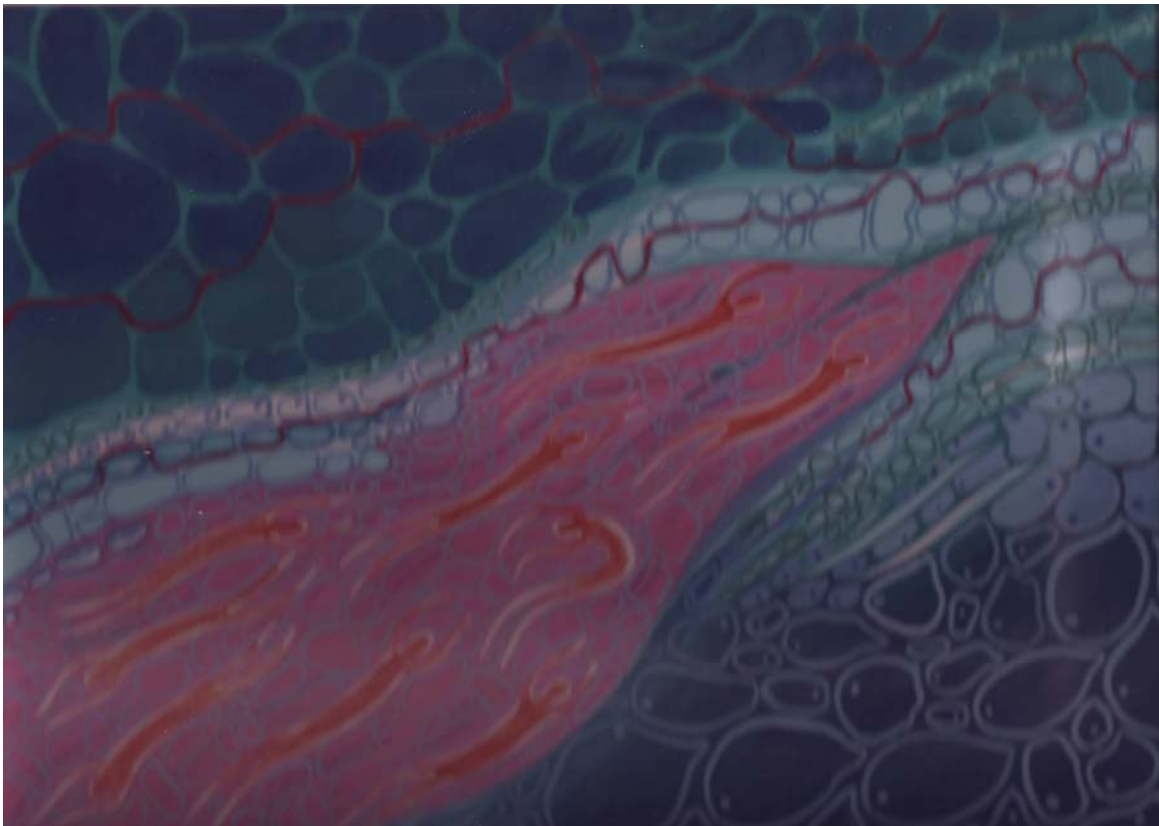


WRITING FROM THE CREATIVE WRITING GROUP

MEDICATION, RECOVERY, SLEEP, BENEFITS, FREEDOM



'Back to Source' - courtesy of Joanna George

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WHAT IS HUG?

HUG (Action for Mental Health) is a network of people who have experience of mental health problems.

At present July 2010, HUG has approximately 400 members and 14 branches across the Highlands. HUG has been in existence now for 14 years. Between them, members of HUG have experience of nearly all the mental health services in the Highlands.

HUG wants people with mental health problems to live without discrimination and to be equal partners in their communities. They should be respected for their diversity and who they are.

We should:

- Be proud of who we are.
- Be valued.
- Not be feared.
- Live lives free from harassment.
- Live the lives we choose.
- Be accepted by friends and loved ones.
- Not be ashamed of what we have experienced.

We hope to achieve this by:

- Speaking out about the services we need and the lives we want to lead.
- Challenging stigma and raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues.

HUG's aims are as follows:

- To be the voice of people in Highland who have experienced mental health problems.
- To promote the interests of people in Highland who use or have used mental health services.
- To eliminate stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems.
- To promote equality of opportunity for people with mental health problems irrespective of creed, sexuality, gender, race or disability.
- To improve understanding about the lives of people with mental health problems.
- To participate in the planning, development and management of services for users at a local, Highland and national level.
- To identify gaps in services and to campaign to have them filled.
- To find ways of improving the lives, services and treatments of people with mental health problems.

