

The Emergence of a Collective Recovery Consciousness
L'esprit de Liberation, Recobrar la Vida

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The purpose of this article is to describe our experiences of connection with people which produces an expanded quality of consciousness and spirit. In an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect, people feel free to share from their hearts and to imagine new, hitherto undreamed-of possibilities. These experiences of “collective consciousness” often arise in spontaneous moments when people are fully present as members of a group sharing a common vision. The subjective experience of collective consciousness enables people to become more aware of their central part in the community. This heart-to-heart connection and its resulting expansion of consciousness appear to be an essential step towards full community integration.

Underlying the expression of severe emotional distress, which is often labeled “mental illness” there is typically an individual who longs to be part of the greater community consciousness. In this light, the ‘symptoms’ of mental illness are in reality a healthy protest to the evaporation of community consciousness which is particularly notable in the industrialized countries. The mental health consumer/survivor movement seeks to build inclusive, respectful, cooperative communities, facilitating not only individual recovery for people labeled with mental illness, but fostering a collective sense of connection between all people.

The authors recently participated in an unusual moment of *l'esprit de corps*, defined here as a common spirit existing in the members of a group, inspiring enthusiasm and devotion. The moment came halfway through a community recovery forum entitled “Learning Empowerment Together,” held in Arlington, Virginia.

The focus of the daylong forum was on overcoming barriers to community integration and creating an abundant life. People with the lived experience of mental health recovery had connected during the morning through a facilitated discussion where they shared where they were from and identified a personal passion. Many of the participants emphasized the importance of being of service and giving back to community, which they said, helped in their own recovery.

In the afternoon, two local presenters discussed their innovative and pioneering work as peer leaders. One spoke of starting her job by listening to what people wanted her to do. “My peers wrote my job description. They told me what I needed to do”. She spoke of gaining their respect and trust by being hopeful in what they could accomplish individually and collectively, letting nothing stop them. Another presenter, who started a non-profit wellness center, spoke of people who inspired him throughout his life and felt that now was his turn to give back by creating a hopeful, mutually supportive advocacy

corporation. Together, the members of the wellness center are fighting stigma and discrimination and breaking barriers by tapping into existing community resources and creating new relationships and new resources.

Following these presentations, Dan continued speaking on the importance of hope, emphasizing the possibility of complete recovery from what is called “mental illness.” These themes clearly resonated with the group of about 100 mental health consumers and administrators, who were very engaged in asking questions, sharing lessons they had learned, and nodding in agreement with what was being said.

In the next panel, a presenter spoke about his own mental health recovery journey, which included the importance of having inspiring mentors in his life, as well as his own deep inquiry into his personal potential. He spoke from his heart about his own transformation and learning to envision a world very different from what we have today. In a moment of clarity and boldness he proposed that a consumer/survivor should be the Virginia Commissioner (of mental health) for a day; that the consumer/survivor movement is at the point where it is ready, willing and able to take on such a challenge. An audience member spontaneously held up a shoe and said “we could walk in the Commissioner’s shoes.” The Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, who was present but had not yet taken his turn speaking as a panelist, seemed quite receptive to this idea.

Suddenly, a stillness came over the room. It felt very high-energy and centered. At the same time, the violent thunderstorms outside that we could see and hear for much of the afternoon ceased.

Dan commented, “Does anyone feel what I feel?”

Many people nodded in agreement.

“Do you feel that energy?” he asked.

More people nodded in agreement.

One participant later spoke about this moment. She expressed her gratitude that the group had reached that point. She recalled looking up and sensing that the feeling seemed to have come from above. It was a spiritual force.

Lauren experienced the moment as a collective sigh. We stopped and took a deep breath. There was an opening of our hearts, our minds, our vision; a moment to imagine new possibilities embedded in a shared spiritual awakening, a raising of consciousness. There was a spontaneous collective realization that we could take risks beyond what we thought were capable of (in no small part, inspired by the ‘Commissioner for a Day’ idea). We could think and act differently, and we could do so not alone but with other people close by our side. There was an awareness of both our individual and our collective role in

building a more cooperative, respectful, inclusive society. In that moment we experienced a heightened sense of possibility through being aware of the present moment.

In hindsight, Lauren thought it would have been useful to have the group focus a bit longer on what was transpiring. Perhaps one or two people could acknowledge what they were experiencing or perceiving as a means of not only honoring that moment but of deepening our collective awareness of the unfolding process that was occurring. This would have invited a deeper connection to self and to one another. One wonders what would happen if we all stopped in the stillness for a little longer? What might happen next? It is an invitation to deepen our awareness, to take the time to be curious and explore what might have been discovered or revealed.

Lauren also felt an awareness of being part of a shift in society, that is, a sense of our collective mission: to bring about a culture change based on our learned experience and from lessons we continue to learn from one another as we listen to ourselves and others more deeply from our heart.

Shortly after the Arlington forum, Dan shared that he had had a similar event occur in California during a four day 'Finding Our Voice' training that he facilitated with consumer leaders. On the second morning of the training, several of the participants said they felt lost and wondered where we were headed. In response, Dan set the curriculum aside and said he wanted from this point on to create the curriculum together. There was a shift in the room. Everyone felt a cohesiveness begin to emerge. It was the same special, spiritual feeling that emerging in the group that occurred in Arlington. It formed a strong bond, a foundation on which they continued to build over the next 3 days. The connectedness felt strongest when Dan made sure that he felt and believed that their contribution was as important as his. This *esprit de corps* takes the united, active participation of all members of the group. It seems the true expression of "nothing about us without us."

