You Had to Be There: Six Month Odyssey

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Approximately one year ago at this time I was nowhere. Literally, I was situated in Toronto, having just been discharged from a psychiatric facility with no particular direction in life, completely uncertain of what the future held and how I was going to face it whatever it may be. Basically, I was stuck in my head. There was only the faint hope of a referral to a far off place in what may as well have been the hinterland. I had no knowledge of the hospital other than the recommendation of a social worker; and the community may as well have been outer space as far my home-based isolated mind was concerned. What I did know, however, was that this was the last stop. There would be no more voluntary psych wards for me, no more rehabs, and no more false unsustainable realities. If this didn’t work, then life could take its course and have its way with me. This was the end of the line of my personal tour of mental health institutions.

The waiting game went on for a few weeks as best I can recall. With each passing day, I would waver on what I was potentially getting myself into this time around. This scenario was even more maddening when you consider the fact that the core of my issues at the time was decision-making—what a merry go-round ride that was! After a grand total of eight months on a waiting list (this type of logic in the healthcare system confounds me: take someone in crisis and let them wait eight months for treatment. I suppose the hope is you’ll die first), the call came in that there was a spot available immediately; and it had to be accepted quickly, or not at all. After another day or two of deliberation, the decision was reached to head for the hills! When you’ve got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose. So, it began.

The journey into yet another unknown was met with no preparation whatsoever. I hurriedly called around, and a great friend of mine dropped everything and offered his services to make sure I arrived in one piece. I hustled together some very basic necessities at the last minute because in my mind this was to be a brief sojourn for a maximum of two weeks to solve some issues which should have been looked at many

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years previously. This was the first false assumption of many to come. On the way there, my comrade and I debated the many possible outcomes of this undertaking. We were both veterans of various facilities for assorted reasons. Was this one to have a different outcome? Would this one provide some tools with which to create a sustainable existence upon the inevitable discharge? If not, it was pointless and simply another break from a reality that would still be there at the end. Would it be worth the typical marginalization and compromise of institutionalized existence? The questions continued for the duration of the trip, but it all boiled down to the fact I didn’t have a better option at the moment. Maybe this would be the tipping point to access a quality of life I felt I deserved but did not know quite how to undertake. We approached the destination as night was descending; and I prepared myself for the initial step into a world of which the only thing I was certain, was nothing. This was it—no turning back now! We headed on into it and discussed many matters which I cannot accurately recall with the nurse at the time. With that, my ally departed and the experiment had officially begun.

The most difficult part of any journey is the first step. Upon my official admission, that step had now been made. Somewhere inside myself, I decided that I was going to see this through until the end no matter what. This was going to work; that was it. I was not going back to Toronto to be a rotting corpse waiting for life to happen. Someone was going to get to the root of the issues one way or another. With that intention, I set forth.

One of the first bones of contention was the issue of the accommodations. Having been down similar roads a time or two, I knew that roommates did not work for me. In previous scenarios, little progress was made until this issue was resolved in some fashion. It’s not looking for special treatment; it’s just a proven fact of my existence. After some deliberations the ‘quiet room’ was granted to me. This was to be the first of many protests on my part with the establishment at the hospital. Just as I did not know what I was getting into, neither did they!

I’m not the best at blindly acquiescing to authority, to say the least. Prior to my arrival at the hospital, 9 to 5 was a distant land to me, one which I never intended to explore. Many manifestations of this dilemma would arise soon after the room situation was somewhat stabilized. I could not for the life of me accept some of the policies which existed on the NPS (Neuropsychiatry) unit. The most glaringly and immediately obviously oppressive of these was the access to the outdoors.

There were all sorts of limitations on and requirements for this ‘privilege’. It was explained to me that this had to be earned over time and that it was for my and other patients’ safety! Take into consideration that this was the peak of summer last year with the sunshine at the height of its brilliance and the fact that the hospital is located right on the lake with endless miles of trails and glorious exploration in all directions. This is a rare circumstance and experience in my opinion when it comes to mental health institutions. The norm for me had been downtown Toronto in all its manmade sterility and toxicity. So why not take full time advantage of this natural luxury? I got into many heated debates on this point with all levels of staff. I proceeded to break just about
every rule in regard to curfews, check in times, distance and time allowed for travel offsite, weekend pass times, etc. I even believe a time or two, I was deemed AWOL, and police were called. To me, it was just unconscionable and criminal to not be "allowed" to roam free. I could not and still will not accept any explanation of the rationality of these regulations. I have yet to find anyone who can say that they feel worse in the fresh air; and I have never heard a reasonable medical argument stating that sunlight and exercise may have a negative effect on someone! This being the case, I cannot understand why having as much time outside as humanly possible is not mandatory at the hospital. If I was some sort of danger to myself or others, wouldn’t that have happened the very first time? I was in far greater danger when trapped inside for countless hours. Even on the unit, there was a patio that was rarely used, and I had to protest vehemently to get that opened more frequently. If I was some sort of suicide risk, wouldn’t that have been far more likely in the concrete jungle of Toronto? Various amounts of negotiating were done on these regulations; and eventually I had more freedoms granted which apparently broke all previous precedent.

