



Mad professor? Sure, and he's full of 'mad pride'



April 30, 2010

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Special to the Star

The "mad man" was making a joke.

He was talking about the stigma of madness and how, because of historical context and cultural cues like movies, people equate madness with evil.

"That stereotype exists, the mad man with an Uzi in one hand and a machete in the other," says David Reville. "We all carry it in our heads."

And that's why, explains Reville, speaking for mad people. "We get bent out of shape whenever something hideous does happen."

For example, he says, when someone on a bus cuts the head off another passenger, as happened two summers ago in Manitoba. "Now that's mad," he said, in reference to the man who was later found not guilty of murder because he is schizophrenic and was suffering from a major psychotic episode.

Of course, most mad people are not dangerous, he points out. They're no different from you and me.

(Chances are, they *are* you and me; one out of five Canadians will experience mental illness, advises Health Canada.)

"I'm never going to harm you physically," says Reville. "I'm not going to cut your head off — but I might talk your head off."

As with all good jokes, there's truth in that, because Reville does, in fact, proceed to talk non-stop for more than two hours — even though he still has a stack of papers to mark for the courses he teaches at Ryerson: A History of Madness, a liberal arts course, and Mad People's History, a similar course offered online for the first time this year by the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

But then, Reville has lots to talk about — and lots of experience doing it.

Now 67, he was 22 when he dropped out of law school because of "what is euphemistically called a nervous breakdown." After two years

in Kingston Psychiatric Hospital, Reville became a plumber, then owner of a successful plumbing business. (He was first diagnosed with what is now called bipolar affective disorder, and takes an anti-depressant.

“The antidote to madness for me is political activism, advocacy work and conscious-raising,” says Reville.

He spent two terms on Toronto City Council and two terms as a New Democratic MPP at Queen’s Park (elected in 1985 and again in 1987). He talked the heads off constituents, colleagues, the media and anyone in the vicinity of his voice, actual or virtual, about poverty, homelessness, unemployment, social exclusion, human rights and the consequences of being labelled, “medicalized” and “psychiatrized”—the latter term being a particular favorite.

Reville once made another widely quoted joke, about how he joined the NDP because he was mentally ill.

That one, too, was based on truth.

“I was trying to explain that, while locked up in a mental hospital, I was in a position to observe what the power structure did to people on the bottom end of it and what it felt like to be completely powerless,” he explains. Having experienced that, “you would join a political party trying to do something about it.”

Now he talks to students and other “high knowledge crazies” – another term he’s fond of and one he invented—about the history of madness and the mad movement.

The label Reville uses most for himself is “psychiatric survivor” but he’s kind of partial to “mad professor,” though modestly insisting he’s not a professor, merely a part-time instructor in the School of Disability Studies.

If he were of a younger generation, he says, he might go with “crazy” or “lunatic” or “wacko” – increasingly popular terms of self-reference in the mad movement, properly known as the “consumer/ survivor/ ex-patient movement (C/S/X).”

“It’s a compound word because it reflects the different ways members of the movement describe themselves,” explains Reville.

Labels like “lunatic,” he says, are a way of “queering madness — jamming the culture by taking the most pejorative terms and embracing them, the way people in the gay movement did. It happens in many equity-seeking movements.”

The mad liberation movement that gave rise to, and is explored in, Reville’s courses, along with the horrors, ignorance and indignities that preceded it, owes a debt, he says, to other human rights and liberation movements: feminism, black pride, gay pride.

“We have the same roots,” he says, “but have not been as successful, perhaps because we’ve been even more marginalized and because it’s so dangerous to come out as a mad person. Many of us pass for normal – and that’s a rational decision to make.”

But it’s the narratives of people who not only come out as mad but “who talk back to psychiatry” that are prominent in the courses he teaches.

“A lot of the course is about mad people who are activists, trying to change the way madness is viewed by society, and about what happens to people who are identified as mad,” he explains.

Reville believes we're on the cusp of including Mad Studies in the academic world in the same way Women's Studies have become enshrined.

Meanwhile, his students are learning that Mad Pride is a growing and evolving movement.

The Mad Pride parade and celebration in Toronto on July 14, coinciding with Bastille Day, is part of an international celebration of mad pride on that day. "We changed the name from Psychiatric Survivor Pride," explains Reville.

But the change that excites Reville most, after all these years, "is to see young people at the university who are themselves mad-identified. This is new, an intellectual innovation whereby people who have had some experience with madness or mental illness or the mental health system are now studying the phenomenon itself."

About the video

Would you call yourself a lunatic? If you had good reason to, you might. Video interviews show society's treatment of those who live with mental illness

We call mad people lots of names. Most of them are not meant to be complimentary. But what do mad people call themselves? Do they accept labels that others stick to them? Do they apply their own labels? Why might one person choose a different label than another? Twelve Toronto activists discuss how they identify themselves.

The film clip is a part of an online course called "Mad People's History," taught at The Chang School by self-described "mad professor" David Reville, an instructor with the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University.