Dan shared that he had spoken to his daughter about team spirit in her soccer games. His daughter said in her soccer game against Virginia (rated as a superior team), her Harvard team was all together. They didn't need to worry. "I could take a risk, as opposed to worrying too much about myself. We played best against the stronger teams. We took more risks, because we had nothing to lose, and we played better than we ever thought possible."

Dan's thought provoking stories brought the words *l'esprit de liberation* (the spirit of liberation) to Lauren. Lauren has found that when she senses a level of cohesion and mutual respect in a group, she is both inspired and more effective in taking risks to show herself or share her thinking. Being in that zone, seems to come when there is a bi-directional flow of positive, or at least open, energy. There are two components that seem necessary as conditions for this leap of faith, this sense of liberation. One component, is the internal mind-set which seems to include two parts; a) having a message one would like to convey, and b) maintaining an openness to listening and learning. The second

component is creating a respectful setting that welcomes new ideas, connections, and spiritual awakening.

The beauty of the bi-directionality is that the group *esprit* inspires the individual *esprit* and the individual *esprit* inspires the group *esprit* in an upwardly flowing spiral. Perhaps what happened in Arlington was that there was this collective flowing of energy in a context of mutual giving and receiving, co-existing with an openness to risk exploring our individual truths, our genuine identity, and our potential. All of these elements came together in that moment and manifested as *l'esprit de liberation* or *l'esprit de corps*.

What would happen if we did more of this sharing and exploring in a safe space? What kind of community could we create? Would bonds of trust and honest communication deepen? How would it inspire power sharing (e.g., between providers and persons served)? What is the relationship between this type of sharing and mental health recovery?

A few days later, Dan recalled another workshop that he had facilitated three years ago in Puerto Rico with mental health providers whom he found to be resistant to the application of recovery in their work. The first question from a participant reflected this skepticism. "How are we expected to incorporate these ideas of self-determination and empowerment into our daily practice?" Dan suggested that the trainers themselves be people in recovery. He also spoke of creating safe and effective environments. A participant asked what he meant by "safe," and Dan responded, "safety is created through the development of respectful, nonjudgmental relationships."

Dan also spoke of *ubuntu*, an African concept of our humanness and interconnectedness. He spoke of the need for people to treat each other with respect in honor of their shared humanity. Unfortunately, the mental health system often forces consumers and staff to treat each other in a dehumanized fashion.

Then a participant commented that Dan had demonstrated this principle in the way he was genuinely interested in knowing people, appreciating them, and connecting with them in a very respectful and sensitive manner. Upon hearing and feeling how important this was to the participant, Dan began to ask himself where he learned the importance of deep human connection, and realized it was at the heart of his recovery.

Dan spoke to them about Dr. Daniel Stern's book *The Present Moment*, in which the author refers to the interconnectedness of two people as "inter-subjective consciousness." A workshop participant, Ms. Diaz, talked about "experiential consciousness" and "collective consciousness" and how two people are able to experience each other's subjective feelings. Dan pointed out that the shared consciousness of two can happen in an entire group, as was starting to occur in their workshop, and that a route to that expansion of consciousness is through deep human connection.

Dan could feel the group as a whole expanding its consciousness. He said they were experiencing a "present moment." Dan recalled to them a time he was doing a talk in

another Latin American country and how they would say a deceased hero's name and then shout in unison: "presente!" By this they meant those who had died were still "presente," living among them in spirit.

Ms. Diaz said that in Puerto Rico they use the same term, *presente*, to mean that God will be present: *haz tu presente*. This reference brought an even deeper level of cohesion among the group. Here was an aspect of recovery that resonated within their cultural framework and therefore, they were more eager to contribute and to connect. A skeptical member was moved to share that the connection was like the chemistry between two people. You could feel the swell of connection. It was a heightened sense of collective consciousness deepened by a clearer understanding of recovery, of *recobrar la vida*.

These observations may help us understand a reason why the recovery rate from 'psychosis' is higher in developing countries than in industrial countries. Anyone who travels in developing countries can easily see the connectedness between people and the cohesive sense of community, as compared to American society which seems to be moving towards greater isolation and less trust. Being in community at a heart-to-heart level seems essential for mental health.

In contrast, living in emotional isolation seems to create a barrier to recovery. It makes it more difficult to stay grounded in our emotions and in our bodies, and our groundedness is critical to distinguishing what is real from what is not. In the absence of community connectedness, we risk getting trapped in our own individual version of reality, which could be labeled a "delusion." This would explain why the Finnish Open Dialogue approach works so well in bringing persons back from delusional states, or "psychosis." The approach focuses on helping the person in emotional distress reestablish dialogue and in so doing to reintegrate into their community. In this manner the person going into distress or a delusional state is sensitively surrounded by a healing network of significant caregivers and supporters who assists the person to reintegrate back into community.

We think the consumer/survivor movement is performing a similar function for our society as a whole. We are the canaries in the cave, who first succumbed to the toxic effects of loneliness and emotional disconnection. Our miraculous recovery is a testament to the power of our hearts' quest for love and our minds' quest for peace, and is serving to heal those not yet labeled as well as ourselves. Our emphasis on the values of self-determination, empowerment, peer support, hope, and respect are values that help build a strong, resilient, hopeful community for everyone.