

Outside Mental Health Voices and Visions of Madness

Will Hall

Outside Mental Health: Voices and Visions of Madness reveals the human side of mental illness. In this remarkable collection of interviews and essays, therapist, *Madness Radio* host, and schizophrenia survivor Will Hall asks, "What does it mean to be called crazy in a crazy world?" More than 60 patients, scientists, journalists, doctors, activists, and artists create a vital new conversation about empowering the human spirit through transforming society.

"Bold, fearless, and compellingly readable...
a refuge and an oasis from the overblown
claims of American psychiatry."

Christopher Lane, author of *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became an Illness*

"An intelligent, thought-provoking, and rare
concept. These are voices worth listening to."

Mary O'Hara, *The Guardian*

"Must-read for anyone interested in creating
a more just and compassionate world."

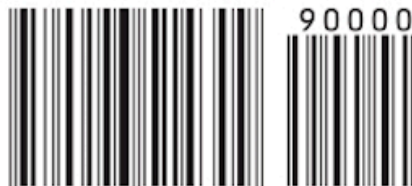
Alison Hillman, Open Society Foundation Human Rights Initiative

"Brilliant...wonderfully grand and big-hearted."

Robert Whitaker, author of *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets,
Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*

INTERVIEWS INCLUDE Gary Greenberg, Bonfire Madigan, Robert Whitaker, Eleanor Longden, John Horgan, Alisha Ali, Christopher Lane, Clare Shaw, Ethan Watters, Paula Caplan, Jonathan Metzl, Tim Wise, Kalle Lasn, Arnold Mindell, & dozens more...

ISBN 978-0-9965143-0-9



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PUBLISHED BY *Madness Radio*, madnessradio.net

Outside Mental Health Voices and Visions of Madness

This free e-book is made possible through support from Madness Radio listeners.

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Outside Mental Health Voices and Visions of Madness

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Acclaim for *Outside Mental Health: Voices and Visions of Madness*

“Will Hall’s *Madness Radio* has long been for many a refuge and an oasis from the overblown claims and corporate interests of American psychiatry and Big Pharma. This collection of interviews and writings—bold, fearless, and compellingly readable—captures *Madness Radio*’s importance and fierce independence, urging us to think differently and anew about the ‘thought disorders’ involved in illness and wellness, sanity and recovery. Required reading.”

Christopher Lane

author of *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness*

“This is a brilliant book... Nicely written, and wonderfully grand and big-hearted in its exploration of the world of mental health and much more. Remarkable in scope, *Outside Mental Health* delves into autobiography, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and spirituality. Will Hall elevates the radio interview format into an art.”

Robert Whitaker

author of *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*

“Will Hall’s gentle wisdom shines through in this diverse collection of intimate interviews. *Outside Mental Health* adds to our collective understanding of the complexity of human suffering, and offers new opportunities for compassion and healing.”

Yana Jacobs. LMFT

former Chief of Adult Mental Health Services, Santa Cruz County, California, and current Senior Program Officer, Foundation for Excellence in Mental Health Care

“It is an exhilarating challenge and a great pleasure to be interviewed by Will Hall—a widely knowledgeable and widely explorative interviewer.”

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone PhD

author of *Phenomenology of Dance*, University of Oregon Department of Philosophy

“An intelligent, thought-provoking, and rare concept...These are voices worth listening to.”

Mary O’Hara

The Guardian newspaper columnist, and author of *Austerity Bites: A Journey to the Sharp End of Cuts in the UK*

“*Outside Mental Health* is a must-read, not only for those in the mental health field, family members, and those who experience extreme or altered states, but for anyone interested in creating a more just and compassionate world. Hall’s lyric, authentic voice, woven throughout, speaks powerfully to the dominant narrative about mental illness, and provides hope for transformational change in our approach to emotional distress.”

