



INITIATIVE!

From *being human*
Spring 2013



Inner Fire: Rekindling the Individual Spirit

Interview with Beatrice Birch

One participant at the LA Forum was a woman named Beatrice (Bea) Birch who is carrying an impulse called “Inner Fire” or even, “Inner Fire – Claim It!” It has taken shape in her life out of decades of therapeutic and educational experience in the US and UK. The program will be based in Vermont, two key collaborators have stepped forward, and the organizational form is taking shape.

Inner Fire is taking aim at is the tremendous epidemic in which individuals with psychological disorders and addiction problems are being met with a single practical choice: lifelong treatment with consciousness-altering drugs. It asserts, and will demonstrate, that these sufferers have a real choice.

Inner Fire is just at the stage of incorporating, taking a physical location, attracting anthroposophical therapists to collaborate, and raising funds. The last is a special challenge since the whole rehabilitation field is strongly influenced by the pharmaceutical industry, “big pharma,” which must be biased for economic reasons against attempts to reduce dependency on prescription drugs.

Inner Fire’s initial documents call it “a proactive, healing community offering a choice for people with addictive and mental health challenges.” Its mission is “to offer a choice by exemplifying through insight and understanding, love and pa-

tience, commitment and perseverance, that there are safe, alternative approaches to recovery from mental health and addictive challenges other than through pharmaceutical medication.” Of the key vision, Beatrice Birch has written: “At Inner Fire, the key to recovery has to do with the image of the human being. Anyone who experiences the human being as consisting of a body, soul and spirit must recognize and appeal to the creator within. In the mental health world, one refers to ‘maintaining’ the human being. I dare say, ‘maintaining’ should be limited to trucks, not to human beings!”

On the “action day” of the Social Initiatives Forum we met with Bea at Elderberries Café and asked her to share her life path, the questions and experiences by which has now reached this very serious undertaking.

I started life in Concord, Massachusetts. I was able to do independent study for my last year in high school so I traveled with an international organization, 150 people in the cast, called “Up With People,” an amazing experience. We performed for the opening of the Olympics in Munich—which means we experienced the murders of the Israeli athletes by Palestinians. Afterwards the question was, will the show go on, because we were going to perform in the Olympic Village for the athletes. And it did go on. So the experience was singing to an audience which was sobbing.

During that year I realized I wanted to teach in a form of education I had not had. So I worked in Montessori and other alternative schools, searching for something but not finding it. During my first year of college my mother sent me an article about what’s now the Lexington (Mass.) Waldorf school, then in a church basement in Porter Square in Cambridge. At the top of the article she wrote, “This sounds like you.” Indeed, after being there I was struck by an element of truth; I didn’t know what it was, but there it was. So I got in touch with Emerson College and saved a place.

My year at Emerson was a “coming home.” And there



Beatrice Birch, interviewed at
Elderberries Café in Los Angeles

I heard of the social impulse of the Bristol Waldorf School, first of a new generation of schools which felt Waldorf should be available regardless of the parents' financial situation. You did not go to teach in Bristol by mistake. You knew what you were getting into, you knew that this is the way you wanted to work. I taught there for eight years.

To deepen the artistic within myself, I left Bristol to do the Hauschka Artistic Therapy training in Gloucestershire. Over the years, I kept my foot in schools while working in the Blackthorne Trust in Maidstone, St. Luke's in Stroud and finally at Helios when the doctor asked me to come back to Bristol and joined them, this was where my son Martyn had his first four years in school, before I came back to the States in 1989.

Thirteen of my 25 years in the UK I practiced artistic therapy with people wrestling with cancer and other conditions. These last ten years most of my clients were fighting psychiatric and addiction issues. Many have been to other rehab programs before. When I would ask, what did you do while you were there—well, it was clear that people didn't know how to help these struggling souls. One young man was told he needed time by himself, so he played his guitar while his parents paid thousands of dollars a week. Another, angrily, told me how his parents gave him money, oblivious that he'd spend it all on drugs.

I started getting phone calls from mothers and aunts, concerned about a son or nephew, fearing he would end up in prison. While in England, I had been involved in the early days of Ruskin Mill, a very successful will-based initiative working with at-risk youth. I knew what these boys needed, but I couldn't find a place like that here in the USA.

When I returned to the United States, I'd had two wishes. One was to find colleagues and create a place

for people at the end of their lives which would really honor this stage in life. I had worked in nursing homes in England with people sitting around waiting to die, and knowing it. Yet they were curious. One woman would want to follow me into another client's room. I would say, "Let her come." But instead she was medicated.

My other thought had been, to create something like a Ruskin Mill. So hearing what these concerned women were asking of me for the boys in their lives, I began to do some exploring. I visited rehabs and just felt emptiness. It was disheartening, but I heard about a place in Vermont. The executive director

was very open and interested in my work and urged me to come. But I had the chance to go to Arta, in Holland, a dream I'd had for thirty years, and was able to spend six amazing weeks engaged in their program around addictions.

Upon my return, I visited the community in Vermont, and have been working there since with the Hauschka

Artistic Therapy. It has been a very valuable and a very painful experience. I'd always worked with anthroposophical clinics. So I was naively disbelieving when the organization's psychiatrist talked about the human being devoid of soul and spirit, and about brain chemistry and which medications to add to the cocktail.

