



DISCOVERY AND RECOVERY WITH MY VOICES

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I am very honoured and blessed to be stood here able to present my story today and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the hope, patience and empathy I was shown by the learned souls I eventually met. They were willing to bear witness to my story, hear my pain and encourage me to find the strength to heal. Everyday I'm acutely aware of just how lucky I am and how very easily I could have been one of the many individuals who don't get that chance, who don't make it! They are the driving inspiration for me to tell my story, for me to join this movement. A movement of wise, impassioned and passionate people who are committed to creating systemic change and providing much needed hope, understanding and alternate ways forward. They are the very reason this Movement is so important. Recovery should not be a few exceptions but rather the rule, a human right even.

You see just 6 years ago, I was firmly entrenched in a belief that I was defined by an illness and limited by a diagnosis, a belief that was completely re-enforced by the world around me. So how did I get there? How at just 20 years of age could I have no hope, feel so completely worthless so determined to die, convinced at just 20 years of age I had nothing to live for. To understand this, I had to try and at least begin to understand the experiences that shaped me into the person I then was and that understanding eventually enabled me to grow and become the person stood before you today.

Mental illness was a prevalent part of my early years, my Mother had received a diagnosis of Bi-Polar disorder as a young woman and this often made for a volatile and tumultuous atmosphere in the home and there were many unexplained absences. My parents separated before I was three and it was not long after moving out of our shared family home we experienced a house fire. This was the first time I can remember hearing voices. I heard a warm, soothing maternal voice reassuring me. She became a constant source of comfort in my life always telling me I was loved and a good girl.

At 7 I was meant to have a two-week holiday with my father, his new wife and her children. This stay was extended for several months with no contact with my mother or my grandparents. I endured a truly horrendous time exposed to and experiencing horrific physical and sexual abuse and neglect on a daily basis. It was a truly toxic environment. It was then I began hearing more voices. I heard a group of loud, indistinguishable voices that would increase my sense of feeling unsafe and a little girl who screamed and cried uncontrollably. I was incredibly overwhelmed by these voices but as soon as my father returned me home to my mum and my grandparents they diminished to only be something that occurred rarely and mainly at night.

It wasn't until I was 15 and a close friend committed suicide and my grandfather passed away that I became unable to cope. I was put on antidepressants and began my ascent into madness. I became withdrawn, disengaged from home, school and friends. My mother and I began clashing in a big way and as the situation escalated enter a new voice. A voice that felt controlling, powerful, terrifying, cruel

and demeaning. She was incredibly sharp tongued and clever and it was around this time I began self harming. For a moment, it felt I was able to bring the pain I felt so incredibly deeply to the surface. It felt as if I could see it then I could manage it. I moved out of home at 16 began using drugs and alcohol to excess. I used them to fit in, to feel normal to feel some sort of a sense of control. At 18 I met an older man, thought I had fallen in love and fell into an emotionally and sometimes physically abusive relationship.

My behaviour and life was becoming increasingly more erratic and out of control. I began to see a series of psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors; I was diagnosed with Bi Polar Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder. I really couldn't talk to or trust any of these professionals; I felt they held all the power and knowledge without earning it, without getting to actually know me. I was queried about my symptoms never about my experience. Why was I asked what's wrong with you rather than what has happened to you? I never disclosed hearing voices! I was truly terrified of being diagnosed with schizophrenia, an illness I believed to be an incurable, biological, carnivorous disease. I was only asked if I heard voices just once.

Christmas day 2006 I made a serious attempt on my life and was admitted to the local psychiatric ward. I had many preconceptions and notions of psychiatry, mostly based on what I had witnessed of my mother's experience. As a little girl, I had witnessed my mother so heavily medicated she had no idea who I was, this ingrained in me a fear I wasn't soon to forget. My hospital experience was not a positive one; the only contact I had with nurses was when having medication or at times of severe distress. I was terrified to say the least and I was most defiantly not an easy patient I'm sure the term non-compliant would come to the minds of those who were treating me. Hospital involved taking medications, attending groups I found meaningless and feeling mostly ignored and left. There was no mention of recovery it seemed to be a mixture of maintenance, compliance and revolving doors to me. That's what I had seen others experiencing and it was not what I wanted for myself but there seemed no other options, no other way forward.

