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Pat Capponi

After I got out of the hospital in the 1970s, I lived in a psychiatric boarding home in Parkdale. I edited *The Cuckoo's Nest*, which we did from the house. It was just people in the boarding home, trying to say what it was like there. It was a very dinky, tiny little paper.

That's the first time I came up against something that's been consistent ever since. This little parade of professionals came up to me and said, "You can't call it *The Cuckoo's Nest*. That's very offensive." And I said, "Excuse me, I'm a crazy, and I'm not offended." That same kind of dialogue has been going on ever since. [Pat has always insisted on using the word "crazies," and gets a lot of flak for it.]

Anyway, after I got together with David Reville, we went to the papers with a story about our working group on boarding homes. The *Globe and Mail* picked it up. It was called "Nowhere to Go."

David and I organized a lunch in a committee room at City Hall that was to approximate a lunch in a boarding house. We invited the mayor and critics of the Ministry of Community and Social Services from the legislature to have lunch with a bunch of crazies. We served baloney sandwiches, and little packs of Smarties that were supposed to be people's medications. The "pharmacist" went around from person to person filling everyone's little cup. We passed them all around because of course that's the way it happened in the boarding house: you'd end up getting somebody else's dope. We had a bag of cockroaches. And we decorated the committee room with cobwebs. It was political theatre. We were trying to highlight the conditions in boarding homes.

The mayor came. He toyed with his baloney sandwich. He sort of opened it up, and said, "Oh, shit." To be as realistic as possible, we'd left the sandwiches out overnight, and they were really dried out.

In the early 1980s, I developed this proposal for leadership facilitation, just for the Parkdale area, called "Looks Like Up." I'd gotten into a fight about a personnel thing. I sided with a staff person who the Ministry of Health was trying to fuck over, for being a maverick. They said they'd only fund it if I shut up about this other thing. As soon as they told me the choice, I was on the phone to the assistant deputy minister in charge of mental health, telling him I was going to organize a demonstration.

This staff person had taken substantial risks, including giving me the “daily movement sheets,” which showed who’d been killed—who’d died, I mean. And I would print those. So they really wanted to get her. It seems to me, if you let somebody hang out to dry who’s helped the movement, nobody’s going to be brave enough to do that anymore.

Some years later, I was sitting on the board of the Gerstein Centre. I was on five or six different committees, and it was killing me. Especially the hiring committee. Just the impact of the stupidity of the interviews. You had to choose from the existing stock of service providers. So I got mad. And they said, “Go get some other people, then.” And I said, “How can I go get anybody when I’m sitting in these committee meetings all day?” I was given an office at Gerstein, and I started the first leadership group.

I’d found a lot of people during the hearings on community mental health legislation [the “leash-law” hearings], where they’d come out and told their stories, often for the first time. It was just a matter of playing “connect the dots.” Here were all these people thinking they were all by themselves, and I got them together. We had the opportunity to connect, put stuff on paper, get stuff on video. Suddenly people were seeing each other in a different light, in terms of “What can we do?” rather than, “We’re persecuted.” It was very cool.

Initially, the point was to prepare people to sit on boards and committees so that they could influence mental health policy. But it quickly got into how to survive the manipulation. And then we figured out that we had to get the service providers’ heads straight, or they’d massacre us. They were killing us with their games, so we had to make them realize the games they were playing. That process constantly evolved. The experience of the people participating changed from month to month; the problems, the scope. It went from “How do I make a motion,” at the beginning to very sophisticated strategy stuff at the end—“How do we talk to these people and make them actually listen?”

I had lunch recently with a guy from Hong Fook Mental Health Services, which is for Asian crazies—mostly Vietnamese, Cambodian and Chinese. David Reville had got me on the board of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, and I got this guy on, and then I left. I didn’t expect to abandon him on that board, and I still feel bad about that. He needs another crazy on there. But he’s wonderful.

I worked with the Hong Fook group. I was worried about whether it was culturally appropriate for me to be doing that. I told them I didn’t think it was going to work, but they all voted and decided they wanted me to do it. Their cultures are

very big on respect for authority; respect for the doctor. And there’s a deep, deep shame. They have a lot more to overcome, in a way. But it’s wonderful—the crazies have already separated from Hong Fook. They’ve got their own organization now.

Watching this guy negotiate those mine fields on the Clarke board, and having seen fifteen crazies from around the province write provincial mental health policy—those kinds of things make me feel like the leadership program really succeeded.

I’ve learned so much about the inherent worth of people. And that’s both elevating and a killer. It was so hard, in every group I ever worked with, even though nobody ever whined or said “Poor me”—but just hearing those stories! You feel this great pride, but it’s balanced with all that pain.

I’d like to see our movement develop strong regional connections before we get to the wider ones, because it’s too easy to become distanced from what’s on the ground. I also want to see stronger cross-disability connections. The similarities between us and people labelled physically disabled blow me away. Somebody sitting in a wheelchair who’s trying to take control would run into the same games, the same words. So you really shake people out of the idea that “This happens to me because I’m schizophrenic.” It happens to anybody who’s different. To strengthen those bonds would strengthen all of us. We’re in the middle of a right-wing wave now, and we need to broaden the movement if we’re going to keep fighting.

Above all, I want individual people to recognize enough about their self-worth that all else follows, so that any act of impinging upon someone’s autonomy is met with legal and intellectual force.