Inside the Ward

THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO INPATIENT PSYCHIATRIC UNIT for teenagers had locks on the doors, and you needed a special key to get in. The yard was wrapped in a fence that soared 25 feet into the air and was topped with metal shards to keep people in, not out.

I was a graduate student in social work, and my supervisor was a maternal woman who wore turquoise squash blossoms and black turtlenecks. She rolled up her sleeves and dialed the parents of patients who didn't know how to help their children, or didn't want to.

"The mother's the mother," she said, looking at me over her bifocals when we were alone in her office, which we shared. It seemed as if she could see two realities. "You shouldn't judge."

The county facility had something I'd never seen before: a metal restraint table bolted to the floor. It was mounted to a thick steel pole. The thin mattress on top of it was dimpled in the exact spot someone's knees, hips, and chin might be if he or she lay down. Leather bands lolled limp over the sides. I can still remember running my finger along a cold buckle on the foot strap, thinking it looked like something a pirate might wear.

It was a locked unit, after all, and I understood, in a textbook kind of way, that the teenagers who were patients had experienced what the experts called *loss of internal control.* Some nurses called the hospital the "glue factory," because these kids needed something external to literally hold them together, to contain them, like a glass holds water. The glass was, often, the hospital itself, but sometimes that wasn't enough. Like for the boys and girls who drew razors on their forearms like X-ACTO blades slice plastic wrap. For those kids the doors and locks of the unit weren't enough.

My supervisor said we shouldn't judge.

Our office was across the hall from the restraint room, and many times I judged. I watched screaming children dragged in, lifted up, fastened down. They'd been fighting, or threatening to kill themselves. Once the child was flat on the mattress, I watched six nurses hold him down and three more check the belts around the wrists and waist. I heard 13-year-old children scream the basest profanities. I heard them yell, "F--- your mother!"

Shaking, terrified, I thought, They deserve this. I thought this because I judged.

But the head nurse, like my supervisor, didn't judge. "You're not coming out until you can hold it together," she'd say. She'd have to raise her voice. But her tone was so kind, so gentle, the child in restraints always began to weep, and the crying gave way to heaving sobs. And after watching this happen enough times, and every single time, I finally understood why we shouldn't judge.

They say ten hugs a day are essential for mental health. But what if being held is terrifying, yet the only thing that might heal you? What if embracing the intensity of loss to the point where it feels like it might kill you is the very thing that could save your life?

I don't know if restraints are right or wrong. I still leave that to the experts. But what I do know is that some kids hated the restraints. Others begged for them. The leather bands made some kids feel trapped and others safe, weaving an imaginary cradle, the artificial embrace of the mother. When the bond of mother and child breaks, we mourn—all of us. But we grieve, really, for the part of ourselves we've abandoned in the process, without even realizing it.

That's why it's so sad, and scary, not only to witness it, but to feel it stirring inside. And why I finally understood why we shouldn't judge.

Meredith Resnick, LCSW
Irvine, California
mjresnick@aol.com

A Piece of My Mind Section Editor: Roxanne K. Young, Associate Senior Editor.