

Helen: You're watching Broad Horizons.

Have you ever felt that you are losing the plot? Unraveling a little?

Well, we're speaking today to director of a film called, "Evolving Minds" which gives some practical self-help ideas for people who do feel that they're just unraveling a little bit.

This is Melissa Gunasena.

Mel: Hello, hello.

Helen: (Laughs) So, what's the film about?

Mel: "Evolving Minds" is a guide to self-help techniques that people can use to improve their mental health, and it's also looking at the connection between spirituality and what's called psychosis, and alternatives to psychiatry.

Helen: Hmm. Why did you make it? What's it about?

Mel: Well, I got locked up in mental hospital myself, very much against my will, and none of the information that was... that enabled me to kind of get out and live my life, and live a happy healthy life, none of that information was available to me in mental hospital. The only 'treatment' if you can call it treatment, that was offered, was forcing me to take very toxic pharmaceutical drugs.

Helen: So you felt that there was something else that you would be able to do, and you went out and found out about it.

Mel: Very much so. Yeah. Yeah. In the film, we look at nutritional therapy, shamanic techniques, shamanic trance, and meditation, creative therapies. So, yeah, there are a number of things that people can do.

Helen: It sounds really interesting. Perhaps we could just have a little look at a clip of the film and see, see for ourselves.

Mel: Yeah, yeah.

(Begin clip)

Fancy a nut?

Under the 1983 Mental Health Act, people can be detained and medicated against their will. This is known as being sectioned and can only be enforced in the interests of the patient's own health or safety or with a view to the protection of other people. Contrary to popular belief, most psychotic people are not violent. According to government statistics, you are 13 times more likely to be killed by a 'sane' person you've never met before than by someone with a mental health diagnosis. Despite this, the government wants to bring in new laws to increase compulsory detention, and introduce forced medical treatment in the community. Under the current act a person can only be forced to take medication whilst in hospital. Under the proposed reforms anyone who refuses whilst in the community can be forcibly medicated.

People's human rights are violated every day in these hospitals, all the time, and they go unrecognized. The things on the back of the T-shirt express very clearly what happens to someone once they're linked in with the mental health system as it stands.

(End clip)

Helen: Okay, so these are techniques that you've put into practice yourself and found benefit from, and enabled you to live a so-called normal life.

Mel: Yeah. Yeah. I think the problem with the traditional psychiatric system is that once people get hooked into it, they end up in a kind of hamster wheel of being given very strong drugs, being in hospital, coming out of hospital, having quite a poor quality of life, going back into hospital, and I feel very fortunate in that having been aware of alternatives to psychiatry, and using them. As you say, yeah, I've been able to have a very normal life. (Laughs)

Helen: And the film's been very successful as well. Can you tell me a little bit how it's been received, distributed? I mean, it's an independently made film, isn't it? So, how have you got it seen?

Mel: Well, I've showed it all around the UK, and in all kinds of different places, from hospitals, to cinemas, to working men's clubs, all... yeah, festivals...

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Mel: And also I've run a lot of workshops, training people, using the film. And, I've been invited to go to America, and to go on a tour showing it around the States. That'll be this autumn. And we've also sold it... We've also set it on the Internet, through a number of different sites, including mental health charities.

Helen: Okay, so, just for you to know, that film is available from the Undercurrents site, www.undercurrents.org and it's on the broadhorizons DVD. So that's a... it's a 40 minute film, isn't it?

Mel: Yeah, 45 minute film.

Helen: Yeah. And how's it been received by the psychiatric profession?

Mel: Well, there's actually been a lot more interest recently in looking at spirituality and nutritional therapy. On an academic level, it's received with great interest. It's actually... one psychiatrist even recommended that all mental health professionals should watch it, which is very encouraging. I've also shown it at the Institute of Psychiatry in London.

Helen: And you've written a chapter recently for a book coming out, right?

Mel: Yeah, I've written a chapter recently for a textbook, on mental health, for university students and professionals.

Helen: Do you think it's going to take a while, then, for this to be taken on by mainstream mental health care? Is that what you're saying?

Mel: Yeah, unfortunately... unfortunately, because of the nature of the psychiatric system, and the fact that it is centered around forced medication, compulsory medication, it's... and the fact that they are under resourced and understaffed. On the [walls?], the actual reality is that the system's geared just towards sedating people.

Helen: So your message is just very much just: Do it yourself?

Mel: Very much so, yeah, yeah. I mean, the whole aim of the film is to try and keep people out of psychiatric hospitals, and empowering themselves to look after their own mental health.

Helen: So, once again, though, if you want to take control of your mental health, if you want to find alternatives to the mental health system, and to medication, really, then take a look at "Evolving Minds," available through the Internet, on the Undercurrents website, www.undercurrents.org
And, just to talk about your next project. One of the things that you brought up in the film is... is it sha-mans or shay-mans?

Mel: Well, some people say shay-man, some people say sha-man.

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Mel: I think the correct pronunciation is sha-man. It's a Siberian word, which means a shaman, someone who travels between different realities, in order to do work or sometimes do battle in the spirit world with different spirits, in order to affect change and healing in this reality.

Helen: Okay, so you explore this a little bit in the film "Evolving Minds," but you're planning a trip to explore that a little bit more. Can you tell us?

Mel: Yeah, I'm going to be going to South America, specifically to Peru, to explore shamanic practices, and technique.

Helen: Okay, so perhaps you'll come back, when you've been...

Mel: Yeah.

Helen: And sat with the shamans...

Mel: Yeah.

Helen: And tell us a little bit about that.

Mel: Yeah, I'll tell you all about it.

Helen: Fantastic. Okay. Thank you very much. Melissa Gunasena.