

Famously Shameless

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of the NARPA community by speaking to you tonight. I want to share some thoughts on madness, my own journey of healing, breaking out from under the many institutions that mold us in this country, and about the strength in each us that is multiplied when we are part of a like-minded community.

I grew up an institutionalized person. I was raised on Army bases; my stepfather was a staff sergeant, so that everything I experienced growing up was Army: Army hospitals, Army commissaries, Army movies, Army housing, everything was a State system. I was raised in a large, extremely poor, strict fundamentalist Mormon family - another type of institution. And then I was institutionalized by going through the public school system.

I left home for good at 16, and put myself through the University of Texas at Austin, another institution, with no financial support from my family. So when I graduated in 1983, there was this cultural gap - suddenly I was facing life as a civilian. I was discharged from all the institutions in which I'd grown up, and I was not prepared for that. It was unlike anything that I had ever experienced in my life - an absolute blank slate of total freedom. I had time that was completely unaccounted for after having had a very exhaustive and rigorous schedule for years. And I didn't choose a career path upon graduation. I chose instead a bohemian kind of lifestyle; I began traveling, hitchhiking and playing music on the street with friends and becoming very active and involved with grassroots politics. And all the while I continued to nurture and develop my love for poetry and songwriting.

I am an eccentric person. I think in very unorthodox and unconventional ways. It's not a deliberate effort on my part; it's a result of a certain type of adolescent alienation that I addressed by becoming very immersed in literature, by spending a lot of time by myself and then by developing creative outlets. When I was in the mental hospital, one of the comments that the psychiatrist made to me was that I was "under the influence of literature." And I had enough presence of mind at the time to recognize that statement for the anti-intellectual assessment that it was. But the influence of literature, and its impact on my life and work and worldview, has been very crucial to my understanding of who I am.

After graduation, I headed out to San Francisco and became involved in anarchist politics there, and also played in a street band. One night we took some LSD, and the following day I was still high, I still hadn't come down. And we got on a bus to Santa Cruz, where we would sleep in the hills that night, and I started having very powerful hallucinations. And later we went into town and I became very paranoid, because now it was three days later and I still hadn't really stopped hallucinating. And I was wandering around on the streets of Santa Cruz and the police tried to stop and question me. And because I was feeling so paranoid, I panicked and ran and so they chased after me, handcuffed me, and I assumed I was being arrested.

But instead they took me to the mental hospital in Santa Cruz and I was injected with Thorazine in order to subdue me. Over the course of the next few days, finally the inner experience that I was going through ended. I realized that there was a pay phone in the lobby and that I could someone to come get me out. So, I kind of got it together and I called my dad. He flew out from Dallas, picked me up, took me to the airport and flew me back to Dallas, where I stayed with him for a couple of months.

But I was still thinking about the new life that I had set out on, and so when my friends from the street band contacted me to say they were coming to Texas, I reunited with them in Austin. A friend invited me to live in the science fiction section of his bookstore, which was completely surreal. He ran a coffee house and there were open mike nights for poetry and songwriters, and there was a songwriter's group in Austin that I participated in. And we did benefits and small gigs around Austin.

And then I had another episode of what they call psychosis. I was about to start a job, and I got word that my friend, who had recently had a baby, had been taken down to the police station, and they were questioning her to find out if she tried to kill her baby. The baby had fallen out of a window, and it's routine for the police investigate, to find out if there was an act of negligence on the parent's part. I went over to her house and I saw what appeared to be blood along the wall and I panicked, thinking that she really had tried to kill her baby. Later I discovered that it was, in fact, red paint.

But that experience set me off. The next day when I went to report for my job, I had a flashback. I realize now that it was a flashback, but at the time it was just a hallucination, and because I had not taken any drugs, it was very difficult to conceive of it being a hallucination. I thought that I was having a vision. I didn't really know what was going on. So, some friends were concerned and they called my father, who didn't really take it seriously. He had seen me that first time in Santa Cruz, and he felt like I was just kind of running amuck, or as he put it, trying to get attention.