So sadly, I did what many people feel they have to do to get out of hospital. I learnt to play the game and even though I felt more desperate than the day arrived I was deemed fit to rejoin society. My life continued to spiral out of control, I was on such a cocktail of medication I was barely able to function. The side effects debilitating and embarrassing to say the least. I had been put on a nasal spray to stop me from wetting the bed as I was so overmedicated. A delightful situation to be in at only 19, as you can well imagine. I went out one Saturday night about 3 weeks after I was discharged. Heavily medicated and intoxicated I went out got in a fight with my then boyfriend, was kicked out of the night club and walked home alone visibly distressed. I was viscously attacked and raped by a complete stranger. I somehow got my self home and made another attempt on my life.

The next few weeks are but a blur but I was re-admitted to hospital, this time hearing a nasty, malicious voice that had taken on my attacker's tone. He named himself MAX and he was all powerful and demeaning. I was completely terrified of him. When I was distressed, the only comfort I was offered was Medication. During my hospitalisation, I had an altercation with a male staff member which resulted in me dragged by 5 orderlies from my room to HDU I was completely terrified and unable to comprehend what was happening, I was left there screaming all night, begging for someone to talk to me. Seclusion and isolation made no sense to me then and makes no sense to me now. Hospital was lacking the warmth, understanding and compassion I needed to heal.

What I did have though was a lot of family and friends fighting for me. But I wasn't doing a lot of fighting myself, there in lied the problem. My mum in all her hard work to find some real support had sourced a service GCH and a worker Ros Thomas. They believed in Recovery, but more importantly they believed in me. I had never heard the word recovery in the same sentence as mental illness before, so when this worker sat across from me telling about recovery and her belief in my ability to recover. I have to say I thought she was completely nuts and I avoided appointments with her. I believed she didn't know how sick, unwell and pathetic I truly was.

I didn't say much of anything for quite awhile; some of this is attributed to just how much medication I was on, but rather I just sat there listening. I am so grateful now that she just kept talking. She built up a relationship of trust with me and slowly I began to talk. She wanted to know about me and my life; she even shared experiences from her own life. I was blown away. Never before had I been treated by anyone in this role like that, she spoke to me like I was a real person. She gave me enormous amounts of information and I absorbed what was relevant to me. There was no focus on my self-harming. Once it was acknowledged that they had simply been a strategy I was using to cope, this subsided on its own. I was learning so many more practical and healthier strategies to use.

This is where I my recovery/discovery journey began, this is where I was asked the right questions, and this is where I was shown the compassion, warmth and empathy I so desperately needed and innately knew I deserved. I was given an opportunity to explore and make sense of my experiences. I was told and shown actual helpful strategies and skills that worked. I began to attend the young peoples program where I could connect, learn and share with other young people. I was learning about Mindfulness, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Thinking Strategies and Values, and luckily was exposed to the Hearing Voices Network.

A profound part of my recovery was hearing Jacqui Dillon's story. I'll never forget being sat in that room, watching the DVD, hearing her talk about her life, her voices and the hearing voices network. I was completely in awe by this woman's story. Her strength, her courage and her determination inspired me more than I had ever been inspired in my life. That was my light bulb moment; I finally had confirmation that mine was a completely normal human experience. Hearing voices was not a sign of an incurable, carnivorous disease that I was desperate to avoid being labelled. Rather it was an incredibly creative coping strategy. This empowered me, I realised I had the capacity and ability to move beyond the medical models limited view of what my life could be.

I found myself rebuilding one piece at a time. Sometimes it was a case of one step forward and eight steps back, but my life started to change when I took responsibility for myself and my actions. After not being able to get in to see a Doctor or Psychiatrist to start reducing my medication, without telling a soul I began to do it myself. The first few months were hell but I could truly think again. This was a far cry from the overmedicated mess I was weeks/months before. It took a lot of hard work and determination, both utilising and implementing the strategies I had been learning. In leaps and bounds my situation was improving, I was hungry for information. I began seriously contemplating the mental health services and stigma and decided that it wasn't nearly good enough. It started a burning desire to make other people's experience easier, less fraught than my own and I became determined to be a part of creating a paradigm shift so we could all be seen for our potential, not our labels.

