

"My inner thoughts on" by Lion Gai Meir

Translated by Rosanna Josman

"Send me your CV"

"But it says that one needs a first degree and I don't have one!"

"Send it anyway!"

"I don't want to send it and then get disappointed....if they don't get back to me "

"Sent it, it is quite a special position"

"Simply send it"

"Okay, okay, I'll send it...."

This happened when I was in the first job where I had felt comfortable. It was a job whereby I hadn't tried to find a way of leaving. My CV is very long. Every half year, I start to grow attached to the job and the people. This level of intimacy has always been quite scary for me so I always tried find a way of leaving after a year (I always had good reasons, which you could call "excuses" – self-development, moving to a different area. It is quite incredible how the mind can delude oneself in order to survive). So that is how every year I would find myself in a different place starting the same old process of getting to know a new place of work.

I felt at home working as a supervisor in sheltered housing with people that had dealt with emotional crisis. This was because of what I had been through. One of the most significant aspects of my life at that time, was my own therapy and the fact that I didn't have to hide my past. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I have been hospitalized because of a mental break down that I experienced several years ago. I myself have been through the rehabilitation process. I remember the look on the managers face as she interviewed me for the role of supervisor whilst asking me the question "I wonder what you are trying to tell me, why are you sharing this....?"

I tried to say that I knew what it was like when your life has been turned upside down and when you feel that the rug has been pulled out from under your feet. I tried to say that I know what is like to feel

that those that around you are your enemies or are out of reach and you can't get there. I know what it is like to feel that all that is left is a self that is like a broken vessel, you want to be mended but you continue to disintegrate. It is a sort of Humpty Dumpty syndrome.

I wanted to say that my experience is what will allow me to connect, to touch, to create human contact, although I'm not sure that I understood at the time how accurate this was.

I think I could not hide myself anymore. My self has had many experiences. Talking about them is "forbidden" in most situations. Probably because of this, I found myself in this interview revealing my dark past with the hope of a brighter future.

This experience of not hiding my-self, being involved in a field that was of interest to me, knowing that I had something to contribute, was in itself healing. I spoke about my story on different occasions and I felt that my self-revelation opened up the opportunity to touch areas of taboo that had previously been out of reach. That year I didn't need to escape. I was about to finish my first year and I hadn't any plans of leaving. How strange and ironic, because that is when I received the call from the Regional Rehabilitation office, the same office that had urged me to send my Curricula Vittai .

I arrived at Mazor Mental Health center situated in Akko for an interview. I sat in front of a panel of professionals. I think that throughout the whole of my recovery process, I had not sat in front of so many professionals in one go. Just before I left the room, one of the heads of departments asked me how much I want the job from one to ten. I answered nine. At that moment I knew I really wanted the job.

Since then, two years have passed. I am now the coordinator, together with the head of social services in the hospital of the first project "knowledge through lived experience". At this stage it is a pilot project operating in two hospitals, Beer Sheva mental health center and Mazor Mental Health Center Akko. It is funded by the Special Projects Department of the National Insurance Agency, Ministry of Health-Rehabilitation section, partnered with Shema charity (mental health users), the Derech HaLev initiative- (mental health consumers organization that accompanies) and the School of Rehabilitation which provides the relevant training.

At Mazor, we are six experts, including myself. We are considered as workers of the hospital and receive a full salary. We work in three departments: the first port of entry, a closed ward which contains the reception and emergency department, and the day unit which concentrates on rehabilitation. The other

department is the family center that offers counseling to family members. It feels like only yesterday that we started the project, however we are close to finishing the two year pilot, although we now have an extension for another year up to February 2018. It is very moving that the project has been extended, however unsettling as there is a lot of uncertainty about its future.

Will the Ministry of Health continue with the “knowledge from Lived Experience” project? Will it continue only in the field of psychiatric rehabilitation in the community? Or maybe this pilot study will show that its position in the therapeutic institutions such as the hospital and in community mental health clinics is an important stepping stone and has a positive influence on the recovery process. Will the consumer movement become empowered so that it constitutes a real force and influence in mental health? Will these institutions continue to employ those with “knowledge from lived experience” and will do everything possible to ensure their continuing integration as equal partners in the workforce, for the good of the consumer and for the good of improving service delivery in accordance with the needs of the consumer? Will there be a continuation of the setting up of alternative therapeutic and rehabilitation services by people with knowledge through experience (alternative to hospitalization) as has been done through the years in many countries? I am left with many questions.

These questions sometimes become quite pertinent through my experience as an expert. This experience is quite daunting. There are days that I have the feeling of doing great work, as being part of the process of changing perceptions of mental health and providing the means to help the individual go through his/her crisis, to grow and lead a fulfilling life of his/her choice. However there are days that I don't always grasp the meaning of the work I do. To be the first, is to cross the line where no one has been before - no knowledge and no experience. Questions such as what should I do? What will work? What should I avoid? These are the questions that are my reality.

