

Clifford Whittingham Beers: From Patient to Pioneer in the Mental Health Movement

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CLIFFORD WHITTINGHAM BEERS (1876–1943), a pioneer in mental health reform, admitted himself to Butler Hospital in 1939. Burdened by his own recurring mental health issues, he was uplifted in the company of **ARTHUR RUGGLES, MD**, the hospital's long-time superintendent. The two had first collaborated in 1919, forming the U.S. International Committee for Mental Hygiene.

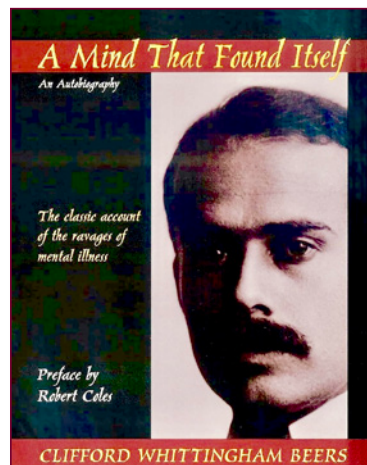
In 1944, a year after Beers' death, Dr. Ruggles paid homage to his colleague and friend in an article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.¹ "For thirty-five years of his lifetime his work profoundly affected American



Butler Hospital in 1907 [Providence Library digital collections]

psychiatry. His plea for the better care of the mentally ill and his founding of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene had the definitive effect of rallying physicians and layman toward the better understanding and care of mental disease and defect," he wrote.

"Over the past twenty-five years it was my privilege to work closely with Clifford Beers and to know his innermost hopes and desires."



Autobiography

Beers' personal battles with depression, delusions, and mania first came to the world's attention with the publication of his autobiography, *A Mind That Found Itself*, in 1908, which is still in print and digital formats. In it, he recounts his struggles with what was then termed

Cover of autobiography reprinted in 1981, with a preface by Robert Coles
[UNIV. OF PITTSBURGH PRESS, AMAZON]



Clifford Whittingham Beers, Yale College, 1897 [YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY]



Arthur Ruggles, MD, Superintendent of Butler Hospital [AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION FOUNDATION ARCHIVES]



The Mental Health 'Bell of Hope'

ALEXANDRIA, VA — The following information on the Mental Health "Bell of Hope" is from the Mental Health America website (mhanational.org).

May is designated as national Mental Health Awareness Month. During the early days of mental health treatment, asylums often restrained people who had mental illnesses with iron chains and shackles around their ankles and wrists. With better understanding and treatments, this cruel practice eventually stopped.

In the early 1950s, Mental Health America issued a call to asylums across the country for their discarded chains and shackles. On April 13, 1953, at the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, MD, Mental Health America melted down these inhumane bindings and recast them into a sign of hope: the Mental Health Bell, the "Bell of Hope."

Now the symbol of Mental Health America, the 300-pound Bell serves as a powerful reminder that the invisible chains of misunderstanding and discrimination continue to bind people with mental illnesses. Today, the Bell of Hope rings out hope for improving mental health and achieving victory over mental illnesses. Over the years, national mental health leaders and other prominent individuals have rung the Bell to mark the continued progress in the fight for victory over mental illnesses. ❖



Maryland Gov. Theodore McKeldin and Mrs. A. Felix DuPont in 1953 pour the metal made from melted chains used to restrain people with mental illnesses to create the Mental Health Bell. [HTTPS://MHANATIONAL.ORG/THE-MENTAL-HEALTH-BELL]

manic depression, now bipolar disorder. His initial bouts were sparked by an older brother's "epileptic" seizures over a six-year course, and subsequent death in 1900 (ultimately determined to be caused by a brain tumor). Beers worried the same thing would happen to him.

He and his four siblings grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1897, he graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale College, and went on to work in accounting, insurance and finance firms—successful, yet haunted by his brother's seizures, as he described in his book. "For five years I had my ups and downs. I finally decided to take a respite from work. I said to friends I would rather die than live life as an epileptic. My persistent dread became a false belief. My disordered brain was busy with schemes for death."

Suicide attempt

On a June day in 1900, in the throes of despair, Beers climbed out of his fourth-story bedroom window, hung on to the sill, and then dropped down, hurtling past the dining room window. His family, seated at a table eating, were startled. Incredibly, he landed on his feet, but incurring severe ankle, foot and leg injuries. His younger brothers ran out and carried him inside. "I thought I had epilepsy," was my first remark. "I wish it was over!" he recounted in his autobiography.

Institutionalized

After a hospital stay of several weeks, he returned home, but continued to suffer from acute depression and delusions. The latter led him to believe his family members were imposters, and that the police were after him for attempting suicide. He was admitted to a private sanatorium, followed by two other mental health institutions in Connecticut, from 1900 to 1903.

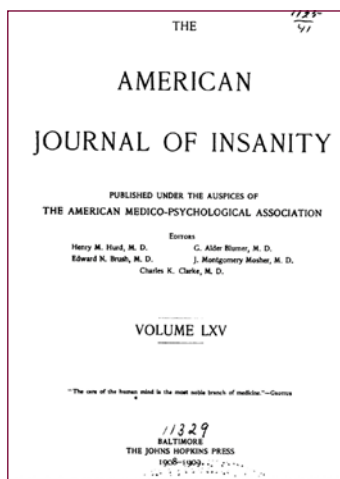
Confined to the "violent" ward in one institution, he turned to art and literature. Reading *Les Misérables* was a pivotal point for him. "Hugo's plea for suffering Humanity—for the world's miserable—struck a responsive chord within me. Not only did it revive my latent desire to help the afflicted; it did more. It aroused a consuming desire to emulate Hugo himself, by writing a book which should arouse sympathy for and interest in that class of unfortunates in whose behalf I felt it my peculiar right and duty to speak."

