

Recovery heroes – a profile of Dolly Sen

Dolly Sen, Sarah Morgan and Jerome Carson

The development of the recovery approach must mean a fundamental change in how mental health services see service users, for as the Social Perspectives Network paper rhetorically asks, 'Whose Recovery is it?', it is, of course, the service users' (Social Perspectives Network, 2007). The recent influential Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health report, suggests that professionals need to move from a position of 'being on top, to being on tap' (Shepherd *et al*, 2008). Service users need to take a more central role in the whole recovery debate. One of the ways that this aim can be realised is by looking at 'recovery heroes'. These are individuals whose journey of recovery can inspire both other service users and professionals alike.

Key words: Recovery heroes; Dolly Sen; Psychosis; Recovery; Belief; Mental health



Dolly Sen: a brief biography in her own words

Dolly Sen was born in 1970 in London, the oldest of five children. She is from a mixed heritage. Her father is Indian and her mother is Scots-Irish. Her childhood was not a happy one, with physical, emotional, mental and sexual abuse, racism, poverty, neglect and bullying. Despite this, she excelled academically and had very close bonds with her siblings.

When Dolly was 14, she had her first psychotic episode and had to drop out of school. She was under the care of child psychiatry and social services, but felt that they exacerbated her problems by trying to force her back into the school system

without addressing either the volatile home situation or the psychosis.

Dolly attempted to work but was unable to, lost in a world of psychosis, self-harm and suicide attempts until her 30s. Dolly has been in hospital four times: in 2000, 2001, 2005 and 2006. She is currently diagnosed as suffering with bipolar affective disorder, but has

in the past been diagnosed with schizophrenia and psychotic depression.

Three things changed this darkness into light. These were: her decision to recover and take personal responsibility; her creativity; and a course of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in the Psychological Interventions Clinic for Outpatients with Psychosis (PICuP) at Maudsley Hospital.

This enabled her to dream and make up for three decades of painful sleep. Dolly is now an accomplished and published writer and her works include, *The World is Full of Laughter* (Sen, 2002) and *Am I Still Laughing?* (Sen, 2006), which have both been published by Chipmunka Press.

Dolly's dreams keep coming and keep being lived. She is a writer, director, artist, filmmaker, poet, performer, raconteur, playwright, mental health consultant, musician and public speaker. These include a succession of performance roles around Europe and at places like The Young Vic, Trafalgar Square and The Royal Festival Hall. She has undertaken a poetry tour and won a poetry award from Andrew Motion. She has directed two plays and several films, appeared on TV, and has given presentations at London City Hall and Oxford University. She has appeared over 20 times on TV and radio talking about mental health issues.

This is quite staggering, because in the past she was told that she would never amount to anything and would end up in jail or Broadmoor. She believed this, and was on her way there until she changed her belief into one of

believing she could do anything she wanted to do. To Dolly, this proves that the mind is an amazing thing; it can drive you mad and inspire you in the same breath. And that you can do anything if you believe that you can do it.

Dolly Sen – interviewed by Sarah Morgan

Dolly Sen spent years in a delusional state. She published her book *The World is Full of Laughter* in 2002, to much acclaim. Most recently she performed at Bonkersfest, a festival by and for the mentally ill. In the programme she calls herself a professional mad person. She tells me that since she's been creative professionally she writes, talks and creates artwork around the subject of being ill. 'I just find I'm being paid for being mad', she laughs.

She describes how she first got ill:

'I was listening to the top 40 on the radio, when ... the DJ's voice kind of disappeared and instead this kind of deep gravely male voice began talking to me and saying "You know I'm watching you", and "I know what you want". Those two sentences were the very first sentences of me hearing voices.'

She experienced one long period of psychosis from that point.

'That block of time was from a little bit of my late teenage years and my 20s. I wasn't Dolly Sen, I was this thing taken over by psychosis. Paranoid and depressed and angry and negative ... the only kind of light I had in those days was my writing ... it stopped me going too into myself. But then again, having said that, when you're really ill, you can't write.'

She was very embarrassed about her illness and didn't talk to her family about it. Talking about her family in her first mental health memoir forced her family to talk about it. 'You know after that I felt really supported by my family.'

Once her illness was more public, she had both positive and negative reactions to it. She used to have a neighbour, who reported her to the Department for Social Security (DSS). The neighbour wrote threatening notes and Dolly even had faeces put through her letter box. That was the worst example, but usually reactions are less extreme. She also gets people saying: 'I'm going to make something of my life after reading your story'.

When Dolly first saw a psychiatrist at 14 because the paranoia stopped her going to school, she didn't admit to hearing voices or having hallucinations, so she was just treated for depression and didn't take her medication. She says it was only in her 20s when she 'just wanted help', so she went to her GP and was transferred to the mental health centre. It was only after six weeks of taking antidepressants and seeing a key worker that she admitted to seeing and hearing things and was put on antipsychotics.

She has been hospitalised several times: 'there were a lot of women who were really vulnerable because there were men

that would pester them. I was big and crazy enough to tell them to go away and leave me alone'. As a result, she feels that hospitalisation wasn't good for her recovery: 'Let me put it this way, they said: "Dolly are you hearing voices or do you think that people are coming to get you?" and I said no, even though I believed it. I just wanted to get out as quickly as possible'. She was back in the hospital two weeks later.