There would be more heated clashes on 'norms' to come. To the best of my previous knowledge, one does not go to the hospital with the goal of becoming even more incapacitated. This belief was definitely challenged from behind my back. Once on a psychiatric unit for any significant period, there really is not much choice when it comes to inpatient interaction. Now, I'm not the type to seek approval from anyone; it's a take it or leave it situation for the most part. I do my thing; you do yours, and if our paths cross, then carry on from there. I'm not here for recognition from this world but rather to fulfill my destiny. That being said, I can't control who may want to communicate with me for whatever reason. As it turned out, a particular female patient decided that my time held some value. Evening conversation and perusal of YouTube videos expanding on leftist leanings became the norm. There really was not much choice in this type of thing. Everyone's along the same ride in a quite confined space. This was innocent enough to me. This individual seemed to want someone to talk to so I did. The next thing I knew I was on the floor on my back. The perpetrator turned out to be another patient who had also been known to have interactions with said female party. The only conclusion I or anyone else could draw was that he was offended by my contact with her.

I was later informed by various sorts that this type of incident was not unheard of on these shores. The general reaction of staff was close to indifference, and it seemed to be par for the course. Shouldn't living in such an environment calm one down and bring a decrease in violence? I guess not. I do not know for sure what the consequences to this individual were. The consequences to me were a fractured wrist which required a cast and several months of rehab. These types of results would seem to be the opposite of what would typically happen in a facility designed for 'recovery,' but it was not treated as a cause for much alarm. If someone had told me that such an event was likely to happen in a hospital, I would have said that they were the crazy one. For this event, you definitely had to be there. Words really don’t do it justice.

As fate would have it, the preceding incident came at a time when I was undergoing a period of deep transformation. I had begun to get more actively involved in my 12-step
program of sobriety in conjunction with the works of Wayne Dyer and Tony Robbins, amongst others. These undertakings overlapped with accepting what the clinical team had to offer rather than dreaming about what a utopian hospital may be like to spark a personal awakening of sorts. Mindfulness practice became daily, if necessary, more than once. I began to look at what I could do rather than what I couldn't; and with the patience and persistence of the team, rapid progress began to happen. Pounds started to fall off, the guitar came out of nowhere, articles almost began to write themselves, various types of classes were attended in combination with work placements and a rigid daily schedule was maintained. I cannot say that all this was a pleasure, in fact far from it, but there was simply no more space to go backward. It was and is either get busy livin' or get busy dyin'; and the latter had already been virtually attempted.

Sometime around this point, I had incorporated the practice of staying the course of day no matter what and visualizing the finish line before setting out towards a goal. This approach manifested from a combination of my chosen methods and the persistence of NPS staff that I religiously stick to a daily schedule as a form of medicine. I'm certain that I protested at first; but with time, this worked wonders in many categories. Who could conceive of becoming exponentially more productive in a hospital than the wider 'community'? But take my word, it did, and continues to happen. The world has never been enough for me. As more time passed, I increasingly discovered more access to authentic power. I felt that this came from finding a determination to complete the day's tasks by any means necessary. These had now progressed to include: weekend trips back to Toronto for family and socializing amidst attending to practical matters, various work placements and vocational activities at the hospital, computer classes, active participation in Music Therapy on the unit, a 12-step study at least thrice weekly along with meetings in Durham Region, yoga classes, consistent mindfulness practice, an intensive physical and nutrition regimen, financial restructuring, journeys to become familiar with the local community, writing practice, continued private study of the works of renowned masters, the odd bit of socializing and the continued general maintenance work required for spinal and brain health in conjunction with active sobriety. Not too bad for someone starting from zero! These undertakings may seem trivial on the surface; but to me, the organization and attention to detail required to complete the majority of these on a regular basis, rivaled just about any figure I had ever admired. I felt I now had a practice comparable to the masters I had been reading.

