Dizzy Dan's Hologram: Part III – Psych Ward

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Dan Newth is a Street Roots vendor and periodic writer. This is final of three columns, told through his perception of events surrounding his recent attempted suicide and recovery.

On the way to the psych ward, I had an entourage of a security guard and an intern. They didn't talk to me much, but I did get one chuckle out of the security guard. They wheeled me into the psych ward. A woman was standing in the hall staring at me, and I nodded toward her because my speech was still slurred, and her mouth dropped open. She seemed to recognize me. I might have resembled some ghost from the past.

I was checked in at the desk and given a private room with a wonderful view. The thought crossed my mind that this was going to cost money I didn't have. I suddenly became psychic. I saw bankruptcy court in my future.

The staff in the psych ward worked in teams of nurses, social workers, counselors and orderlies. They ran an efficient, compassionate, and for me, effective unit. But I was yet to discover this.

An orderly came into my room, I was lying on the bed, and he started with the usual series of questions.

"Do you know why you're here? Why did you try to commit suicide? Do you want to harm yourself right now? Are you planning to harm yourself in the future? Do you want to harm anyone else?" Answer these questions correctly and they unlock the bathroom door for you. Answer them wrong and you might end up in restraints.

What I had thought was a sleeping pill (Trazadone) was actually an antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication. I didn't want to hurt myself or anyone else – well, maybe the Koch brothers, but no one else. I was rewarded with access to the toilet. The orderly explained that I was not allowed to leave until the court reporter met with me to determine if I would be committed. There was paperwork, a basic explanation of daily schedules, optional groups, meal menu (the food was great) and an explanation of the camera in the room.

When the orderly left, I slowly sat up in the bed. I felt weak and dizzy. I managed to wobble into the bathroom. I had hoped to take my first shower in three days, but there was no way I would be able to remain standing. I decided to try in the morning. There was a sign inside the bathroom door that read: "Most falls happen when you think you're safe." I didn't feel stable at all, so I guess I was safe. I felt like I would black out making my way back to the bed. I spent the rest of the evening and night in bed.

I woke in the morning to the announcement that breakfast had arrived. I tottered out and picked up a tray, said good morning to a few other residents and ate the delicious breakfast. For a "nut" house, this sure did resemble a bed and breakfast.

A resident invited me to the morning meeting. I said I might go. I didn't have my bearings yet. Everyone seemed polite, as if walking on eggshells; one never knew what might set off the new case. I was unsure of both them and myself. My ability to monitor myself disappeared when I became mentally exhausted, and I seemed to get exhausted every day after a few hours work.

I have yelled at customers, panhandlers, fundraisers and scammers while selling Street Roots; I have been ordered to leave the Street Roots office; I have caused disturbances on TriMet buses and yelled at police officers when they answered the call. I worry that I am in the early stages of dementia, a disease my father and his mother died from. I deal with PTSD, anxiety, depression, chemical dependency and paranoia, and sometimes I think I know it all. One saving grace I have is the ability to laugh at myself.

Back at my private room, I risked taking a shower. It was touch and go; I was so dizzy I almost blacked out. At least my smell and appearance was less offensive. Looking in the mirror my eyes had thick black indentations under them. My body was very toxic. I dressed in the scrubs given to residents and made an appearance at the morning community meeting.

The lead counselor led the meeting that morning. Everyone checked in to some degree. It was obvious some residents were in profound despair. Despite a recent suicide attempt, I was not the worst off here. We were asked to name a favorite dessert. My brain was so slow I couldn't think of one. The woman who had stared at me when I came into the ward mentioned carrot cake. When she said that, I piggybacked on her idea, adding cream cheese frosting. One young woman commented that some of the residents hadn't taken a shower and smelled. An older woman, whose hair looked a little greasy, became defensive, asking if she was being referred to. She left the meeting crying and would continue to cry for two days.

Fifteen minutes after the community meeting ended, a process group began with the same lead counselor. I found out some of the people I had thought were staff were residents dealing with mental process dysfunctions – truly overwhelming. Most folks here exhibited the dichotomy of strength and fragility, and what really resonated with me was our common human spirit. These folks seemed like kin. The psych ward became a very human experience for me. We practiced some mindfulness activities, four-square breathing, meditation and the practice of bringing yourself back to the moment. When the world is starting to crash in on you, sometimes your only defense is the distraction of the now.

They also had other therapies that incorporated creativity and mindfulness: art therapy, music therapy, dance and movement therapy and my favorite, horticulture therapy. Any creative activity combined with mindfulness can be part of the process of recovery (also known as life).

Writing these columns is a big part of my recovery. I have done decades of group therapy and individual counseling. I thought the root of my problems could be cured by thinking it out, and only when my brain is functioning well.

Immersing yourself in a creative process reaches to a deeper part of yourself over time than mere thought can. It can be a way to reach self-actualization, establishing self-esteem, a sense of purpose and a safety net for darker days.

I met with the psychiatrist, who seemed to be more of an administrator, and answered his questions, but I never had the feeling he was listening. He did prescribe an antidepressant for me. I met with the court reporter who, instead of committing me, told me I was free to go. Go where?

I met with a social worker who tried to hook me up with continued mental health care and a place to stay since my wife didn't want me back home. However, she could not find a mental health provider who would accept my insurance. The only housing she could find was a referral to a homeless shelter. It was three nights on a mat on a floor.

My insurance tends to pay mental health services slowly. The mental health providers that accept my insurance tend to be all booked up. The mental health system is no longer SNAFU (situation normal: all fucked up) it is FUBAR (Fucked up beyond all recognition) and yet here I was in a private room of a psych ward with a wonderful view. My next step was to be homeless.