

Too Weird to Live: The Case for the Individual in a Sick Woman's World

Dr. Bones

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What the hell have I gotten myself into? Does this happen to other people?

Synchronicities are everywhere, so much so that I'm beginning to feel paranoid. One essay, one little essay on a website I don't even read has thrown me into the oblivion and practically ripped my head clean off my shoulders. For days it incubated within me, feeding on previously held constructs and thought-patterns only to burst out of my chest in a bloody and new take on mental health itself. I'm reading about Hell's Angels, watching Pirates of the Caribbean, and struggling with a desire to load up my wife and cats in a camper and hit the open road.

I've developed an extreme aversion to therapy programs even though I've never attended one and mutter "sluggish schizophrenia" at odd, random intervals. I've researched intentional communities, communes, and even building my own fortified compound off somewhere in the swamps, accessible only by airboat and protected by an army of voodoo dolls hung from every tree. A new tattoo is itching on my arm and it won't be long before I get another.

My wife says I'm sick, and this might be true. I've never felt more myself yet I can't deny my behaviors are... anti-social. Odd. Peculiar. Maybe I am sick, ill, and maladjusted. Just yesterday I told an otherwise very nice Anarchist that he could take his rotating councils and shove them so far up his ass that consensus would positively drip out of his eyeballs.

I'm beginning to notice I'm a crocodile among alligators, similar yet not quite the same. Cops and Occupy-faithful tell me there's something wrong with me, that if I could just "think correctly" I'd come around. Get well.

But I don't want to be well, not if it means living and thinking as they do. So I'm back at where this crazy ride all began, the same question Johanna Hedva's essay sparked in my head only a few moon phases ago:

Where was a sick person's place in the Revolution?

"I thought of all the other invisible bodies, with their fists up, tucked away and out of sight."

*"I am antagonistic to the notion that the Western medical-insurance industrial complex understands me in my entirety, though they seem to think they do. They have attached many words to me over the years, and though some of these have provided articulation that was useful – after all, no matter how much we are working to change the world, we must still find ways of coping with the reality at hand – first I want to suggest some other ways of understanding my 'illness.'" – Johanna Hedva, **Sick Woman Theory***

Johanna Hedva's **Sick Woman Theory** at first appears to be the work of a chronically ill woman demanding to let the world know she mattered. All good and well, but also Mask Magazine's bread and butter. After all, the site's **writer how-to guide** is so similar to Vice's that I expected to see a call for submissions on a juggalo-themed issue.

If it had just been that, some feel-good story about being sick, perhaps it wouldn't have affected me so strangely.

What started this weird quest for understanding was actually a feeling of *revulsion*. One of the last paragraphs terrified the ever-living piss out of me. It was a description meant to inspire, but one that filled me with loathing:

“Once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other’s tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much-needed, long-overdue, and motherfucking glorious halt.”

I’m all for the death of capitalism, *but what the hell was this?* Sick, pained, expensive, sensitive: these were not words that inspired any revolutionary fervor in me. My anarchism had always been a thing of life, vitality, and beauty. When I think of it energetically, I feel strong rivers of red force, unbridled kinetic power moving reality. It’s a verb, something you do.

My heroes didn’t go to General Assemblies to talk, they robbed banks and shot fascists. They burned down **houses** or **construction equipment** instead of engaging in sit-in’s or camping sessions. My anarchism is unapologetically violent, even gleefully so, and I long for the acrid smoke of a riot like junkies long for meth.

Here appeared to be the quiet, soothing politics of the ill. *Anarchist therapy*. I was happy to see those confined to a hospital bed could display solidarity in their own way, but I walked away firmly convinced I’d taken a stroll through a world that had no bearing on mine.

Some people’s revolution involved care and love and feelings. Mine involved bullets and fire and blood.

Yet...something lingered, some subtle shift deep within my mind. I began to realize that just because the *response* of the ill to capitalism might be different from mine, that did not mean the exploitation they lived under was any less brutal.

