

MOVIE REVIEW



Documentary Film Review

Bell, F. and Sanandaji, D. (2022).
Breaking the Silence. Golden Rule Media,
Freddie Bell and Dara Sanandaji

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'I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become' – Carl Gustav Jung

The film begins with Carl Jung's emphatic words and sets the tone for this deeply moving documentary film about Dara Sanandaji, while he painfully navigates his way through the maze of, without a doubt, one of the most confounding and debilitating of human experiences- that of mental illness. The film traces his journey from the appearance of the first symptom/s to the veritable roller coaster of dealing with the literal ups and downs of bi-polar disorder, his endeavor to understand his condition and Dara's continuous resolve, to lead a fulfilling, meaningful life, despite his illness.

The film decisively brings to the fore the perplexing nature of mental illness, so much so that not even the specialists that Dara interviews seem to agree about what exactly is mental illness and how one is to treat it; let alone cure it.

Yet the film is not about despondency. Like Jung's assertion, Dara moves between these two epistemic poles, not easily, not in the least; illness tethers him to one end, while he wades his way slowly to the other end, one underlying loss of control over one's mental faculties, a break from reality, and the other a hard-won agency over one's body and mind.

All the while, attempting to constantly interrogate, inquire and ask some basic but profound questions about the nature of mental illness and seek answers from highly qualified people in the field. But Dara also talks to his friends and family. These two perspectives lay out the running dichotomy in the film. One being the 'patient', a category the film locates entirely within modern psychiatry/therapy, and the language it deploys and two, the 'person' that his family and friends constantly seek and reinforce.

What is impressive is that Dara tries to navigate through the labyrinth of mental illness, seeking its etiology and nature, cure and management, and gain insight, in the midst of going through it himself. Dara is diagnosed with a serious mental disorder, that requires powerful medication, with its own set of complicated side effects. Yet, he is able to find periods of complete clarity and understanding and a state of functioning that enables him to make this documentary and all that goes into it.

The film follows the changes Dara goes through, from the perspective of a set of professionals like doctors and therapist as well as his close family and friends; the latter equally confused but nonetheless resolved to be supportive. The film feels like a cathartic experience for Dara; his resolve to get well is indeed striking.

Mental illness is unlike any other illness in its description, diagnosis, prognosis and cure. It presents itself to Dara by way of thoughts that were not his 'own' (Bell and Sanandaji, 7:16) seeing colors and numbers, storylines about good and evil, aliens, and the 'universe opening up' (09:00) to him; stepping into a world completely at odds with the one in which people around him are in.

Notwithstanding, Dara attempts to continually understand what mental illness is, by talking to some highly qualified professionals who try to shed light on the subject (but not quite arriving at any one answer). Dara asks the right questions; how does one get bi-polar and where do psychotic symptoms come from? Genetics seem to play an important part but other factors like sleep deprivation and neural connections are also implicated.

The problem, as stated by Dr Tohen, from the New Mexico School of Medicine, is that 'We don't have a biological test '...only thing we have available is the symptoms that we observe or the symptoms mentioned by the family or the patient...we collect symptoms, and...this creates...a syndrome, which is not necessarily a disease' (22:32). People with bi-polar simply experience as Dara says, 'uncontrollable highs and debilitating lows' (23:03).

Confusion seems quite prevalent; mental illness is variously described as, 'complicated', a 'tough problem', 'multi-determined' (25:11), all the way to one of the doctors stating 'I don't think these diagnoses are worth much...used for billing insurance companies!' (25:39) One could possibly move between psychosis, schizophrenia and bi-polar and this can change over time, for the same person; one can also be misdiagnosed. What is more or less agreed upon is that there is no absolute cure for this condition. Mental illness is deemed to be partly culturally created but '...there is also a real thing in the body going on...' As succinctly stated in the film, '...it's a complicated dance' (27:38).

Treatment involves pharmacotherapy (Lithium for example), trial and error but it is mostly about addressing symptoms. Some medicines block dopamine in the brain and this ameliorates the symptoms, but then again, as one of the doctor states, one knows very little of the brain.

Dealing with mental illness seems to be one step forward and two steps back. 'Treatments we have now are still not good enough for a lot of people' (30:42), says one of the doctors. Some doctors embrace the medical model to a fault; others combine medicine with psychotherapy. Though medication and therapy helped Dara, the film underlines his sheer quest for survival as well.

The film is about trying to unravel the confounding experience of mental illness using the lens of science, medicine and the medical model. But it is also about Dara's relentless need to overcome his condition or gain some semblance of control over it. This amazing clarity and candor and the motivation to get better, is the mainstay of the film as it propels Dara out of the darkness, that his condition

signifies, whence he is perceived as wanting to get himself better, and find an '... explicit road back to sanity' (34:58).

Despite a relapse, Dara does this and more; he makes this film with a friend and in the process try and bring some form of congruity into a very incoherent, crippling experience, and gain what his therapist calls 'psychological mastery' (44:32) over it. What is further distinct is that Dara provides some rather deep insights about mental illness, outside of an otherwise very clinical, cut and dried, presentation of mental illness, that the film puts forth, which is its main drawback.

Dara states that the 'netherworld' of mania and psychosis can teach a lot, about ourselves and the world. It opens our eyes into 'new patterns, new connections'; that which is invisible to others. It is only when we question, that we discover more profound truths. If we take these things as 'positive', we can 'evolve from our current state of mind, see... things differently... and be more 'empathetic'. And do something with this new knowledge; it enables one to 'aspire, inspire, construct, build-up and... create' (39:10). And creativity happens to be one of the side effects of psychosis, as stated in the film.

The film ends by focusing on agency and choice, and this is definitely one of the strengths of the film. In Dara's words, '...existence is not about how much you know...rather...how you choose to use your time here' (46:51). Dara chooses to be connected to others, to take responsibility for himself and actively participate in society and think more generously about the nature of psychosis. The film is about mental illness, but it is also equally about Dara, and that is where much of its appeal lies.

The film fosters a compassionate view of mental illness certainly, but it adopts an overly western/ bio-medical and clinical view of it; with psychiatry occupying the predominant space. The voice of the care giver/s and care giving is also not pronounced. While the film is about one of the more dominant epistemologies, that of psychiatry and psychotherapy, there is enough documentation and research to show that mental disorder has been addressed by multiple systems

- from Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, to traditional healers, to folk remedies based on religious practices, in the case of India for instance. Given the complex and chronic nature of mental illness, and the kind of suffering involved for care givers as well as people living with mental illness, perhaps interface between multiple systems could provide better possibilities to health and healing, as well as insights about it.

