CHAPTER 6

Befriending the Bereft: The Compassionate Legacy of Dr. George Zeller and the Peoria State Hospital

Sylvia Shults

"Our biggest fear is that Doc Zeller may make being insane a pleasure."
-- an Illinois senator, quoted in a newspaper article about the Peoria State Hospital

Imagine, just for a moment or two, that you are insane.

Maybe you're depressed. Maybe things haven't gone your way for a very long time. Maybe your life just seems kind of . . . bleak.

Maybe you can't seem to make it through the day without a glass of wine, or two, or five. Or maybe you need something a little harder to keep the black dog at bay. Maybe you're epileptic, just waiting for the next lightning strike to hit your brain.

Or maybe, things are worse than that. Maybe there are so many voices in your head, you're no longer sure which voice is your own. Maybe you can't make your way through the rusty fishhooks and barbed wire in your mind anymore. Maybe it hurts so bad to be you that you just can't stand it.

You know you need help, but you've heard such horror stories about asylums. You don't want to be bound, helpless, in a straitjacket. You're terrified of ending up shackled to a bed, trapped in a room just as your mind is trapped in the bony prison of your skull.

But there is hope.

There is the Peoria State Hospital.

The insane asylum has historically been a place of fear, pain, and abuse. Want to make a horror novel twice as horrible? Set it in an insane asylum. Every horror movie aficionado knows instinctively, if a story takes place in an asylum, nothing good's going to come of it. There will be no redemption, no happy ending. There will be blood and filth and pain and tears. Horror novels are the same way. Setting a novel in an asylum is a surefire recipe for desperate fear.

Even real life reflects this. There are plenty of modern sources, like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, that graphically describe life behind the walls of an asylum. The stigma of mental illness, and the fear of being locked up, of having one's freedom taken away, haunt us to this day.

But the Peoria State Hospital, in Bartonville, Illinois, was nothing like that. For most of its existence, it was held up to the rest of the country as a model of what psychiatric treatment *could*

Find this image at
https://www.peoriastatehospital.com/

Figure 6.1: The campus of the asylum was a self-contained little village occupying the hilltop in Bartonville. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

be. It was used as an example of what could be achieved with kind words, gentle treatment, the total absence of restraints, healthy food, wholesome entertainment, and productive work. People who suffer from mental illness inhabit a very confusing and at times frightening world, but the Peoria State Hospital was a place of refuge for the suffering.

And it all started with one man's vision.

George A. Zeller was tapped by the Peoria Women's League in 1898 to be not only the superintendent of their planned asylum, but its father figure. Zeller was born in 1858, and grew up in Spring Bay, north of Peoria on the Illinois River. Following in his father's footsteps, he too became a surgeon, with a thriving practice in Peoria. He spent some time in the Army, serving the population of the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. When he came back stateside, he took on the position of superintendent of the Illinois Asylum for the Incurable Insane.

Right away, he began to implement his vision for the institution. From the very beginning, he chafed at the name that had been assigned. He found it deeply offensive. He made a visit to the state legislature in Springfield to demand a name change. "Don't tell my patients they're incurable," he insisted. "That's exactly what I'm here to do." The institution's name was changed at his request to the Illinois General Hospital for the Insane, and later, to the Peoria State Hospital.

Dr. Zeller had a policy in which he proposed to take in "the worst of the worst" patients. A modern mind automatically assumes, oh, that must mean violently psychotic patients. Dr. Zeller's interpretation of that phrase was much different. By "worst of the worst," he meant those patients who could not care for themselves, people that needed the most care, people who were considered incurable, people that every other institution had given up on – the most vulnerable of the mentally ill. Dr. Zeller was proud of the fact that he had no training as a psychiatrist. He realized that this lack of training meant that he was not hide-bound by current treatments in the care of the mentally ill. His philosophy was simple: let's treat these people with kindness, as we would want our family members to be treated, and see what happens. And what happened was that the Peoria State Hospital became the premier institution for the care of the mentally ill, not just in Illinois, not just in the United States, but in the *world.*