- To share information and news on mental health issues among mental health service user groups and interested parties.
- To increase knowledge about resources, treatments and rights for users.
- To promote cooperation between agencies concerned with mental health.

INTRODUCTION

The HUG Creative Writing Group has been meeting for a couple of years now. We hold our meetings on the first Thursday of the month in the HUG office. The meetings are well attended with between six and ten people regularly turning up and many more participating at a distance.

We have also just started joining in with creative writing sessions (provided by Occupational Therapy) in New Craigs for people who would not be able to come to events in the community.

Once or twice a year through the fundraising efforts of Moniack Mhor Writing Centre, and through funding from Comic Relief, some of us attended a few days residential workshop to help us with our creative expression.

This activity does wonders for our self confidence and communication skills and can help us understand what we have gone through when living with mental illness and in life in general. It also helps us develop alternative ways of talking about our experiences that are not found through meetings and committees.

In recent months we have set dual themes for the groups, some on a mainstream subject and others on a health related one. This allows us to make some of the things we go through more real to other people or, if not that, help people understand our viewpoint.

It is very definitely not a mechanism for representing the combined collective views of our members, but it is one way of giving expression of different perspectives from a particular communities' experiences and opinions. It is a way of promoting discussion and increasing understanding on issues that are important to so many of us.

We hope you enjoy the short selection of writing that follows:

THEME: MEDICINE

Medication is something our members talk about again and again. Sometimes it is to say they wish they had medication, sometimes to grumble about side effects. At other times they wish that they could refuse it or be free of it and then occasionally they say they hate it, but without it they wouldn't be alive today. You can find two HUG reports on Medication on the HUG website (hug.uk.net) which give a wider view about our feelings on it.

MEDICATION

Circles on circles
Following round

Asthma and steroids
Not too much – or you hear the voices
Not too little - or the infection grows
Balance - luck
I got away with it

Asthma and inhalers
Not too much – or it's the fast fast heart
Not too little - or you can't breath
Balance - fine
I get so tired

Atrial fibrillation and regulators
Not those ones – or your asthma will take off
Try this one - but watch your thyroid
Balance - none
I got so sick
At least I lost weight

What's my choice
Can I break this circle?
Is it worth it?

I could take the risk
And live life breathing the best I can
Forgetting every day that I might have a stroke
No warnings no guarantees.
At least I wouldn't hear the voices – I think

I could choose
No meds and no safety
Or
Be in a controllable illness caused by drugs and the body I live in

Following round I choose
Circles on circles

(J.H.)

MEDICATION

Lithium for mania
Citalopram for depression
Mirtazapine for depression and sleep
Lisiprinol for blood pressure
All washed down with alcohol

They make me what I am today
These jagged little pills
Hip, hip, hooray!

(M.R.)

RESPIRIDONE

Silence
My life drips away
With the ooze of chemicals
Sliding inside me

Sucking reality into a fantasy

(G.M.)

DEPOT 2

Jag
It hurts

Yikes
The big needle

Pin prick
But that's it

Then deep within
A pain

And
It seems a coldness
The nurse feels guilty
And stays to chat

It's good

(G.M.)

MEDICATION

As good as the caught breath
That says I don't believe you

Cared for in the glare
Of the everlasting light bulb

My self slips in the rainbow
Of the sun shattered glass

I live in the haze of lost memories

I dream of freedom
And rest with barbed thoughts in your hands

(G.M.)

HOMEOPATHY

Latter-day snake oil?
At least that might have worked
Giving, as it did, the desired placebo effect
Hair of the dog?
How puzzling to read that the side-effects of these drugs
Are the very outcomes they're designed to keep in check
Murder? Suicide? Death?
"Only in a relatively insignificant number of cases"
Tardive dyskinesia?
"We have other drugs to treat Parkinsonism"
Weight Gain?
"She's depressed. Why should she care about putting on weight?"
Couldn't we try alternative medicine?
"Under no circumstances! It's completely unregulated!"

(John Sawkins)

THEME: RECOVERY

Recovery is a word that seems to be applied to just about anything in mental health nowadays. Some people even say we should apply the recovery model to the design of buildings! It is an important concept and for many of us it is that tenuous journey to well being with or without illness. In HUG we provided Wellness Recovery Action Training in 2009. We have written a report on it and given talks about it which can be seen on our website (hug.uk.net). We have created a DVD on the subject and participate in the Highland Recovery Network (highlandrecovery.org.uk).

RECOVERY

Recovery feels flighty; feels fitful. So is it real?
What is wrong with me? This time

I'm in a mood and I don't know why

I want to write, I want to decorate, I want to walk, I want to sing, I want to swear, I
want to what?

