

I am Hugh Massengill. I identify as a psychiatric survivor, Vietnam Veteran, Child of alcoholism and suicide (mother), and a person with PTSD. I lived for ('75-'78) years in State and VA mental hospitals diagnosed a Chronic Paranoid Schizophrenic.

Having been told I was severely mentally ill and would be for the rest of my life, I left the hospital and went to a rescue mission where I pretty much sat for five and a half years. I was, periodically, wildly suicidal. It wasn't an odd intrusive thought, suicide, it was a way out of my unbearable pain. My early family life was remarkably dysfunctional. My finally crumpling under the unbearable emotional pain was labeled insanity, rather than the sanity it really was, PTSD being a very normal reaction to terror.

I am not about sweetness and light. My life was a struggle with pain and isolation. I lived for decades without any sense of belonging to the human race. In the mission I would often spend a week or so without a conversation that lasted longer than four or five words. When I left the Mission, I lived in a small furnished room. Unlike others of my age, I had no house, furniture, car, wife, kids, job, career, family or friends. After years of isolation, I had lost the ability to hold a conversation, or to really know what I was thinking.

I gained at least fifty pounds in a year, living in the VA mental hospital, on powerful anti-psychotic drugs. I did no exercising. I kept my PTSD in control by isolation, overeating, and daydreaming. Both the State and VA mental hospitals did their best to convince me that I was defective, that I had a genetic mental illness, and would need drugs forever. My self-esteem was in the negative range. When I was in a crowd I would try to get to the edges, or leave, as I didn't feel I was anything other than a social reject (schizophrenics are crazed killers, don't you know?). My mother and I, both terribly traumatized in our respective youths, seemed to be having an unspoken contest to see who would suicide first. She age 56, took her life while I was in the VA hospital system.

And yet, here I am, age 61, alive and, most of the time, happy to be alive. I do a lot of volunteering, and am on several Boards and Commissions. I am Eugene's Human Rights Commission, and I am on this current task force looking at the fact that those who go through the mental health system die 25 years before their peers.

If I am getting health, within my limits, it is only because I believed in myself. I woke up one day and realized that I wasn't "mentally ill" in the traditional sense, and that I would have to do all the work myself, if I wanted to survive. Recovery simply wasn't built into the mental health system. It was designed by "Big Nurse" to warehouse the very lost and battered; to avoid paying the true expenses of taking care of those with PTSD, though it wasn't called that at the time. I give the most credit to the Eugene Rescue Mission where I lived for years. It helped because it wasn't connected to the mental health system. No one there forced me to take drugs that dulled my mind, no one there labeled me crazy or defective. I had a cot in a large dorm, simple food, and a very simple job folding newspapers for their recycling program. Let me repeat that: I was aided the most by someone giving me sanctuary from the highly degreed shrinks and their soul-shriveling labels. I lived among equals, men who were equally damaged, distant ghosts unbound by family or relationships.

I fought the VA for years until I got a fairly small pension. Using that, I joined a weight-loss club. Cost me a fortune, but that was the only way to get the 50 pounds off. Very hard to keep it off, but I joined an exercise club, which was expensive, to help me. I went into counseling, as a Vietnam Veteran I was eligible to use their Vet Center system, which was then a peer-led counseling program. I sat across from someone I grew to trust, for years, relearning how to take my inner world and expose it to the light of conversation. I got off those damn psychiatric drugs, and I stayed off them.

I counsel people today not to do what I did, as I just walked away from the drugs, and for months, had a doubling of my emotional problems. The inner emotional storms were...horrible. But I survived. And I suspect that, though those years took a lot out of me, I bought back a lot of those 25 years. And I do not give much credit to the traditional mental health system for much of my "recovery". It fought me for years to stay on Thorazine. It refused me a pension, even though I was diagnosed schizophrenic and locked in

a VA crisis ward. It did nothing to aid my self esteem. I do have a lot of respect for the Vet Center perspective that sees dysfunction as a natural result of trauma.

I don't have degree from Yale or Harvard, but I would match the education I received in Norwich State Hospital, Northampton VA Hospital, the Eugene Mission, and years on the street, with the education of any psychiatrist. I sat in the Mission and the hospitals and, within limits, learned what terror and horror and hopelessness felt like. I watched where it came from, how impossible it is get rid of (broken hearts never heal), and above all, I learned that we are remarkably resilient, we human beings, if we get a chance to relax and relearn love. Recovery isn't about being "cured", as many of us never had a disease in the first place. It is about relearning to love who we really are, and to accept the daily burden of our struggle as just something we share with most other humans.

Hugh Massengill

H.massengill@comcast.net