Alison Hillman

Open Society Foundation Human Rights Initiative, past Program Director for Disability Rights International, and 2011 appointee to the Presidential Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities

“There are few books that I come across that make me want to drop everything I am doing and immediately read it on the spot. *Outside Mental Health* is such a book. Will Hall has given us a real gift: this book offers us a new, helpful, liberating—and dare I say, sane—way of re-envisioning our ideas of the nature of mental health and mental illness in a world gone mad. Truly an inspired, and inspiring, work.”

Paul Levy

author of *Dispelling Wetiko: Breaking the Curse of Evil* and Director of the Padmasambhava Buddhist Center, Portland Oregon

“Will Hall has done an extraordinary job bringing together a wide-ranging and diverse collection, all united by a concern with empowerment. These voices challenge current orthodoxy and constitute a fantastic resource for those who are seeking change.”

Dr. Pat Bracken MD

psychiatrist, philosopher, and Clinical Director of Mental Health Services, West Cork, Ireland

“This extraordinary book will make a difference for therapists and ‘patients’ alike. Interviews and essays acknowledge the overuse of medication and hospitalization, but don’t demonize these treatments... *Outside Mental Health* reads with fierce emotional intensity: journeys shaped by forced commitments, homelessness, and soul-crushing family conflicts, as well as extraordinary triumphs, creativity, and originality.”

Stanley Siegel

author, *The Patient who Cured His Therapist and Other Tales of Therapy*, and publisher, *Psychology Tomorrow* web magazine

“A terrific conversation partner.”

Joshua Wolf Shenk

author of *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*

“Phenomenal... a tome of treasures, filled with great findings for all kinds of seekers. And it begins with Will Hall’s story, bravely and lovingly told. This outstanding book has brought together a rich trove of fascinating interviews with survivors, philosophers, researchers, artists, psychiatrists, journalists and scientists, all of whom illuminate the darkness and plot innovative strategies for survival and recovery.”

Susan McKeown

Grammy award winning singer-songwriter

“*Outside Mental Health* explores the lived experience of psychosis and psychiatric treatments with openness and curiosity. Will Hall brings lessons learned from his own altered states and work as a therapist to offer fresh perspectives on madness and how to respond to it.”

Arnold Mindell PhD

Jungian therapist, founder of Process Oriented Psychology, and author of *Processmind: A User’s Guide to Connecting with the Mind of God*

Preface

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CALLED “CRAZY” IN A CRAZY WORLD?

Before I began to work as a community advocate and therapist, and before this book was conceived, I was a psychiatric patient. At age 26 my file from San Francisco’s Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute read schizoaffective disorder schizophrenia, I carried a bus pass with the word DISCOUNT above my photo, and each month Social Security deposited \$700 in my bank account to live on. “You have a thought disorder,” the team of doctors told me in the locked ward. “Symptoms can be managed with medications, but there is no cure.”

For many months before I was first hospitalized, there no sun was shining in my world. I barely spoke. I walked through the city all night, afraid of people watching me, unable to escape the loud, angry voice telling me I should die. I climbed out my apartment window to hide from my roommates, I watched for a demon to come at me through a postcard, through phone calls with no one on the other end. Then, on a cold January night, desperate for a way out, I wandered to the Golden Gate Bridge, dragging my bloodied hand against a chain-link fence. As the dawn broke, I stood by the roadside and held up an orange scrap of plastic sign debris, a riddle displayed for the rush-hour traffic. I was trying to say something, but I didn’t know what it was. I made my way to the Divisadero Street clinic. Maybe they could tell me.

Staff put me under observation, then tied me down in restraints. They drove me in a dark van to San Francisco General Hospital, where, terrified, I was admitted as a psychiatric patient. And after more hospitalizations and stays in mental health residences, more tests and observation, I was pronounced schizophrenic.

Should I believe doctors who said my mind was unreliable and my only hope medications? Was this my new life, with no possibility of something more? Or should I start asking questions?

Today I no longer have a prescription for antipsychotic medications, Social Security deposits no money in my account, and I haven’t been in a

mental health facility in fifteen years. How did I get from there to here? How did I prove a team of psychiatric medical experts completely wrong about me?

Outside Mental Health is part of the answer.

