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Plenary speech on “The Clubhouse Journey to Recovery”

By Mark Glickman

When Robby asked me to make this speech my first impulse, which is unfortunately usually my first impulse, was to say no. But Robby, knowing this, said would I please do it. If at least for old time’s sake, so I said yes.

And that reminds me how all things at the clubhouse flow from relationships.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

My story starts a long time ago.

Thirty two years ago I walked down 47th street for the first time to the door of Fountain House.

By my side was my father, who was about the same age as I am now, 58. My dad died a few years ago of Alzheimer’s. If he hadn’t been there that day, long ago, I would either have never gone, or run out the front door of Fountain House shortly after arriving...

When I entered Fountain House for the first time it looked as strange a world to me, as when Dorothy opened the door after crash landing in her tornado driven house in the movie “The Wizard of Oz”.

I was in a state of shock.

What I thought was going to be a great life had been rudely interrupted at the age of 24.

The print was barely dry on my college diploma and rather than entering the promised land of a job in broadcasting or film, I had just left a mental hospital after a two month stay.

Like the characters in “The Wizard of Oz”, I needed it all. A brain, a heart, courage and a *home* where I could rebuild my life.

Little did I know I was about to get a second chance at life.

In fact I’m convinced that when we breakdown with mental illness the building back up process is like growing up all over again.

In order to do this, it takes, to quote Hillary Clinton, a village, or in this case, a clubhouse.

There are some people who say that the name “clubhouse” is not a good name. It’s not impressive enough, or scientific enough, or sounds too childlike, they say.

I say clubhouse is exactly the right term, because it describes something which is homelike, but much more than a home. On our quest for recovery we need a place where we can be both safe and challenged.

A big problem with the recovery process in mental illness is that we are dealing with a mostly invisible illness. This is the opposite of physical disability.

We do, I think, a much better job of dealing with physical disability, because we confront it head on. We know we have to do the straightforward rebuilding of our bodies, to re-emerge stronger.

For psychiatric recovery, for many years, we were stuck in the how do you feel about this and how do you feel about that, ad nauseum mode. Now we are very good in clubhouses at recovery but total acceptance eludes us because we are doing something so hard to describe. So our goal must be to do a much better job of explaining our process of recovery.

However all this was way above my head over thirty years ago, when I walked down the mean streets of what we used to call Hell’s Kitchen. Then Fountain House stood absolutely alone. No other clubs, no standards, no ICCD. How lucky I was to get to the one place that could give me, what I wanted so much. My life back.

Unfortunately, I didn't see it that way then.

I was convinced my life was over.

How I learned to see the clubhouse as a place of recovery, is what I am here to talk about today.

While preparing this paper I thought I better check out the definition of recovery. Webster's unabridged defines it as restoration or return to health from sickness. Close, but it doesn't quite do the trick for us. We need more than restoration because where we were before, isn't often good enough.

So I'd like to talk about transformation because I didn't go back to who I was. I became a *new person*.

But at first I didn't see Fountain House as anything but a place to come to meet my new clubhouse friends.

Yet no one said shape up or ship out.

That was long before the term, voluntary nature of the clubhouse, was coined.

Once again, I'm getting ahead of myself.

My transformation had already started and I hadn't realized it.

Stage one, for me began the first day I got there.

It was the stage of thinking what am I doing here, where I fit in and are these people much more sick than me, or am I just kidding myself.

It didn't take me long to realize. I was definitely kidding myself.

About three weeks after I got to Fountain House I saw someone I had been in the hospital with, walking off, on the way to a TEP. I couldn't believe this guy was already going out to work! When I was in the hospital, I was sure he was much, much sicker than me!

For me stage one lasted a long time. I tried a number of different units but was too nervous to sit still in any of them.

Stage one, I would describe as, “the sanctuary stage”. I was safe, but I wasn’t going anywhere. We don’t talk about sanctuary. But it’s a very important and invisible aspect of the clubhouse.

In medieval times the church offered sanctuary from state authority. And there is this wonderful scene in the movie, “The Hunchback of Notre Dame, an American film made in 1939. Charles Laughton playing the terribly deformed, twisted, despised, desperately lonely and ultimately heroic Quasimoto, swings out of the cathedral on a rope, to save the beautiful Maureen O’Hara from execution. He sweeps back into the cathedral, with her on the rope and all hell breaks loose, as the crowd cheers ecstatically. Back in the church, Quasimoto holding Maureen O’Hara over his head shouts, sanctuary, sanctuary, over and over!

**I’m not saying it’s anything like that. But it is a big deal, in a very quiet way. Because before you can recover you have to feel you are valued for being a part of something, no matter what you do, or who you are. Just like the embrace of a good family.
That’s sanctuary!**

Stage two took me to the very heart of the clubhouse world. I had brief experiences with a placement, an apartment and very poorly timed vocational training.

The calm of my sanctuary was interrupted when several staff people cornered me and asked me to take a placement. I really didn’t want a placement. I felt it would disrupt the comforting routines I had. But not wanting to hurt their feelings, I said okay.