Dolly was first in hospital for three months, then six weeks, then a month and finally three weeks. 'I don't plan to go back in, so I'm not going to say [the length of her hospital stays] are going to get better each time.' She says: 'I've had a lot [of antipsychotics], because they weren't working. It was eight years until they found the right one. That's a lot of time to wait, actually.'

She had to fight for non-drug therapies. In her 20s, she asked eight different psychiatrists for cognitive behavioural therapy and was told by all of them that it was only for people with depression and it couldn't help her. They said the same about psychotherapy. It was only when she had a 'good' psychiatrist, that she was put on the waiting list for CBT at the clinic at the Maudsley hospital. She was on the waiting list for a year. She says:

'CBT was the first thing that made me see that my psychotic thinking was actually quite logical and it always followed the same pattern. What CBT does is to see how one thought affects another and affects another until you end up in the middle of paranoia or kind of depression. What the service did was break down this thinking process, but with alternatives.'

She felt that a lot of people outside the mental health service helped her recovery, like her publisher, Jason Pegler: 'He was the first person to really truly believe, not just the fact that I could be a good writer. He believed that I could recover – nobody else had that belief about me, not even me.' He persuaded her to write her life story for Chipmunka Publishing, which concerned her at first, because her life had been so difficult. But once started, she finished the book in six weeks. 'That's how much it needed to get out.' There is a note of laughter in her voice as she says 'it was a cathartic experience'.

At the same time, Dolly became one of the founding members of Creative Routes, which started at the end of 2002, and which organise Bonkersfest. Their original membership of six is now around 500. She feels that the artists she has met have helped her. 'I had social phobia for the longest time and I met a poet who kind of literally forced me onto the stage [laughs] to do some of my poetry reading'. They helped by giving her confidence. For her, the artists who she has met have been the biggest influence on her, as unlike mental health professionals 'they do see my heart and they do see I'm a human being and that I've got good things inside me. They don't see something that's broken, they see someone who can make poetry and music and write. I call them my angels, actually'.

She says with some mental health professionals, 'it's like you're being served at Woolworths. Sometimes what you just need is a hug from these people'. She had a more positive relationship with the woman who gave her CBT. 'That was



Sarah

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Jerome

“Her life was as painful a story as I had ever heard in my years as a clinical psychologist”

probably one of the first times in the system where I felt that this person had hope for me.’ She said that Dolly simply needed strategies to improve her quality of life and get her symptoms under control.

For her, being well is having control of her life and control over her symptoms: ‘wellness is being able to laugh about yourself, because I think you really need that. Just to see that my dreams, they’re not going to stay in my head, they’re going to come true’.

An appraisal of Dolly Sen by Jerome Carson

Shortly after I moved from the Norwood Team to work in the Streatham Service in south London, I began to hear about Dolly Sen. Colleagues would tell me in almost reverential tones how ‘she had written a book’. The opportunity to meet Dolly came when I invited her to give a talk at our local recovery group (Morgan & Carson, 2008). She spoke to a group of our service users and answered a whole range of questions from how she coped with suicidal thoughts, to the importance of having dreams for your life. ‘Have big dreams, take small steps’, she advised. Our service users were hugely inspired by her presence and personal witness.

The story of Dolly’s life and illness as revealed in her two books is a remarkable account of recovery, not just from mental illness, but extreme social adversity. Her story is an example of what the journalist India Knight has referred to as *Misery Literature* (Misery Literature), which I note Waterstones places in a section called, ‘Painful Lives’. Her life was as painful a story as I had ever heard in my years as a clinical psychologist. This woman happened to be a service user in the new community mental health team I was working in, and was our own local recovery hero. One of the training initiatives within our own service was the Retrain Project, developed by Professor Tom Craig and Doctor Mike Slade. This project aimed to train mental health professionals in two inner-city boroughs about recovery over four and a half days. On day one of the training, Premila Trivedi, herself a service user, talked about four recovery heroes. These were Patricia Deegan and Mary Ellen Copeland from the US (readers can see and listen to both women on YouTube) and Rachel Perkins and Peter Chadwick from the UK.

Another service user, Michelle McNary, has made a film about recovery, which features Dolly and three other local service users. In the booklet that accompanies the film (Carson *et al*, 2008), Dolly describes what helped her recover:

‘In the fabric of hell that enclosed me like a straitjacket, there was an infinitesimal tear, a hole

which unravelled my hell, thread by thread, until the constraints became more hole than limitation. Recovery is a letter of hopes, dreams, songs, peace, hurt, chaos, transcendence, night and light. Recovery is to be able to dream and live those dreams. To shine my brightest and live my fullest. To seize the day without the weight of the past. To lose any negativity in my life. To find the Dollyness of Dolly.’ (Sen, 2008, p11)

The four key elements of recovery, according to Andresen *et al* (2003), are having hope, finding meaning in life, developing a sense of identity separate from an illness, and taking personal responsibility for your life. These are complex processes. To my mind, Dolly epitomises all four, summed up in her wonderful phrase, ‘to find the Dollyness of Dolly’. Patricia Deegan also reminds us that the most important goal is ‘to become the unique, awesome, never to be repeated, human being that we are called to be’ (Deegan, 1996). The challenge for all of us is to help our service users value their own uniqueness and help them move towards their own personal dreams and goals.

Dolly Sen is a remarkable woman. To my mind, she is a true recovery hero.

Acknowledgement

Photos of Dolly Sen and Jerome Carson by Jane Fradgley.

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For more information about Dolly Sen, visit her website at www.dollysen.com.

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