For three years, I trusted doctors. I only got worse. In the hospital I was asked about a “family history of mental illness.” I was never asked about a family history of trauma. My father was a foot soldier in the Korean War, and my mother is a sexual abuse survivor; I endured neglect and bullying at home and at school; I grew up amid the racial conflict of the South. I began to ask if war and social oppression could be part of why I was so terrified, why I fell into frozen states and couldn’t move or speak. What if my “catatonia” was a way to protect myself, not just a proof of a diseased brain? Doctors asked me if I had “auditory hallucinations.” But what if I was having spiritual experiences, what if I was hearing the tormented echoes of my ancestors? Maybe the visions I saw really were coded messages, messages about the world I live in. And what does it mean to be told you have a “thought disorder” in a world that is so disordered by violence, consumerism, and fear?

The diagnosis of incurable mental illness is not something you just leave behind when the hospital discharges you: the bracelet can be cut off, but the identity remains. As I began to ask questions, I realized I had to regain trust, not just in other people, but in my own mind. I desperately wanted to get better, but at each step my schizophrenia diagnosis blocked the way, making me doubt myself. If I didn’t find my own voice, the doctors’ verdict could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thinking for myself meant unlearning what the hospital said, and defying the relentless narratives of hopelessness that saturate our media culture.

We consider people with a severe mental disorder to be incapable of taking charge of their own destiny by exploring, learning, and finding a way. But this is a stereotype. There are growing numbers of people around the world who have survived psychosis and hospitalization and moved on, all kinds of people, from all kinds of backgrounds, with privilege and without, using many different strategies and all sharing one commonality: we are human. And like all living creatures, human beings have an innate capacity, even if it is just a potential, for survival, growth,

and healing. Finding a life beyond madness, like finding a way out of any human suffering, is possible for anyone.

When I found friendship in the psychiatric survivor movement, my recovery picked up momentum. Drawing on my past training in journalism, I started the community radio program *Madness Radio*, seeking out conversations with people in the “mad movement” whom I learned about in support groups, gatherings, and workshops. Those interviews sustained me, gave me clues, and unlocked doors, reinforcing what I had learned and inspiring me to continue my search. A different understanding of my madness and “psychosis” emerged. I had nearly lost everything, and the stories on *Madness Radio* and now in these pages were making it possible to re-create a life for myself.

I interviewed more than 150 people, all of them excluded from usual mental health media coverage. Patients described how, like I was, they were abused in the name of care, even as they also soared to extraordinary spiritual and creative heights. Journalists helped me understand Big Pharma’s corruption of science in the name of profits, and explained a more honest approach to what is known and not known about the mind. Researchers overturned conventional wisdom about medications and supported my choice not to take psychiatric drugs. Spiritual seekers conjured connections between mysticism, meditation, and psychosis. My own religious sensibility and indigenous heritage as mixed-race Choctaw Indian were reawakened, and I taught myself to listen for messages and purpose in what were labeled my delusions, paranoia, and voices.

With each *Madness Radio* conversation, I became more convinced: to find out who I was after being told I was schizophrenic, I would have to keep going outside “mental health.” As I met fear and discrimination around my diagnosis, it became clear that the term “schizophrenic” stood in the way of my being a full human being. And it became clear that a world that would label anyone schizophrenic, even in the name of help, is a world that itself is crazy.

So I was left with the question: What place outside mental health could possibly be “outside” enough? More and more, I shed my identity as a mental patient and got closer to a new vantage point on myself. I expanded my support group work and began leading trainings and class-

es, earned a degree, and started working with individuals and their families as a counselor.

But I also faced a growing, and surprising, paradox.

The stronger I became in reality, and the more I became capable and my “functioning” improved, the more something unexpected happened. My altered states and different mental experiences that got called “psychosis” did not go away. They became *more* real. I found more and more reason to believe in the truth of my “symptoms.” I wasn’t recovering from “madness.” Something far more mysterious was happening.

