

IN A NUTSHELL

Sept. 23, 1971

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MPA NEWSLETTER

#7

Up to now, In A Nutshell has been used mainly to communicate information about MPA and to ask the members for help with particular projects.

The newsletter should also be used as a forum for exchanging ideas about topics relevant to MPA activities and to the concerns of patients in general.

Everyone is invited to write articles.

NOBODY EVER SAID THIS WAS GOING TO BE EASY

Some thoughts on power and MPA

Some of the main issues that any group must come to terms with are: how decisions are to be made; who is to make them; who has the authority to carry them out. These issues come up time and time again around MPA.

Two extreme solutions to these problems are dictatorship and anarchism.

1) Dictatorship means that one person or a small group of people have absolute power to make decisions and carry them out. Dictators are not responsible to the people who are affected by the decisions. If the people are not happy with the decisions, force is used to make them obedient if not happy.

The word dictatorship brings to mind thoughts of people like Hitler. We all feel absolutely opposed to organizing social relationships along dictatorial lines, and most of us believe that in our society we do not have dictators. There are institutions in our society, however, where all decisions are made by non-elected people who never consult those affected by the decisions. Prisons and the military are two such institutions. Mental hospitals often fall into this category.

Erving Goffman, a sociologist who made a survey of mental hospitals, concluded that they have the following features:

a) All aspects of life are conducted in the same place, and under a single authority.

b) There is little or no room for private activity. All inmates are treated alike and are required to do the same things together.

c) There is a strict schedule of daily activities which do not arise from the inmates' interests or wishes, but are imposed from above.

d) The contents of the various enforced activities are brought together as parts of a single overall plan designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.

It is my impression that most MPA members do not like having their activities dictated as they are in mental hospitals. People come to MPA in an attempt to build an alternative to the authoritarian atmosphere in these institutions.

If people want dictatorial rules about when they must get up and go to bed, about signing in and out, about when they can have visitors, the hospital is the place they can find rules galore.

2) Anarchism is the opposite of dictatorship. Most people equate anarchism with chaos, confusion and disorder. Actually, anarchism doesn't mean these things. It come from the Greek and means without leadership. It is possible that not having leadership will lead to chaos, but not necessarily.

Some MPA members, in their distaste for rules and authority, believe that MPA should follow a policy of anarchism--that we should have no rules and that people should be absolutely free to do anything they want here.

Most MPA members, myself included, feel that this policy is unrealistic. Absolute freedom often means the freedom to interfere with the liberty of others, and perhaps the freedom to jeopardize MPA's existence.

3) Democracy is the alternative to dictatorship and anarchism. I am quite sure that the large majority of members want MPA to follow democratic principles. Democracy is a concept that almost everyone agrees with. I do. I associate it with concepts like Mother and apple pie. (Maybe those are bad comparisons because, actually, I associate Mother with neurosis and apple pie with hives.) And democracy, too, is a word we often endorse unthinkingly, without really knowing what we mean by it.

Democracy also come from the Greek, and means strength of the people. In ancient Greek society, where democracy originated--although neither women nor slaves were permitted to have a say--"free men" voted by raising their fists in the air. Their clenched fists represented strength or power, and the majority ruled because they were stronger than the minority.

Today we have lost the sense that democracy means rule by strength, and have come to think of it as meaning simply majority rule. There are many ways, however, in which the majority can rule and it is important to examine the ways majority opinion is estimated and how it is put into action, if in fact it is.

I will consider two main forms of the democratic process: representative democracy and participatory democracy.

a) Representative democracy is the type we have in Canada, and is really the only type we have experienced. According to this system, we elect people to represent us in government. They do the day to day work of running the country; they do not consult us about decisions. This system differs from dictatorship because, if we don't like the decisions our representatives have made during their term in office, we can vote them out at the next election.

Most people think this process of putting an X on a ballot every few years is democracy and freedom. For a number of reasons, I don't believe it is. First of all, most people don't vote. There is hardly ever more than 50% of the eligible electorate who exercise their voting rights at any election. "Well," you might say, "they could vote but they choose not to, and that is not the fault of the system."

I think it is the fault of the system. The fact that most people don't vote implies that they feel their vote doesn't make any difference. And the reason their vote doesn't make any difference is that the people (us) have no say over who runs in elections. Candidates almost always represent very similar points of view. Aside from personality differences, anyone we elect will do about the same things

any other candidate would do.

The realities of the situation dictate that candidates must be supported by a political party. To have any chance of winning an election, the candidate must spend huge sums of money on his election campaign. Only the very rich or political parties (and they usually involve the same people) can afford to support a candidate in an election. All political parties tend to represent about the same points of view, and it doesn't really make much difference who is elected, unless we want our leaders to be handsome.

Does anyone seriously think that your life or mine would change in day to day details if Stanfield were elected rather than Trudeau?

We have been conditioned into thinking of politics as being something that has nothing to do with our daily lives. It's just a kind of entertainment show that rolls around every few years. But politics ought to be about procedures for involving everyone in making decisions that do affect the details of our lives, in schools, factories, offices, neighbourhoods, mental hospitals etc.

We think of this as a pipe-dream, however. Representative democracy has removed us all so far from the levers of power that we are resigned to thinking the only role we can play in politics is putting an X on a ballot and getting drunk while we watch the election returns on TV.

We're fed up with and intimidated by politics because we know we have no real, active role to play in the political process. And no one is going to give us that role until we decide we are going to have it.

We feel so powerless that we may believe the rationalization that the only way to run a huge nation is to elect people to represent us. This rationalization is false, however. If a nation the size of the United States can organize programs to send men to the moon and to move half a million soldiers to Vietnam, surely we can re-organize Canada's political system so that the people have a real say in how the country is to be run.