The hospital had been stocked, for its opening in 1902, with equipment that was standard issue for asylums of the day: bars on the windows, straitjackets, and Utica cribs. (A Utica crib, designed to keep patients corralled, looks very much like a baby's crib, except for its barred lid, which locks.) Dr. Zeller believed passionately in a lot of things, including absolute non-restraint. He didn't want his charges to feel that they were living in cages. He ordered the bars taken off of the windows, so that his patients could see for themselves that they were not confined. He had his nurses leave the windows of each cottage open a few inches for the same reason. The hospitals, the cottages, all of the buildings on the hilltop were not locked. "These folks don't lock their doors at home," Dr. Zeller reasoned. "Why would we lock them in when they've come to us for help?" The straitjackets and handcuffs, he kept, but for only one reason. He stored them in a room next to his office. Their only use was as museum exhibits, something for his staff to point out to visitors and say, "Never again. Not here. Not at this institution."

The asylum, being a state-run institution, was watched closely by the higher-ups in Springfield. Dr. Zeller had to answer not only to his Board of Directors, but also to the state legislature. He was asked, "You've taken $6,000 worth of bars off of all the windows—what do you propose to do with all that hardware?"

Zeller had a brilliant idea, one of many. He had the bars fashioned into cages, for a petting

zoo on the grounds. The Utica cribs were repurposed into rabbit hutches, or mangers for hay for the deer to eat. And the patients cared for those animals.

Any patients who found themselves at the Peoria State Hospital entered a world, perhaps, unlike any they had known before. Accounts from other asylums tell of patients being force-fed, of having a wedge shoved into their mouths to facilitate medicine dosing, breaking teeth in the process, of patients in the geriatric ward getting one meal a day, consisting of a thin, colorless broth. At the Peoria State Hospital, patients were fed wholesome food, supplied by the asylum's three farms. Personal stories from other institutions describe the mind-numbing monotony of sitting in a chair staring dully out a window, of not being allowed to do anything that would provide mental or physical stimulation. The days and weeks at the Peoria State Hospital were filled with activities. For years, the patients made the clothes that were worn by all the inmates. These garments were pants and shirts or dresses, too, not the shapeless pajamas we picture when we think of mental patients. Dr. Zeller believed that if you took away a man's clothes, you took away his dignity.

Patients were encouraged to socialize, to the extent that their issues allowed them to do so. Patients took their breakfast and lunch in their cottages, but they all came together for dinner in the Dining Hall. Shared mealtimes were not the only way that the staff encouraged socialization. The cottages were decorated for every holiday and for every patient's birthday. There were movies every Friday night and dances every Saturday night. There was church on Sunday morning, and baseball games on Sunday afternoon when the weather was fine. The patients tended the gardens that produced the food they ate. They raised the chickens and the pigs that provided eggs and bacon for their breakfasts. They cared for the animals in the zoo—whose fenced-in yard was created from the grates that had formerly barred the windows of the asylum—and trained a tame black bear to take baths in a pool on command. The *patients* did this. These activities were part of their daily life, thanks to Dr. Zeller's vision.

At other asylums, patients weren't permitted to have sharp objects, even sewing needles. Dressmaking was out of the question: in addition to being messy, with fabric and patterns spread out all over a room, it also involved the use of scissors. Putting needles and scissors into the hands of insane women? Unthinkable! But at Peoria State Hospital, women were encouraged to create clothing for themselves and for their fellow patients.

One of Dr. Zeller's favorite photographs shows a group of several men, epileptics, standing around a pool table. One of the men is lining up a shot with his cue. It's a perfectly ordinary scene – until you start imagining what it would feel like to be beaten with a pool cue. Or to have a billiard ball slammed into the bridge of your nose. Epileptics who were committed to state hospitals were considered to be potentially, explosively violent. For Dr. Zeller to encourage these men to enjoy a quiet game of pool during their down time was revolutionary. This photograph became one of Dr.

Find this image at
https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/wiu_digimgc/id/3339/rec/85

Figure 6.2: A nurse sitting in one of the original administration offices in the Bowen Building. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

Zeller's favorite examples of the effectiveness of his treatment. That treatment, for the most part, was simple kindness.

Dr. Zeller and his wife, Sophie, were unable to have children of their own. They referred to the asylum's residents as their children. And the patients who passed away, and were buried on the hilltop? Those were "our sleeping children." There was nothing Dr. Zeller and Sophie wouldn't do for their charges. History tells of a storm that rolled through the area in 1915, lashing the hilltop and knocking out power to the buildings. Sophie stood at the stove in one of the cottages, making pot after pot of coffee so that the nurses could take the hot, fortifying brew around to all the residents.

