

May 25, 2015  
(February Letter)

Hi Samantha

I just received your April letter today. I'm way behind but I'm very glad that you have not slowed down sending your letters – in spite of my tardiness! I decided I will respond to each of your letters in the original order even though I will probably write them all this month.

I was flabbergasted by your February letter and especially the story that was in it. You drew me into the narrative in an expert fashion – and kept me there with a series of nicely crafted sub-stories. I loved how you introduced the tapping and tile-stepping so nicely – it's a feature of psychiatric illness that was beautifully foreshadowed.

What were the instructions from your teacher? Did you have to write it on mental illness or any topic? Did you do some reading on it before writing the piece?

I remember how the book entitled "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (by Ken Kesey) as a book that was very influential during my student days. It was more about mental institutions and their organization than about mental disease itself, but it highlighted some important issues about how we stigmatize mental illness and tried to keep the problem hidden and quiet rather than address it in a more compassionate fashion.

Did you know that I worked in a mental hospital when I was 21? It was in 1965 when I went to a summer work camp organized by the Student Christian Movement (SCM) at UBC. These camps were organized to support about 15 students over the summer so we could learn about various social issues while earning some money for school. The topic of the camp I went to was mental illness. All the students worked at the main mental hospital in Toronto at 999 Queen Street.

We lived in a church just down the street from the hospital (Queen Street United). They set up the education centre into 2 dorm rooms with bunk beds, a kitchen, and a lounge. We were responsible for planning our meals, cooking, cleaning, and figuring out a program of study along with the work at the hospital. Another objective of the camp was to learn how to live with other people.

You might remember the other work camp I lived in for another year. I told you about it in my letter about working in Vancouver at Kraft foods. This was also organized by the SCM but on the theme of manual labour.

When I was in Toronto at the mental hospital, Fran was at another work camp across the city. Their topic was the inner city so she got a job at a Woolworth's store and later at a factory producing plastic bottles for bleach and detergent. You should ask her about that sometime.

My work at 999 Queen Street was on the "back ward" of the hospital. It was a locked ward where they placed all the patients who were difficult to control. Many of them were difficult to communicate with because of their disease, but occasionally they would put someone on the ward who was violent since it was the only ward that was locked.

Unfortunately, there was very little therapy taking place on that ward. Every so often a patient would meet with a doctor or social worker, but they were seldom around so most of our time was spent just  
C:\Users\Bill\Documents\Personal\BillHistory\Stories\SamanthaLetters\Letter2SamanthaFeb2015StoryAndMentalHospitals.docx (31/05/2015)

cleaning up, feeding the patients, managing their outbursts, and dispensing drugs. It was by the use of drugs that most of them were controlled. The drugs made them very lethargic and as a result most of them just sat around watching crappy TV or hanging out in their rooms. It was very depressing.

Every so often one of them would get agitated and violent. In those cases they may have to bring in a couple of orderlies who would subdue the person. They would strip them completely then wrap them tightly in sheets that had been soaked in cold water. The sheets would be wrapped tight so that the person couldn't move. Eventually their body heat would warm up the sheets and they would calm down. It seemed to me that this was particularly cruel treatment.

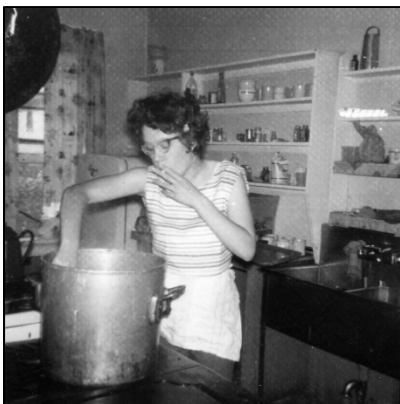
One day Fran and I arranged to take one of the patients out for a visit to the Canadian National Exhibition. He was reasonably competent and had never been to the event so we thought it would be nice to take him for an afternoon. It took a lot of work to get permission but we were successful. Fortunately he seemed to like it.

After that experience I became very interested in the analysis of institutions like mental hospitals. There is quite a bit of research done on them in sociology and I found the analysis very useful and thought-provoking. In those days many of the researchers felt that the identification of socially unacceptable behaviour was labelled as mental illness rather than simply as different ways of understanding the world. Once they were labelled as such, they were then processed by social institutions in a way left little room for individual variation.

In the 1980s the approach to mental hospitals changed significantly. It was probably more because of the high cost of institutionalizing people rather than compassion or evidence-based policies, but in most places across Canada the patients were moved out of the hospitals wherever possible. What this meant was that their eccentric behaviour became a problem for the police. Unfortunately, the police were not well trained to deal with these types of problems so we started to see a series of aggressive (and sometimes deadly) encounters between street people and the police. It is only in the last few years that police training has included the discussion of dealing with mental illness.

It seems to me that your little story would be good reading for them. Thanks for passing it on.

Love,



I don't have a photo of my work camp, but here's one of Fran cooking at her work camp in Toronto. Those were the days when smoking was commonly accepted!