“You’re gonna carry that weight”

Capitalism in its barest form splits the society it breeds: the many are regulated to “labor,” while the few are free to gamble the spoils of the many through “capital.” This system can chug along quite well, provided the few can hire enough of the many to kill and maim the rest of their kind. The worker who gets a foolish idea—like living for herself—can always be convinced or beaten, and if foreign markets get a bit rowdy you can always send in workers to fight over the honor of a rag on a pole.

The one thing capitalism really struggles with is disease. Illness of any kind is anathema to the entire system, throws everything out of whack. People **must** be healthy enough to work and buy products otherwise the Few cannot enjoy the spoils of the Many. Disease, and even rumors of disease, are enough to cause employers to offer free flu shots, tobacco cessation products, and mental health treatment provided you’ll continue to show up and perform your allotted task.

This is not to say Capitalism wants you **HEALTHY** however. On the contrary, a sick worker is fine so as long as they’re spending money on **NOT** being sick. The nation’s five largest for-profit insurers **closed 2009 with a combined profit of \$12.2 billion**. Between 2000 and 2006, wages in the United States increased by 3.8%, **but health care premiums increased by 87%**. Clearly there is money to be made in treating illness, and that makes quite a few of the Few happy.

But when the worker gets really sick, the kind of sick where life is pain and every breath becomes a poisonous cloud of infectious disease...well, it becomes another matter entirely.

Illness, the kind where you can’t show up for work, is a cardinal sin in the Church of Capital. You’ll be asked all manner of questions to determine whether they can weasel out of paying you.

If they can't, they may require you spend your money to go down to a doctor and prove you're "unfit to work."

That's just the practical side, of course. Anybody who's called out of work knows the inner turmoil of letting the team down and needing time to heal. The message is made clear: sick people are "lazy," "unreliable" and the bosses make sure workers blame the sick, not the illness. With a plethora of options available to treat almost every symptom, most bosses can't understand why cancer patients can't work in-between chemo.

Commercials like this assure us that "real" people don't need to rest. It's only you with the problem.

Of course this is just the people with a **temporary** illness, something that can be overcome and eventually will. The bosses monitor their stock constantly, preparing for it, noting in evaluations losses in productivity due to such unnatural inconveniences as pregnancy.

Those with long term illnesses are even worse off and might end up being excluded from work, the only acceptable means of survival in our society, altogether. Melissa King **painfully describes the struggle** many go through:

"I am a trans woman with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) – the latter catalyzing enough depression and anxiety to qualify me for disability. Whenever I try to leave home, I have to fight an anxiety akin to what one feels before going on a roller coaster..."

*Days where I am well enough to work are as common as sick days for a neurotypical worker. This means that **my options for employment** are extremely limited, and that I will likely be relegated to low-paying jobs...companies would still rather **not hire people with ASD**, and generally avoid making any formal accommodations."*

Capitalism has no time for the ill, no time for those who can't keep pace with the levels of output required from their owners. To be ill is to be "off," and in dire need of fixing. Illness becomes part of a weird binary system, a yes-or-no question workers must answer all the time. If we can maintain our highly regimented lives at the behest of those around us, we are "well;" if, however, we display behaviors that do not fit the mold, if our souls and bodies refuse the psychic armor and physical output required to generate value, we become breathing wastebaskets.

And here is where the great danger of being ill lies.

"The problem is not the problem, it's your attitude about the problem."

Johanna's essay, perhaps in its title, had caused me to see her not as a Unique One but as "sick," as broken. My first thought was to wonder how the hell one might reduce the burden she'd impose upon Insurrectionists like myself. Still struggling to understand, I re-read the whole thing as I had my morning coffee.

And that's when a new passage jumped out at me:

"The Sick Woman is all of the "dysfunctional," "dangerous" and "in danger," "badly behaved," "crazy," "incurable," "traumatized," "disordered," "diseased," "chronic," "uninsurable," "wretched," "undesirable" and altogether "dysfunctional" bodies belonging to women, people of color, poor, ill, neuro-atypical, differently abled, queer, trans, and genderfluid people, who have been historically pathologized, hospitalized, institutionalized, brutalized, rendered "unmanageable," and therefore made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible."