In the asylum archives there is a wonderful photograph of Dr. Zeller standing in his typical rigid military pose with several attendants in a field. It is only with a second look that you can see the two hundred male patients sitting quietly behind him, partially hidden in the tall grass in the field.

When Dr. Zeller went for a walk, the patients went with him. He just had that sort of charisma. In the early days, before the gymnasium was built, before the bars on the windows were turned into paddocks for the deer, before the dances and films and baseball games, the only physical activity available to the patients was a stroll outdoors—or, rather, a hike. The reasoning behind this was simple: a tired patient was a quiet patient.

Find this image at
https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/wiu_digimgc/id/3341/rec/86

Figure 6.3: Dr. Zeller delighted in taking walks with his patients, and they would follow him anywhere. As they strolled, he would ask his charges how they were getting along at his asylum. Everyone—even female patients—had a chance to express their opinions on these chatty walks. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

But it wasn't only the male patients who attended Dr. Zeller on his walks. He encouraged the female patients to stroll with him too, and he put that time to good use: he talked with them. Imagine being a mental patient, and a woman at that, and the head of the entire asylum takes the time to ask you how your day is going, did anything exciting happen this morning, and are you enjoying the food?

Interaction with his "children", and giving them a fulfilling life, was very important to Dr. Zeller. The hilltop was a self-sufficient community. Farms provided food for both patients and staff. Every cottage had a small truck garden for fresh vegetables as well. Farms and gardens alike were tended by patients. Each cottage was assigned a chicken pen, because the staff felt that caring for chickens and other small animals gave the patients a sense of responsibility. This practice turned out to be especially therapeutic for violent patients. Dr. Zeller wrote in his memoirs about a particular patient who suffered from paranoid dementia, who ended up completely cured and was allowed to go home. Before she left the asylum, she spoke with Dr. Zeller, who asked what had brought her mind back to reason. The woman said it was the chirp of the chicks, which were outside when a storm blew into the area. She hurried to catch the chicks and bring them to safe shelter, and that's when it occurred to her that they were tiny, helpless creatures who needed

her protection. “This woman, who smashed furniture and tore clothes, became a ministering angel to a brood of helpless chicks,” Dr. Zeller marveled.

Dr. Zeller was a father figure to his patients, but a military man to his employees. He refused to hire what he contemptuously called “bug housers,” any attendant who had previously worked in an asylum before coming to the hilltop. If he found that a bug houser had slipped past the application process, he would fire them immediately and without cause. But Dr. Zeller also lobbied the state senate for an eight-hour workday, both for his staff and for the able-bodied patients. He realized that working for more than eight hours at a stretch was harmful to his staff’s mental health.

Find this image at https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/52542664/george_anthony-zeller

Dr. Zeller insisted that his female attendants be as well-trained in patient care – even care of violent patients – as male attendants. He felt that the soft touch and kind words of a woman were a balm to the troubled mind of someone suffering from insanity.

As it turns out, he was right. Due to the hospital’s no-locked-door policy, it was not uncommon for patients to wander away from the grounds. Sometimes patients would get as far as Peoria, where they often got picked up by police. When this happened, someone at the station would simply pick up the phone and dial the asylum. “We’ve got one of your folks here—please come and collect them.” A pretty young nurse would be sent on the train to round up the patient and bring them back to the fold. And the patient would come along quietly, maybe a little abashed to have caused so much bother.

Figure 6.4: Dr. George A. Zeller. A military man to his employees, and a father figure to the patients under his care. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

Another of Dr. Zeller’s passions was his respect for women. The reason he refused to hire “bug housers” was that he insisted on training his staff to his exacting standards. To that end, he established a college of nursing, right there on the hilltop. The classes that made up the original three-year nursing program formed the backbone of the very best accredited school of nursing in the country. It was here that young women were trained to care for the mentally and physically ill. A few male students were trained as orderlies, but the overwhelming majority of students that sought their education at the Peoria State Hospital were women. And why not? They got a magnificent chance to make their own way in the world, to earn their own paycheck, to succeed

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Figure 6.5: The expansive yard of the Bowen Building was a place for patients and visitors to visit when the weather was fine, and a gathering place for nurses on a break from their classes in the elegant edifice. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

in a fulfilling career, doing real good in their community. This was at a time when women didn't even have the right to vote. Dr. Zeller even encouraged his nurses to go on to become doctors in their own right. He believed passionately that women were equal to men, and indeed, were superior when it came to tending to the needs of patients with mental illness.

