
The following section features personal stories from consumers/survivors/ex-patients. From these accounts, personal experiences of abuse or healing emerge to give life to or challenge theories about mental health and illness, psychology, psychiatry, biological and cultural origins, generally accepted practices, and institutionalization.



Personal Stories

Insist on Your Sanity: An Interview with Kate Millett

by Darby Penney

Kate Millett, pioneering feminist and author of the landmark book Sexual Politics, among many others, is also a survivor of psychiatry. She was interviewed by Darby Penney for the Consumer/Survivor/Ex-patient Oral History Project in October 2002. The following are excerpts from the interview.

DP: In your book, *The Loony-Bin Trip*, you write about your summer job as an aide in a psychiatric hospital at the age of 18. What kind of work did you do, and how did it make you feel about the mental health system?

KM: I guess it was my first cause, because I saw *hell*. [The patients] were prisoners in the system. I guess they often wanted to kill themselves. I can see why; they were there for the rest of their lives, and their lives were made miserable, unnecessarily miserable. And they communicated some with each other, because that was before the age of drugs. So, there was a little solidarity among

them. Although occasionally you saw really nice human things happening, the hospital had divided and conquered pretty successfully.

I worked all shifts. I worked the graveyard shift with old people, which was really demoralizing, because the old people didn't have a chance in hell of ever getting out of there. Because in those days, when you got "boxed," that was it. A lot of old people were there because somebody wanted the farm. It was about property. And people are treated like property in places like this.

And this is how psychiatry has functioned—as a kind of property

arm of the government, who can put you away if your husband doesn't like you. A lot of women were put away for that. Or you won't put out sexually. Or you won't do the dishes, maybe. You won't do any more housework. Then you go to the bin.

DP: So as an 18 year old, this must have been a real shock to you.

KM: It was horrifying. I mean, I would come home and tell Mother, "You won't believe this place, Mom. I want to write articles for the paper." She said, "Oh, no. They'll just think you're crazy." I said, "But Mom, it's a *State* institution! And this place—it smells so bad I can't keep

my food down. You wouldn't believe how people are treated there. I want to write about it." She said, "Well, no one would believe you. You're only 18-years old."

You could see that these people had withdrawn so far that they just lived in their own minds and, of course, their own minds were very unhappy. So, sometimes they did terrible things to themselves. One woman would scratch herself in her sleep. So we'd have to wake her up every couple of hours and bandage her. Now that's a degree of unhappiness that's really kind of hard to arrive at.

They used straight jackets all the time. And there was a very brutal nurse who I tried to talk into letting me calm patients down, because she'd threaten them with a plunger and stuff. They were really crazy, she thought. Well, they weren't crazy. They were tired of being locked up. Even I could see that. And so I'd sit with the woman and calm down with her. And she would calm down, and then I could unbuckle her arms if she promised not to make a fuss. Well, I was the only person who had ever been nice to her, and so she promised not to make a fuss. And then I said, "You know, in a while, we can go out on the balcony and have a cigarette. You can tell me what's really wrong." Sometimes they told me. Sometimes they didn't trust me.

DP: Did they use shock at this hospital?

KM: Oh, yeah. They used shock. They said, "Hold onto somebody's ankle," and I held on and they went *whirrrrr*. And when it was over, I said, "You know, I don't like participating in this." And they said, "Well, she's a kid. She's only 18. So we're not going to make her." So, I said, "Thanks, 'cause I'm going to quit if you do." I made my little stand. I had always thought psychiatry was some kind of hokey thing, which it is, but I didn't know they had police powers until I worked there and saw what powers they've got. I'd seen hell—and I never forgot this hell.

DP: In *The Loony-Bin Trip*, you describe a series of events that led up to your sister having you committed, and one of the things that struck me was that your sister and your husband and your lover kind of colluded. What does that do to your sense of trust [in] the people close to you?

KM: You never recover from betrayals like that. Because, you know, I trusted my husband, who I had helped through immigration and been such a good friend to him. And he *turned* on me. My mother used him to sign me in; you see, she needed his approval, because I was married to him.

But I should go back to the

beginning. My sister Sally had me incarcerated. The doctor said to me, "We want you to sign a voluntary commitment." I said, "I'm not an idiot." He said, "Well, unless you sign it, you're never getting out." Well, I had his promise he'd let me out if I'd say it was voluntary. which, of course, what's that worth? But I had no other option, because nobody else would get me out.

DP: During that hospitalization, were you force-drugged?

KM: Oh, yeah. All the time. With Thorazine.

DP: What kind of a diagnosis did they give you?

