the mainstream.

Later that year we created a collective document which we called *Friends Make the Best Medicine: A Guide to Creating Community Mental Health Support Networks* that people around the world download from our website and use as a guide for starting local Icarus Project support groups. Here is part of the introduction.

Underground roots and magic spells

Visions for resisting monoculture and building community

You can see it all from the highway: enormous monocrops of identical corn plants that reach for miles bordered by an endless sea of strip malls, parking lots, and tract housing. You can see it on our kitchen counters and in our classrooms: the same can of soda on the table in Cairo and Kentucky, the same definitions of “progress” and “freedom” in textbooks around the world. Monoculture – the practice of replicating a single plant, product or idea over a huge area – is about the most unstable, unsustainable, unimaginative form of organization that exists, but in the short term it keeps the system running smoothly and keeps the power in the hands of a small number of people. In the logic of our modern world, whether it’s in the farmer’s field or in the high school classroom, diversity is inefficient and hard to manage. Powerful people figured out awhile time ago that it’s a lot easier to control things if everyone’s eating the same foods, listening to the same music, reading the same books, watching the same TV shows, and speaking the same language. This is what we call the monocult, and while everyone is supposedly more and more connected by this new “global culture”, we’re more and more isolated from each other. Things feel more and more empty, and so many of us end up lonely and rootless, wondering why everything feels so wrong.

Out in the wild things are very different. In old forests everything is connected, from the moss and lichens to the ferns and brambles to the birds and beetles. In our human minds we separate all the parts of the forest into separate pieces when a lot of the time it can be more helpful to view the forest as one giant organism with separate parts all working together. The trees of a forest intertwine their roots and actually communicate with each other underground. You see it most visibly along ravines and creek beds where a cut-away hillside reveals totally asymmetrical tangle of roots that no scientist could ever have imagined or planned out with all his laws of physics. Something in that tangle explains how those trees can lean out at all kinds

of gravity-defying angles and hang their necks into the strongest winds and still survive, bending but not breaking, adapting with unpredictable curves and angles to the way the world breathes and shines and rains and burns. Concrete can't do that. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the way life evolves and gets stronger in the wild. Something about the living architecture of chaos and time, multi-tiered forests and microscopic algae, outlasts any of the straight lines and square institutions we're told to believe in.

We believe that people do not belong in grids and boxes of rootless lonely monocultures. Humans are adaptable creatures, and while a lot of people learn to adapt, some of us can't handle the modern world no matter how many psych drugs or years of school or behavior modification programs we've been put through. Any realistic model of mental health has to begin by accepting that there is no standard model for a mind and that none of us are single units designed for convenience and efficiency. No matter how alienated you are by the world around you, no matter how out of step or depressed and disconnected you might feel: you are not alone. Your life is supported by the lives of countless other beings, from the microbes in your eyelashes to the men who paved your street. The world is so much more complicated and beautiful than it appears on the surface.

There are so many of us out here who feel the world with thin skin and heavy hearts, who get called crazy because we're too full of fire and pain, who know that other worlds exist and aren't comfortable in this version of reality. We've been busting up out of sidewalks and blooming all kind of misfit flowers for as long as people have been walking on this Earth. So many of us have access to secret layers of consciousness you could think of us like dandelion roots that gather minerals from hidden layers of the soil that other plants don't reach. If we're lucky we share them with everyone on the surface—because we feel things stronger than the other people around us, a lot of us have visions about how things could be different, why they need to be different, and it's painful to keep them silent. Sometimes we get called sick and sometimes we get called sacred, but no matter how they name us we are a vital part of making this planet whole.

It's time we connect our underground roots and tell our buried stories, grow up strong and scatter our visions all over the patches of scarred and damaged soil in a society that is so desperately in need of change. (The Icarus Project 2006)

With this statement, we attempted to define ourselves in opposition to the cold logic of the DSM-IV. The same way that monoculture corn fields are horrible for the environment but profit a few, the monocultures of the mind are a disaster to our planet, our communities and personal lives. The Icarus vision, a weaving of multiple counternarratives, throws the cold DSM narrative on its head and grows a new world with the broken pieces.

A dandelion conclusion

Biopsychiatry remains the dominant narrative of mental health despite the fact that it has faced tremendous resistance. Indeed, over the same years that the Icarus Project developed, biopsychiatry has become the focus of widespread critique (Whittaker 2011, Tamini and, Cohen 2008 Lane 2007, Morrison 2005). New approaches to mental health focus on stories and narratives echoing many of Icarus Project perspectives and emerging from a variety of sources (Stastny 2007). Yet, despite widespread critique and alternatives, biopsychiatry remains the invisible common sense on our television screens and in our medical culture. It is the overwhelming option that is available to us when we and our loved ones are in distress, and it is the language in our mouths when we try to talk about our most intimate struggles with our minds. Biopsychiatry is the mainstream that we all drink from and, for many of us, the story that keeps us feeling trapped in psychic boxes like we are sick and diseased, rootless and alone.

In the preceding pages I have shared with you the attempts of my community to actively and creatively counter the biopsychiatric narrative and way of life. Early on in our struggle, we came up with a metaphorical symbol, an image that carries a story which best conveys our resilience in the long battle to redefine how our culture understands mental health. This is the symbol of dandelion roots and their relationship to soil.

It is a rule of nature that the ground does not stay bare for very long. Wherever soil has been disturbed, there are always seeds that come along which grow into plants with roots and leaves that cover the bare soil, providing homes for all kinds of creatures and enriching the earth through their cycles of life and death. These plants are called pioneer plants because they lay the groundwork for the inevitable successions that follow. Many of the most common pioneer plants are the ones we are trained to see as weeds, plants like the dandelion whose strong taproot extends far below the depleted topsoil to the deep layers of subsoil that hold hidden minerals underground. The dandelion pulls these minerals up and incorporates them into its leaves and flowers; when it dies all the nutrients that were locked underground join the upper layers of soil, making them available to the next generation of plants growing in the soil.

We have learned, in the Icarus Project, to see the dandelion—this wild and unpredictable plant that reaches into the fertile darkness of underground places—as a symbol for our work. Many of the ideas from the Icarus Project are taken from the cultural and political underground, from important stories and wisdom that are not so easy to find in the topsoil of mainstream culture. Many of our visions for the future emerge from the depths of our own experiences as the mad ones whose roots reach down into the darkness but whose voices open up into the light.

Pioneer plants tend to create thousands of tiny seeds that are lightweight, sometimes with fine hairs that act like parachutes, keeping them afloat in the wind and preventing them from succumbing too quickly to gravity. We see the Icarus Project setting seed and releasing messages from hidden worlds that just might travel far and wide and colonize patches of damaged soil all over the planet, slowly transforming old stories into new, laying the groundwork for inevitable changes. In this spirit, the dandelion serves as an organic metaphor for our strategy and our vigilant hope going into the future.

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