So they called my mother and she absolutely panicked, thinking that I had gone over the edge. She came and took me back to East Texas, from where I had run away when I was sixteen, so that just heightened all manner of emotional sensitivities I was experiencing at the time. It was almost like I was trying to resolve the experience of running away by being back in my childhood home.

After about three days, she wasn't convinced that I was any more normal or sane than I was when she picked me up, so she told me she was taking me to see my grandmother. But in fact, she took me a hospital in Dallas. Ironically, it was the hospital where I had been born, which heightened all of the emotional epiphanies I was going through. But this time, of course, it wasn't the maternity ward, it was the psychiatric ward.

They administered something to me that was so strong that I was knocked out. I woke up and I was strapped down to a bed in what looked like intensive care. But then even I woke up and came to, *no one*, no one came to talk to me at all, to explain what my circumstances were. I didn't know what had happened. The last thing I knew I was sitting in the waiting room, the next thing knew I was strapped to a bed. And so my paranoid state of mind was exacerbated. I thought I was a monkey in a zoo. I remember defecating on the hospital bed and the nurses being outraged like I was an animal. They didn't explain that I had a catheter inserted in me, and that's why I had this strange feeling in me. No one told me anything.

Maybe a half a day later my father showed up and kind of manipulated me into signing some papers. Looking back now on those papers that I signed, they really reflected the type of identity crisis I was having. Because on one paper, I signed with the name I had been given at birth. On another, I signed with the name I had given myself. I signed yet another with the name I had been given when I was adopted as a stepchild. Each time that I signed one of these papers, which were allegedly proof that I had voluntarily admitted myself, I was really working through an intense identity crisis- even the handwriting was different from signature to signature.

And then they wheeled me into the day room, still strapped down to the bed. And I was just left there for two days, and every three hours they would come by and give me some kind of pill to take. After a couple of days they un-strapped me, and a nurse came in, and with very little explanation, just shoved me into the shower, and basically clawed the shit out of me. And because of the medication, I couldn't really figure out what they wanted me to do. I realized later that they thought that I was either lousy or covered with vomit or something, but at the time, no one explained anything to me. And then I was given a room with a bed, and I started asking myself: "Where am I? Why am I here? Who are these people and how do I get out?"

And then there was this whole ridiculous process of occupational therapy. They had me weaving yarn around Popsicle sticks and gluing beads onto paper. Meanwhile, I encountered all these different people who were also in the hospital: A group of teenagers who would gather in a corner to smoke cigarettes and complain about their parents having committed them for drug or alcohol use. A housewife who needed a break and was in there reading *Ulysses*. And a man who would grab his ankles and rock back and forth and yell, "I'm in hell. I'm in hell." And there was a girl who was on a crying jag. I saw her a little while later, all smiles, and I asked, "What happened to you?" And she said "Shock therapy."

And then, of course, every few days the psychiatrist would show up for a session. And I would sit with her and talk, and she had obviously talked to my mother. She had talked to my father. But what I remember best about those sessions was the psychiatrist who sat there facing me. She was wearing a gold pendant, and the design of the pendant was a teddy bear, of all things. And the teddy bear was designed so that the head was separated but attached by a chain to the torso, which was separated but attached by a chain to the legs. In my heightened state, I couldn't believe that the psychiatrist would wear such symbolic evidence of dissociation. What was she trying to say with this teddy bear?

The psychiatrist informed me that a judge was going to be coming the mental hospital and this judge was to determine whether I was sound enough to speak on my own behalf at a hearing about whether I should be committed to long term care in a state hospital. And that set off alarm bells for me. And then my father visited me and said, "You better get it together. This is getting serious."

So the judge came and I had the experience of talking to this judge and trying desperately to sound normal and sane, and yet the whole time I realized that it didn't matter what I said to this guy. He was the judge and the jury; the verdict had already been decided. And sure enough, I was told that I had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and that it had been determined that long term care was necessary.