In 2009, I was part of a small delegation that had the honour to travel to Holland for the Worlds First Hearing Voices Congress in Maastricht. We were there to present the HARD project. For me this is where everything changed, where things truly began to make sense and fall into place. This is where I found my Tribe, my people. To meet so many people; voice hearers, professionals and allies alike all there to truly listen, learn and share empowered me in a way I could never have imagined. Seeing psychiatrists and voice hearers side by side, sharing a meal or a conversation finally challenged the "Them and Us" mentality I was holding onto. I saw here people truly coming together and learning from one another. There were no power imbalances. Everybody was so willing to share any knowledge or information they had. Hearing people's personal accounts of their journeys in person was so overwhelming, inspiring and life changing. I went away from that congress a different person. Someone who realised she had a lot to learn and a lot of work to do.

Over the next year, I had many opportunities to attend various training and conferences. I spent a lot of that year trying to understand and make room for my past hurts, traumas and losses. I had read so many books but none more important to me and my journey than Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman and Living with Voices, 50 stories of recovery. These two books taught me that knowledge is not power but empowerment.

In November 2010, I had the privilege to attend the 2nd World Hearing Voices Congress in Nottingham and give a keynote presentation titled Beyond Psychiatry making sense of my own human experience. The safety and emotion I felt being with my Tribe for four days was incredible. Openly speaking about my voices with other voice hearers was incredibly healing and normalising. I felt and saw first hand what benefit this open dialogue and sharing of strategies had been to me and realised we needed a hearing voices group back home that wasn't just open to clients of our service. We needed a Hearing Voices group that was open to our whole community.

After attending a 4-day voice dialoguing course in Melbourne with Dirk Corstens, Ron Coleman and Eleanor Longden, I began to heal the part of me that was angry at the professionals involved in my care. During this training, I worked through the voice dialoguing process with two of my psychiatric staff from my admissions back home in Albury. This was an incredibly confronting and challenging journey for the three of us and we learnt so much about each other. I realised then that it was much more systemic the issue I had with psychiatry and mental health care and it was not with the people; they were working in systems that didn't allow for them to work authentically with people. I think the system has to recover to enable its workers to recover and work from a more humanistic and holistic way.

I began to present my story to more Conferences, Schools, TAFES, Universities and Service Providers and I realised I had found my survivor mission. I had found a way to recycle the darkest parts of my past to be meaningful and worth more than I ever believed they could be worth. I truly began to understand that through sharing we become more human. This was reinforced when we finally launched Free Voices Speak Out and had a community based hearing voices group. The learning, kindness and acceptance offered there made me immensely proud to have had a small part in creating it along side some inspiring individuals. Watching it grow and develop is exciting and is an absolute credit to all the incredible members and facilitators.

The very word Recovery though has become a stale concept to me, a word that seems now to be like so many ideas that have been taken on by services and governments from the survivor movement. It now feels like something they are trying to give to people, a tokenistic idea that for me has lost its meaning. I never had any intention of recovering the person I was before. I wanted much more than that. That person had no idea how to connect to her values, communicate or express herself in ways that weren't harmful. That person didn't believe in herself, didn't think she was good enough. Reclaiming a word and an idea for myself to attempt to define my unique experience seemed important to me. My recovery journey has naturally developed into what I believe to be a discovery journey. An opportunity for me to build and create endless possibilities. A chance for me to truly understand my values, my parts and what drives us. A decision to embrace the learning and obstacles life was throwing my way. To truly recognise I would never be recovered and nor would I want to. This is a life long journey, this is going to be amazing, testing, demanding and gruelling but I'm determined to feel the incredible reward of living by my values and constantly trying to learn from all I encounter and experience.

I'm now dedicated to be part of making change, diminishing stigma and providing hope to others. If I had a magic wand I would shape a system that validates, understands, and offers every opportunity for all people to recover. A system that asks what happened to you rather than what's wrong with you? A series of diverse services meeting peoples unique and individual needs. Services that offer programs like peer support, living skills, strategies to cope, problem solving skills and alternate ways forward. We need services that will take care of their workers and offer them adequate training and supervision that enable them to truly be with people.

I think we need to all come together to make this a reality. Encourage all people to join the last great civil rights movement, to make this a current and meaningful issue to absolutely everybody! Because that's who it affects everybody. We need to talk about it; we need to demystify the stigma and myths surrounding it. We need to make it ok to not be ok. We need to honour the individuals who never had the chance to make it and remain committed to trying to prevent this for our current and future generations. We need to be able to talk about trauma, grief, loss and the responses just as they are. Not shrouded in guilt shame and taboo but seen for what they are, valid responses to human experiences.