The realization hit me like a bucket of cold water, freezing illumination locking up the nerves until a cold shudder moved from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet.

I, too, was sick.

There is something horrible and depraved about getting up at 5:00am to work for somebody else. The whole body rebels against it, the brain seems unable to correctly fire, and even tastebuds rebel in their own special way, making sure whatever coffee you have tastes like shit.

As I grunted and pulled my work shirt over my head, I thought of all the aspects of my life denied to me under the work-discipline of Capital, like spending holy days in prayer or having to work inside when the Florida sun kisses everything it touches. Every now and then, when the moon gets full a weird urge seizes my blood and demands I transform into a drunken were-lizard, compelled to raise hell and do magic. I roam without aim, energetic whiffs and psychical vibrations my only compass.

Nothing like those still Florida nights, streets so empty you can dance in them with nothing to do but whatever you want. You alone are awake, the world suddenly a playground. You feel like you've entered a time outside of time, and if you walk soft enough the armadillos will mistake you for one of their own. Every inch of pavement becomes a promise, an open road beckoning towards adventure. On those nights you sit in open fields and burn incense under the stars, rattling to draw invisible guests and drinking to welcome them. You keep wishing you could chase the moon down to the next town and the next, maybe live like this forever.

I can stalk those empty streets and do these things, but my time, my life, is owned by somebody else. Booze-fueled esoteric madness does not fit on the "normal" schedule. Aspects of me must be denied, must be hidden.

So instead of swilling beer and speaking with the gods, I'll be knee deep in grease from 6:30am to 5:00pm, frying chicken for angry pissants on their way to diabetic comas.

As I hit the buttons on that time clock, the thoughts kept looping round and round my head: how much more I'd like to be home writing, drinking a cool beer and a warm coffee, or reading cards for clients and musing on the finer points of necromancy. Such thinking is ill, at least I'm told. I'm "maladjusted."

If I tell these desires to a therapist he'll conclude I have a host of illnesses keeping me from succeeding, from *adjusting*: alcoholism, grandiose illusions, hallucinations, and magical thinking. If I protest and affirm it's *his* worldview that's bullshit, I'll be diagnosed as another poor soul suffering with **oppositional defiant disorder**.

This of course assumes he talks to me at all.

In 2011 **the New York Times** reported "*a 2005 government survey found that just 11 percent of psychiatrists provided talk therapy to all patients.*" The article makes clear psychiatrists can make far more providing "*medication management,*" in which they only check symptoms and adjust pill doses, rather than doing actual therapy.

One could imagine the scene easily: my symptoms will be calculated by a balding man in his late 40's and I'd be handed a prescription to "get better," another person in "recovery" added to the **400% increase in anti-depression medication use**. Eventually, after a few weeks or months, a 9mm bullet sprays pink brain matter formerly belonging to Dr. Bones against a wall. Tears, wailing, the gnashing of teeth soon follow, but not because of side effects or a system hell-bent on killing the weird.

No, no. Instead, my file will read that the subject couldn't deal with "reality" and was simply too mad for his own good. Just another "sick" person who couldn't deal.

On scales large and small, this sociological terrorism is repeated everyday.

Boys are expelled from preschool at nearly five times the rate of their female counterparts due to problematic “higher energy and competitive drives.” These are traits no longer *en vogue* in a massive sterile school system that demands they sit still, stay inside, and regurgitate useless facts. They end up getting in trouble more often than girls and “receive lower grades from their teachers than testing would have predicted” due to biases based on perceived misbehaviors.

As a result, boys are diagnosed with learning disorders and attention problems at nearly four times the rate of girls, the massive amount of artificial neuro-chemicals and Pavlovian punishments to “fix them” destroying fragile lives who merely need a different style of teaching. Boys are more likely to drop out of school than female students, and only make up 43 percent of college students. Rather than bemoan a system out of step with actual human beings, these victims will be labeled as “losers,” “underachievers,” and “slackers” who refused to reform their “toxic” masculinity.

