



the ICARUS PROJECT

Radical Mental Health Activism

The Icarus Project began when Sascha Dubrul, a long-time radical activist and punk musician, sought out other people struggling with the out-of-control emotional extremes that got him diagnosed with bipolar disorder and labeled “mentally ill.” Mental health issues are rarely discussed openly, and when they are, talk is either dominated by pharmaceutical company propaganda that says, “You have a brain disorder and need medication,” or by a narrow anti-system view that preaches, “Mental illness is a myth and taking medication is selling out.” Sascha did not fit into either category; he made the decision to use a prescription psych drug to keep him sane, while at the same time being very uncomfortable with mainstream views of madness.

A lot of us deal with the same dilemmas. What does it mean to feel crazy and have a very real, even life-threat-

ening problem with your mind and emotions, yet at the same time see that the world itself is crazy and in no position to tell you it’s all in your head? What do you do when you keep hitting the same wall of voices, isolation, depression, manic energy, or anxiety? How do you navigate the confusing world of psychiatric treatments when the medications are dangerous but alternatives are scarce? Through writing about his experiences, Sascha started finding people asking the same questions, including visual artist and designer Ashley McNamara (who became the co-founder of the Icarus Project) and Madigan Shive of Bonfire Madigan, who brought years of experience as a mental health advocate. Icarus—taking its name from the mythical boy who escaped a labyrinth but shouldn’t have flown so close to the sun—started taking flight.

Dangerous Gift

With a thriving website, a popular zine, and now a growing network of community activists, the Icarus Project is rethinking what “mental illness” is all about and creating new ways of dealing with it. Instead of blaming faulty brains, bad genes, or defective neurochemistry, can we recognize that our mental anguish is part of being sensitive, creative people living in an oppressive world? Instead of illness or disorder we may have something more like a “dangerous gift,” a talent and potential that needs to be respected and taken care of? Can activists diagnosed and labeled “bipolar”, “schizophrenic”, “borderline”, “ADHD”, etc. come out of isolation and shame to support each other in the urgent work of building a new world? Can we even bring something new and vital to radical politics?

Over the past 4 years we’ve organized scores of gatherings and discussions across the country in communities that have never discussed mental health issues openly before. Recent highlights include helping inspire groups to form in 6 cities, a packed Resisting Corporate Psychiatry discussion at the National Conference on Organized Resistance, touring to the anarchist book fair in Montreal, collaborating with students at NYU, organizing Beyond the Psych Ward: Voices of Madness, Rebellion, and Revolution at NYC’s St. Marks Church, launching our second art show in NYC, joining forums with mental health professionals and academics, and organizing discussions and skillshares in New Orleans. Our website forum has expanded to more than 3,000 members, who discuss everything from shamanism and spirituality to human rights