

*Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness*, by Gail Hornstein, Ph.D. Rodale, New York, 2009, 304 pp., \$25.95

In this rich and important work, psychologist Gail Hornstein, the biographer of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, has taken the rare step of writing a history, right up to the present, of the patient's experience of mental health treatment—from the patient's perspective. She focuses on the spoken words and the published literature of people diagnosed primarily with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and she recounts their stories, including their desperate, traumatizing journeys through the mental health system, in vivid and often painful color. As such, *Agnes's Jacket*—a title based on a late nineteenth century mental patient's struggle to have her voice be heard by stitching her lonely words all over her hospital jacket—reads like much of the mental patient literature: as protest literature.

In this vein, Hornstein makes the fascinating point that in no other branch of medicine but psychiatry do the voices of so many of the doctors and so many of the patients differ so dramatically in terms of their perspective on the treatment. This point alone should fan the flames of curiosity of anyone wishing to study the mental health field from an angle alternate to that presented by the mainstream field, the mainstream field which states that "mental illness" is caused primarily by chemical imbalances and genetics, that medications are vital, that the doctor knows best, that full recovery is impossible, and that the right of patients to have a say in their own treatment is invalid by the very nature of their "disease-induced" lack of insight and judgment.

As I read *Agnes's Jacket* I found myself wishing again and again that Hornstein had written it ten years earlier, when I myself was entering the mental health field. This book would have been a powerful and insightful ally for me. It could have spared me so much confusion—and

saved me so much time, and, most poignantly, so many errors of my own. Although my own experiences working with people diagnosed with severe psychiatric disorders have led me to many of the same conclusions Hornstein presents, my discoveries came as the result of painful uphill struggle: against colleagues and professors and supervisors—and often the field's own standards of care!—who loudly, and sometimes dangerously to my career and my relationships with my patients, stated the opposite with utmost confidence. Yet oddly enough, I arrived at my conclusions by following the main dictum of therapy, which, tragically, most of the mental health field seems to have forgotten, or simply ignored, as regards those diagnosed with the most severe problems: *listen to the patient!*

What makes this book special is that Gail Hornstein does just that, writ large—and writ thoroughly. Although she is not a clinician (she is an academic professor) it struck me repeatedly, with admiration, as she recounted her interactions with countless individuals in great distress, some of whom are still in the throes of emotional problems conventionally defined as “mentally ill,” that we clinicians would do well to follow her lead.

Hornstein places the experiences of persons in distress in the historical context of the patient-written literature. She highlights the things that *they* consider to be the most healing (and most harmful) in their recovery processes (and many of them are fully recovered), and she presents her findings in an objective, multi-faceted framework that respects the patient's right to be an informed consumer who has a voice in deciding his or her preferred mode of treatment. That said, I don't expect that many mental health practitioners will see Hornstein's work as objective, but she accounts for this by documenting the field's historical dismissal of its most logical critics, be they professional or patient.

Yet from beginning to end, *Agnes's Jacket* reads respectfully. Although the content is critical of convention, and critical to the point of eye-opening, the tone is moderate, the research substantial, the logic seamless, and the message, ultimately, redeeming.