

## Section 5: Book Reviews

### Book Review

***American Snakepit.* By Dan Tomasulo. Stillhouse Press, 2018.**

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Dan Tomasulo's extraordinary second memoir, *American Snakepit*, is by turns moving and hilarious and sometimes a quirky mixture of both. The book opens with a chilling scene of a severely psychotic nude woman hauling off and hurling a five-drawer dresser at Tomasulo when he goes to her room to say hello as he starts a new job managing a group home for people with intellectual disabilities and mental illness. Doesn't sound funny? Well, Tomasulo makes it so.

Much of the memoir chronicles his work managing the group home in the aftermath of the deinstitutionalization movement that began in the early and mid 1970s. As Tomasulo notes, thousands of long-term patients—children, adults, and seniors—were dumped out of psychiatric hospitals around the country, with professionals scrambling to find and establish group homes that could accommodate this vastly underserved and often abused or neglected population. Specifically, those who came to live at the home Tomasulo managed had all been residents of Staten Island's Willowbrook State School.

Willowbrook is the institution that Robert Kennedy in 1965 said “borders on a snake pit.” It was an institution infamous for its deplorable living conditions and rampant abuse of residents, some of whom had lived there from birth (their mothers being long-term patients) or early childhood and would reside there until the end of their lives.

Then, in the 1970s and early '80s when Willowbrook and other long-term facilities were closed and deinstitutionalization occurred, many patients were dumped into the streets without concern for where they might live or what services they might need. It doesn't take much imagination to guess how ill equipped these unfortunate people were for life outside an institution, given the years they had spent virtually incarcerated.

Fortunately, some forward-looking and compassionate groups of people realized the depth of the problem and began opening boarding homes to house former residents of the institutions. One such organization, the Young Adult Institute, opened a few group homes for people with overwhelming physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities. It was into one of these group homes that Tomasulo stepped as manager.

It was a time in his own life when Tomasulo too was virtually homeless, having just ended a marriage. He was also finishing his graduate studies and needed a place to live and work where he could begin to pay off graduate-school loans and continue his lifelong desire and gift for helping those who are underserved and in greatest need. His optimism, compassion, and belief in the innate goodness, spontaneity, and creativity of people seem to have carried him through the frighteningly challenging experiences involved in helping injured, disabled, and forgotten people reclaim their lives and restore joy and connection.

His sense of humor is a big plus, too. Throughout the memoir we are treated to his way of juxtaposing sometimes wild and scary events and interactions with the inherent absurdity of the situations or people's reactions to them. Tomasulo's self-effacing views of himself and his expertise in learning to work in the home are comical in the extreme, particularly regarding his lifelong inability to hammer nails in properly.

The chapters are divided into segments introducing us to the residents of Walden House, their needs, unique and fascinating personalities, and their gifts and goodness. We also meet the shifting staff of the house and those intrepid and dedicated souls who, like Tomasulo, stayed. Through respect, interest, intuition, and loving care for the residents, these stalwart people contribute to building the strong sociometric connections that effect positive and meaningful change in the residents who had been given up for lost by those who sent them there. What's particularly lovely about the memoir is that we also see how positively transformed the staff are through their relationships with the residents.

Some chapters are devoted to those outside the house, people living in the community and their dislike and distrust of having obviously challenged people living in their town and neighborhood. Tomasulo chronicles the repeated and varied efforts he and staff make to foster positive connections between the community and the group home residents.

He also shares the battle of titans between the local fire chief (who wants to shut the home down) and the residents and staff who must practice to clear everyone from the house in 2 minutes during a fire drill so that the home can stay open. Both comical and frightening events ensue that ultimately underscore the innate goodness of humanity and the ability to thrive despite obstacles.

Whether in recollections about residents, staff, or members of the community, many gems of wisdom stand out amid the humor. The memoir repeatedly highlights the ways we stand in our own way and in each other's, in part because we are triggered or fearful or just can't figure out what else to do.

After his work at Walden House, Tomasulo begins his work as a professor at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey and starts training with Bob and Jacqui Siroka to become a psychodramatist. Here again, through a moving case example, we see Tomasulo's gifts at being with a protagonist's pain, exercising patience, acceptance, and presence, and cocreating healing moments psychodramatically to alchemically transmute pain and sorrow into joy and thriving.

Tomasulo concludes this brilliant book with a moving account of a meeting he had with two former inmates of Willowbrook who had met and fallen in love there and were still a married couple in 2010 when he met them. Had they not

been released from Willowbrook, they would never have been able to marry, let alone have many loving years together, since men and women were segregated from each other at the institution. One can feel their love through the pages as the book comes full circle.

Finally, this beautiful memoir is a history of transformation from disempowerment to empowerment, from disconnection to connection and the joy of appreciating the positive moments of life. It points out the importance of savoring small moments of sweetness, love, and thriving.