

# Reframing Psychosis

I have a particular interest in the experience of psychosis or what used to be called having a nervous breakdown, and this is because I and all my close family members have experienced a psychotic episode, on one or more occasions. You might describe it as normal for us.

However the challenge has always been the psychiatric inpatient treatment with its reliance on diagnoses, medication and compliance. Or labelling and disabling as I like to call it.

It's fair to say that I have never believed psychiatry, since 1970 and aged 17, when I visited my mother in the Kinnoull locked ward at Murray Royal Hospital, Perth. I knew then that something wasn't right with the treatment of mad people and that locking everyone in together couldn't be the best way of doing things.

The psychiatrists said I had an old head on young shoulders when I used to meet with them to discuss my mother. I remember not being impressed and thinking that I would never be a psychiatric patient for I was resilient and level-headed.

And then in 1978 and 1984 I had puerperal psychoses, following the births of my second and third sons, and a menopausal psychosis in 2002 at age 50. I was always non-conformist in life, a community development worker to trade, so was non-compliant in psychiatric inpatient care which meant I was forcibly treated but it also meant I completely recovered after each episode, within the year postnatally, after two years menopausally. Despite the labels and prognoses of lifelong mental illness, which I didn't believe and never will.

I enjoyed being a mother, bringing up my 3 sons, and didn't do paid work when they were young, rather I did community work voluntarily throughout the 1980's - playgroup committees, developing playschemes, after-school clubs, youth work, school involvement, driving the community minibus, church. School holidays were great fun and we went on trips to the city, kept diaries of activities, used trains and had adventures.

We lived in a council house, I still do, and it was more important to experience life with my children than to have a career or money. The point being that they had a varied and grounded childhood. And then as each of my sons left home to go to university and the big city they all experienced psychotic episodes, like their mother, and my mother.

A transition and journey, a rite of passage and a battle to get out of the psychiatric system unscathed, dodging the labels and recovering from the psychiatric drugs. I stood with them, from 1995 until the present day. It's been a challenge, they're doing well.

I want to see a reframing of psychosis so that the experience is a thing in and of itself, not tied to psychiatric diagnoses or mental illness labelling. Psychosis is different for everyone and isn't about a one size fits all or square peg in a round hole scenario.

For my family the psychotic experience was an adventure and a transition, something that strengthened us and in some sense was a shortcut to a better place. We emerged from it with more confidence and maturity, more at home in our bodies and comfortable with ourselves. It wasn't an illness or biomedical flaw, rather a part of our life's journey that had meaning and purpose.

We don't hear voices in our family although some folk do when experiencing a psychosis. My mother used to say how the psychiatric professionals always asked her if she heard voices, to which she replied no but they didn't seem to hear or believe her and so she was labelled schizophrenic. And for the last 20 or more years of her life had to take a depixol injection every 3 weeks. It didn't interfere too much with living, she had a job and an ordered life, although it did affect her sleeping pattern.

My mother was a gentle woman who made the best out of life's circumstances and did what psychiatry told her to. I wanted better for her but it was her life to live as she chose. I choose to live mine differently. My mother had a good death in 1998, coping well with the transition as she had coped well with other life transitions, making the best of it.

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