I'm rushing from one thing to another.

Write
About Seagulls. Flying rats
About Recovery. Feeling good or feeling better?
Prose?
Poem ?
About her shoes. Don't be rude
Look after someone, anyone. Can I help? Let me do that for you

I'm watching
I'm jumping. What am I handling?
Underneath bubbling and bruising
Why don't I sleep? Does tiredness make me weep?

I'm not ill. I can see how instant my stumbles and starts are: How unstuck I am
So what am I?

Look
I'm seeing
I see the lessons I have been taught and how wrong they are
I see my teachers and their damnation
I see how they helped me to see how I could keep their worlds intact
I see how I was denied any world of my own
I see that I did not find that choices were there
And I am ashamed
And I'm angry that my teachers have taught me such shame

I'm building and unlearning and I'm hurt that I am my mentor
I'm middle aged and alone and I'm sad that seeing has taken so long

I'm seeing how life has treated me; And so,
I'm in a mood.

I'm normal

(J.H.)

RECOVERY

When you have a breakdown,
You think about recovery
Maybe you should have joined the AA?

No, you've got it wrong
I'm not an alcoholic
I just tend to get depressed

And I don't need a mechanic
To get me back on the road again
To recovery

It was just the breakdown
That suggested a slight diversion
Down the more circuitous B-roads, for a change

(John Sawkins)

RECOVERY

The sea abrades my mind, the salt crystallizes and settles in the folds of my brain in an irritating slick of sensation. I would claw at the slurry, bathe it in cool fresh water to wash away the prickle of anxiety.

My mind is abuzz with thoughts that won't go away; a feathered mass of speculation that I try to suppress but which stirs up my body in a quivering tension.

A little trip, a sidestep and the sickness rises, fills my throat with an ache I cannot slake. My eyes blink with grit and I find myself teetering on precipices. The night passes into my dreams and breathes. I stir with the memory of dark demons and dread the return to days that don't switch off.

The road which seems a steady walk into the summer air is full of surprises. I didn't know that after the glow of a relaxed spirit I could fall so suddenly, disturb my friends with my sullen silence, my intense introspection.

The whole web of protection built to keep me secure shakes with the slightest kick. That shattering burst of anxiety at the flow of a few well meant words, a few words designed to help me but which fill the air I breathe with a cloying insecurity.

It is learning what it is, becoming familiar, seeing the looming breeze where the trivial builds guillotines in my mind. It is more than catching sight of those dark clouds, it is knowing how to shelter from the rain and the sleet; finding ways to keep dry and warm. Building a fire and finding friends to sit around it to share in its brightness and heat.

I smile a quick glimpse. I drink a draft of water and feel it flush the dirt away from my heart. I look to my inner feelings and shudder a bit. I am not ready to face my loneliness and the memories that drag comfort out of my body. I feel my body snug around me, the breath of a warm memory of ease. I almost forget that the air brings the energy to face the world daily. I forgot that it was flowing into the crevices of my soul.

I breathe, I breathe and I celebrate the life the breath gives me. I stretch, I smooth my face and shut my tired eyes and when I open them I smile at the warmth around me. Panic can pile waves of calamity around my thinking but as I shudder at the past I also glow at the future.

Wrapped in soft cloth, I think of the web of friendship that I am learning to trust. Those faces, the offers that I am so ready to reject, people, the bed of security and the tear in your sanity. I fade the wrinkles that build on my brow and remember smiles.

I want to rush round the houses saying "thank you", I want to learn not to say "thank you" and to believe in the ever present gift that surrounds me and which I keep batting away with my self disgust. I echo in an empty cavern of my own solitude and yet I can see the entrance where the green sea sparkles and the sun beats against the smooth warm rock. All I need to do is to walk towards it, to learn that to trust is that vulnerable leap into the unknown where a warm smile, a quick hug is the confirmation that loneliness is a question of attitude.

Ah! My heart is slowing so I don't notice it anymore. I sway invisibly to the sound of music that sends a comforting mist into the night air. The melting notes allow me to speak a medley of words that make sense of the darkness.

The birds can be heard outside flying in the breeze, full of grace as they look after their young and swoop over the grey sea. My spirit could fly with the whiteness but it doesn't need to float free. I do not need to escape, just watch and see the everyday, the hubbub of the sea shore, the rise and fall of the waves, the everlasting flow of the clouds above me.