It was a janitorial placement at Macys, then the world’s largest store. I was very scared. I thought it would involve heavy cleaning equipment. In fact it just involved a simple route of sweeping and emptying baskets. Too bad I hadn’t figured out the analogy with “The Wizard of Oz” yet, because I had already captured, metaphorically speaking, the infamous broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West!

That placement did me a lot of good. But I made a common mistake. I tried to cut short the recovery process. Enough with the placements I said! One I thought was more than sufficient. Time to reach for the golden ring! Time to go to school!

Not a good decision. It was the wrong school, at the wrong time for the wrong reasons.

I only lasted several days before dropping out. I was so disappointed and so embarrassed I dropped out of the club and hid at my parents home for several years. That was stage four, the lost years.

Then came stage 4, incredibly bored and frustrated I returned to the clubhouse and was taken back, no questions asked.

Unfortunately, once back at the club and doing another placement I began to spiral downward again towards severe mental illness. It was like in the Wizard of Oz, that relentless sound could be heard again, like whenever the wicked witch of the west entered the scene...DA du DA du uh....DA du uh du uh..... the sound of getting sick again! The same illness coming back, dropping down like a house on me. Back in the hospital, in a hell-like state, I hit bottom and then bounced back up with a change in medication.

Stage five began when I returned from the hospital to the clubhouse. Little did I know I was about to begin the stage of true transformation.

It started slowly. I wasn't making much progress at all at the club, when a very small windfall came my way, enabling me to take a trip to Europe where seeing the wider world, inspired me to see myself in a new way.

Back at the clubhouse again, I began to experience an insatiable desire to change my life for the better. This desire led me to an overwhelming and inescapable conclusion. *I had to take personal responsibility for using every opportunity I could at the clubhouse.* It was a eureka moment. I began to see the clubhouse as a *gymnasium for function*. Just like going to a health club I couldn't become stronger unless I lifted, so to speak, the weights. The units, I thought, were the place I would become stronger. No where in the world was there a similar

opportunity! I couldn't go into a McDonalds and say "do you mind if I work behind the counter for a while". Or go to the New York Times and say, "do you mind if I do some editing or writing".

Armed with these insights, I never looked back. My path to transformation was clear.

I couldn't wait to get out on more TEP's. Entry level work, no way, these were golden opportunities, my personal ticket to a better life.

I would even go to the club in the evenings and work in the snack bar. I didn't ask for permission, I just went where I felt I was needed. I saw the structure of the club as ideal. Low staff ratio, perfect, I'll just jump in and take up some slack! And no one said "what the hell are you doing, get out from behind the counter!" Why? Because they needed the help too desperately.

Also extremely helpful for me, was that I had my own apartment through the clubhouse right across the street. This made me feel like an intimate part of the clubhouse community. I also had to fix it up and since at that time there was no housing staff, I had to learn how to assert myself to get what I needed to thrive.

A big element of my transformation, as for most members was Transitional Employment. Having a variety of real part time jobs with real bosses both good and bad greatly increased my confidence.

The ultimate transformation came when in stage six I began to find and work on my own full time jobs. I kept my connection with the clubhouse and remained actively involved in evenings and on weekends.

After working a number of my own jobs I had the privilege to eventually work on the staff of Fountain House and was very involved with the enormous growth of the training program and eventually the writing of the standards which paved the way for the ICCD.

In 1992 I moved with my wife Cindy, who I met at Fountain House and who is at this conference today, to California where we are now living. I continue to be a part of this movement through my involvement with the ICCD .

When Robby first mentioned this project, she asked me to think of what worked for my recovery and also what might have not worked so well. All I can say is I guess it would have been nice if it hadn't all taken so long.

The heart of the clubhouse experience will remain the same. It works worldwide because it addresses the humanity we all have. That humanity is found in the search to develop our hearts, our minds and our courage despite our terrible setbacks.

Like in the Wizard of Oz there is no magic person or magic machine behind the curtain that can make this process any easier. When all is said and done, hopefully each member will ultimately see that the power to be transformed was always there within them.

Having said that, maybe we can do much more to clarify how recovery in the clubhouse works.

I think it is so important to recreate the mindset I discovered in my eureka moment as part of clubhouse culture. I deeply believe people in clubhouses should actively, openly talk about the clubhouse like a gym, with opportunities that can facilitate recovery and healing.

Can we not make the eureka moment of clubhouse transformation a more public event? Can we not say we are in the business of helping people recover because we are like a gymnasium for function? Can we not be a place where every opportunity to work is not to be taken for granted but cherished as a means to recovery?

For there is no work in the clubhouse which is to be looked down upon. There are no placements which are not golden opportunities. All work, all interactions, all support given, all enthusiasm displayed, all passion for the common good goes a long way to speeding the recovery process. Every positive thing done in the way of work, relationship and building opportunities is another step in the transformation process.

Every member and every staff must hold the vision of recovery through work, relationship and opportunity. We have to make it clear that we are here for an overwhelmingly powerful purpose, to build a

community where all members are transformed through their immersion in this unique opportunity system. And we must simply say clubhouses are the best places to rebuild our lives!

For me the clubhouse is a place which I believe always bring out the best in all of us. And it will always be for me, the home of my most cherished values. And with that I'll finally just say...*there's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home!*