

# The Social Safety Net in Recovery From Psychosis: A Therapist's Story

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I was a teenage runaway in Connecticut. Twenty-six years ago, my father found me smoking pot in my room, and he kicked me out of the house. It was the middle of winter. I was 16 years old. Like many runaways, it wasn't long before I ended up in court. I had been arrested for shoplifting and was to be tried as an adult. My father told the judge that, like my mother, I was emotionally unstable and he intended to seek professional help for me.

Because of this declaration, and the report of a psychologist who had seen me once, I avoided jail. However, I was committed to a psychiatric hospital on the grounds that I was suicidal. Actually, I was too terrified of death to entertain any suicidal thoughts, but I was clinically depressed and somewhat dissociative.

Life was hell in that private hospital. I was heavily medicated, and the staff treated me with indignity. They watched me constantly, even while I was relieving myself and showering. I was permitted only to sit, smoke cigarettes, and play cards with other patients. By the time of my discharge four months later, I had been stripped of my self-esteem. I had lost my confidence; I could not perform even the simplest of tasks.

Nevertheless, one year later, I started college. I fell in with some students who took psychedelics, and I started taking them myself. Once, before going to a Halloween party, I took some LSD, unaware that there

would also be acid in the punch. I got so high that I didn't come down for months. During that time I wasn't eating or sleeping much. I lost considerable weight and became physically exhausted, yet did not feel distressed or anxious. As a matter of fact I felt connected to the universe and felt I had meaning for the first time in my life.

My thought processes became tangential and circular. One thought would trigger another that would trigger other thoughts and then lead back around to the first thought. I also began hearing voices. They told me I was to be visited by people from the planet Mars. The voices told me to go to a field where the Martians would land. In the middle of a cold November night, I went to that field and waited for hours for the spaceship. Finally, another transmission revealed that they weren't coming because it was too dangerous for them.

During further transmissions from Mars, I learned that I had been called to be a "messenger." I was to tell everyone to get on boats and go out into the middle of the ocean in order to be saved. Messages were coming to me from the radio, the television, the telephone, and, of course, the voices. I would stop people who were in their cars or were walking down the street to give them the instructions. I called radio stations to tell them to announce the instructions on the air.

Ultimately my roommate intervened. She phoned my father, told him I was crazy, and said she wanted me out of the apartment. He came immediately and took me to a psychiatric hospital in New York City. Due

to my previous hospitalization and presenting symptoms, I was admitted. I quickly became paranoid and suspicious of everybody in the hospital. (The copy of the admission note I received later showed a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia.)

After a couple of weeks, I realized that I was a voluntary patient and was free to leave. I took a train back to Massachusetts, arriving in the middle of the night, and walked to the home of an ex-boyfriend. He took me to a place called Project Rap, a drop-in hotline center, where staff let me sleep on the couch while they tried to figure out what to do with me.

After two days, they took me to J. B. Thomas Hospital in Peabody. It had a new therapeutic day treatment milieu, including a community group, a therapy group, and occupational therapy. At least the staff there approached me more as a human being. I wasn't seen as crazy, just as a mixed-up kid. My saving grace was that I was 19 years old. The staff helped me find a room near the hospital so I could participate in the program.

At that time, Massachusetts offered lots of social services. I qualified for general relief, Medicaid, and food stamps. The doctors prescribed several medications for me, but I agreed to take only Librium to help me sleep. Eventually, I went from being ecstatic to being mildly depressed, and then into deep depression.

When spring came, I knew I had to get out of my depression. I began walking to the library and spent hours reading science fiction. That sparked my mind, and I started to think again. The staff at J. B. Thomas Hospital sent me to vocational rehabilitation for a battery of tests. I be-

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came eligible for funding to go back to school, and I could get social service benefits as long as I maintained a B average. Tuition and books were also covered.

I am grateful to Massachusetts for all the time and money invested in me. The social service programs supported me for years while I got my life back together.

When I was well enough to function again, the director of Project Rap told me he was looking for an experienced volunteer who had "flipped out on drugs," to work with others who were abusing drugs. He invited me to work at Project Rap. In that summer of 1974, I was also accepted into a new two-year human services degree program at a Massachusetts community college. My rage at how I and others had been treated in previous hospitalizations before I entered J. B. Thomas Hospital fueled me through seven years of education and internship, in order to act on a deep desire to change how people are or were treated in the mental health system.

After completing my associate degree, I attended Franconia College in New Hampshire, taking a double major in psychology and human services administration. At the same time, I inquired about an internship at White Mountain Mental Health Center in Littleton, New Hampshire. They made a deal with me. If I wrote a grant for a drug and alcohol program and got it funded, I would have a job. Meanwhile, setting up the program and writing the grant would be the duties of my internship. The grant was funded, and I had created a job for myself. I was 22 years old.

Four years later, I applied to the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut and was awarded a graduate assistantship in the department of counseling and psychology. During the past 15 years, I have worked at the Sonoma County (Calif.) Mental Health Department, have obtained my license in California as a marriage, family, and child counselor, and now have a private practice. I am dismayed to see the current political effort to dismantle social safety nets, since my recovery was made possible by the social and mental health bene-

fits afforded me. Without that social safety net, I've little idea where I'd be today. If anywhere.

Once back on my feet, I felt a deep need to understand the nonordinary experiences encountered during my drug-induced psychosis (which is what it could be diagnosed as by *DSM-IV*). The writings of transpersonal psychiatrists and psychologists helped me by highlighting the importance of spiritual values and experiences that can occur in nonordinary states of consciousness. My path to meaning involved finding correspondences between the "content" of my experiences and accounts of the spiritual realm.

Today I view my "psychotic episode" positively, as a spiritually transformative experience. I had tapped into a spiritual dimension, often described as a higher power. At the time, I didn't know how to make sense of such an intense experience. Since I had been raised without any religious or spiritual awareness, I used the only frame of reference that seemed logical—that the voices were transmissions from the planet Mars (probably related to my avid reading of science fiction literature from the age of 15 on).

Now, when faced with a client in the throes of a tumultuous episode with spiritual content, I know how to respond. I spend a lot of time listening without judgment to that person's story. I honor the experience and focus on its transformative potential as a vehicle of increased spiritual connection and values. This is the kind of therapist I myself needed 23 years ago.

After hearing about the new diagnostic category of "religious or spiritual problem" (V62.89) in *DSM-IV*, I finally had a professionally sanctioned designation for my experience. While the social service net brought me back to functioning, finding a reference for my experiences brought me back to understanding. And together these two have brought me to a place of meaning. ♦

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