Struggle in Movement: The Icarus Project and Radical Organizing for Many Realities

The Icarus Project

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Authors Note:

This article was written during an intense period of organizational change within The Icarus Project. A large shift is currently taking place in which space is opening up for more voices to guide the project, which involves a lot of stepping back for some folks, stepping up for others, and stepping side to side for just about everyone.

Not only are we in a heightened state of change, we're at such a place in this process that it felt unfair to try to document the day-to-day work of The Icarus Project, or to hold up our everyday functioning as a model. It also felt premature to document the shapes we're morphing into, 'cause what those are is still being determined, and there are a lot of hands in that clay.

So this piece glances at where we've been in the last few months and what it is we see the project participating in. As you read it, know that you are witnessing our evolution!

Introduction: The Icarus Project

In defining the nations' power in relation to its subjects, Michel Foucault describes "a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 137). Those of us labeled with mental illnesses—those of us that suffer and rejoice in madness—too often bear the wrath of this power and suffer more from persecution by systems than we do from the torture of our own brains. The Icarus Project (TIP) is an organization engaged in struggle to make sure the sacrifice of the mad will not be ignored.

TIP works to bring a discussion of mental health into community spaces and to make narratives of internal struggle part of narratives of collective struggle. As an organization, we are mindfully creating our own narratives, authoring the documents that build our histories, and crafting future realities from our desires.

We are a radical mental health collective founded by people who experience extreme states that are commonly labeled as Bipolar Disorder and other psychiatric illnesses. We believe that conversations about social justice are incomplete if they don't include conversations about mental health. We work to resist oppression through community building and the creation of a new language to describe our experiences.

There are thousands of members of TIP's online community, and small numbers of participants in our local organizing and support collectives.[1] TIP is part of the Mad Pride movement and we are allied with radical mental health organizations that have paved the way in this work.

TIP's structure has been evolving since the project's inception. Originally founded by two mad people with a tremendous amount of energy, our young life was shaped by the vital voices of our online community, and also through the hard work of the founding collective members who joined with the initial founders to shift the organization's structure to that of a consensus-based collective.

In the past five years we have published zines about community organizing, a harm reduction guide to

coming off psychiatric drugs, and a larger zine entitled Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness: A Reader and Roadmap of Bipolar Worlds.

The Importance of Guiding Documents in Radical Organizing

TIP has only just begun to draft a roadmap of its own territory. The bifurcated life of an organization with a wild online world and intense, passionate people working on the ground face-to-face and via satellite certainly requires a map: a guide to who's accountable to whom, and for what. Such a document would support the work of the people running support groups, fundraising, writing articles and zines, and traveling the world giving workshops and connecting with other activists.

The reality of working without guiding documents is that people get frustrated, and feel easily slighted and taken for granted. Without a conscious, structurally supported commitment to radicalism, TIP organizers have found harmful tenets of mainstream culture—sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and homo/transphobia—alive and well in the work we do.

Many Narratives for Many Realities

In the early part of 2008, a group of women that participated in TIP gathered to talk about the pattern of sexism in our organization, both as it related to specific individuals and to the organization's larger culture. One of the themes the women in these meetings discussed was that of dominant narrative.

In our society, the narrative of the collective is almost always sublimated to the narrative of the individual, and the narrative of women is too often sublimated to the narrative of men. This pattern of story-making has been replicated in the work of TIP throughout our life, just as it has been visible in so many movements throughout time.

There are many powerful things about narrative, and one of them is that narratives create our realities. A dominant narrative of individual masculine creation and success has the effect of silencing women throughout the world. It took coming to a point of grave desperation in TIP to publicly acknowledge this process of revising and silencing, and to work to transform it into a process of re-visioning and space-making.

As movement builders, our intention is to create new realities. Narrative is a central part of that creation, and TIP's current process of transition toward more power-sharing—creating space for more voices and hands in the work of the organization at every level— is largely an effort to use many narratives, not just one. Every creation story has multiple beginnings.

The story of the radical work of the mad folks in TIP is not a hero's story, and must make space for collective struggle. Our story is one of people creating their own realities. The movements around mental health activism are about self-determination; they're about creating the realities we want to live in, each of us, together and alone. They're about listening to and honoring each other's experiences of reality, the narratives we write to make sense of ourselves and the world around us, as well as the movements we are collaboratively building.

Many Realities, Many Struggles: Mental Health and Social Justice

The work of people in mental health movements is vital to the work of all other radical movements. The discursive creation of "mental illness" works "mental health" into a medical dependency model from which people spend their whole lives struggling to escape. TIP's mission of changing the language of mental illness—crafting speech that is eloquent and descriptive, using words that illustrate not only the gravity of our experiences, but also their velocity, darkness, brilliance, and terror—stands in defiance of the doctors, wardens, and governments who claim we are in their care.

To call a person "sick" and to normalize ideas of "health" is to determine how to relate to and

ultimately punish people whose experiences fall outside the circumscription of acceptable reactions to this crazy and fucked up world. These are acts of social control that reach people far beyond the walls of asylums. We may have been locked up, but you, too, are at the mercy of the same machines that put us behind bars and between hospital sheets. You cannot talk about social justice and not talk about mental health.

Communities often organize in radical ways, around issues like economics, race and war, but when a community member begins to struggle with his/hir/her own mind— or begins to slip into edges of reality unknown to many— that person is sent away to deal with her/hir/his own darkness or light in traditional ways, such as hospitals, parents' homes, and prisons. To break away from a power that seeks to administer and optimize life through the "precise controls and comprehensive regulations" described by Foucault, we must band together in rejecting the options we are given and build new options. Such new options require new concepts of wellness and health, new crisis centers for those of us in pain, and new resources that will keep each one of us safe and able to contribute to the work at hand. This is social justice.

In a world where being different is punished with medication— where those of us who cannot deny our difference lose the right to participate in the daily lives of our friends and family— it is imperative that movements create space for support.

Mental health activism can take the form of direct action and the organization of mental health collectives, but it can take myriad other forms as well. Working "mental health" into larger plans for sustainable organizing structures means acknowledging that madness surrounds us. It means placing the onus for community care on the community, not the individuals who might need their communities to support them. It goes beyond crisis planning and sensitive language, and it applies to all of us who are doing hard work to change this world.

Resistance is challenging. Everyone struggles in the face of hegemonic power and ideas of power. Sustainable organizing—organizing that sustains movement, organizing that sustains people, organizing that will last until the work is done—makes space for our individual pain and fatigue, for our histories and traumas, for our desires and fantasies. We must be able to contextualize all of those fantasies, traumas, fatigues and desires in our communities and our ideas about community without turning to frameworks of sickness and deficiency.

Bibliography:

Foucault, M. (1985) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol 1*; trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

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1 Visit: http://www.theicarusproject.net [link]