Being in a mental institution has all of the contours and shapes of any other kind of institutional life- and as I said earlier, the first 22 years of my life were basically spent in institutions of one kind or another. In the mental institution, activities are scheduled and very rigid. You don't stop when you finish the project. You stop when the schedule says to stop. The people who work there, some of them are good people, but the institution pretty much forbids them from functioning outside a certain standard of compassion. The institutional mentality told the staff, "You can have one percent of compassion and ninety-nine percent follow-the-rules."

And this mindset is a barrier that makes it almost impossible for staff to show the depth of true human compassion that institutionalized people desperately need. When you are in an altered state, hospitalized, drugged, isolated from the people you care about, the most important gift you could receive would be a genuine, caring connection with another human being. The lack of compassion, in my mind, is the single biggest failing of the mental health system.

They kept administering these drugs without explaining to me what they were. I asked at one point and I was told it was Haldol. It made my neck seize and I was just facing the ceiling all the time. And then they started giving me some other drug for the side effects of the Haldol. And then - this part kind of happened in a blur - one day my father came and picked me up and took me out of the hospital, saying that the insurance had run out.

And so I went to stay with him for a while, and tried to work. But I was still on the drugs and I couldn't work, and he thought I was lazy so he kicked me out. And then I went to my mother and I asked her for just \$100 a month. I asked her for just a little money to get by on, but really I was asking for a vote of confidence, for her to show that I was worth something, anything. And while she had been perfectly willing to let the insurance or the state provide for me, when it came to the request for \$100 a month for her own daughter, she turned me down. And I was so bitter about that.

After my mom turned me down, I left Dallas. I had this instinct to get out of Texas, and I went to San Francisco. It was 1984 and things were gearing up for the presidential elections. I participated in a demonstration in San Francisco that resulted in my being arrested. And it was at that event that I gave myself the nom de guerre of Michelle Shocked. It was intended as a comment on the fact that a lot of my emotional sensitivities had been conditioned by the social climate of the Cold War - the paranoia, the sense of the enemy at the gate - which had been heightened by the Reagan Administration. When I was arrested for protesting the Administration's policies, I gave myself a name that implied that there were shell-shocked victims of the Cold War, just like shell-shocked soldiers from World War I, men who returned home from battle with their bodies intact, but with their minds blown. I was trying to make the argument that the Cold War policies of the Regan Administration had contributed to my heightened sense of paranoia and to my marginalized place in society.

So I was now Michelle Shocked - shell-shocked in that way. After I got out of the mental hospital, I started chopping my hair. And very shortly after that I had a Mohawk. I've always heard that in psychological terms, chopping one's hair is a type of suicidal gesture. For me, it signaled a definitive break with my past - it said "Your ideas of normal are never going to hold for me. I can't live in your world. I'm going to kill the person that I was and I'm going to live in another world, a world where this look is normal."

I went to Dallas that summer for the Republican Convention and we had a similar protest, where I was also arrested. And that was just a little too close to home, having been through the psychiatric hospital experience earlier that year in Dallas. So, I went to New York City, thinking that I was going to eventually make my way over to Europe to live as an expatriate, to wash my hands of the whole United States system of values.

In New York, I met a woman therapist who tried to help me arrange for SSI. The advice I got from the SSI workers was "Why don't you go back to school? You did so well." They were basically saying "You function well in institutions." But the therapist, a woman named Isabel Pierce, pointed out something that I found very significant. She said, "You're not crazy. You're just poor."

And that found this explanation very revealing. When my mother had me committed, one of her reasons was that she thought that I was anorexic. And I wasn't anorexic, I just didn't have any money for food. And I'm sure that's what kind of made me lighter than air in some respects. I've come to realize that nutrition really contributes enormously to your mental state.

While I was living on SSI in New York, I made the radical decision to have my tubes tied. And I think it was part and parcel of a very early emotional crisis due to the fact that I was an unwanted pregnancy. My mom had gotten pregnant when she was eighteen and she used to get up in front of the church and talk about how that was the single event that had ruined her life. Having grown up knowing that I was the result of an unwanted pregnancy, and then having been so thoroughly rejected and abandoned by my mother at age 22, and having been essentially thrown away at an earlier point, I think it was a self-cauterizing act on my part to say, "Well, the buck stops here."