The hospitals and the threat of my label have faded. Today I am less isolated, more in control, and less terrified than I was that day when a team of doctors gathered around a consulting table to pronounce me schizophrenic. But my most “florid” symptoms of that time, my unusual beliefs, my conversations with voices, my paranoia, my contemplation of suicide, my silent inward withdrawal, my perception of prophetic omens... all of that remains. Professionals made their case for my severe mental illness diagnosis by presenting symptoms as evidence, but that evidence is all still part of me today, even as I live outside any psychiatric care or treatment.

I am doing something completely different from what medical and mass media narratives say I should be doing: I am regaining my well-being in the world while at the same time losing touch more and more with “reality.” My madness is leading me somewhere that is *more* real than what everyone seems to say is real. I’m leaving behind not just the doctors’ diagnosis, but also the mechanistic, soulless, and “objective” reality that gave rise to it.

I have begun to arrive somewhere very far outside mental health indeed.

“WHO’S THAT COMING IN THROUGH THE BACK DOOR?” When I was a kid, every Sunday we visited my grandparents’ small family home on “the Boulevard,” and every Sunday we passed by the front door. My father led us instead up the narrow side stairway to the kitchen, and when we rang the doorbell it wasn’t my grandmother or grandfather who greeted us. The door opened and we were welcomed and hugged first by the cook and housekeeper, who were black, or “colored,” as was still said at

my grandparents' home in South Carolina in 1973.

I thought everyone who came to visit passed the front door and walked up the back steps like we did, until one day I saw my uncle's family arrive: they rang the front doorbell, and then gave a proper greeting to my grandparents. They did not hug the housekeeper first.

I didn't understand it, but each time my father led us up the back steps we were somehow at odds with the normal reality of my grandparents' house. This mysterious ritual was never mentioned, but I do remember a few times hearing my grandmother, with a strange tone in her voice, shout from the middle bedroom, "Who's that coming in through the back door?"

My grandmother knew, after so many Sundays, who was there. So why the question? And why did I hear a hint of something in her raised voice, a disguised satisfaction? She was, after all, calling loud attention to my father's unusual act, which was perhaps better passed over in silence.

The odd sound of that satisfaction resounded deep within me. My family fought again and again; growing up I lived in a frightening, ongoing tumult. But the fights were strange and incomplete, exploding out of tension that never eased and then suspended by obedience that was never talked about. And while this obedience was at times brutally physical, it was not total. In defiance of my grandfather's loud bigotry, my father had black friends and chose to marry my mother, a woman with mixed racial ancestry. So was my father's herding us through the back door another, subtle act of opposition? And was my grandmother's raised voice and "Who's that coming in through the back door?" a disguised act of allegiance with her son against my grandfather?

And why were the silver and crystal locked away in the mirrored cabinet, never taken out, for any occasion?

Social change in the South, like change everywhere, takes place in the quiet, tense gestures, as well as the grand dramas. My father was by no means anti-racist and my grandmother was by no means feminist. But the rise of Civil Rights, the challenge to Jim Crow, and the stirrings of the women's movement all played out along the fault lines of torn families and micro-conflicts, not just in the clamor of protests on the television news. When I heard my grandmother call out, "Who's that com-

ing in through the back door?" I heard more in what was not said than in what was said.

Before I knew much about life, I was terrified by complex and confusing patterns of obedience and resistance that went along with the violence around me. There was raging abuse at home, and then my father, mother, brother and I would cross town for a polite dinner with our grandparents, as if nothing had happened. I listened to whites and blacks converse warmly with each other face-to-face, then heard, when they thought I was too young to understand, bitterness and rage spill out behind each other's backs. I saw my father screaming at my mother one moment and then smiling at her the next. I was bullied at the same school where I was praised for my success. Conversations avoided what everyone felt: code switching and caricature swirled unnoticed through the language, as if everyone were performing a dance choreographed in trance. Mysterious allegiances puzzled me, exchanges of secret conflicts and unspoken truths. And for some reason when others looked the other way, I found these knots of communication uncannily irresistible: they hinted at a reality much more compelling than the one openly acknowledged and spoken about, a reality calling to me.