KM: Oh, manic, of course. It's the fashionable thing, has been for thirty years.

DP: And they gave you Thorazine for that?

KM: Yes. They gave me Thorazine because I was speeding, they said. You bet I was speeding! I mean, I was going 150 miles per hour trying to save my life and get out of there.

DP: You write in *The Loony-Bin Trip* about how, just before they had you incarcerated for the first time, you were working to try to get a political prisoner from Trinidad named Michael X freed. And people felt that you were, I don't know, over-

Kate Millett's memoir *The Loony-Bin Trip* tells the story of Millett's diagnosis as "constitutionally psychotic" and the thirteen years she spent using prescribed drugs that hindered her mind and body. Millett eloquently traces her horrifying experiences in the mental health system, from her involuntary commitment and electro-shock treatments to the abuse and betrayal endured at the hands of her friends, family, and, ultimately, a legal system that subjected her to incarceration and isolation.

involved or something. I think a lot of times people find the energy of activists kind of bizarre, and they use that as an excuse to say that there's something mentally wrong with activists.

KM: Oh, yeah. I exceeded. See, I was supposed to be "women's lib," and now I'd exceeded it and gone over into international politics. Michael was a friend of Yoko [Ono] and John Lennon, who were friends of mine. And we were all in this together. [William] Kunstler, our great constitutional lawyer, decided I should go to England, because I'd been to school there. I got on the front page of the *New Statesman Nation*: "Shall We Hang Michael?" It had been a foregone conclusion that they should. They didn't hang anybody in England in those days. But in the colonies they still did hang people.

Then I came back to California, and my big sister boxes me. And she'd been a psych major, and so she decided I was crazy. Or said I was crazy. I never could figure out whether she thought I was or not. When I came out [as a lesbian], she also thought I was crazy. But just crazy in the sense of irresponsible. She said, "You're making it hard for all us housewives in Nebraska."

DP: So that was your first incarceration, when you were 38?

KM: Mother had committed me for life to some little polite boys who came with a stretcher. And this is where I felt betrayed the most. Because these huge, enormous bullies got me on the ground and were breaking my arm. And I looked

at my husband and he didn't move.

So, I got to St. Paul and I'm incarcerated again for the fourth time in three weeks or something. And then my knights in shining armor showed up, and they said, "We're your lawyers. Do you want to get out?" I said, "Yeah, I do. But I'm not sure I'm getting out with you." And they said, "We can make history with this case. We can change the legislature's view of things and so let's try." I said, "You're trying with my life? What are the options?"

So, everybody is lying a little bit, but I figure I'll go with the lawyers.

Let psychiatry prove that anybody has an illness, and I'd concede, but there is no physical proof, as with germs. There's no physical proof, so there's no pathology.

So we have a sanity trial. Every day court was packed with my supporters from the women's movement. And I didn't say a word, because I had careful instructions from my lawyers not to open my mouth. And I won because I shut up (laughing). I'd proven my sanity, but my family wouldn't speak to me.

DP: Given the police powers that psychiatry has, and given your sense that things are becoming more authoritarian in general, what hopes do you think there are for psychiatric patients?

KM: I think that this country is kind of run by capital punishment. Because if they can do that to you, if they can kill you, if they can take your own life, then what can they do

short of that? They can lock you up. I think that the fact that this country is becoming increasingly authoritarian is really based on capital punishment. And psychiatry's chief role was always to control the poor. And now it's doing it in a big way. Because psychiatry is a form of social control, and capital punishment and punishment systems are forms of social control.

Everybody believes in psychiatry; it's supposed to be for our own good. Let psychiatry prove that *anybody* has an illness, and I'd concede, but there is no physical proof, as with germs.

There's no physical proof, so there's no pathology. A pathogen is provable. You've got a germ or you don't. So, this is sort of silly. Here is someone who is not discernibly sick in any way, except somebody said that they acted in a certain

way. That won't wash in a court of law. Where's the burden of proof? It's hearsay. But hearsay convicts you of being crazy. If they say you've got schizophrenia or bi-polar, well, show me the evidence. Well, of course, there isn't any. So there isn't any illness. Now there's inappropriate behavior, but I know people who behave inappropriately all the time. They just think it's artistic or left wing, something like that. They may be loathsome louts, but they're not crazy.

Psychiatry causes so much death, because what is the natural reaction when told you have a hopeless mental illness? "Well, I might as well shoot myself now, because I'm going to disintegrate." And that diagnosis does you in; that, and the humiliation of being there. I mean, the *indignity* you're subjected to. My God. ♦