In 1904, "after becoming a free man," Beers resumed his business activities, and began work on *A Mind That Found Itself*. His accounts of staying silent for two years, and placed at times in solitary confinement and straightjackets, are both chilling and compelling to read. In Chapter 1 of his book, he described the demons that afflicted him.

"It is an autobiography, and more: in part it is a biography; for, in telling the story of my life, I must relate the history of another

self—a self which was dominant from my twenty-fourth to my twenty-sixth year. During that period I was unlike what I had been, or what I have been since. The biographical part of my autobiography might be called the history of a mental civil war, which I fought single-handed on a battlefield that lay within the compass of my skull. An Army of unreason, composed of the cunning and treacherous thoughts of an unknown foe, attacked my bewildered consciousness with cruel persistency, and would have destroyed me had not a triumphant Reason finally interposed a superior strategy that saved me from my unnatural self.

"For what purpose was my life spared? That question I have asked myself, and this book is, in part, an answer. That the very delusion which drove me to a death-loving desperation should so suddenly vanish would seem to indicate that many a suicide might be averted if the person contemplating it could find the proper assistance when such a crisis impends."



[HATHI DIGITAL TRUST]

Book Review: An "Alienist's" Analysis

A book review appeared in 1908 in *The American Journal of Insanity*,² later renamed the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, written by **CLARENCE B. FARRAR, MD**, an associate professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Medical School, who worked at a psychiatric hospital and asylum in Maryland.

He wrote: "It is, or should be, the object of every alienist to study his cases first and foremost from their individual subjective point of view." He criticized the "habit of passing through a mental ward and forming opinions of patients from brief and routine interviews; setting down extraordinary ideas as delusions, without more ado...and meting out at once summary and violent treatment to

meet violent emergencies, without deliberate consideration of the pathogenesis of the emergency. One of the richest and most valuable sources of information at the alienist's disposal is the "confession" of the convalescent or recovered patient."

Society/Committees for Mental Hygiene

In 1908, Beers founded the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene, which would expand a year later to form the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, the predecessor to the National Mental Health Association, and the current Mental Health America.

Beers and New Haven native Clara Louise Jepson, also a Yale graduate, married in 1912, but the couple decided against having children, worried about possible hereditary links to his mental health issues. She traveled widely with her husband, engaged in the formation of national and international foundations for mental health.

In a 1933 *New York Times* article on Beers' accomplishments,³ L.H. Robbins wrote: "Institutions once known as "insane asylums" are now "hospitals." Harsh practices within

them, under which the ill suffered needlessly, have been largely done away with. Violent wards have almost disappeared. Intelligent after-care is provided in most communities. Best of all, the notion is dying out that “to be once insane is to be always insane.” Mental illness is coming to be as rationally looked upon as physical illness, and thus a long injustice will some day be ended.

“And all because one man had the courage, at any cost to himself, to tell what he had learned in three bitter years, and the determination to follow up his message with a quarter century of tireless effort. True, it might have come about in some other way. But it did not. It waited for Clifford Beers to be the pioneer.”

As a young man, Beers aspired to be a Wall Street financier and build wealth, in part because his family was of limited means. But his mental health battles led him elsewhere. Robert Frost, a contemporary poet who lived in New England at the time, perhaps illustrates Beers’ winding path to reform in the final verse of *The Road Not Taken*, published in 1916.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

References

1. Ruggles A. Clifford Beers and American Psychiatry. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 1944; 100(6). <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.100.6.98>
2. Farrar CB. The Autopathography of C.W. Beers. *The American Journal of Insanity*. 1908;215.
3. Robbins LH. “Light From a Mind That Found Itself; Out of Bitter Experience Clifford Beers Evolved the Mental Hygiene Movement, Twenty-five Years Old”. *New York Times*. April 30, 1933.

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MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

May is Mental Health Awareness Month Mental Health Association of RI to recognize state legislators

PROVIDENCE — The Mental Health Association of Rhode Island (MHARI), an affiliate of Mental Health America, is holding a celebratory and recognition event of Mental Health Awareness Month on Tuesday, May 26th, from 2:30 pm to 3:30 pm in the second floor State Room at the Rhode Island State House.

Legislator of the Year Awards will be presented to the Speaker of the House of Representatives **K. Joseph Shekarchi** and Senator **Linda Ujifusa**. A special recognition will also be presented to former Director of Communications & Community Partnerships at Horizon Healthcare Partners **Karen Jeffreys**.

History

The movement began with Clifford Beers, whose experience in early 20th-century asylums helped spark a national reform effort demanding dignity, accountability, and humane care. That legacy is symbolized by the Mental Health Bell of Hope, forged from the iron shackles once used to restrain patients—a reminder of how far we have come, and how much work remains.

MHARI carries the 110-year legacy of the national organization forward by elevating lived experience, advancing policies that expand access and rights, and advocating for a stronger behavioral healthcare system for all Rhode Islanders.

For more information, visit: <https://mhari.org>, an affiliate of Mental Health America <https://mhanational.org> ❖