Many fathers bring their sons into a world of violence and give them no guidance to navigate it. And some fathers are themselves lost in a phantasmagorical maze of complicity and dissimulation, both victim and perpetrator, a self-denial that can be far more oppressive than cruder forms of coercion. For violence to continue in the structural fabric of day-to-day life, as racism in the South (and the rest of the US) has since slavery time and as domestic violence continues, it must be wrapped in silence, in mute assent and carefully negotiated acceptance. The simple act of a Sunday visit becomes strange and incomprehensible to a young boy. Something was reaching me for in all those messages that I heard and felt. And so maybe to find my way to "reality," I had to leave behind what other people claimed was real.

TODAY I WILL MEET SOMEONE FOR THE FIRST TIME. I make breakfast, and last night's dream rings in my imagination: I was with my brother, we were playing together outside.

As I recall the strange atmosphere of the dream, I break a single egg into a bowl, and look down. I see two yolks there, fused together, both from the same shell.

I arrive at my counseling office, and the woman I meet says why she has come to see me. She tells me her birth was traumatic. She tells me that her twin sister died when she was born, and, she says, her sister is still haunting her.

Psychiatrists haven't helped; they labeled her delusional.

I sit listening to this anguished woman talk about her twin sister. I recall the dream about my brother from the night before, and I remember the egg I broke this morning. I know that it is only the habit of what we call "real" that makes us think there are two people in this room, instead of there being one person here, meeting themselves for the first time.

I REMEMBER THE DAY MY FATHER FIRST ENDED HIS SILENCE about his mental hospitalizations. He had never before told me of his own psychiatric diagnosis, had never told me about the shock therapy, the confinement, the beatings, or the drugging. There had been unspoken signs, comments overheard or tones of voice exchanged in strange moments between my mother and father, but it was all hidden, carried quietly underneath his grim, traumatic scars. It was too shameful, too painful, despite the fact that, if I had learned about it sooner, it might have helped me make sense of the chaotic and often terrifying way he treated us.

The day my father first spoke to me about his past as a psychiatric patient was just after the first time I myself had been hospitalized, and he never spoke about it again. This is how he said it: He looked at me with his eyes and face set in a subtle grimace, struggling not to speak and also forcing himself to speak. "I was in mental hospitals," he said. And then, with restrained fury, daring me to defy his command, he stared even more closely. "You knew that."

No, I didn't know that.

Or maybe I did, in that other reality, the reality that was there but we acted as if wasn't. In that moment of revelation about his hospitalizations, he was domineering and brutal, and he was familiar, repeating an established pattern of abuse towards me, turning my own beliefs and

reality inside out, inducing me with a false truth. I was to believe that I already knew what I knew I didn't know, but now I did know it, because he commanded it. He was, in a way, driving me crazy. But there was also something more.

That moment was, for my father, also a rare act of trust and vulnerability. Just to have said that much, or that little, was a risk of love. I do wish that, instead of demanding that I join in his lying to himself and join the lies about psychiatric abuse that pass for normal, my father had apologized for not speaking with me sooner. I do wish my father had put more faith in our bond, had relied on me more and trusted me more with his emotional honesty. But, just as he never defied his own father in front of me, at the same time he did marry the woman he loved and did guide us through the back door on Sundays to greet the black staff first. My father's decision to remain silent about his own psychiatric traumas was a complex negotiation of survival. It was his way between the violence of normalcy and the imagined greater violence of that other reality. Maybe the openness I wanted would have let something in, something between him and his father, or something in between him and me, something unspeakable and unimaginable, something that might have been too much.

And so in these and many other small gestures and silent conversations, there was a teaching for me, and some answers to the question of what does it mean to be called crazy in a crazy world. Because there is no world more crazy than a world of violence accepted as normal.

THIS WEEK IS BAD. I carry a physical object stuck in my heart, pinched and weighted, sharp edges. I am short of breath, I keep thinking of killing myself. Isn't there an expiration date on this? Numb, for days now I've been numb, can't work, just sleeping, can't talk to anyone. Now I'm in crisis.

