



“It’s no longer a mental hospital”

From patient to poetry teacher at Alberta Hospital

By LEIF GREGERSEN

“HELLO, 911. WHAT IS YOUR EMERGENCY?”
“I’m at the St. Albert Inn and I think someone has poisoned me.”

“We’ll send someone right away.”

I hadn’t been poisoned. I had just spent the night in a hotel room after taking cabs all over town, causing all kinds of “disturbances.” One of them was going to the home of a young woman I went to school with and walking into her house and talking to her family. When her dad found out who I was, he exploded and told me to get off his property. I tried to ask him what wrong I had done him or anyone, but he was livid, so I got back in the cab I had waiting and went back to the hotel.

I had just eaten breakfast, which was served by another young woman I went to school with. Everyone knew everyone in St. Albert. I even knew the front desk clerk from my Air Cadet days, but didn’t talk to him as I sat and waited for the

police to come. They asked around, found out I was a local and ended up asking me to come with them. They took me to the Sturgeon Community Hospital. I was experiencing severe psychosis, and my call to 911 was a desperate cry for help.

At the hospital my mind kind of went in different directions. The police stood staring at the wall, silent as death, and I read out loud from a children’s book for no apparent reason. Then the doctor came and I called him derogatory names and said I went to the young woman’s house on orders from her father, who was a general in the Canadian Armed Forces (he wasn’t). A struggle ensued and I was given a powerful injection and taken back to the police car.

This wasn’t the first time I had been taken to the hospital in this way. But I had the same fears as the first time. Were these cops going to take me out of town and beat me up and leave me in a ditch? Were they going to take me to my multi-million-dollar mansion my delusional thinking told me I



Left: 9B-South, the lockdown ward, “the one place in the world I never wanted to be.” Right: Gregersen teaching in an Alberta Hospital cafeteria, 2022. “I tell my students about journaling, how it can benefit writing and mental health, and then I teach them simple poems.”

owned? Or was I simply going back to the one place in the world I never wanted to be: 9B-South, the lockdown ward of Alberta Hospital?

In my own experience, psychosis has four parts. The first is delusions. These are thoughts, false thoughts that can be persecutory, grandiose or religious. Mine were usually grandiose. The thoughts would take things I saw and heard and reinterpret them. I would mishear something and then play it over again in my head and it would come out as a fake memory that my delusions ran with. Hallucinations are the next part. I didn't experience these often when I was younger, but basically hallucinations are delusions in action. They are false sensory inputs which reinforce your delusions. If you have a delusion that you're a billionaire, you may hear someone say your limousine is waiting outside to take you to your mansion.

The next aspect is paranoia. Every part of psychosis takes small steps towards making your delusions seem like the most logical possible answer to what you're experiencing. If you keep having delusions that people can read your thoughts and that you've travelled far forward in time, you may logically conclude that you're not in a hospital, but under the control of alien invaders. It may be so convincing that you run down the street with your clothes off (of course the aliens can't see you, only your clothing), screaming and shouting that people have to hide and run away. You realistically believe you're saving lives, but in reality you scare most people half to death.

The last aspect of psychosis, and one of the main characteristics of major mood disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, is that you have a general susceptibility to believe bizarre and unusual ideas. In recent times, amazing

medications have been developed that help with these symptoms, making people once unable to align themselves to reality almost fully functional.

I WOKE UP IN 9B-SOUTH ON A COMFORTABLE BED in an isolation room. It was worse than having a hangover, because when I started to recover from the severe side-effects of the tranquilizer I'd been given, I was heavily medicated. This sort of left the feeling that I'd been beaten up with repeated blows from a rubber hammer. And to top it all off my thoughts were going a mile a minute.

When you're in the hospital it's so critical to have a buddy, a friend you can talk to. One of the unfortunate things about Alberta Hospital in Edmonton is that while they may acknowledge this fact, they leave it up to you to make friends. The first time I was there I had no friends; I was, in fact, a stuck-up jerk. I didn't feel that the people in the hospital were worthy of my friendship, and I was under the mistaken idea that I had many friends back at school. In reality only one person outside my family visited me, and I treated him poorly. Once, in a hospital in North Vancouver, BC, I was assigned an employee as a “buddy” or peer support worker. He would show me around the ward, explain the rules, mediate if I got into any disagreements. It was amazing.