In the Spring of '85, I made my way over to Europe and I lived in Amsterdam in a squat, an abandoned building which was owned by the city. The Dutch were pretty tolerant of economic refugees like myself who lived on the margins, and the squatting movement had created a sense of sanctuary from police hassle. And I used that eighteen month period to get my balance again, to try to process what had happened to me. At age 23, for the first time, I had a place that was a refuge from the emotional upheavals I experienced ever since I had run away from home at age 16.

People sometimes ask me if the experiences that led to my hospitalization had any kind of positive impact on my work as an artist. That question is similar to one that I've been asked concerning the origins of my career as a recording artist, which began in a very unusual way. I was volunteering at a festival in Kerville, Texas, when an Englishman approached me and asked if I would sing some songs into his Sony Walkman. He told me he was a journalist and that he was doing a story for a magazine in England called *Folk Roots*. So, I was charmed by the attention and I proceeded to fill up his entire tape with my songs. He went back to England and first played the tape on the BBC, as a session that was kind of like "My Adventures in America." From the reaction that they got from people phoning in, in response to the tape, he decided to issue it as a bootleg.

And over the years, I've experienced enormous legal and financial complications because my copyrights were violated in that manner. But people sometimes ask me, "Aren't you glad that this started your career? Aren't you glad that you were discovered? Don't you think that if he hadn't discovered you, you'd still be unknown?" And all I can say is that when you fuck with a person's destiny, it is a very powerful responsibility to do so. I can no more answer the question about what my creative destiny would have been if this man hadn't interfered than I can answer the question about having been first picked up by the police and later committed against my will by mother to a mental hospital. But I can tell you that the stigma that was attached to this institutionalization is something that I've spent the rest of my life transforming into something positive and good. And had I lived my life without that stigma, I don't know what my life would have been like. This is a subject that can be easily romanticized and I just don't buy into the romance of it. The experience was ugly.

I've come to understand that my experience was a spiritual crisis. I had been raised Mormon, had been fed all manner of doctrine that was offensive to my innate sensibilities, such as their doctrine concerning race, their doctrine concerning relationships between men and women, and their doctrine concerning personal conduct. As a young person, you see so much hypocrisy, both in the doctrine and in the actual conduct. Those things had offended my sensibilities so deeply that my solution was to believe that I could reject entirely, whole cloth, everything that I had been indoctrinated with.

And it was only when I had taken the LSD and had the flashback, I recognized that all of my references during the flashback were to Armageddon-like metaphors. I realized, "Damn it. They got to me young. They completely shaped and formed my way of conceiving of the universe as a battlefield." And this was the cosmos that I had been thrust into, and I had the acid flashback that I had been raised to be a spiritual warrior fighting the battle of good versus evil. And it was a real shock to me to realize that I was no more in control of my ability to reject that indoctrination than I was in my ability to transform it at that time in my life.

It's almost like my character set up the experiences that allowed me to go so far out on a limb that someone noticed it and said, "You need to be in a mental hospital." I had a tendency to isolate. I had a tendency to go against the pack. I had a tendency to be interested in and do things that others didn't think were worthwhile. So, it just made it easier to keep going further and further to the point where someone decided that it was extreme.

Now that I'm forty-one years old, my perspective on my past experiences comes from not only a life of fighting and transforming the stigma of having been a mental patient, but of a life spent trying to resolve the same issues that I was addressing during that "ecstatic poet" phase of my life. And those issues became resolved for me not through any psychiatric intervention, but rather through a very deliberate, active surrender on my part. And in this case I'm talking in the spiritual context of recognizing that we are essentially spiritual beings living in a material world. That this world is not our home. That it is alien to us and that with any degree of sensitivity, psychically we will find ourselves over and over again in very foreign and uncomfortable situations, and that each individual's reaction or response to these situations may vary. But I've resolved for myself a surrender to this fact and an acceptance of my true spiritual nature.

