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Extra

Seeing the psychiatric hospital now

Leif Norgaard Gregersen 

Just over 20 years ago, after going off my medication and having a severe breakdown, I spent 6 months in a psychiatric hospital, most of it on a closed ward. Being a patient in a hospital can be an unpleasant experience, not because the people there are bad or because the facilities are inadequate, but because often you are sick and it can be very hard to receive the help you need.

I first went to the psychiatric hospital when I was 18 and I walked around feeling like I had received a severe head injury. Delusions told me I owned several billion-dollar companies, and a young woman I was friends with wanted to run away with me. These delusions, fuelled by auditory hallucinations made me think I was in a type of jail/torture chamber. How I came back from that state without trusting my symptoms to any doctors is pure magic.

During my later 6-month stay, every day, every hour, seemed like a painful disappointment. Voices would tell me the doctor was going to visit and release me that day. But I was far from stabilised. My doctor chose to wait for signs of improvement before even seeing me. It made me feel as though he was incompetent and wanted to keep me there forever.

What I will never forget was, as the months wore on, worrying I would never accomplish my dream of returning to London to once again experience the people and places I had fallen in love with during a trip there as a child. I told a psychiatric aide about this and she consoled me, saying I was still a young man and it was a possible dream. Those words brought me through the most difficult time of my life.

Near the 5-month mark of my hospitalisation, my doctor was away and another psychiatrist took his place. I had typed up a list of things I wanted that I showed him and he seemed amazed that I could operate a computer and printer. After that appointment, he transferred me to an open ward and within a few weeks I was released. I was a wreck, but I have to admit that even my so-called 'incompetent doctor' had helped perform a miracle.

I still go to the clinic where my old doctors work. I can't help but feel a little smug. I accomplished my dream of returning to London. I managed to use my typing skills to write three memoirs of my mental illness and nine other books. The greatest irony is that I now teach creative writing to patients in that same hospital. I have discovered the facility is actually a wonderful place full of caring people and miracles of modern science that get people better when few places could offer such care. There is so much stigma surrounding mental illness, and the respite, treatment, professionals and support staff of a psychiatric hospital make it a place to be cherished, not despised.

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