In short, they are “sick.”

Woman suffer much the same. Johanna Hedva recounts the horrors of womendeemed “too emotional” or “irrational” by the arms of the greater society:

*In September 2014, Brock, a 32-year-old black woman, born in Jamaica and living in New York City, was driving a BMW when she was pulled over by the police. They accused her of driving under the influence of marijuana, and though her behavior and their search of her car yielded nothing to support this, they nevertheless impounded her car. According to a lawsuit brought against the City of New York and Harlem Hospital by Brock, **when Brock appeared the next day to retrieve her car she was arrested by the police for behaving in a way that she calls “emotional,” and involuntarily hospitalized in the Harlem Hospital psych ward.** (As someone who has also been involuntarily hospitalized for behaving “too” emotionally, this story feels like a rip of recognition through my brain.) The doctors thought she was “delusional” and suffering from bipolar disorder, because she claimed that Obama followed her on twitter – which was true, but which the medical staff failed to confirm. **She was then held for eight days, forcibly injected with sedatives, made to ingest psychiatric medication, attend group therapy, and stripped.** The medical records of the hospital – obtained by her lawyers – bear this out: the “master treatment plan” for Brock’s stay reads, “Objective: Patient will verbalize the importance of education for employment and will state that Obama is not following her on Twitter.” It notes her “inability to test reality.” Upon her release, she was given a bill for \$13,637.10.*

R.D. Laing, in *The Politics of Experience*, blew the lid off this “inability to test reality”: normal is only the most widespread of mental illness:

“What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience. It is radically estranged from the structure of being. The more one sees this, the more senseless it is to continue with generalized descriptions of supposedly specifically schizoid, schizophrenic, hysterical ‘mechanisms.’ There are forms of alienation that are relatively strange to statistically ‘normal’ forms of alienation. The ‘normally’ alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labeled by the ‘formal’ majority as bad or mad.”

Millions of people quietly suffer to maintain that “normal” amount of alienation.

“Ever since my mother died I’ve been forced to be entirely dependent on myself. I have no friends or family that I can ask for help financially if I ever needed it,” says Danielle Farmer, a woman I spoke to who struggles with a world out of step with her own spirit.

“My anxiety has gotten progressively worse, culminating in chronic hives, chest, and abdominal pain. I can’t help but think that my career has exacerbated my anxiety, being forced to put on a smile and my grand customer service act while I bury my true introverted nature for eight hours at a time. I absolutely relish my time alone. I neglect my sister’s attempts to spend time with me on my days off so I can stay in a coma on the couch all day.”

As a former anthropology student, she longs for the day she can trade in air-conditioning for the quiet solitude of jungle life and small scale social networks:

“I have to override my natural tendencies so that I can sell products [to rich people] I could never afford so that I can afford to make ends meet,” she lamented. *“I am stifled and held captive by the need to stay afloat. I can’t tell you how many times in the last six years where I’ve wondered how much of my goddamn life I’ll spend within the same four walls.”*

Are her desires unhealthy? Or is it a healthy human response to a very sick world? Millions of people are being ground up because they refuse to fit the capitalist “truth.” They become living testaments that competition between business is not some magic pill that makes everything okay or creates beautiful meaning for the lives it touches. For those on the bottom, it is hell. Gods help you if you can’t obey the master’s whip, or just aren’t cut out for mindless, repetitive tasks.

When we really start to examine what “normal” passes for, it certainly is a byproduct of *“our current regime of neoliberal, white-supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cis-hetero-patriarchy”* as Johanna puts it.

But she misses something else, something huge, that allows such abuses to exist in the first place. An unseen enemy many like her have failed to critique, an unnatural faith in a “cure” for all ills....

“In other words, there is one incident. However, there are as many stories explaining it as there are people involved in it.”

I don’t know exactly when the gnosis hit, when Johanna’s ideas finally filtered in and exploded through my spinal cord. For two days after reading the essay, my spirit felt like a boiling pot of gumbo, increasing in flavor and depth with each passing minute.

