



2010 MENTAL HEALTH ARTS AND WELLBEING FILM FESTIVAL

CREATIVITY, STIGMA AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Graham Morgan October 2010.

Hello , thank you so much for inviting me to speak to this conference.

I am going to talk about creativity and the involvement of people with a mental illness in a festival like this.

I, like almost everyone else who experiences this world, feel that I have had an eventful life. Some of it has been filled with bliss and wonder and some of it is the stuff of great sadness. I have sailed the coral seas, scaled mountains, skied in the lonely forests, loved and been loved. I have spoken and eaten with royalty, somewhat to my bewilderment, and served on government committees. But I have also ripped the skin from my wrists, poured boiling water over my hands entered worlds of darkness where it is only the persistence of nurses and doctors and friends and the strictures of a section that have kept me alive.

Nowadays, I live alone in a tiny house and have lost my family and many of the people who populated my past. This makes my nights lonely and makes the presence of my friends so important. I walk on the beach as the sun sets below the black sea and I talk on my phone and my life is given warmth by the opportunity to cuddle babies, walk dogs, baby sit children, make meals for others but above all to communicate.

To me it is such a basic need, to say: I felt, did, thought, I worried about this, I want you so much to understand my perspective, I want you to see both the richness and the poverty of my life and the world around me, I want you to take the gift of my words and return it with the gift of your acceptance and understanding.



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This for me is what creativity is about, it is the communication in words, images, in song and drama, in the creation of fabrics and the presentation of a laboured over gift of a meal where conversation will flow. It is the act of saying this is me, this is my world and my interpretation of our world and I will use a hundred different techniques to help you understand my reality, my emotion, my love my anger, my kindness and my insecurity, my beliefs and values and ethics and of course my culture, my background and my community.

I would love to communicate in images, sometimes when I walk on the beach at night and watch the swaying seaweed, the oystercatchers and the still herons outlined in the glimmer of the setting sun I wish that I could capture that scene and somehow imbue it with the thoughts that I had as I walked on the wet sand and send it to anyone anywhere who would want to know of my world.

Instead I use words. I sit with a glass of whisky and I translate the preoccupations of my life into words that try to breach the emptiness and the apartness we all experience to a greater or lesser extent. That is my chosen form of creativity, words, both spoken and written; though sometimes, I think I give more with a meal or a quick hug of communion between different people.

I meet people who say that they are not creative in any way at all but I have never met any one who cannot communicate, even those who hesitate for what it says, who feel inadequate and unheard have so much to say. Sometimes their silence says so much more than the words that I have.

Communities also have a need to be listened to, they need in the context of the universality of our humanity to be recognised and accepted, for their own voice to be heard, for their joint experience, within the confines of the individuality of their expression to be recorded and celebrated and understood.

I find that when I meet other people who have been through mental illness and the depths of experience that so many of us go through, that I find a connection, a bridge, a link that unites us. We are all disparate people with different beliefs and values but more and more I find that the commonality of our experience and yes, the commonality of our oppression unites us and creates those bare bones that says that, in many ways we, people with a mental illness, are often our own community within a wider community.

It seems to me that a community needs a voice, it does not need to become separate from all other communities but it can do wonders when it finds those individuals who can express the breadth of experience of its members and distill in words, poetry, painting all those myriad forms of expression. An expression of the unique that nevertheless connects with those people who have similar experiences and treatments.

This is why creativity is so important, it gives voice to both the individual and the community that they may feel they represent, it adds to the rich culture that so many communities possess.

In the world of mental illness some may hesitate to say that we can define ourselves as a community, with its own form of expression and I must admit that I hesitate a little with this, as so many of my friends who have a mental illness have such different perspectives and experiences to me. But then I know in my heart, the connection I immediately feel when I find a companion I have just met has had similar experiences to me and, when I read of our past, we have for so long been seen as distinct. In the past it was the negative that bound us together, the massive hospitals, the terrible treatment, the bleakness of our lives and being singled out as different and alien as those that children were warned off of. We were and still are subject to the greatest of stigmas as a community and a group of people.

Some people would say, now we have the opportunity to break away from those restrictions and the culture of exclusion and rejoin the mainstream but for me, I hesitate with this. There is an intensity to our experience and our lives and circumstances that does define us and link us together. Where we feel bonds with each other because of how we view ourselves and are viewed by others.

It is with this in mind that I think of the arts and mental health festival as being one mechanism to find a positive expression of an experience or community (whatever you want to call it) that shifts from the focus on the negative to the full flood of expression which by its nature if not its subject matter, must be positive.

