



# Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing

By Susan Schellenberg, Rosemary Barnes

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In *Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing*, artist Susan Schellenberg, a former **psychiatric patient**, and psychologist Rosemary Barnes relate their own stories, conversations, and reflections concerning the contributions and limitations of conventional mental health care and their collaborative search for alternatives such as **art therapy**. Patient and doctor each describe personal decisions about the mental health system and the creative life possibilities that emerged when mind, body, and spirit were committed to well-being and healing.

Interwoven patient/doctor narratives explain conventional care, highlight **critical steps in healing**, and explore varied perspectives through conversations with experts in psychiatry, feminist approaches, art, storytelling, and business. The book also includes reproductions of Susan's mental health records and **dream paintings**.

This book will be important for consumers of **mental health care** wishing to understand the conventional system and develop the best quality of life. Rich personal detail, critical perspective, clinical records, and art reproductions make the book engaging for a general audience and stimulating as a teaching resource in nursing, social work, psychology, psychiatry, and **art therapy**.

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**Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing** By Susan Schellenberg, Rosemary Barnes **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

``What sets this book apart is the insight it provides into patient and clinician experiences in the parallel and often overlapping narratives. Schellenberg and Barnes have never had a patient-clinician relationship, but their identities as each inform their friendship, and their experiences individually and together fuel each other's transformation. This is a story of people exploring their past in a quest to understand who they are and where they are headed.... War is a metaphor for madness in this book?the problematic approach to recovery depicted as an epic battle against unwanted parts of oneself. Schellenberg and Barnes' stories advocate exploring and embracing ourselves wholly. Schellenberg shares pages from her files as a psychiatric patient, which, she says, allows the medical professionals she interacted with to tell their side of the story. Reading the charts is surreal. It is gut-wrenching to see the impersonal nature of the notes, and to realize the profound impact that these superficial, subjective observations had on Schellenberg's life.... The book is compellingly frank and accessible. The stories are intensely personal. Schellenberg and Barnes share with such honesty that it is easy to become immersed. These are stories about truth?the courage to look for it and the healing that comes from embracing it." (Jane Shulman *Canadian Women's Health Network*, April 2014)

``*Committed to the Sane Asylum* is much more than a biography of mental illness. It elaborates on a very personal theme and, through a variety of means, makes it universal. There is straightforward narrative set against historical events--1969 to the present. The reader is permitted a look at confidential hospital records and is privileged to see representations of imagined reveries conveyed by a gifted artist. We read extensive dialogues with experts. There are numerous quotations. In addition, there is a parallel story of a mental health professional who experiences and relays the changes in diagnostic perspectives, dynamic inferences, causal attributions, and psychotherapeutic stances that have evolved in the field of mental health, for better or for worse, over the last forty years. This is psychobiography with a difference, written and illustrated by talented contributors to a landscape in need of exploration." (Mary V. Seeman)

#### About the Author

Artist and writer **Susan Schellenberg** began her career as a public nurse. In 1980, she committed to healing from a 1969 psychosis and ten-year course of anti-psychotic drugs and to keeping a visual-art and written record of her dreams and inner journey as her mind healed. Susan's *Shedding Skins*, **dream art** with text, is on permanent exhibit in the main lobby at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

Psychologist **Rosemary Barnes** has worked at Toronto General and Women's College Hospitals and been affiliated with the University of Toronto, York University, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She has published on suicide, HIV conditions, and residential schools, and has provided expert opinion in legal cases relating to lesbian/gay issues and trauma. She is currently in independent practice.

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Remarks from the Launch of *Committed to the Sane Asylum*

Edward Day Gallery, Toronto, Canada, January 21, 2009

Susan Schellenberg and Rosemary Barnes

**Susan:** Hello, I'm Susan Schellenberg.

**Rosemary:** I'm Rosemary Barnes.

**Susan:** Once, a long time ago, Susan exhibited her art at Women's College Hospital as part of an event honouring the December 6, 1989 massacre of women in Montreal. Susan asked Rosemary to read over the wall text which described her experiences of healing from mental illness. Rosemary said to Susan,

**Rosemary:** "What you've written is very interesting, but it's way too long. You should make it shorter for the exhibit and write a book." Then, so long ago that no one can remember exactly when it occurred, Susan asked Rosemary,

**Susan:** "Do you want to write a book with me?" Rosemary said yes. Susan gave Rosemary *Conversations Before the End of Time*, an art history book of conversations that asked, "What, given state of the planet should art be at the end of the millennium?" The book inspired Susan and Rosemary to include in their book conversations about mental health care with Susan's experiences as the case history.

