

Film Guide

THE MAZE

30 minutes, color, film, 1970

How do we determine if someone is mentally ill? What causes mental illness? How can mental illness be treated?

In this film we learn about William Kurelek, a self-taught artist, from William himself, friends, family, and persons who worked to help him recover. There are no actors, no script, and no planned ending. We are in the position of a psychiatrist having people talk directly to us. Real events are described, feelings are expressed, and interpretations given.

The title of the film comes from one of Kurelek's paintings entitled "The Maze" which was painted during his confinement in a mental hospital. The Maze is his view of the mind and consists of an endless maze divided into chambers portraying childhood memories and anxiety-ridden situations that confronted the artist during his hospitalization.

William Kurelek was born May 3, 1927, on a small farm in northern Alberta, Canada. His father, an immigrant from the Ukraine, struggled to earn enough money to support his wife, William, and a younger son and daughter. The father, who seemed demanding to William, had great expectations that his eldest son would someday become a doctor. Williams's desire to paint, his tendencies toward gentleness and introspection, and his careless handling of farm machinery, led to numerous confrontations. He apparently began to feel that his father would kick him out of the house, but he still had great love for this hard-working man.

Kurelek read widely and was an outstanding student. Because of his Ukrainian background and his lack of athletic prowess, he was often bullied in school and saddened by his lack of playmates. He ran into similar social difficulties at the University of Manitoba and began to suffer persistent blinding headaches. After his graduation in 1949, he read about psychiatric care at the Maudsley Hospital in England and made up his mind to obtain both art training and therapy in London. He entered treatment in Maudsley in 1952 and was classified as a "schizoid psychopath." After six months in the hospital he created "The Maze," which was not used directly in his therapy but which was discussed from time to time in an attempt by his psychiatrist to isolate the causes of the patient's difficulties. While at Maudsley, the artist met Margaret Smith, an occupational therapist. He began studying Catholicism out of affection for Miss Smith and respect for her strong faith. Until then, he had been an atheist. The medical staff viewed Kurelek as a long-term patient, and after a year at Maudsley, he was transferred to the Netherne Hospital, where he could receive care for a longer period. When he entered Netherne, he was depressed and depersonalized; the psychiatrists doubted that he would ever recover. He made two attempts at suicide. He was given a series of electro-shock treatments at this time. His thinking before and after these sessions contributed to a religious conversion that he regards as a key to his eventual recovery. After that he fought to get well, and he was ultimately released from the hospital. He was hospitalized for a period of three years. He continues to seek psychiatric counsel from time to time on an out-patient basis, but he is functioning extremely well and leading a normal, productive life.

Today William Kurelek lives in Toronto with his wife, three children of his own, and one foster child. The Kureleks also have three foster children whom they support in foreign countries. Kurelek is a very successful artist. He exhibits through the Issacs Gallery in Toronto, and his paintings are in collections in well-known museums. Current paintings portray Canadian farm scenes reflecting childhood memories, religious scenes (including a six-year project of 160 paintings illustrating the Passion according to St. Matthew), and subjects of moral, economic, and social concerns. Whereas before his illness and during his hospitalization, Kurelek was painting inner torment, he has now turned his eye toward the condition of humanity; he is trying to shock us into self-awareness, into looking at the evils of society, into resolving poverty and racial conflict. He is trying, in a sense, to save us.

The nature of this film is to raise questions. As with life, few neat, tidy answers emerge. Raising questions and thinking about ways to answering those questions deepens understanding about the world outside of us but also the world within.

Learning Objectives

1. What course concepts did you observe in the film? Example: problem of defining mental illness, creativity.
2. How do we define mental illness? Was William Kurelek “mentally ill”? Explain your answer and include the symptoms of behaviors you feel are important.
3. What are some of the possible specific causes for Kurelek’s illness?
4. What therapy was used with this patient?
5. How do we know when someone is “cured” or “recovered”? Do you believe Kurelek was cured? Explain your answer.
6. What additional information, not presented in the film, would you like to know about this patient? Who might have this information?