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Recovery as Discovery

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This first person account describes recovery as discovery of new meanings and opportunities in life. It travels through a journey from illness to wellness, from darkness and despair to light and hope, from futility to fruitfulness, as well as, from a state of death and loss to new life.

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The story of my recovery-related journey begins in the fall of 1992, when I was doing my Masters in Organic Chemistry at the University of Toronto. Slowly, slowly, something terribly wrong began to occur in my life. I began missing important meetings. I began thinking that fellow graduate students were out to get me and sabotaging my research work. I became ambivalent and could not decide what research to conduct and which professor to work under.

Now, I was not a born chemist, and I had to work very hard at it to do well; but the stress of graduate school, along with other factors, triggered the beginning of my illness. I began fearing for my life because I thought that people wanted to harm or kill me. I became afraid to take the subway, believing that I was being followed, and withdrew from everyone thinking that they were plotting against me. I believed that my house was bugged, that people could read my mind, and that people were trying to insert evil/destructive thoughts in my mind. The television and radio began to send me secret messages and were referring directly to me in their broadcasts. I sometimes heard voices saying negative statements about my religious faith, and I felt that I was being persecuted religiously.

Eventually, things got to the point where I became so disabled by delusions and other psychotic symptoms (although no one in my family, including myself, knew it was this) that I was admitted into a psychiatric ward at a general hospital. And thus began my experience with the mental health system. I was in an inpatient unit twice within a period of 3 months, after which I spent over a year in day hospital.

The hospital experience was not particularly positive. No one ever explained mental illness except for depression to me or to my family while I was there, and I was made to feel responsible for my misfortune (or at least I felt that way). The staff was not always helpful. I will never forget one of my meetings with my hospital psychiatrist. In one of my weekly visits that lasted no more than 15 minutes, my psychiatrist was becoming annoyed and inpatient with me as usual because I could not finish my sentence, and I would start to repeat the same thing over again (this was due to thought disorder caused by my illness, although I did not know it at the time). Rather than trying to help me, he told me quite coldly: “You are always saying the same thing over again, it’s so boring.” I could have died at that moment. Just because someone is ill does not mean that they are any less human without feelings. Reflecting back, I now think of Psychiatric/Psychosocial Rehabilitation (PSR) Core Principle 7: All people are to be treated with respect and dignity and PSR Core Principle 8: PSR practitioners make conscious and consistent efforts to eliminate labeling and discrimination, particularly discrimination based on a disabling condition. I wish the mental health workers back then would have known and practiced such principles.

I thought that everything that was happening to me was my fault and that I was to blame because I had some “character flaw.” I thought that I had lost everything, my life was over, and I was a failure. I became depressed, and although I did not actively think of suicide, my will to live had never been less.

I started seeing another psychiatrist outside the hospital who fortunately was very caring. He listened to me patiently, got me on the right dose of medication, and after 6 months diagnosed me with schizophrenia. He described to me what the illness was and gave me literature references to read to help me understand the illness. I remember sitting in the family room with my mom and spending hours reading everything I could get my hands on.

I never felt labeled or stigmatized by my diagnosis. In the beginning, it was a relief to know of it because now I had an understanding of what caused my precarious circumstances, and I realized that it was not my fault or anyone else’s fault. The guilt that haunted me disappeared,

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and I no longer felt so helpless because now there was a name to my enemy.

With understanding, however, came the overwhelming realization of the powerful force that was against me, and I felt devastated. The negative symptoms of the illness kicked in, and I felt incapacitated and depressed. I could do nothing, and I lost all hope in myself and in life. For several years, I lived in darkness and despair.

Fortunately, I had people in my life, like my mom, who genuinely loved me and who believed in me and never lost hope in me. With her steadfast support, along with that of my psychiatrist and the rest of my family and along with my faith that guided me through the darkest hours of my life, I very, very slowly began to recover.

Recovery was not some magic wave that swept over me. I had to learn to live life all over again, and it occurred in painstakingly small, tiny steps over long periods of time. In and of its own, each step may have seemed insignificant, but with a steady reinforcement of incremental growth, progress was miraculously achieved. It was incredible how disabled I had become. At first, I was unable to do anything. Something as basic as grocery shopping was both frightening and overwhelming for me. I remember my mom taking me along to do grocery shopping as a form of rehabilitation. Initially, I would just cling to the shopping cart too terrified to move while my mom began busily loading the shopping cart. I did this for the longest time until 1 day, after many observations, I actually decided to venture away from the cart and gather some apples. This was how small my steps were, and it may sound silly, but then I was faced with the daunting task of deciding which apples to choose from the bunch. Everything seemed so difficult.