I work for an hour a week with these same individuals, and when you work artistically you go very, very deep. My colleagues began to notice a whole new part of the resident begin to unfold. One psychiatrist came up to me and said, "I've been working with Steve for over ten years, and I never expected to see any change in him. Since he's been working with you I see things I never imagined." I was impressed with his humility, but I also asked myself, "How can a practitioner never expect to see any changes?"



Creating clay faces locates in one's own experience feelings like the difference between sadness and depression.

Wherever there is a spirit, there is room for change.

I also work in prisons. In the USA, “you are your crime”; the system doesn’t expect anything different from you. I’ve met the most extraordinary human beings “inside.” When I first began going in to paint with the men or facilitate AVP (“alternatives to violence” programs), and someone would share his story, I would feel, I can’t imagine how you could have done that. I came to realize that *you* didn’t commit *that* crime; but *you* under the influence of cocaine or another substance did.

A young man from a privileged background experienced his parents’ nasty divorce just as he was heading off to college. His foundation was shifting and he felt very vulnerable, and he latched on to a freshman. The relationship was okay for a while but it became too intense. She finally asked him to stop phoning or she would call the police. He had no one else so he phoned again, and she called the police. He was scared when they knocked on his door so he resisted. They took him to a psychiatric hospital where he was medicated. He’s been highly medicated since then, for twelve years. There was nothing wrong with him, he only needed support. But one medicine leads to another, to another, to another. Today he walks around like a zombie and says he’s unable to think clearly or feel his feelings. He hates being medicated but no one will listen to him. He is unaware that there is a choice.

So many people are grateful to read Robert Whitaker’s book *The Anatomy of an Epidemic*. But it is a tremendous shock to see that “big pharma,” the pharmaceutical companies, are hiding results on the effects of psychotropic medicines. I’m working with people—I don’t want to say they’ve lost their inner fire, but I feel sometimes like a fisherman, I’m searching for their divine creative self.

The beautiful thing about artistic and other anthroposophical therapies is—they cannot be *done to you*. When I was moving from the Blackthorn Trust in Maidstone, one woman I worked with said, “You can’t go, you healed me.” And I could turn to her and say, “You picked up the paintbrush.” I’m not interested in *healing* people, I’m interested in facilitating

their healing process.

Whether it’s cocaine, a therapist, or yard sales, addiction is addiction. One man I’ve been working with in his mid fifties, he’s been on three different anti-depressants at the same time for years. I asked, do they help, and he said, “I didn’t ask to be fifty-seven and a vegetable.” We know now that our life span may be shortened by 25-30 years by medications, that diabetes is linked to Ritalin, and so on. Many psychotropic medications shrink the frontal lobe of our brain, the part which makes us distinctly human. An excellent documentary, *Generation Rx*, shows what we are doing to our future generations. The wish to homogenize, to make all children the same so that they’re easy to teach—it’s a tremendously serious situation.

I have not yet found a rehab center which will not medicate people. Yet I know people who have gone through severe psychological stress with no medication. Of course you can’t take the meds away without putting something in its place. A website, mindfreedom.org/personal, shares stories of how people got off these medications. Four things helped them come off medication: friendship, family, art, and music. Nothing mind-blowing. Just being in human company they could trust, and having support to go through the eye of the needle.

My tremendously valuable experience at Arta in Holland has guided the development of Inner Fire. We say “inner fire—claim it,” because without claiming our inner fire, proactively acknowledging that we have it, we will not recover.

This community of healing will involve a year’s commitment. There’s some flexibility on that, but the daily schedule involves a strong intention. Arta has a conscious and focused schedule and achieves a 50-60% recovery rate. I understand the rate is 10-15% in the rest of Holland, and 2-3% in this country.

Inner Fire will be a wonderful opportunity for therapists who’ve been working out of anthroposophy. There the chance to develop the wisdom, working with colleagues, and it’s an opportunity to step further out into the world with the larger picture of the



Working with clay moves consciousness into the hands and directs intention into purposeful change.

human being. Besides the Hauschka artistic therapy which I do, we need speech, music, eurythmy, rhythmical massage, and Spacial Dynamics therapists, a biography counselor, anthroposophical nurse and doctor, and a sympathetic psychiatrist.

Individual and group therapies will happen in the afternoon; in the morning, there'll be a work program to exercise intention: the gardens or the woods; cleaning and caring for the house, and in the kitchen. Everyone will learn good nutrition and the ability to cook to take back out into the world with them.

Inner Fire is all about choice. I would never tell somebody not to be medicated, and if with awareness of the side-effects a person chooses medication, that's fine. The tragedy is that people don't realize there's a choice.

There have been initiatives like Soteria House and Diabasis House in California where they showed that you can work with people suffering from schizophrenia without using medications. It was a threat to the system, so funding was withdrawn. This is the main reason why Inner Fire must be privately funded.

A very important thing: because the opportunity for recovery is a right and cannot be a privilege, Inner Fire will be available for people regardless of their financial situation. It will be a place where all kinds of people can strive together for inner healing and balance. That means we're going to have to raise a lot of money. We definitely need donors who believe in this.

And I know it will spread. It will spread like wildfire.

Inner Fire, Inc., is now developing documents to tell its story, which will also soon be available at www.innerfire.us; Beatrice Birch can be reached at beatrice.birch55@gmail.com or at 518-444-4828.