**Rosemary:** Conversations with mental health professionals, feminists, artists and a business woman would explain diverse perspectives on mental health as the 1990s came to an end and the new millennium approached. A book would be easy, completed within six months. In 1996, psychiatrist Dr. Mary Seeman, psychologist Dr. Brenda Toner, sociologist and nurse Dr. Marg Malone, artist Paul Hogan, storyteller the late Helen Porter and businesswoman and sociologist Dr. Gail Regan all gave hours of their time for conversations.

**Susan:** Transcripts were prepared and these people again gave generously of their time to review and revise these transcripts. A manuscript was prepared, a publisher sought and after many inquiries, a press agreed to review the manuscript. Reviewers?unknown to Susan and Rosemary and unavailable to be thanked publicly?made excellent, and positive suggestions for changes, while the press decided it was not the best kind of book for their marketing abilities.

**Rosemary:** Susan and Rosemary were discouraged, but revised the manuscript. In 1998, Susan's *Shedding Skins* art was installed as a permanent exhibit in the lobby of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Clarke site. Jean Simpson, Chief Operating Officer at the Centre, and Dr. Paul Garfinkel, President of the Centre and Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, greatly encouraged both Susan's art instillation and the joint book project.

**Susan:** New insights and further revisions called for an additional conversation with psychiatrist Dr. Cheryl Rowe. Friends and colleagues were asked to discuss the project or?a big favour?to read and comment on the manuscript. Maureen Edgar, Dr. Sarah Maddocks, Dr. Gail Regan and Dr. Cheryl Rowe all read the entire manuscript and suggested changes. Their generosity and encouragement lifted Rosemary and Susan's flagging spirits and inspired further revisions. In 2000, Susan Macphail, Louise Fagan and Elaine Pollett of the Women's Mental Health Action and Research Coalition arranged for Susan and Rosemary to give a presentation in London, Ontario. The audience's standing ovation offered enormous encouragement. Subsequent invitations from Brian McKinnon at Alternatives Mental Health Services, Dr. Anne Oakley at the Women's College Hospital Brief Psychotherapy Centre for Women and Dr. Arpita Biswas at the Toronto East Counselling and Support Services made further presentations possible and provided valuable feedback.

**Rosemary:** Letters of inquiry, proposals and occasionally boxes of manuscript flew out to publishers, agents, well-placed contacts. People listened and read, made supportive comments and explained, “unfortunately, we cannot proceed with this project”. Something was wrong. More specific inquiries uncovered that the manuscript, while promising, was still a “mess” as one professional artist informed Susan and Rosemary while speaking words of great kindness and strongly urging them to continue. A search was begun for a professional editor. Author Eve Zaremba suggested artist and filmmaker Lynn Fernie, who suggested Pedlar Press publisher Beth Follett who suggested editor and poet Jacqueline Larson.

**Susan:** Jacqueline Larson read the manuscript, conveyed that she understood what Susan and Rosemary were trying to do and agreed to take on the project. Rosemary, Jacqueline and Susan met for ginger tea and desserts at Susan's home. Jacqueline's comments were homeopathic. Evenings of delightful conversations, great encouragement and critiques so small, precise and gently delivered that you'd wonder if anything had happened. These evenings transformed the manuscript “mess” into a suitable submission.

**Rosemary:** Jacqueline helped Rosemary and Susan to submit to the Wilfrid Laurier University Press, where Acquisitions Editor Lisa Quinn and two further reviewers?again unknown to Susan and Rosemary?made further excellent suggestions for changes and agreed that the manuscript should be published. Lisa and marketing specialist Leslie Macredie helped Rosemary and Susan to feel welcome at the Press and to conclude a contract for publication. Jacqueline edited the final manuscript. Chris Hoy and David Schellenberg designed a striking cover, Dr. Mary Seeman provided a strong jacket endorsement.

**Susan:** Nancy Webb did proofreading with a fine-toothed comb. And so the story came to an end as Managing Editor Rob Kohlmeier and other staff at the Wilfrid Laurier University Press transformed this complex manuscript with multiple voices, clinical records and art reproductions, into a beautifully designed and easily readable book.

