

Director's Statement.

HBO

Crazy, Not Insane

Throughout my work, I have been interested in crime and the psychology behind it. "Crazy, Not Insane" was an opportunity to try to understand why we, as human beings, kill each other. Are killers born, or are they made? Are we all, under certain circumstances, capable of murder? If so, what are the root causes that lead some of us to commit unspeakable acts of violence, sometimes over and over again?

These are issues that Dr. Dorothy Lewis has been dealing with all of her professional life. Upon meeting her, that's hard to believe. At 82 years young, she is bubbly, has a sparkle in her eye and an ability to find a laugh in the darkest corners. Like emergency room doctors, her dark humor is an occupational gift that comes from her constant exposure to our deepest wounds.

I vividly recall, when I first met her, Dorothy told me a story about examining a convicted murderer named Marie Moore. In person, Marie seemed an unlikely candidate for having committed the grisly torture and killing of a young teenager. She was shy, soft-spoken and slope-shouldered, almost afraid of her own shadow. While others had told Dorothy about another, more violent part of Marie's character, Dorothy was trained not to believe in such things as "alters" or multiple personalities. So after two hours of unsuccessful probing, Dorothy picked up her notes and prepared to leave. But, as her hand touched the doorknob, she heard a deep, masculine voice behind her say "Don't go!" When Dorothy cautiously turned, she found Marie transformed. Her shoulders were broad, and her eyes were lit with a raging fire as she thrust out her hand. "Hi," said the person before her, "I'm Billy."

That was the first time she recognized a multiple. But it would be the first of many. As her daughter told her, "mom, you're the only person I know who does group therapy with one person."

As a filmmaker, I was hooked when I learned that Dorothy had audio and video tapes of her interviews with murderers and serial killers. In those tapes, you can hear evidence of the childhood antecedents of violence, and even see those afflicted with multiple personality disorder switch from one persona to another. Just as important to me is how the tapes reveal Dorothy's skill as an interviewer: empathetic but always probing, curious and never shocked, playful but always serious about unearthing, methodically, vital details. What she discovers is never intended to excuse horrific acts of violence. Rather, as a psychiatric detective, she seeks to explain why killers kill, so we might take steps to stop the killing.

As I spent more time with Dorothy, I became interested in her as a scientist and also as an artist, whose literary voice we explore almost as a separate “alter.” In making the film, we found a crazyquilt style – using cinema verité, archive, animation, home movies – that playfully mirrors the magnificent complexity of the human mind.

The title, “Crazy, Not Insane,” refers, in a colloquial way, to the way that the legal system – framed too often by a sense for justice that veers into a need for revenge – conflicts with the world of medical science in defining grave mental illness. For many years, Dorothy testified in death penalty cases about whether convicted murderers were sane enough to be executed. Her forensic skills changed the law and the way that death penalty lawyers looked at their clients.

In this film, we use Dorothy’s involvement with death penalty cases – and one executioner – to examine the sanity of the death penalty itself. As part of our team’s research, we discovered that the death penalty has no deterrent effect. Further, it appears to encourage homicidal behavior. The states with the death penalty have higher murder rates than those without. In that context, once we have dangerous killers locked away and the public is protected, why are we so determined to execute these human beings? Are Americans serial killers? And, if so, are we crazy, if not insane?