

Madness, Rebellion, and Community Gardens

Kelly Pflug-Back

2013

a review of

Maps to the Other Side: The Adventures of a Bipolar Cartographer, Sascha Altman DuBrul, 2013, Microcosm Publishing, 189 pp., \$15.95, microcosmpublishing.com

"The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain..." once wrote the renowned Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. "Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy. Only when you are empty are you at standstill and balanced." While the term "bipolar" had not yet been introduced into the world of psychiatry when Gibran wrote these words in 1923, the sentiment is strikingly similar to that found in the eclectic mixture of essays, interviews, eulogies for deceased friends, and self-reflective ramblings which compose Sascha Altman DuBrul's latest book, *Maps to the Other Side*. This slim volume is part punk memoir, part how-to manual for guerrilla gardening, and part rallying cry for a revolution in terms of our cultural perceptions of and reactions to mental health.

For those well-versed in the literary products of the American punk scene, DuBrul's candid storytelling and angsty poeticism will be reminiscent of such titles as Noah Levine's *Dharma Punx* and Henry Rollins's *Black Coffee Blues* series.

However, while the cynic in me has a tendency to brush off figures such as Rollins as being more talk than action, DuBrul takes the non-conformity and anti-authoritarian sentiments of punk rock past the level of mere social criticism, and into the realm of applied and meaningful social change.

The self-proclaimed child of an upper-middle class, intellectual New York family, DuBrul describes shirking the conventional path expected of well-to-do youngsters and seeking his education hopping freight trains, living in squats and starting anarchist food security projects rather than in university lecture halls.

While his descriptions of the drifter lifestyle are rife with certain romanticized notions of squalor and street life which generally seem unique to those who live in poverty by choice, it soon becomes difficult to dismiss him as another hipster malcontent with a publishing contract.

DuBrul's sheer dedication to anarchist organizing has earned him an impressive activist resume throughout his travels, he describes working as a human rights observer with the Zapatistas in the Lacandon jungle during the 1990's, forming the Bay Area Seed Interchange Library (a community garden project which is still running strong today), touring with the iconic punk band Choking Victim, and of course co-founding the Icarus Project, a radical community organization dedicated to ending the stigma surrounding mental health issues and providing alternative support for people who are otherwise left at the mercy of the mainstream psychiatric system.

What are commonly referred to in our society as "mental illnesses," the Icarus Project challenges us to think of not as congenital defects, but rather as natural forms of human diversity which carry positive as well as negative potential, Dangerous Gifts, as he calls them.

DuBrul's descriptions of his life and activism, indeed, give credence to this concept. While his vibrant levels of energy would be the envy of many and have undoubtedly been a valuable asset to several anarchist communities, these bouts of inspiration and productivity come at a price.

“They say that the shaman swims in the waters that the schizophrenic drowns in,” DuBrul writes, pages after a harrowing transcript from his third time being admitted into a psychiatric institution. The transcript documents the writer at age 33 being found disheveled and half-clothed on a rooftop, destroying a satellite dish which he believed to be transmitting signals from aliens. In another chapter, DuBrul offers an almost light hearted description of an incident in which he was picked up by police while smashing church windows with his bare hands and running through traffic, “convinced that the world had ended.”

The Icarus project, DuBrul explains, was named after the Greek myth of Icarus, whose father, the craftsman Daedalus, made his son wings of wax and feathers on which he could escape from the city of Crete where both were held captive. Heedless of paternal warnings, Icarus flew too high, and plunged to his doom when the heat of the sun inevitably melted his wings.

This story, according to DuBrul, is an apt metaphor for the “double-edged blessing” of Dangerous Gifts. “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,” he writes. “At our depths we may end up alienated and alone, incarcerated in psychiatric institutions, or dead by our own hands.” The Icarus Project’s radical take on mental health has not come without criticism. DuBrul writes at one point about him and his comrades being approached during an educational seminar they were hosting by the relative of a person who had recently committed suicide. She lambasted them for glorifying things which can be devastating and fatal for many people.

While DuBrul at times could be seen as glorifying his Dangerous Gifts, often referring to them endearingly as his “super powers,” turning social ostracization into a sort of elitism has long been a coping mechanism, and often a survival strategy, of the oppressed.

People who fail to fit into psychiatric definitions of mental health and stability have for so long been told that we are worthless, defective, and deranged, that perhaps a bit of overcompensation is called for when it comes to reversing society’s biases as well as our own internalized notions of self worth.

Whether or not one agrees with the idea that exceptionalities such as being bi-polar are gifts rather than illnesses, the Icarus Project provides an alternative for people who struggle with their mental health in a world of profoundly limited options.

In addition to hosting workshops and peer-support systems, the Icarus Project is also one of the only groups providing people with information on how to safely stop taking psychiatric medications.

Simultaneously, they do not view medication as being something inherently good or bad- DuBrul himself writes that he has taken the medication Lithium every day for years, and that he finds its effects beneficial in combination with a generally healthy lifestyle.

Maps is hardly a book which follows a conventional narrative. Rather than being a single story, it reads as a collection of small ones which weave together and intersect in a frenetic sort of web.

Though its chaotic nature at times resembles a journal or scrapbook, the common patterns found throughout it are clear: the concept of health, whether physical or mental, is not something which we can truly achieve on an individual basis.

While modern consumer society touts models of achieving health by way of buying organic wheat grass juice, signing up for yoga classes, or going on personal wellness retreats, DuBrul shows, rather than tells, the ways in which this is a fallacy.

If our environment is sick and our community is suffering, then all the bottled wheat grass juice and meditation retreats in the world can only do so much for us.

Whether it means growing our own food and sharing skills on bio-diesel conversion or forming spaces where we can safely talk about our mental wellness, health is something which begins with the ability to provide for ourselves collectively, both in terms of physical and emotional needs.

As the fight to de-stigmatize mental health becomes more prominent in public discourse, hopefully we will see more activists like DuBrul mapping out the connections between anarchism, community building, and the importance of honouring human diversity in all of its beautiful forms.

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