**Rosemary:** This book was published in the cold of early December 2008 and tonight is being launched. We'd like to thank Leslie Macredie and Clare Hitchens for their help with marketing; Susan's nephew has already found *Committed to the Sane Asylum* at a bookstore in Winnipeg. We'd like to thank Mary Sue Rankin, owner of the Edward Day Gallery, for providing this beautiful space, Chris Hoy and David Schellenberg for producing the lovely electronic and print invitations to this event and Kelly, Brett and Vincent for their assistance with arrangements today and tonight.

**Susan:** We hope you will join us in thanking the renowned Toronto Jazz bassist Rob Clutton for tonights music. [pause] Many of you are friends, colleagues and family who have been important in our lives for many years. We thank all of you for coming and for all your support, sometimes unknowingly, for this project.

**Rosemary:** We'd now like to read briefly from the Introduction to *Committed to the Sane Asylum*.

**Susan:**

“There will be a place for Susan after the war, Mrs. Regan,” was the doctor's response when my mother asked if something could be done about my artistic nature. It was 1939, I was five and the Second World War had just begun. Armed with my father's promise that a day would come when pictures of war would no longer be on the front pages of newspapers, I settled into dreaming as I waited for war to end.

Close to VE day, I dreamed a marriage between two fish. The fish dressed in traditional human wedding attire sailed off to their honeymoon in a seahorse-drawn carriage. My grade five teacher and mother, disturbed by the excellence of my fish composition, jointly concluded that despite my effort, a sixty rather than one hundred percent grade would better serve the taming of my imagination and good of my soul.

There was no let up in my Irish Catholic grooming. While the seeds of the Vietnam war were being sown and the Korean and Cold wars were raging, I trained as a nurse, travelled the obligatory three months in Europe, then broke with the Regan tradition of marrying Irish by falling in love with a first generation German Canadian. While my husband worked at excelling in business, I gave birth to the first four of our five children in four years, helped nurse my ill and dying parents and gave my all to being a glamorous corporate wife. Though exhausted, I blossomed.

In 1969, as an estimated 1 million Americans across the US participated in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, protest rallies and peace vigils, I too began to protest but my demonstrations took the form of a psychosis.

I was solely treated with prescribed anti-psychotic drugs during my three-week stay in Toronto's, Lakeshore Psychiatric and for the ten years that followed. My former husband and I understood psychiatrists had explained my illness as schizophrenia. My willingness to take the drugs was influenced by a nursing background that taught schizophrenia was a chronic, irreversible, degenerative illness controlled solely by drugs and by my four small children's need of a well mother. Additional reasons for my drug taking included the mirroring of graphic and disturbing extremes in schizophrenic behaviours that I witnessed during my nursing career as well as during my stay at Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, the lack of any other explanation or meaning about my diagnosis being given to me by my caregivers, and my willingness to place sole authority for my health in doctors' hands. The combined effect of these motivating factors contributed to my certainty that I suffered from a chronic illness with no hope for recovery.

Ten years later, while Quebec was considering a split from the rest of Canada, I too threatened to split apart. My suicidal urges triggered by anti-psychotic drug side effects began to manifest and accelerate. On one of the darkest days in that period, the smallest of acts that suffice to say here represented my first ever act in my own best interests, led me to find a psychiatrist willing to supervise my withdrawal from the drugs. Soon after my decision to withdraw from drugs, I made deep commitments to heal my mind from the causes of my psychosis, heal my body from the drug side effects and to paint a record of my dreams as my mind and body healed.

### **Rosemary:**

Healing was never mentioned when I began training as a clinical psychologist, about seven years after Susan was hospitalized with a psychotic break. Though my graduate studies in psychology had prepared me to become a university professor, scarce employment opportunities forced a career change. In September 1976, I began a post-doctoral fellowship in clinical psychology at a prestigious university-affiliated psychiatric hospital, an apprenticeship of the kind undertaken by students in every health profession both then and now.

Had any one mentioned "healing", which few did in mental health settings, I would have considered the word flowery, quaint or quirky with connotations of primitive or marginal beliefs and practices, as in "faith healing". Had I been challenged, I would have argued that patients improved, so clinical practices must be healing; a poetic word such as "healing" was simply inappropriate in a scientifically grounded professional setting. I would not have recognized clinical constructs and terminology to be obscuring lacunae in theory and practice.