The trouble is that we have been conditioned politically to want to be children, to have parent-figures make our decisions for us. We want to be represented by others so we don't have to be responsible for making our own decisions.

We rationalize our irresponsibility as the need for efficiency. How else can things be run? The answer is up to us. Things are not being run efficiently now. If efficiency means creating conditions of human happiness, the system of representative democracy is highly inefficient. We all know this from personal experience.

And not only nations, but most small groups the size of MPA use representative democracy. The membership elects an executive who mess things up while everyone else bides their time til the next election.

(b) Participatory democracy means that everyone who wants to can participate in decision making. I believe MPA has been using and should use this system. The power should be exercised by the membership not the executive. MPA's executive has less power than in any other group I know of. Participatory democracy is slower and sloppier than representative democracy, but is in every other way better. The membership of MPA should be responsible for everything that goes on here. Authority must be the group's not the executive's. If you have complaints or suggestions, you must attend meetings and raise them.

Talk to other members; try to convince them of your point of view. Don't be afraid of raising unpopular ideas. I don't want to make decisions on my own. I want as many people as possible involved. The general membership has the final say on how things are to be run. General meetings should be held more regularly.

The main way that MPA differs from a hospital, I feel, is that we do run this place democratically. If you don't think we are democratic, say so at meetings, get the feeling we all run MPA, make the feeling free.

The issue of leadership comes up again and again. In democracy, leaders exercise authority and power. In part, democracy leaders do not have formal powers. They coordinate, organize, make suggestions. If members don't want to follow these suggestions, they are free not to. I don't want formal power over other people's lives. I believe the only meaningful leadership is the type that people follow willingly. If MPA's leaders give orders the way hospital staff do, we are no different from a hospital. Setting up a few ex-patients to play doctor and nurse is no way to create a real alternative to the hospital structure.

I don't feel that my refusal to exercise formal power implies that I am shirking responsibility. On the contrary, I think the most responsible leadership entails making sure that the entire group participate in decision making and that no one fills the power vacuum by forcing his ideas on others.

I think the level of democratic participation is very high, but it could be higher. Too many people still want to delegate authority to others.

I see my main role in MPA as ensuring that people don't make one-sided decisions without bringing it before the group. Also, I want people to feel responsible and powerful regarding decisions.

There are not many groups that are run by the active participation of the members. If MPA is going to serve any useful function, it will only be through the democratic participation of everyone.

The issues raised in this article and related issues should be discussed openly and frequently. I hope the article will encourage this discussion.

Don't let your executive take the power that is yours.

I hope it goes without saying that these views are my own and are not MPA policy.

Lanny Beckman

Research Committee

The research committee is collecting a file of articles on mental health. If you come across an article in a magazine or newspaper, please clip it out and get it to Lee Cowan or Lanny.

Crisis Lines

We have had a two-line crisis and gossip phone installed. The new number is 738-5177. All calls other than business calls should be made to this new number. Our old number, 738-1422, should be used for business calls only.

MPA Salaries

There is a good chance that two or more salaried MPA positions will be coming available within the next month. The salaries will be in the range of \$250 per month. If you might be interested in getting paid for a full-time MPA job, give your name to Barry or Lanny. Applications will be considered at a general meeting; the membership will decide who is to fill these positions.

NEXT GENERAL MEETING

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1ST, 8 PM

MENTAL ILLNESS, THE CAUSE AND THE CURE.

By

Sir Pigby Snort, M.D. (Mentally Deficient), S.O.S., P.T.O.

I suppose that Mental Illness has been with us for some fifty years or more, depending on your age. I will not dwell on the cause except to say that a lack of sanity in the brain will often bring on Mental Illness. The cure is the important aspect of this wonderful book. Perhaps a short biography would enhance the reader and open a communication link beneficial to the reader. I was born in a log cabin in Missouri of poor but honest parents. Not completely honest, because they used to steal my diapers, little booties, teething rings, etc. They were very kind people and would often let me sleep in the house when it snowed. My parents insisted that a University education was the key to a successful life and because they couldn't afford the tremendous amount of money involved, they kidnapped a University professor and locked him in our basement. I spent the first fifteen years of my life conversing with this brilliant man and gained a fantastic amount of medical intelligence from him before he was finally released by a band of roving gypsies who broke into the cellar to steal pickled plums.

After a year of rest in which I learned how to operate a water tap they booted my ass out of the house to make room for a large hairy baboon who was a good cook. At the age of seventeen I stole a car and after a hectic two-day drive being chased by the police I arrived in Boston where I got a job as a doctor. I spent two years treating young pregnant women who were not pregnant when they came in. After six years of research working with Dr. Einstein trying to find ways to cheat old age pensioners I set up a large hospital complex with a fifty-member concert orchestra in each room to cheer up the patients. By offering \$50.00 per week I obtained

the best doctors in the country to staff the hospital and it developed into perhaps the ~~most~~-well-known medical centre in the world, Flop House Peter's.

So much for my life story. The cure for mental illness is quite simple. I obtained the knowledge some five years ago. However, why the Hell should I tell you People. I don't know you that well.

Sir Figby Snort
M.D., S.O.S., P.T.O.

IDENTITY HUNT

to watch them leaning
over themselves -
is to think of
the mad bird -
struck by stone -
pulling its guts
out a hole in its feathers
and swallowing them
the beak keeps shrieking
its own endless probe

Elaine Bougie

FROM OUR GRAFFITI BOARD

Nebulating can be fun. - L.L.

What about post-nebulating let down? - G.W.

Would you prefer to ~~xx~~ study scatology or eschatology?

C. Batten.