Eventually, I was well enough that I felt like working again. I thought I could try and return to the field of science, so I tried returning to graduate school; however, because 5 years had passed, they no longer would accept me. I enrolled in a program called Work on Track that helps people with mental illness prepare to reenter the work force, and at the end of the program I began to look for work. Although Work on Track had helped me to prepare a good resume, again I had a 5-year gap in my resume, which, I was to find out the hard way, worked sorely against me. Even when I did get an interview, the question of the gap would arise. I was told to say that it was due to a medical condition but that it was now under control and that it would not be a factor in my job. It was unbelievable how, after saying this, I immediately sensed that any hope of getting the job disappeared and that we then went only through the motions of a superficial interview with no chance to succeed. I never got a second interview. In one way, I felt discriminated against; however, I would never have been able to prove it even if I wanted to. This was my first "failure." I became convinced that I would only be accepted to work as a janitor and spend the rest of my life cleaning other people's toilets. Not that there is anything wrong with that. It is a noble and honest job, but I felt that I wanted to do something different.

After sometime reflecting and regrouping, I was determined to find a meaningful job and to contribute positively and constructively to society. So I went back to college and got accepted into George Brown College's Dental Technology Program in Toronto. I thought that if I worked with my hands and did something practical, I would be happy. I told no one about my illness, and I was terrified that someone would discover my "secret." Returning to school full-time (and with no accommodations) was incredibly difficult; however, after 3 years, I graduated with my diploma in dental technology. Schooling was not, however, my most difficult step. After graduation, I found work in a dental laboratory and soon realized that this was an even more stressful, fiercely competitive, and productivity-oriented business. The law of the day seemed to be that if you were not better and faster than the next person, your days were numbered. After a very difficult year of working in the field, it was clear that I would not be able to work effectively in this field. Both my employer and I agreed that the situation was not working out, and I resigned. I told no one about my illness. Maybe, I erred; however, I did not think that this was a field open to accommodations. This was my second failure.

It was now 2004, and I was in my early 40s. I was afraid that my life would amount to nothing and that I had little purpose in this life. Then, my psychiatrist suggested one day that I consider shadowing a peer support worker on an Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team. Up until now, I wanted nothing to do with the mental health system or its users, and I was still unwilling to disclose my illness. I found the experience, however, to be very interesting and positive. It was encouraging to see the dedication and the care that the ACT Team demonstrated in improving the quality of life for people who suffer from mental illness, and I wanted to contribute to this dedication and caring. After some thought, I enrolled in the PSR Certificate Program at Humber College in Toronto. I found the PSR courses to be totally amazing. They were also a double blessing in that they taught me how to work with and care about people with a mental illness, but I could also apply the teachings to my own life as well. Recovery took on a totally new meaning for me. I joined the PSR/Réadaption Psychosociale Canada Ontario Chapter Board of Directors (of which I am still a board member), and I began volunteering at a drop-in for a case management organization. My life seemed to take on new meaning and purpose. Things came to me naturally, and I really enjoyed what I was doing.

Then I lucked out. While I was doing my PSR Field Experience Course in Toronto East General Hospital's ACT Team, an opening for a peer support worker arose on Canadian Mental Health Association's West Metro

ACT Team in Toronto. I applied, and in February 2006, I was hired as their peer support worker. I still work there, and I love my job. I am happier now even more than I was before my illness started.

They say that recovery is knowing oneself under new circumstances, redefining one's role, and reevaluating oneself to develop a new sense of respect of oneself. After living in darkness for many years and having died to my old self, thinking that my life was over and futile, a new birth emerged from within me that has made my life more meaningful and purposeful than before. Whereas before I was a "thing" person, I now discovered a part of me that is a "people" person. I treasure relationships, everything from my relationship with our Creator, family, service users, coworkers, fellow peers, and friends.

They also say that the goal of recovery is to be more human. All the pain and suffering of the past was not a waste because it has helped me to be more human in that now I feel I am a more compassionate and empathic person, and I can use that new enlightenment to help others. Thus, my recovery has been a precious discovery for me and hopefully for others, which I happily share here.

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