My throat eases, I sigh, I think of the islands scattered in the yellow sheen of the sun scattered sea. Along the beach I can see an old wreck and the drift and slip of seaweed at the waters edge. I am relaxed and discovering a friendship as I walk on the soft grass. The hills rise on the other side of the loch. I would sit on the earth and feel the press of world to which I belong, I would feel the grass on my hands, the spiders running over the dried bladderwrack. I would sit and the maze of thought would flow away into the spring air and find new meaning with the green buds, the ducklings and the tadpoles.

I walk on the beach on another coast; the sand stretches right to the harbour's mouth. I walk and my muscles rejoice in movement. I feel real again, I breathe, I breathe and my eyes cool themselves in the morning's air. My

tangled thoughts slip through my fingers and unravel. I begin to rejoice in the birth of a new day.

Sometimes you want to leave it far, far behind; all that oily mess that chokes the heart of you; the cloy of medication; the days where freedom is a distant memory; the terrible thoughts; the living reminder of the scars on your wrists.

You leave it, bury it in the sand and run laughing in the spring air, rejoicing and basking in the freedom to be and to feel, to talk and to cuddle and to share and to eat and to look forward; forward to peace and contentment and then, all of a sudden, an unnoticed stone trips you.

You graze your knees and sob because you realise it is only birds that can fly and then, sprawled amongst the heather, you smile because you recognise that you can still walk, that you can lift the stone, clean its mud away, slip it in your pocket, link arms with your friends and walk into the distant hills where the future beams unknown destinies into your mind, where walking is its own reward, the sound of the birds a buoy to tether your hopes to, where you can dream of beauty and recognise that even in the muddy path there is a glow that can be celebrated.

(G.M.)

THEME - SLEEP

Sleep is, for all of us, essential. Many of our members tell us that one of the key ingredients of well being is being able to sleep (look out for our forthcoming report on Positive Mental Health) and that one of the sure indicators of relapse is when we lose the ability to have a good sleep.

SLEEP

On Saturday I had known before I awoke that they were gone
I had known before I woke that Social Work had come and taken them away
I had known my tempers and smacks were so bad my children were better off there
My shame was so consuming; they were better off there

I remembered my children were at their grandparents
They were always there when they weren't with me
They were not at home
Then I remembered what I had known when I awoke
They were gone
Social Work had come and taken them away

I know I walked streets, confused and alone
Indoors showing the space where they should be
Outdoors containing the shame and security; no-one would find me;
Walking with silence gossiping in my head and never quite sure

Where were my children?
What was the dream?

I was sure I was a bad mother; their father had left
I was sure I was pointless, no job, no career, no family, no hope, no help
No visitors or phone calls to tell me what's real
To tell me I was bad
To tell me I was fine
No-one who cared

On Sunday night I went to bed
Circles of questions stalled; no longer needing answered. Nothing mattered
I was beaten. I was tired
I fell asleep
I did not dream

On Monday my in-law's dropped off their excited and beautiful and safe and happy
and missing-their-mother grandchildren
And I had slept for a whole night
My children were home
I had walked a nightmare
I needed to sleep

(J.H.)

SLEEP 2

I lie and I think
I close my eyes
And I think

I bury my head in the pillow
And I think
I hum with black electricity

I force my thoughts away
And the night rips apart
I tremble with sadness

I wake before I have slept
My thoughts burst in my mind
The night is a whirlpool

I dread the glimmer of the morning
Where I will have to face my thoughts again
Out of darkness I have rediscovered tiredness

I am too tired to wake up

(G.M.)

SLEEP

Balm of the quiet evening
The glow of amber in my glass

A wasp strips bark from wood
to build a night time nest
The vibrant relaxation of conversation
My bitter thoughts melt

Dancing in the garden
Watching dark figures against the red sky

I sleep and I wake
Thoughts bursting from my head

My night gleams with dark energy
I sleep again

I wake at dawn at ease with a smooth body
I glow

(G.M.)

THEME: STONE

Stone was one of the Creative Writing Group exercises. It was not titled on a health theme but this piece, in particular, illustrates powerfully, our inner vision and how it helps with our recovery journey.

Stone

I remember I once went to a craft workshop.

We were asked to choose a stone and paint something on it, and I chose one that eventually reminded me of a closed fist.

So that's what I painted on it and topped it off with H, A, T, E on each curled finger.

People said it was brilliant in a sad way. My children looked concerned. I had a closeted sense of owning something strong and determined and worrying it was trivial.

It lay around for years but really I think I kept it. Since it had come into my house, each time I came across it, I moved it to some other place where insignificant things were kept. It's as if they are all waiting for me to work out when it's time for them to go off to whatever grown up life awaits things like painted stones, or decide why they can't just go in the bin.