One of the main questions that represents this new ground, is the question: “how much do we need to be protected when we are in this line of work?” This is a question that I am confronted with many times from the hospital team. Obviously working in a psychiatric hospital can take an emotional toll. It is not always easy to get up in the morning to face the day in a psychiatric hospital. There is a need for the various professions to build a clear wall that segregates between “us and them”. This is a protective strategy; however it strengthens the stigma between “sick” and “healthy”. Should one employ people in a psychiatric setting who from the very beginning are coping with mental health issues? This question is raised over and over again by the medical team.

From my perspective the answer is very clear. As long as there are those that want to pay the price (similar to the fact that there are always be those that are prepared to pay a high price working with danger, damaging their physical health for the sake of fame and glory, high salary etc) and as long as there are those that want to enter the system through their lived experience and share their personal story, the mental health system needs to do all it can so that knowledge through experience is used to benefit everyone. However, unfortunately no one is immune from suffering a personal crises. People receiving treatment in the hospital are the children of, the parents of and partners of us all. Therefore it is important that we do everything as a society to enable their knowledge to permeate within the system and to contribute to others that are in crises.

I would like to deepen our understanding of the value of knowledge through lived experience by citing the process of nutrition and health behavior. This was a field that until a few years ago was dominated by professionals. During the years, role models have inspired us through their experience that it is possible to change, lose weight and adopt healthier relationship to life. This phenomenon of empowerment is prevalent on the internet where one can find many groups representing different fields which share the principle “knowledge through lived experience”. For example the field of addiction has for many years been organized by those that have been through the rehabilitation process and are employed as buddies.

I have also met those that are with ideas that “do as I do and you will succeed!” however the reality is different, at least in the field of mental health. The principles are important however not ones individual specific recovery. My own individual recovery story is without any meaning in its specific details. The importance are the principles by which I operate. I’ll explain.

During the group process of the experts through experience at Mazor, I tried to understand what were the common denominators in our recovery stories. Very quickly, I understood that we all had someone that believed in us (not necessarily a professional). This person believed in us when we no longer believed in ourselves. It could be a neighbor, family member, educational figure a teacher from middle school with whom one developed a deep relationship seeing the person as special.

One of the main principles that appeared to be dominant was the principle of choice – I have a choice that is in my control even when I am being helped by professionals. Choice over my Life is my responsibility. Another principle to emerge was the understanding that my needs in each moment and the way I act upon them constitutes a process of listening to my true self. Another understanding was

the importance of building a broad support system. This can include psychological therapy, close friends, family, alternative medicine, rehabilitation support system, peers. What takes rehabilitation field out of the accepted context and positions it in the real world is to view it as a universal way of coping with life. A person creates meaning in life without direct reference to his/her limitations.

I would like to go back the question “whether and how much we need to be protected?” Reactions to this issue have varied over time. At the beginning, we felt that the focus on this issue, created a preoccupation with our mental health issues. This was expressed with questions such can I go to work with low mood and not be suspected as being in a process of deterioration by my colleagues on the ward. It is obvious that everyone has off days where they prefer not to get out bed and not because we are clinically depressed. At another stage I felt that “protection” towards us in absurd way may me feel that I need to present myself as “strong”. This expressed itself as trying to keep up a façade and trying to find places that aren’t work related to let off steam, to express frustrations after a difficult day.

During our development there was always one of us in the group that revealed their personal difficulties (either in the group format or individually) these were not always mental health difficulties. It was interesting to discover the possibilities of opening up work related difficulties and even the understanding that it is part of our role to be able to discuss this in the group.

The answer to these extreme situations, are interwoven in the feeling of walking on thin ice. On the one hand, as a group we are carrying out our functions on a daily basis, applying ourselves to the job, on the other hand we are dealing with our own personal issues and our own needs. During this process the question arose as to how much to share with the group? What to share with the group? And whether the group is able are needs to be there for the other in every situation?

In every place of work, the group has great power and strength that demands commitment to the process. Sometimes work that does not require emotional investment with clear boundaries, enables us to work in certain roles. Therefore in this delicate dance, we were able to reveal part of our weaknesses during times of crises, talk about our needs and suitability of this type of work. This enabled us to cope rather than to strengthen the façade “work as usual”. This is very new for me and it is difficult to explain. I have never worked in a place where I have not had to hide part of my life.

I am in psychological therapy 6 years. My therapy is a very significant part of my life and is one of my biggest priorities. I feel that every day I am in the process of change, development and growth. It is such a wonderful feeling. However with this process there is also the question of personal boundaries and

how these may change from day to day. For instance, what may be considered a crisis, may be the pain of personal growth and development. This may only be understood in retrospect. It is not easy to be in therapy and also be in an administrative position with responsibilities. Sometimes I want to return to that place of being a patient, with no worries and no responsibilities. However on second thoughts when I was in that position, I had worries and expectations, even when I wasn't prepared to share them with the treatment team. A period of crisis is not a period of rest and recuperation, like many would like to think. When one works with one's personal story, the difficulties that arise to preserve ones mental health, becomes part of the dialogue. I took a break from work for a week as a form of "home hospitalization". This was what I needed to preserve my mental health, a form of intensive therapy. I was happy that I didn't need to have a cover story, or make up some family reason. This freedom and the acceptance by my colleagues of my personal story, makes it more complete and authentic.