These shores were rife with many other incidents one could have possibly witnessed or experienced elsewhere. There were the daily complaints and debates with and about food service at times resulting in in complete meltdowns and tantrums, myself included on one explosive occasion. More and increasingly unpredictable complications with roommates who seemed to have lost touch with all levels of social norms for reasons I will never know. Witnessing a beauty session for female patients was definitely something to write home about, not to mention the sight of said patients appearing daily as if they were at a fashion show. The sudden breakdown of patients for no obviously apparent reason, among various other idiosyncrasies, which I had never previously witnessed in another human being. It led to questions like, how did this happen, what is 'normal,' and what does it all mean anyway? This was also evident among staff. When
one spends so much consistent time around the same people in a restricted space, there is no choice but to wonder what makes them tick, no matter what their classification, label or title at the time.

My respite from the routine was to venture around the grounds for the break preceding curfew to ponder my current reality with the lakes, trees and occasional deer. At times, they seemed to have more answers than I could find for myself or anywhere else on the inside. At the end of these sojourns just before the 9 p.m. closing, I would have to go into deep communion with the moon and stars to adequately prepare myself for whatever circumstance lay ahead behind the locked doors. This was an experience of opposing realities within minutes. At times the unit was calm, and it was a smooth transition into the dream world. On other occasions, chaos reigned all night. I could never know for sure what I was getting into upon re-entry. This duality was a microcosm of my entire stay. Expect the unexpected was the norm, both positive and negative.

At this point, I really don’t have many more words. The process of writing this has been much like a typical week on the shores. A definite sense of progress and accomplishment coupled with psychic burnout due to the magnitude and depth of searching required for what had just taken place. Truth to be told, if I was starting this article today, I would call it “Riding the Wave” because that’s truly what my experience on those particular shores of Ontario was all about. Really learning to just completely surrender to whatever was taking place and accepting that there was some purpose in it for my (and others’) progress. I know that in this piece, I have shared some of the more negative and questionable aspects of what takes place inside an institution of such a complex nature. This was in an effort to paint a true picture of how it really was to navigate in a totally unknown world not completely of my own choosing.

In the beginning, I had expected a brief stay of no more than two weeks, to get a proper diagnosis and perhaps fine-tune some medications and move on with—not a complete voyage into the inner and outer realms of existence. This truly was a journey into the heart of darkness personally and at times outwardly.

Currently, having been an outpatient for approximately as long I was admitted, it seems fair to say that I have moved on though the journey that never ends. I came to the hospital searching for a life. I currently have several. There is an irony in the fact I had to scramble to put this article together, for the simple fact that I now have so many pots on the fire, when previously, I was trying to just to get a spark. This is a blessing and the curse, I suppose. I also know that I have been quite critical at times. It’s not directed to any particular individual, but at a system which dictates how facilities function. It may seem hypocritical to judge a place at which I made drastic improvement. It’s not that it’s bad, but it could just be so much better. I also realize that I am currently actively seeking various avenues of further involvement within the hospital; and since I do not currently own the place, this generally requires requests on my part. That much is true, but these do not come from the consciousness of a beggar.
I know that I have valuable information to transfer here, in the form of living truth about progress from many forms of tragedy, and I’m still here to tell the story. Many are not. If that does not qualify as useful, then perhaps I really am crazy! I feel that the soil at the hospital is rich. With just a slight shift in perspective and priority, true groundbreakers could be spawned rapidly. The time and space are all there and maybe that is happening, but I did not see it. The luxury of time has allowed me to see that we are dealing with a complex reality and there are no quick fixes when it comes to mental health; and I do know that many went above and beyond to help mold what exists today.

I realize that you had probably never come across quite my type before. Don’t worry, no one has; and I feel that part of the goal of mental health should be to create uniqueness, authentic personal power and self-reliance rather than following a crowd that may lead you astray. I realize now that’s a tall order for a hospital, but why not shoot for the stars? If you miss, you’ll get the moon! I’ve been told that my writing can be indulgent but I disagree. If you can’t toot your own horn, who will? I feel I’ve earned the right after seven years of struggle and loss. The methods that I’ve had to implement to stand up are radical and perhaps not for everyone, but they have required tremendous effort; and I will not apologize for being proud and living life to the fullest at the moment. I also know this has not been a solo mission, so thanks to all thus far who have probably set precedent when it comes to my case. I believe you know who you are. The journey is by no means complete though. There is always fine tuning which needs to take place. I will never apologize for standing my ground when I feel injustice has taken place. Whatever else happens, that is my life’s duty. Perhaps the delivery needs updating. Finally, even though I hope you never have to be here, because that would mean that something went tragically wrong, most likely out of your control. But you truly had to be there for this experience. But if you do have to be here, be here for yourself—it’s all you’ve got and you’ve got everything you need.

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