In the late afternoon, I realize my stomach is aching, so I drive to a restaurant. I can't leave the car. I sit staring at the dust on the windshield. And there is a familiar stranger sitting with me, a terrifying stranger, and I want to leave the car but can't, I'm a hostage. A demon is there and wants to kill me. No, there is no demon, demons aren't real. I can convince myself. No, I can't convince myself. But if there is no demon, then also there are

no kind spirits to protect me, there is only the truth that I deserve to die. I am between worlds. Yes. There is something in the car with me.

And then all I can think to do is apologize, to myself, to the demon, to my parents. An apology to the spirits that aren't really there? Just imagination. Nothing but death and wanting to die. But I keep apologizing; I plead, I yell, the windows rolled up, the hood of my sweatshirt hiding my tears from anyone in the parking lot. The demon roars at me, the dead are talking. I start to scream. I scream until I am hoarse. I start to weep. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Darkness, and it's cold outside, but even though I've been sitting in a car with the engine off I'm warm, inside I am warm. I take a breath, and my breath opens and opens more. I'm not gasping, and I'm calmer. No pinched, sharp stone in my heart. I look around in the car, there is no one here. No demon. For now, I don't want to die. Face wet from tears, I'm done with my apology. I'm not sorry. I'm just hungry.

There is no light in the car and no streetlamp in the parking lot. I sent several text messages an hour ago, *please, I don't want to be alone*, but got no reply. Saturday night, no one available. But now, in the car, breathing deeply and done with apologies, my phone lights up, and my friend is calling me.

He tells me he just got my message. He is on the road, in Oklahoma, driving across the state, and he had an impulse to stop at a roadside shop with a sign offering healing. He didn't call me back sooner, because he was still in the session with the healer.

My mother grew up in Oklahoma, and my friend is driving through Oklahoma. He says he is on Indian land. "Wait," he asks, "what tribe did you say your mother has ancestry from?" I tell him the Choctaw nation. And he says the land he is driving through, where he stopped for healing a thousand miles away, is the Choctaw nation. He was there at the same time I was screaming in my car, with a healing of my own.

Either it's just a coincidence, or it's a meaningful way of being in the world. It could be a reality just as true as any culture's reality. A different reality. And it could be a reality where I am not a schizophrenic with a thought disorder, a reality where it all means something else.

JUST BEFORE MY FIRST HOSPITALIZATION, in 1992, I was writing an academic journal essay about the history and future of the environmental movement. Lifelong patterns of emotional extremes and traumatic events, family violence, and school bullying were catching up with me, now combined with sleepless nights in a room strewn with stacks of photocopies and library books. As I wrote, my essay started to take on enormous weight. Was I onto some great discovery or vital insight? Could I unlock human liberation and impact our survival as a species? I felt uncanny inspiration, a force propelling me forward with each word I put down on the page.

There on my desk beside my research was a copy of the old photography news magazine *Life*. On the cover was an image of the planet Mars, with the large headline, “OUR NEXT HOME?” The cover began to haunt me. A message. Psychosis is often described as a “break” with reality, but this was the dawning of a different reality. There was an approaching presence, as I stared at the photo of Mars on the cover of *Life*, and the three words there, over and over.

“OUR NEXT HOME?”

That headline, and the god of war. The Scottish critical psychiatrist R.D. Laing, whose writing shaped the psychiatric survivor movement, tells this story in his autobiography, *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*: When he was in Glasgow medical school, a physiology lecturer showed the class X-ray films of people eating and digesting food. The film struck Laing as odd, and then he realized why. How, he asked the lecturer, was such a film possible, since X-rays are deadly and the prolonged exposure needed to create movie images would certainly kill the person being filmed? The lecturer looked at him and replied, simply: the films were made during World War II, created by doctors working for the military. They were from concentration camps. They were films of Jewish prisoners experimented on, and killed. And then, to Laing’s horror and with the quiet assent of the classroom full of students, the lecturer continued the class.