In 1936, all state hospital schools of nursing closed. The asylum's unparalleled school shut down in July of that year. But just a few months later, in October, the Peoria State Hospital School of Psychiatric Nursing opened its doors. The school was now affiliated with Methodist School of Nursing in Peoria and Brokaw Hospital School of Nursing in Normal.

This slight change in direction reflected a changing attitude towards nurses' training. A specialized hospital was no longer considered the ideal training environment for basic nursing. Instead, specialized institutions, like state hospitals, were used for a two-month course in psychiatric nursing, as part of a nurse's undergraduate work. This gave student nurses from three general hospitals in the community a chance to study psychiatric nursing, instead of providing an entire course of study for only the students at the asylum.

In the late 1940s, another course of study, this one lasting eighteen months, was developed for attendants and psychiatric aides. Peoria State Hospital was one of only a few hospitals in the world, and the only one in Illinois, that offered a psychiatric technician program. These later courses of study never achieved the cachet that Dr. Zeller's original nurses' college did in the early decades of the century. Nevertheless, Peoria State Hospital continued to provide excellent training for nurses and attendants until it closed in 1973.

Life at the Peoria State Hospital was as close to normal as it could possibly be. Patients lived in cottages together, spending most of their time with people who understood them. All of the cottages were looked after by a married couple, giving the residents a much-needed sense of home. The cottage system was what set the Peoria State Hospital apart from many other asylums in the United States.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many asylums were built on the Kirkbride plan, named after the architect who designed it. This plan called for one large octagonal building as the hub, with four wings coming out from the central building. These wings could be built out and expanded indefinitely, according to the housing needs of the institution. The original building of the Peoria State Hospital (then known as the Illinois Asylum for the Incurable Insane) was actually built on the Kirkbride plan. It was also built over an abandoned coal mine, out of shoddy materials, by contractors who were rumored to have ties to the Chicago Mob. Dr. Zeller toured the building before leaving for his service in the Philippines. Noting the cracks in the foundation and the abysmal lack of good ventilation, he refused to use the building. In 1898, never having housed any patients, the building was deemed unfit for habitation and was torn down. The limestone blocks were soon used to build the nurses' college.

In the Kirkbride plan, all of the asylum's patients were housed in one building, without regard for their afflictions. Someone who was merely depressed could have a paranoid schizophrenic as a roommate – not the ideal situation for improving mental health.

In the cottage plan, people with similar issues lived together. Epileptics lived with other epileptics; using the buddy system, they were paired off, and each patient kept an eye on his or her partner. If an epileptic patient was struck by a seizure, help was as close as their buddy.

Alcoholics were housed with other alcoholics, in the cottages on D Row. As with the epileptics, this system had another underlying benefit beyond simple camaraderie. Alcoholics

who had dried out and were able to function were assigned to care for the new arrivals, the patients who were still suffering in the grip of the terrible shakes and sickness and hallucinations of the DTs. This reminded the more stable patients of where they'd come from – and where they could end up once again if they ever found themselves backsliding into the bottle.

Dr. Zeller was the first to recognize that service veterans who had seen combat sometimes suffered from a tortuous mental illness. We now call that illness "post-traumatic stress disorder," but the staff in those early days, around the time of the first World War, simply knew it as "shell shock." Dr. Zeller assigned these veterans to their own cottage, where they could fight their demons in peace. Veterans also had their own burying ground as a mark of respect for their service. Even today, every grave in the veterans' section has an American flag standing at attention before the headstone. The "soldier known only to God" has a flag as well.

Dr. Zeller also recognized that some women, after giving birth, suffered from issues ranging from depression to violence against their newborn children. He assigned them to their own cottage as well. In recognizing postpartum depression as a stress disorder, he saved many young women from death sentences. Dr. Zeller found many of these women in prisons, where they'd been locked up for attacking their children or their husbands. The courts found these women "criminally insane," and sentenced many to die for their violent crimes. Dr. Zeller brought them to the Peoria State Hospital. He saved their sanity—and he saved their lives.