Yesterday I was facilitating the HUG creative writing group, a wee group of 9 of us sitting in a room reading our work and creating new writing and forms of expression. There is something so invigorating in the creation we take part in. There were tender bonds between us, shared experience, a tentative understanding of the horrific things we have all experienced and the desire to turn it all in to something beautiful, in this case in words.

One of our members read his piece on family and halted and stumbled a bit, and went outside for a cigarette break and also to be comforted by friends, another expressed the anguish of feeling the loss of control as illness raised its harsh eyes again, someone else talked in a few moving sentences of losing her family. We all gave expression in our own individual way but were heard by people who understood.

As the group carried on, one of our members read a piece where he described the incredible boost he had gained from the festival in the last couple of days; he had gone to a puppet show organised by Birchwood Highland and heard two of his songs used in the performance, he had gone to the exhibition that occupational therapy had organised and seen his photographs on display.

This prompted other members to speak, another person had staffed the stalls of the art and craft exhibition and been surrounded by people in the hospital and the local theatre asking questions and discussing and praising and she felt wonderful. Two people agreed to take their paintings to a week long exhibition in an arts space, a group of us swapped dates for when the films would be on and promised to go along together and then we talked about our own play that had just been performed at Eden court theatre and had toured schools in the Highlands and been seen by a thousand young people and we talked about how fantastic it was and how good the actors were and what it was like briefing the kids before the performance.

And we realised that this was a huge outpouring of expression, not the dry reports that talk of how we should be treated and in their own way act as voice but that vibrant messy beautiful development of a creative voice.

Later we talked of our latest publication of prose and poetry and I bullied people to hand over work that they were happy to add to the next publication and then I forgot to mention that moniack mhor the writers centre had raised money for us to spend some days working together in December.

Then it was off to the town hall to see a fashion show by Rag Tag and Textiles, where we saw a swirl of colours and dresses and clothes made of all sorts; tablecloths, bedspreads, reclaimed materials and there I met more hug members, some helping with the show, another who had appeared in the puppet show and another who was going to participate in panel discussion about the films that were being shown.

And that, that was more than creativity, more than voice; it was that wonderful feeling of achievement and contribution and joining together and being successful and supportive together.

So yes this festival, for me user involvement, even user control is a central plank of it. As a group of people we have a wonderful depth of expression, a history, a warehouse of undiscovered and neglected talent that cries for the opportunity to find a place to be seen and heard and read and understood.

You could call this festival a way of asserting a cultural inheritance we never knew we had and you could call it a marvellous opportunity to raise the profile of mental health and to challenge the stigma of mental illness.

But it is also more than this because it is a connection, a joining, a sharing.

Let me explain the obvious. Earlier in the day I had given a talk to managers about employment and mental health and in the course of the discussion we realised that this almost random group of people had all been deeply affected by mental illness, either through direct experience or through the experience of partners and children or friends. Mental illness was a daily reality in a different way for all of them. Then earlier still in the day I met with my colleague Emma to discuss the write up of 'the big day' our schools production and we talked about the wonderful skills of the actors, just what fantastic people they were and how well they addressed the issues. And we then talked about how pleased we were that they were willing to add their personal reactions to the play as influenced by their own contact with people close to them with a mental illness. We hadn't asked for actors who had a deep understanding of mental illness we had expected Eden court theatre company to find people full of the huge skills that are needed for a professional theatre production and that's sort of the point isn't it?

I can't think of a single person I know who hasn't been affected at some profound level by mental illness. It is something that affects each and every one of us and although we need a community voice the entire mainstream community is affected by the issue. This festival applies to everyone and can be contributed to by everyone.

Some of our greatest literature, our greatest paintings, music, plays whatever it is that you call creative expression, is the expression of the emotional, of the times of crisis and the times of joy and in fact when you look at the word wellbeing, we almost get to the point of

being meaningless in this context because it applies to everyone and is in many ways the goal that the majority of us seek but often don't find .

It seems to me that all art influences wellbeing and almost all art has an emotional base to it.

So this festival can be shared by the whole population and contributed to by the whole population and in this way we pass on the fundamental message that although mental illness can define us and create a new identity and way of seeing the world for those of us who experience it and this user voice should be the core of the festival, it also applies to everyone. The power of the message that mental illness affects everyone and that mental wellbeing is a part of each and everyone of us that we would do well to understand and develop and treasure.

Thank you