About 1992, I was looking for the roots of the blues and the R&B music that was stimulating my imagination, and I had a hunch that I was going to find the roots of it in Gospel music. I started going to a church in South Central LA called West Angeles, an African-American denomination called Church of God in Christ. I started going there mostly for the great gospel choir, which was very uplifting and inspiring. Every Sunday I felt like, "This would be such a great experience if they just give all that Jesus stuff a rest." But I was also going to this church partly from an instinct that I needed to create some kind of formal spiritual foundation for my life. And I tell people, I just went one Sunday too often. And then one Sunday in the true Christian sense, He touched my heart and I walked down to the altar and was saved, redeemed, forgiven, and all my sins were washed away.

For me, there is a strong connection between forgiveness and healing. There's a story in the Bible where Jesus is casting out demons, and the Pharisees are accusing him, saying "Why are you telling people that their sins are forgiven, when in fact you are healing them, telling them to rise up from their bed and walk again? And He says, "What's the difference if I say you are healed or you are forgiven? What's the difference?" So today I think about this issue in the same terms that I would have then, I had the understanding at age 22 to talk about these things in a complex, poetic way, with nuanced metaphor and sensitivity.

One of the things that happened to me as a result of all my experiences is that I began to recognize that shame is a social control mechanism, and I began to have a much lower opinion of shame as a useful measure of what my response to circumstances should be. When you feel shame about having been institutionalized, you lose the ability to advocate for yourself. You no longer speak up. And that silence...that muting...that paralysis is what makes me so angry about shame. If no one else is going to speak up for you, why should shame have the power to cause you to not speak up for yourself? And, once you do speak up for yourself, you get judged as a raving lunatic. If everything else has been taken away from you, at the very least you should be allowed to speak for yourself and have that dignity.

I saw people who had the official stamp of "normal" placed on them, people who were arbitrators of "normal," making very bizarre and in some cases, just inaccurate judgments of me. I began to kind of suspect that the value of "normal" is not so great. I become passionate about truth, and the metaphor that holds is that of the emperor's new clothes. I don't really care if I'm the only kid in the crowd saying "He ain't got no clothes on."

I think this was catalyzed by the hospital experiences, because if there had ever been a chance that I was going to be repressed into being "normal," it was in the hospital, because the consequences that I faced were so severe. I look at it as a short sharp shock. The implication was: "You think you're weird? Here's what society does to weirdos. You don't want to be treated like this, do you?" And my response was, "You know what, society sucks. Treat me how you got to treat me, but I'm just going to keep on keepin' on. I think I'm right."

And so I found artistic ways of expressing issues that concerned me, rather than through psychological dramas. And I definitely focused on political outlets for my expression. And then I also developed a reputation for being, well, quirky. I've created a world for myself, and in my world, Michelle Shocked is very sane and normal. The world I live in profits from my creativity. Creativity comes from my unorthodox view of the world. It's empowering. It's definitely empowering because I know what I had to crawl up from in order to have this quality of mind celebrated rather than condemned.

NARPA is a place where the journeys of people like myself are honored and understood, and I have a great appreciation for that. But this movement is not *just* about celebrating the healing and growth of individuals whose lives were disrupted by psychiatry. It is also the place from which change must come. Right here in this room, we have the skills, knowledge, talent, power, and energy to fix what's broken and create something new. Our experience with psychiatric oppression, and our ability to stand up to it - this makes us a community. And communities working together in a spirit of compassion is what creates positive social change. This has been true throughout history, and we need to remember it today, when it sometimes feels like the forces of backlash and oppression are on the rise.

As a community, we can take strength in the words of Mohandas Gandhi, a man who understood how to use moral force to defeat an overwhelming foe. During the non-violent struggle for Indian independence from Britain, he came to the following understanding, which should give heart to all people working for social justice:

"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."