Last week I was having a clean out and the stone fell out the window. Presumably the latest waiting space for insignificant belongings was my window ledge where one becomes unnoticeable until one is swept off in a flurry of wet cloth. The next day I found the two pieces it had become. It's inside was a mosaic of sparkle and glitter, black, grey, white and cream preciousness and beauty. It was a geode.

I know I kept that stone because I saw me, angry and isolated, waiting to show off someone other than the single mother at the youth club on a workshop to learn what I have to give, ultimately to my and other people's children. The stone was my raised voice saying there is more to me and for me. I want more.

I should have broken that stone a long time ago.

(J.H.)

THEME: BENEFITS

HUG members have been saying for months that welfare reform is one of their biggest anxieties. Having secure benefits makes life liveable if not easy. You can read various reports and talks on Employment and Benefits on our website (hug.uk.net). The first poem vividly illustrates that despite the fact that many of us have spent many years on benefits we still contribute in numerous ways. The way people give to society is not just measured in wages.

Pro bono – cui bono?¹

Volunteering? – You must be joking
Why would anyone work for zero pay?
You can't have much self-esteem

Now me, I wouldn't even get out of bed
For less than ten grand
Plus a bonus, of course.

Make a small philanthropic gesture?
How would that benefit me?
- Unless you're talking enlightened self-interest

¹ Who benefits if you do something without remuneration?

If everyone takes, nobody benefits
Not even the taker, in the end
If we all give, everyone's a winner!

(John Sawkins)

MEANINGFUL LETTERS

D, W and P
Are the three worst
Letters in the world for me

They engender feelings of remorse
Of anger, of frustration
Of brick walls

I've had my day
My government doesn't want to pay
They feel I've got nothing to say

They think I'm cheating the state
I phone and feel like a beggar
I'm made to feel second rate

They say charity begins at home
Huddled in a blanket in the cold
Why do I feel so alone?

D, W and P
Are the three worst
Letters in the world for me

I much prefer L, O, V, E
Compassion, caring and humanity
They're the actions that will set me free

(Jules Clare)

THEME: FREEDOM

Many of our members have experienced detention under the Mental Health Act at some point in their lives. The experience is usually not pleasant even though it is often life saving. HUG participated in the development of the current Mental Health Act (see the reports on this at hug.uk.net), produced a DVD on the Act for the Scottish Government and has been a part of the MHO training programme for the last few years. It is about to publish its latest report which will be on our experience of Mental Health Officers.

FREEDOM

Close your eyes
Go back in time
Imagine it
The wind rustling
Through your hair
The sun blazing
Deeply on your back
The mountains
Pointed, ragged, sharp
The trees
Green, vivid, bold
Strong, rigid, dependable
The air
Clean, fresh, awakening
The ground
Lush, true, real
Soft yet hard
Undulating, everlasting
The streams
Bubbling, rippling, meandering
The rocks
Protruding, prominent, hidden
Nature in all it's glory
Imagine time
Imagine the moments
The reality
The experience
Imagine yourself
A dot, a thing
A moment in time
Imagine nothingness
Its greatness
Its silence
Open your eyes
Appreciate life

(Jules Clare)

FREEDOM

It's the liquidity of words
The broken stones in a mountain stream
The thick black taste of ground coffee
Olives on a plate with capers
And meat that I won't want to eat
A lemon drizzle cake
And conversation that swells and ebbs
Like the mounds of the waves of the sea

It's snow flakes bathing my eyes
In slick, cold sunshine
Walking, without watching the watch
Talking, without worrying about therapy appointments
Laughing; the trickle of ease
Where life shines
And words spread threads between friends

(G.M.)

THEME: ANYTHING

Sometimes we don't stick to what we are asked to do; we write about what is important to us and the result is still valuable and powerful.

UNTITLED

When I'm down, under the threat of the culture vultures
Trying to avoid the threat of organised predators
Who will watch my back when I am surrounded
What is the method, challenge or surrender
Who will sense the aroma of fear
The prickly heat of neglect
Pheromones of sexuality
Funk of exertion, sweat of impurities
Weakness of character
Choosing victimisation over depredation
Choice
Victim or predator
Net contribution
Positive or negative
Justifying existence
What price survival?
Is there a little pride in your community
Who are the veterans of Malcolm Sergeant?
Who were the pupils of Mathew Arnold?

What price a second red? Overseas postage
An Owen poem on the back of an envelope
The lack of intestinal fortitude
The lack of moral fibre
Now called post traumatic stress disorder
The mark of Cain
The bloody mess of conflict, censored coverage
Death of a character
Death of a comedian

(I. C.)

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