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BORDERLINE PERSONALITY TALK

RECOVERY AND HUG

Hello my name is Graham Morgan. I work with the Highland users group and am going to talk about that first, followed by my own experience of being diagnosed with a personality disorder in the past, and my version of recovery and how I dealt with it.

Marianne will talk of her experience and those of her friends, both of the diagnosis, treatment, recovery and what it is like to be a professional with such a diagnosis. Then Judith will concentrate on her recovery journey.

Hug acts as a voice for people with a mental illness in the Highlands.

There is something beautiful about voice, about the clarity of the expression of the sometimes inexpressible, about speaking into the silence and saying listen to my story, listen to my history and remember. About daring to speak of the taboo, of giving utterance to

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the voice of users and carers

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past horrors and transforming them into a gift of truth, of purity that future generations can learn from and hopefully, the present decision makers respond to and act on.

HUG is a collection of people who have all experienced mental illness. The words mental illness can become glib in our present world of sound bytes and the melodramatic as common parlance for the stuff of the daily media. But you all know it. We need to remember it; mental illness and disorder or, whatever you call it, can be unremittingly awful, it can turn the brightest of days, the most beautiful vision into the dull, exhausted, ashes of sadness and despair, it can transform what seemed like a constant path of progress into the jilting, rickety, uncertainty where reality loses its bearings and nothing is certain anymore and the peace we had from security and continuity becomes filled with pain and confusion.

The reality of mental illness is often of torment and struggle, it can be a place where our brightest hopes vanish for ever and our tenderest dreams turn dark and slimy with disuse.

And of course, for many of us, the awful truth of our experience, is that our present pain is caused by the most awful of lives, the worst pasts.

Things that I cannot imagine; childhoods blighted by different tragedies that mount a never ending path to the aching bereavement of the loss of confidence and desire and safety in our own souls.

You would think a child who had their childhood diminished and stolen would be gathered tenderly and taken to some golden place of wonder, where their wounds would heal and they would be able to look on the world with eyes gilded with the beauty of the shine of the wonder of what our world can really offer.

You would imagine that in a fair world they would be taken to a place of comfort and privilege and healing; that the damage would slip away in the same way that we would like the neglect, the harsh words, the beatings and the abuse to be a thing that echoes only in the distant memory of the past.

But as we know that doesn't happen. The past and the experience of mental illness does not lead to equality and vigour. It leads to damaged people desperately trying to live, to love, to succeed and

being let down by their own pain and our own inadequacy as helpers and as society time and time again.

We all know all the figures, but let us remind ourselves of them again. In Hug, we are half way through consulting our members about poverty. So far not a single person has come forward who is not on benefits. These are some of the comments of last Fridays meeting when we talked about signing on with the benefits agency:

"It's embarrassing. humiliating, degrading, painful. It is done so badly that it is hard to think it is not done deliberately because we are scum."

85% of people with a severe mental illness are unemployed, 44% of the homeless have a mental illness, of people with a mental illness have experienced harrassement because of it, 40% of female prisoners have a mental illness and 66% of male prisoners have a personality disorder.

Now, the experience of homelessness and prison undoubtably leads to mental health problems but, for far too many of our community, the experiences and our conditions that lead to illness have in themselves charted an inevitable route where we will be further degraded by our illness and degraded by the community that claims that it is there to support the vulnerable and the damaged.

This is wrong. It is fundamentally wrong in every sense of the word. We may not know what to do to stop this humiliating descent and constant struggle but we know without a question of a doubt that it is wrong.

That is where beauty comes in to all this. To take a step back from the unendurable and to speak out simply and clearly, maybe with emotion and regret but to say I will take a stand for myself and my friends. I will not let this indignity go unremarked. That is truly remarkable and strong and courageous. It says I will stand, and by speaking, I will choose hope and strength. By remembering and acting for my companions, by saying listen to us, by saying this is what it is really like, by standing up and bearing witness, our members give the gift of the strength of their essential humanity.

That is what groups like HUG try to be about. I am lucky, it is easy for me to do this, I get paid for it and my suffering has only been enough to glimpse the lives of my friends and colleagues.

You would think that a group like HUG would be filled with the most terribly bitter and damaged people. That we would be consumed with anger and hatred and the most terrible desire for vengeance on whoever or whatever had made our lives the way they are.

But we are not like that. The shift into retribution and bitterness is too hard and painful to sustain.

Last Friday, from when I was writing this, we had a smaller than usual Friday forum, just six of us. It was day of hard work, but we shared coffee, joked and looked out for each other. We had a common desire that everyone enjoyed themselves as best they could and, of course we looked at the sad times.

We talked about when people are stripped naked and put in the cells when they are in distress and clothed in the skimpiest of clothes. We talked of our distress and embarrassment at those memories and then we said that although the police still strip us at least they now try to do it nicely. We talked of being refused admission to hospital when our world was breaking to pieces around us and because there was no where to go and no one to talk to we commit a crime so that at least we can be arrested and looked after.

