



Scottish Film and Mental Health Festival October 2007

Narrative

This is a chance to discuss narrative and testimonial when we look at what works and what doesn't in changing the lives and treatment of people with a mental health problem.

We will be hearing from our panel and seeing some film clips. Which will hopefully inspire discussion and debate.

What we hope happens today is that we have a dialogue amongst all of us. We have a panel who have a contribution to make but so do you, instead of seeing us as experts with the answers to whatever questions you might have, realise and remember that our own view of our own personal story and how we may or may not want others to hear or discover about it makes us all experts on this subject.

What we want is for the presentations to spark off questions, ideas, opinions and statements, so, whilst we speak think of what you think is important or how you would like to contribute today.

It can be hard to speak and hold a conversation amongst so many people, especially when emotions can run high when we look at our own stories. But hopefully we will stimulate ideas from each other and we will all be able to learn from our differing perspectives.

I am going to start this session with a brief description of how I have provided my own story, what it means to me and some of the issues it raises for me that may be of interest to you or give rise to your own thoughts.

I am not a neutral chairperson but I really love to hear and discuss a mix and range of ideas.

I have been telling my story for years and years as a way of illustrating points and making different realities real and believable. They give a human dimension to mental illness, play a part in changing attitudes, raising awareness and challenging stigma.

So why do I find the personal narrative so important ?

For me the history of the treatment of people with a mental illness has been one of exclusion and marginalisation. We all know that it is only in the relatively recent past that people stopped being penned away in large institutions , the ‘out of sight out of mind’ phrase trips glibly from our lips but was very true and still applies in some ways. Yes stigma is waning but there is still huge ignorance and fear around the whole subject of mental ill health.

When we develop a mental health problem we may lose so many things , there’s the basic dryness of a life where emotions have become pale visions or alternatively tormenting barriers, but there are also all the other bits, losing jobs, finding friends drifting awkwardly away, watching family react with incomprehension, seeing the stereotypes flow from the latest psycho movie, feeling powerless and discarded. Maybe I exaggerate but in many ways that sad vision is too true for comfort for many of us.

It seems to me that when we are dismissed that one of the few things we have left is our voice and our own expertise in what we have been through. To me to bear witness is a gesture of dignity and a statement that demands respect for our experience and the experience of others like us. It is a way of saying “do not forget” – it says “I will not be discarded or rejected and I will stand up to reassert the value of my life and experience however alien and confusing it may be to other people.”

Our voice and our experience is sometimes all that is left to us and for some of us can be the most precious and important thing left to us. It allows us to be heard. It allows us to comment on what works and what doesn’t, it allows us to stand up for justice and it allows the tragedy of lives gone wrong to be recorded and remembered and respected.

One thing that I would love to have seen done in the 80’s or 90’s would have been a nationwide project to record the lives and views of those who spent such a large part of their lives incarcerated in the old mental hospitals. It seems to me that the voice of the generation before us has in many ways been lost and the record of injustice may be forgotten and not learnt from.

Bearing witness has many functions. I give my story in many settings and have done for years and I wonder why I do it. Part of it is that by having my story heard and recognised I gain recognition and validation. In the early days it was a raw scream of hear me, hear me and to tell the story was painful beyond my expectations . it is the strangest of feelings to be telling a tale in front of a hundred or so people only to find your throat clenching in on itself with the resurrected memories but it is also hugely liberating and healing to know that you have been heard and that the elements of the personal have contributed and illustrated wider debates.

It is no secret that any media story is always looking for the personal perspective. This is not always exploitative. To give that perspective makes it real, it makes it understandable, it brings home and illustrates the dialogue. If we say discrimination is wrong we may nod our heads wisely but if we illustrate it with real stories then we can galvanise and connect with people who feel inspired to create change or further understand. But as I said, it is not always exploitative but on occasion it is, our stories need to keep their dignity but they can be misused and misunderstood when passed on by others.

I have given elements of my story at conferences, awareness raising sessions, in the papers and on the radio but for me although our story needs to be recorded the use of narrative such as this is a way of illustrating and illuminating a point – I bring in the personal to illustrate and make a point, I use it as a highly effective method of getting a message across but there are dangers in this, when we are too raw and angry we may distort our message, when we use our story we may distort the stories of others or even deny the validity of other peoples views and experiences. So it is not always the best way of illustrating a point.

For me a narrative changes all the time. I said at the beginning that we need to record our experience but our perception of that experience changes all the time. Over the years my story has grown and adapted to the extent that it has left me and become its own thing. My story is now literally a story, it doesn't feel as though it is a part of me as I have given it so often – it makes me think that we can fashion our own histories as we grow and move on but maybe we do ourselves a disservice by the constant repetition and reinvention of the highly personal.

From this introduction you will have realised that speaking and bearing witness to my story is hugely important to me but I will finish with a few thoughts and questions for you to consider.

- I give my story and will tell it to anyone but I don't live in a vacuum – I have friends and family and helpers who are all affected by what I say. Is my story really just my story? and how much is owned by other people? Should they have a say in what I say to others?
- At the moment I would personally be happy for my story to be heard anywhere but in public forums you can lose ownership of your story and the version of your life that you gave a few years ago may not be the version that you would like others to hear about in five years time. How much control should I have in this and how does a person deal with life and views that constantly change?
- My story can be a powerful one, it can aid and illustrate points that we may all agree need made. But it is only one story and may distort and deflect from the wider points that people are trying to make. How do we pepper policy with an individuals reality without detracting from debate?
- And attached to that is the difficulty of debate of the personal – it is hard to challenge a personal story as it may seem like we dismiss the person. So how do we respect the need for testimony whilst realising that there may be contradictory testimonies that are just as valuable.

- When we prepare to give our story how do we anticipate the effect that it will have ? How do we anticipate the impact on and the reaction of our community when we are the subject of a feature article in the newspaper? And how do we decide and have control over who does and doesn't hear our story.
- When we give our stories it seems to me that people assume that it is by its nature always correct – it feels to me as though our interpretation of our history varies all the time. We may have hundreds of stories of our life that change as we grow and with the setting we are in. Our stories may become just that, stories. What do we do with that? and does it diminish and distort our own realities?
- By giving stories especially those that concentrate on suffering do we fashion an image through which other people view us. Do we become both victims and people of great bravery by our public declarations and does this diminish our participation and equality and the everyday humanness we all share?

Those are collections of the pitfalls and issues that we might want to address when looking at narrative there must be so many more I hope that the following presentations from our panel will further illuminate our debate.