During the hospital stay after being taken out of the hotel in St. Albert, I had a buddy who was my age and was a patient. He seemed perfectly normal, but at odd times we would talk about something and he would just sort of “click” out of his normalcy and repeat things I said, and for some reason I felt I had done something wrong. It was so critical to have him as a friend,

though. At one point I was in a terrible state, watching TV and feeling the pain and guilt of being in the hospital, as well as my illness, combined with boredom, and he simply said, "Do you like to draw?" He was drawing on some paper beside me.

"Yeah, I guess so. I'm not really that good."

"Here, try to draw a picture of this." He handed me a drawing of a tiger and a blank piece of paper and a pencil.

I sat there and focused for a while. It was hard, but I pushed myself to do it. Anything was better than sitting there listening to the dialogue going on in my head. About a half hour passed and I was starting to enjoy the activity. Then my new friend said, "You see? Now we're no longer in a mental hospital."

I think I'll carry that advice to my grave. I've now used it so many times when I didn't feel like showering or doing my laundry or sitting down to write things no one would read unless they were perfect.

The time when I first went to the hospital, at the tender age of 18, a woman seemed to mistake me for a man named Vern, who had done her some wrong. She often yelled at me for it and there was no convincing her she was mistaken. Then, a month or two later, I had miraculously improved with medications and was soon going to be released. I ran into the woman on the grounds, and she seemed to have improved as well.

She told me, "Oh, good to see you're feeling better. You're going home now?"

I hate myself sometimes for what I said to her: "Of course I'm going home. There never was anything wrong with me!" There had been a lot wrong.

This condition, known as anosognosia, is common with mental illnesses. Even though I'd gotten into legal trouble and fights and was thinking preposterous things, and under treatment had seen my thoughts return to near normal and had forgotten all of my delusional, grandiose ideas, I didn't understand I was ill. This is what often makes it very hard for people to keep taking their medication, which I of course didn't do when I had a chance to go home.

Every day at work I see staff members I know, or knew, or worked with. They have become like family.

I HAVE AN ILLNESS CALLED SCHIZOAFFECTIVE disorder with anxiety. I have a few odd symptoms of other illnesses but none sufficient for a diagnosis. What my official diagnosis means is that I have a rare combination of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and that some things, like social situations or being in a car and not being the driver, can get me so worked up I want to jump out of the car or run away from the situation. I believe I also have post-traumatic stress disorder, because even now, years after certain traumatic things happened (like being arrested in my high school and taken to a locked psychiatric hospital ward), events keep replaying



Some in Gregersen's writing class "have experienced horrible things, from childhood abuse to treatment-resistant schizophrenia."

themselves through my head. I also have symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder. For example, there is a young woman I dated in high school who I last spoke to over 25 years ago, and though I don't contact her, I often have romantic dreams with her in them and I often replay our final conversations over in my head.

It terrifies me to think that I might be a stalker. I've never gone to the point of getting binoculars and hiding out at someone's workplace or home to take pictures of them. A couple of times, in states of desperate loneliness, I've written to this woman, but not for 20 years. I went to my psychiatrist and told him my fears and he said that if I were a stalker, I wouldn't be coming to him for help with the obsession, which quieted my fears.

The amazing thing about my severe mental health conditions is that all of them are treatable. I take a lot of medications each day. I take a mood stabilizer, an antidepressant, an antipsychotic and a pill for side effects of the other medications, such as tremors in my hands. I need more medications to treat my diabetes, and I get an injection of antipsychotic medication every two weeks. I've wanted to go into therapy, but I've run into a lot of barriers in cost and availability of counsellors. This is sad, because studies have shown that therapy alone is proven to work better than medication alone. This isn't an indication that I need to stop taking my medication and get therapy; I'd like to do both for the ultimate benefit.

During the hospital stay when I learned to draw to focus away my difficulties, I was sent to a more open ward. I made a friend there who was suffering from severe schizophrenia and often talked in delusions. I accepted that he had ideas that weren't based in reality, and we ended up close friends. One time I looked in his eyes and it was as though I could see his troubles—his madness, if you like—and he said, "I am everything at once." Another time a similar thing happened and he said, "That girl doesn't want her husband, she wants me, because I'm the smartest and the strongest." These were odd thoughts, but I understood where he was coming from.