The big turn came when I was being woken up from a nap by my wife’s favorite cat after a 10-hour shift. His name is Junior. Junior was born the runt of the litter, and for whatever reason has a little paunch right below his stomach. It causes him no pain, doesn’t affect him in the slightest, yet to a breeder Junior’s genetic line is “sick.” If he were born in the “normal” trade of mass producing living creatures for exacting physical “purity,” he might be deemed a failure. He is one of the most loving cats I have ever seen, uncannily so, and has cared for my wife in a way that rivals belief. He sleeps on her head when she is sad, holds her when she’s anxious, and makes bird noises to let us know when he wants to play.

But he is sick. Ill. Rendered unprofitable, he might be drowned in a sack or euthanized in varying degrees of barbarity. To engage in such behavior is normal for commercial breeders. That’s well-adjusted behavior.

My own desires for constant laughter, strong drink, loud guns, and militant individuality might be deemed “unhealthy obsessions” and result in a court labeling me “unstable.” I might be hospitalized, have my kids taken away, or be labeled a threat to my local police station.

Through it all, the cat and I would be “sick” while the world and its society remained “good” and healthy.

Society is nothing more than the madness Capitalism has deemed healthy for its own existence. Young boys locked in classrooms, women locked up in mental wards, all this in the name of making them “well” enough to function in a system where sociopaths are **rewarded with praise and promoted to positions of leadership**. Even having **anti-authoritarian opinions** is enough to get you looked at funny, held against your will, and shot up with Thorazine in the name of social good.

Johanna writes that, above all: *“Sick Woman Theory is an insistence that most modes of political protest are internalized, lived, embodied, suffering, and no doubt invisible.”*

I would say it goes beyond mere protest, and most times it’s far from invisible.

“Society,” in a pamphlet of the same name by **Pistols Drawn collective**, can better be described as *“the hidden violence done to you everyday in the name of other people—people you don’t know, people you probably don’t like, people you are probably likely never to meet. It is done by happy faces with perfect teeth, wonderfully groomed assassins for whom it is never personal, never emotional.”*

It is *“a set of rules you operate by so that you get along with others. It is the queue and the waiting for the doors to open. The rushing about when the doorbell rings or the guests are about to arrive. It is the folding of napkins and placement of utensils.”*

One might add it is also the behaviors and states of being deemed “normal” and “healthy,” the arbitrary dividing line that separates behaviors that serve the ruling powers, and those that don’t.

Whether under Capitalism or Feudalism, every life that doesn’t fit into the dominant society is deemed ill and sick. On the orders of the KGB, for instance thousands of social and political reformers in the Soviet Union were incarcerated in mental hospitals after being labelled with diagnoses of **“sluggish schizophrenia.”** Society, itself a mental construct, has required the British “keep a stiff upper lip,” that Southern men fight over trivial issues to “preserve their honor,” and that **honest discussions are shut down by online activists to demonstrate just how pure and forward thinking their politics are.**

Every society, no matter how small, demands a norm of behavior built on an intangible spooky ideal, rather than on a sense of trust and reciprocity between real individuals. As such, every society will always seek to stamp out anything it considers unlike its self. The same damage I might cause to a woman like Johanna if I insisted every radical was a bomb-throwing, SKS firing, hard drinking brawler would be done to me under a “liberated” society that demanded I join in *“sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other’s tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, etc, etc”*

Is she sick, or am I? Who can say?

The Sick Woman Theory reaches far farther than mere illness. It critiques the entire idea of normal. Anarchism should be built on real people, real experiences, rather than mental constructs that easily filter people into “sick” or “well” binaries like masculine/feminine, violent/peaceful, soft/hard, magical/secular.

In a world that demands we mirror it or suffer, the truly radical act is to embrace our particular weirdness, to accept we may not be “business material” or have a place in the Great Society. Our

object then is not the overthrow of an established order but our elevation above it, a revolution of ourselves and a seizure of the only flag that matters:

Our own.

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