In 1969, as Susan protested through psychosis, I protested by falling in love with one woman, then another. As I had grown up in a conservative religious American family, I understood these experiences to be equivalent to mental illness and deeply shameful. By 1976, I reluctantly reconciled myself to the conclusion that such feelings meant I was lesbian. I met other lesbians and gay men in the 1970s ferment of the gay liberation and feminist movements. Lesbian-feminist groups, new friendships and the electric creativity of

the day allowed me for the first time to locate myself with confidence in the larger world. Feminist ideas infused my life with new meanings and possibilities. I learned feminist and anti-psychiatry critiques of mental health care and resolved to do be a better professional than those I read about.

For some years, I had a professional career that I understood and enjoyed. After postdoctoral training, I worked for nine years as staff psychologist at a university-affiliated general hospital and matured as a clinician and researcher. In 1986, I moved to a smaller general hospital as head of the psychology department and moved to address the split between my personal and professional lives by joining a small informal group of hospital professionals working to nurture feminist values in health care. I met Susan when she and I worked in the same political faction during the turbulence surrounding a proposed merger between the small hospital and a larger health care facility.

Then, I became lost. My ability to live with the split between feminist values and professional career commitments eroded as I became increasingly unconvinced that hospital mental health care gave paramount concern to human well-being. I felt cynical, exhausted and angry about my apparently successful career.

### **Susan and Rosemary:**

When experiencing unbearable despair, we, Susan and Rosemary, first with wordless groping, later with increasing clarity, committed to live differently, to engage in a creative undertaking. We turned within and examined our lives to locate our most deepest values, then worked to honour these values in our day-to-day thinking, relationships and activities. We came to prize living “with an eye to delight”. We focused, to put it in health care lingo, on well being and quality of life.

If the shift to valuing pleasure sounds oh-so-lovely (cue sunshine, birds chirping, soft music), please excuse us for being completely misleading. Read on and you will find that we both moved in desperation across dark and terrifying landscapes, certain only that we could not go on as we had before. We will tell of inching along shadowy precipices of fear and doubt, harrowing encounters with outer and inner critics, lonely nights in moonless landscapes, painful deaths of false selves and other trials too terrible and numerous to mention just yet. . . .

We met in the context of local hospital politics, a kind of war zone, have worked together as friends and never been in a doctor/patient relationship. However, our ability to learn from one another, to collaborate, to nurture each other, to appreciate strengths and to balance weaknesses is an example of the honest, mutually respectful, interdependent relationship we see as essential to healing and well being.

We hope that this book shows in practice what we deeply believe, that emotional disturbance?and who among us has not experienced this in some form??can be best addressed by living with an eye to delight and commitment to the creative, relational, earthy process of healing.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Gerri Townsend:**

Spent a free a chance to be fun activity to try and do! A lot of people spent their sparetime with their family, or their own friends. Usually they performing activity like watching television, likely to beach, or picnic in the park. They actually doing same task every week. Do you feel it? Would you like to something different to fill your own free time/ holiday? Might be reading a book could be option to fill your cost-free time/

holiday. The first thing that you ask may be what kinds of guide that you should read. If you want to attempt look for book, may be the reserve untitled Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing can be very good book to read. May be it may be best activity to you.

**Valerie Little:**

A lot of people always spent their free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them loved ones or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent these people free time just watching TV, as well as playing video games all day long. If you wish to try to find a new activity honestly, that is look different you can read any book. It is really fun for you personally. If you enjoy the book which you read you can spent the whole day to reading a e-book. The book Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing it is very good to read. There are a lot of those who recommended this book. We were holding enjoying reading this book. Should you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy the e-book. You can m0ore very easily to read this book from the smart phone. The price is not too expensive but this book provides high quality.

**Juli Gadberry:**

Is it you actually who having spare time subsequently spend it whole day by means of watching television programs or just telling lies on the bed? Do you need something new? This Committed to the Sane Asylum: Narratives on Mental Wellness and Healing can be the answer, oh how comes? A fresh book you know. You are therefore out of date, spending your extra time by reading in this brand new era is common not a nerd activity. So what these ebooks have than the others?

**Casey Russell:**

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