I didn’t understand it at the time, but as I looked at the cover of *Life* magazine in the middle of the night, alone in my room and spiraling deeper into an altered state, I felt some of the same horror that Laing must have felt. The normal, the ordinary, a medical school lecture, the cover of a popular magazine, was also a grotesque testimony to barbarous vio-

lence. One of the worst crimes of World War II, medical torture, became a convenient instrument of graduate instruction without any acknowledgment, without any pause. And here, on my desk, was the mass extinction of life on Earth as just a reason to relocate to other planets, a headline in a magazine. Was I, like Laing, discovering that “reality” is violence called normal? Was this realization pointing to somewhere else, to a different reality, a place where people who get called “crazy” might actually know more than the “normal” people do, know more about the violent truths of the world we live in?

What is that place? Can we go there, instead of abandoning Earth for the barren planet of the god of war? Instead of living in the reality of normalized violence, not just the South, under Jim Crow, not just medical torturers, not just families torn by fighting, but everywhere?

“I was puzzled, and uneasy,” Laing writes. “Hardly any of my psychiatric colleagues seemed puzzled or uneasy. This made me even more puzzled and uneasy.”

Years later, I realized what had awakened within me that terrifying night. That night was a crisis, a culmination of years of wrenching inner conflict, and a fall into deep pain. It was a break with reality. And something horrifying seized me: I am human in an inhuman world. I cannot choose to leave behind this heart or its truth, and there may be a price. It may mean being taken to a place where everyone says I am crazy, it may mean going mad.

ON THE HOSPITAL’S LOCKED FOURTH FLOOR, I drew an elaborate map in colored pencil, and each imaginary location had a rhyme alongside it. *A swampy bit / to hike around / watch out or sink / into the ground.* One drawing was pinned on a bulletin board by the dining area, like they do in children’s classrooms. After dinner one night, I noticed two of the staff interested in what I had created, pointing to my words with enjoyment and reading the little poems I had written. I walked up behind them. “I made that,” I said, in a rare moment of reaching out for contact. They both stopped talking and froze. Neither of them had noticed me there, and now they didn’t respond. They turned to me but didn’t look me in the eye or say a word. And while I stood there in shock, they walked away, as

if they hadn't heard me, as if I were invisible.

What institutionalized, normalized violence could make them act like that?

WHEN I WAS A KID GROWING UP IN SOUTH CAROLINA the reality of violence and power that impacted me so deeply was not spoken about. This reality made its way in through coded messages, and through subtle defiances. Through the back door. And so this book is full of back doors. The contributors gathered here hold the possibility that the way we have been shown, the way of normalizing violence and telling people that madness is in their heads, is not the way we have to go.

I am not among those who see mental illness as a myth, or think the only problem is with doctors and their treatments. *Outside Mental Health* is a call to rethink madness and our responses to it, not to neglect those in pain. Human suffering and madness are real. People do lose touch. During my time of deepest torment, I was so incapacitated and impaired that a disability check and housing subsidy were lifelines to survival. As much as I want to change the mental health system, I am grateful for the support it did give me. Nor do I demonize medications, as harmful as they can be. I have seen meds help a wide diversity of people, and I embrace a harm reduction view, advocating for each person to find their own way.

At the same time, *Outside Mental Health*, like the *Madness Radio* interviews it's based on, emphasizes what has been missing. This book doesn't try to be balanced; it tries to be *balancing*. These are voices left out by other media, voices that helped me and others find our way past a medical diagnosis and towards a more human understanding of ourselves. And because each chapter represents a moment in my own learning, I'm certainly limited by my own background and experience. There are many things that this book doesn't do, many perspectives that I wish I had been able to include. *Outside Mental Health* is a snapshot, not an overview, and offers new visions of madness, not a single new vision of what madness is.

As you explore these interviews, guest essays, and some of my own writing all gathered from ten years of *Madness Radio*, I invite you to join a conversation, a conversation that is much broader, and more honest, than

the one we have been having. I became who I am by listening to these voices and learning from these different visions. I hope *Outside Mental Health* takes you to new places and opens up new questions, for you, for the people you care about, and for us all.

“Who’s that coming in through the back door?” ■