

SZASZ'S 80TH BIRTHDAY: SYMPOSIUM AT SYRACUSE

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Professor Thomas S. Szasz, a Visiting Fellow of Regent's College School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, celebrated his eightieth birthday on 15 April 2000. Two of his colleagues, Dr Jeffrey A. Schaler and Dr Nelson Borelli, organised a symposium, 'Liberty and/or Psychiatry: 40 Years since *The Myth of Mental Illness*', in the Weiskotten Auditorium of the SUNY Health Science Center in Syracuse, New York. I had the honour of being invited to give a paper at the symposium. I am grateful to Regent's College School of Psychotherapy and Counselling for helping with my expenses.

Conferences on psychotherapy or psychiatry tend to consist of alienated, institutionalised jargon that throws little light on human reality. This symposium was a shining exception. This was all the more astonishing as there was no time for discussion, no panel, no plenary session, only a succession of terse, succinct papers, most of them read, some improvised. But they sparkled. Szasz was delighted. It was a civilised occasion.

The ten presentations that most impressed me were: 'The state of the therapeutic state' (Jeffrey Schaler); 'After the myth is dispelled: what then?' (George J. Alexander); 'Psychiatry on trial' (Ron Leifer); 'Rhetoric and Szaszian theory' (Richard E. Vatz); 'Epitomizing the myth: Max Fink and electroshock' (John M. Friedberg); 'The existential philosophy of Thomas Szasz' (Keith Hoeller); 'Thomas Szasz's impact on political issues' (René Talbot); 'Psychiatry's moral anchor' (Robert W. Daly); 'Thomas Szasz's personalist and ethical conception of the cause and cure of character, conduct, and conflict' (Zvi Lothane); 'Gnosis vs. diagnosis: Sybil's last stand' (Peter J. Swales).

I was the only delegate from the United Kingdom. My own improvised talk started from the coincidence of Szasz's eightieth birthday with the first anniversary of the death of his British friend and colleague, Aaron Esterson. The method common to their therapy and research I defined as 'Asking simple questions', the title of my talk. But this can not be reduced to yet another 'technique'. Simple questions, in the Szasz-Esterson sense, differ from the simple-minded questions and questionnaires with which psychiatrists and psychologists avoid relating to their 'patients'. Esterson always started from what he called an experience of confusion, of being not yet *ready* to question: 'the water coming up to *here*'. I discussed Laing and Esterson's question about 'schizophrenia': 'Are the experience and behaviour that psychiatrists take as signs and symptoms of schizophrenia more socially intelligible than has come to be supposed?' I explained how I had asked similar questions in my research on the paradigmatic case-studies by Freud, some Jungians, Boss, and others, including Szasz and Esterson themselves. I reported how the students in my 'Great Case-Histories' course at Regent's College School of Psychotherapy and Counselling gave Szasz top marks for his integrity and respect for his 'patient' in his early case-study of 'Prisoner "K."'. Finally, I sketched how a similar approach by Esterson, Gelbard, and myself had thrown light on the methods worked out by the members of the Nazi *Sicherheitsdienst* to deceive, mystify, and psychologically manipulate their victims.