Dr. George Zeller retired in 1935. A grateful Peoria State Hospital board named him Superintendent Emeritus as thanks for his years of service. But one of his colleagues, Archie Bowen, wanted to do something more for Dr. Zeller, something more tangible. Dr. Zeller and Sophie were such beloved figures on the hilltop that Mr. Bowen knew they couldn't just leave, not yet. So he came to Dr. Zeller with a proposition: would he and Sophie consider moving into one of the apartments in the Employees' Building?

It took two conversations, but by the end of the second one Dr. Zeller had grasped what his old friend and colleague was really asking.

"You mean you want me and to stay here? On the hilltop?" The Zellers had been living in the Superintendent's Cottage, but Archie was offering a permanent arrangement, one that did not depend on Dr. Zeller's position.

"For as long as you like," Archie replied.

And this military man, he of the stiff upper lip and the fierce dark gaze, who had served his country in the Spanish-American War and devoted his life to militantly defending the dignity of the mentally ill – this man was in humble tears of gratitude that his colleagues and former staff wanted him to stick around. It's not like Dr. Zeller was destitute at the end of his life. He certainly wasn't broke and homeless; far from it. He'd had a great career, he was well respected, and he was really quite wealthy, with lots of property to his name. In fact, in 1933 he bought Jubilee College and the grounds on which it sat, a total of 93 acres, six miles outside of Peoria. He donated it to the state of Illinois, and it became Jubilee College State Park. He could have lived in any number of fine homes. But he accepted Mr. Bowen's offer because it meant that he and Sophie could live out the rest of their days at the asylum they both loved so much.

He and Sophie moved into an apartment on the second floor, at the end of the building facing what is now Pfeiffer Road. From there, Dr. Zeller could look out over the grounds of his beloved institution. He lived there until his death from pneumonia in 1938. (Sophie had died a few months earlier.)

During his final illness, curious people asked Dr. Zeller why he didn't leave the asylum and travel to Peoria for treatment. His response was immediate and sensible. "I'm surrounded by my family, and by the best nurses, and by the prettiest women in the world. Why would I want to leave?"

The Peoria State Hospital was a unique institution in the history of mental health care. Under Dr. Zeller's supervision, it became a model for state hospitals everywhere. Dr. Zeller himself revolutionized the treatment of mental illness. He went out of his way to rescue the most wretched, most pathetic cases from the squalor and terror of the almshouses, and he brought them to his hospital. There, they were cared for, and their illnesses were treated. Perhaps most importantly, they were separated according to their affliction. They were finally – maybe for the first time in their lives – among others that were going through the same experiences they were, who understood exactly the misery they endured. This had to be an incredible relief to these patients.

Dr. Zeller's pioneering techniques inspired devotion in both his staff and in his patients. He was beloved by the population of the hospital, and in return, he dedicated his life to easing the misery of the mentally ill. That takes guts. Mental illness has few outward physical signs. A nurse at the Zeller Mental Health Center (yes, named in his honor) put it especially well: "It's very hard to keep reminding yourself that these people are very ill when you don't see any blood. You don't see the fever inside of them." The mentally ill often act weirdly or even turn violent. It's not an easy thing to care for people suffering like this. It's stressful, and to this day there's still a powerful stigma attached to mental illness. Dr. Zeller's importance in the field of mental health care cannot be overstated.

The staff of doctors, nurses, and attendants at the Peoria State Hospital had every right to be proud of the institution where they worked. It was *not* a place of terror and despair. It was a place of caring. It was a place of healing those who could be healed. And for those who were beyond healing, those who would never rejoin society, it was a place of refuge. At the asylum, minds too badly damaged ever to become functional were met with kindness. The tuberculosis patients were cared for with compassion until they died. And the mentally ill were allowed to mingle with others who were like them. Fractured spirits met kindred spirits and found comfort.[1]

Find this image at https://www.geocaching.com/geocache/GC7R84G_peoria-state-hospital-hidden-history-series

Figure 6.6: The Peoria State Hospital welcomed all: visitors, reporters, and those in need of refuge. Courtesy of Alpha Park Library Peoria State Hospital Collection.

[1] For further information about the history of the Peoria State Hospital, see the Alpha Park Public Library's "Peoria State Hospital Collection" at https://www.alphapark.org/peoria-state-hospital-collection.

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