And then when memories seemed at their worst our conversation took off and we started this fast flow of interruptions and what ifs.

Remember the idea of safe houses that everyone has been talking about for years? What if we really had one? What would it look like? What colours would it be painted? Who would staff it? Who would be allowed in to it?

And then, because we are optimistic we started talking about ways forward, Jo's a graphic designer she could design it, Kiers good at the philosophy and all that stuff, he could do the concept, Margaret could enliven it with past experience, Garry could lobby our MPS's, this person could get the facts and figures from the police and hospital about so called inappropriate admissions, we could make partnerships and allies with these organisations and these people and and;

Well we didn't quite get that far, but nearly! The point is, when we might easily despair we find hope, we find a shared voice, mutual support, allies who agree just as much with what we are doing as we do. We are the collective embodiment of recovery. We know we have already made a difference, that we will in the future and that it is only by unity and optimism and celebrating each other that we can walk that path to a dim but rapidly clearing vision towards one of justice and fairness and hope for all those damaged in these harsh ways.

That is what I mean by our voice being about beauty, beauty when some might not have expected it or thought it possible.

To find out how we make our voice not only beautiful but effective, where we have vision, talk about services and challenge discrimination and stigma through awareness raising, visit our website Hug.uk.net. where you can read our progress reports, our newsletters, talks and normal reports.

Now a little bit of my story from long, long ago. When I was around 19 my world which had always been a bit delicate collapsed. I am not one of those subject to trauma and horror, in fact I had quite privileged upbringing but somehow the feelings of being alien and apart that I had had all my life stretched into a reality where the foundations of the certainty of my existence became doubtful.

I went to university. I thought I was mature and wise and clever but in fact I trembled with anxiety and worry about the everyday process of living.

I found other people intensely difficult to relate to and get on with and yet I craved their company and friendship above all. I wished for sensuality and love and warmth but could not cross a café floor for fear everyone would look at me or look at a woman without blushing.

I became immersed in the meaning of life, read Sylvia Plath all the time and sought out born again Christians to convert them to the concepts of nihilism and existentialism, neither of which I understood but both of which seemed to imply the world was a pretty bad place.

My room became my prison and refuge at the same time, my fellow students my jailors and my saviours and my wish to learn and understand my downfall and my salvation. And life lost the blush that it should have when you are young and full of vigour.

Suicide became my vision but all I could do was lacerate myself. At first when my hand trembled and my body became cold with a white hot sweat and the razor blade drew red lines along my skin I assumed that this was my last hour, my last evening.

I started seeing a doctor. All I could do was show him my arms, all I could do was write. I couldn't say what was happening to me, I didn't understand anything about what was happening to me.

Every week I would trail in to the surgery, sometimes I would be so anxious that I would mishear my name and walk in on a prior consultation. Every week the blood would be caked on my arms and the scratches would itch so. After every consultation I would wonder why I went because nothing seemed to change, in fact it got worse and worse.

It had all become a habit. I now covered the floor with paper before watching the blood drip, the doctor told me he wouldn't see me if I didn't stop and then said he was just trying to see if it would stop me but hadn't expected it to. I phoned the student helpline service but frightened them and got reported to the doctor who said that I shouldn't bother them that it was too much for them to deal with.

Sometimes he would bang on the desk and cry that life would be good one day and I would laugh inside because it seemed so unlikely.

Then one day he told me that I had a personality disorder, that it wasn't a mental illness and that it was a fundamental defect of my character, that there was no cure and that I would have to try to get used to a life that would always be a struggle ,always be miserable, would never have the joy or the light I craved.

He had become my last hope but with those words it seemed as if all hope had gone. It was sort of good to have this weird word attached to me but was I really so inadequate? so fractured so doomed? Was I such a failure that I didn't even really have an illness?

There was now no way forward, no magical cure, no pill, no therapy, nothing anyone could do to help with the pain and the sadness. It felt so lonely and so dark.

I took an overdose and was admitted to an old psychiatric hospital where my key nurse became my first girlfriend. I remember that we would lie in bed together poring over her textbooks giggling, trying to find out which personality disorder was my one.

She was the start of my recovery , a very unconventional start but a start none the less.

For me recovery was about at last making friends, about being held and loved and admired, it was about finding things to do that occupied me and gave me belief and purpose. It was about the long hard journey where you switch from the negative and at last have sense of self belief and worth. It had nothing to do with services and everything to do with friendship and belonging and love.

For a few years my world gained the rosy lining my doctor had predicted and I met the person I later married and everything glowed vivid. Then a few years later I had my first psychotic breakdown and was re-diagnosed as having schizophrenia. It's a terrible diagnosis but a lot better than personality disorder. At least it was a real illness, had some treatment and was not laden with the myriad judgements that go with personality disorder.

Now it is many years later and I don't think I'm so bothered either way, I'm just me, I have experiences that some people think are very odd and frightening but usually I am fine. I now have friends, I tend to look forward to the dawning of the day, in some ways my world is often a delight. It's more than many many people have.

Thank you