A few years later I ran into this same person... or at least he looked similar. It was in a clinic, and he had gained a fair bit of weight. Understandably; medications make you hungry and tired most of the time, so weight gain is almost inevitable. But



Here, “even the people who’ve done unforgivable murders are given care and understanding... not just whipped and chained.”

he had transformed in another way. He was completely rational and clear-headed. He didn’t remember me, but I confirmed with another person that he was the same young man. At some point medications known as “personality drugs” were developed that can bring people back from the brink.

ON SUNDAY EVENINGS I ALWAYS TRY to go to bed early. Though I don’t like doing it, I will take a pill to help me sleep if I don’t feel tired enough to drift off right away. I wake up at around 5 a.m., as I do each day to take my morning medications, but Mondays I stay up. I often fidget and am nervous. I pick a clean, collared, long-sleeved shirt from my closet and shave, brush my teeth and put on some cologne. I might read or watch YouTube for awhile, then finally 8:20 comes and I walk to the bus.

I take the bus to the LRT, then take the LRT to the very edge of town. Then I board a bus headed for the boonies. The road has changed since I first went down it in the back of a police car. There are no direct routes to the hospital; the bus takes a circuitous route through a residential district, then bounces and bumps down a badly kept road, and finally I’m back at Alberta Hospital. I make my way to the bistro. It used to be a patient-run cafeteria where you could get cheap hamburgers and fries and coffee that was better than what they had on the wards. Now it’s a room full of tables and chairs, and it is my workplace.

I usually start up my laptop, handle any business I need to take care of and then plan for my lesson. I teach creative writing to patients each Monday morning, and I’ve done it for long enough that I don’t need to do much to prepare.

I’ve learned so much from doing this. Even though I haven’t been that 18-year-old jerk from St. Albert for a long time, I still need to humble myself. Some people who come to my class are still very ill. Many of them have experienced horrible things, from childhood sexual abuse to treatment-resistant schizophrenia. One young man who used to come to my class to develop a newsletter has spent five years of his life in here, with no end in sight. I try to give these people my best.

The staff here are incredible. I work with a recreational

therapist and I make her do all the exercises I give the class and she enjoys doing them. Every day at work I see staff members I know, or knew, or worked with, and they are not monsters. They have become like family.

Sometimes I get the chills as I walk past buildings I spent long, deeply unhappy chunks of my life in. But there is so much beauty in this place. Even in Building Three. This is the Helen Hunley Pavilion, where people found “not criminally responsible” for their crimes go. I have had friends who were in there for short periods, and they say they actually prefer it to the stricter rules in the rest of the hospital. I think Building Three is beautiful, because even the worst criminals, even the people who have done unforgivable murders, are given care, understanding and forgiveness, not just whipped and chained.

On a normal day I spend part of the class teaching from a poetry book that’s actually meant for young students but is perfect for the cross-section of people in my classes. I tell them about journaling, how it can benefit writing and mental health, and then I teach them simple poems, how to write haikus, then rhyming poetry. Once, just a few weeks back, I had all the patients work together on a group poem. Each person in the class contributed one or two lines, and I wrote them out, polishing things up a bit. With their permission, I took the poem home and typed it up and submitted it to a literary journal put out in Saskatchewan by the Canadian Mental Health Association, *TRANSITION*. To my great joy, the editor loved it and told me it was exactly the kind of thing they exist for. They’ll send a small payment for the poem when it’s published, and I’m going to buy some very deserving patients donuts or possibly pizza.

When we eat, I’m going to tell them: “You see, when you focus, it’s no longer a mental hospital.”

ONE OTHER THING I DO GIVES ME A SENSE OF PRIDE. I work for the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta and I give talks to groups in the general public about mental illness. I put everything I have into these talks. I give a set presentation, but I like to constantly learn more and relate what I teach to what I’ve been through. One group I’m always sent to is the Edmonton Police recruit class. This is an interesting experience, because I give my talk to 50 uniformed cadets. Once, going into a local hospital, an officer was just leaving and he stopped me.

“Hey—you taught my class!” he said.

“Yeah, that was probably me,” I replied.

“I want to tell you that I’ve had two mental health calls today alone, and what you taught me was totally invaluable.”

These situations mean the most to me. When I know I’ve taken all the pain, all the fear, all the anger from being “cursed” with a mental illness, and turned it into something meaningful and important to others who also suffer. At times like these, my mind has an odd reaction. Even though I’m way too old and my health isn’t up to it, I often now have dreams that I’m a cop. And it actually feels kind of cool. ■

Leif Gregersen writes about living with mental illness and works for the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta in Edmonton.