

INSPIRATIONS

Mad, Glad and Dangerous to Know

Jo McFarlane

Jo is a Community Education graduate and ‘mad poet’ who tries to change the world a little by showing that it is possible to be ‘strong at the broken places’. Here, she writes about the people and things that have inspired her work as a poet.

When I was invited to write an article for *Concept* on my inspirations I thought “Wow! I’ve finally arrived!” and I had a fantasy of impressing you with a list of iconic influences to show what a politically aware, socially conscious beast I am. Originality and modesty have never been my strong points! Grandiosity and mediocrity – the twin afflictions of my bipolar illness – are closer to the mark. Perhaps that’s why the people who have always impressed me most are the unsung heroes supporting the revolution from behind and being remarkable not through ideology but by quiet example.

So it’s only fitting that I start my inspirations with **two people** whom you’ll never have heard of, yet have had the most profound impact through their ‘little way’ of kindness. The first is my sister, Paula McGee, who has come through the trauma of our childhood with not only her sanity intact, but integrity and dignity. Paula is genuinely bemused when I tell her she’s my hero. And that’s part of the appeal. While I shine my light from a poetic platform she polishes under my feet to enhance the illumination. Carers get little thanks for the work they do but they save the economy billions and more importantly they are a testament to the transformational power of love.

My other personal hero is my community psychiatric nurse, Jenifer Neilson, who was recently awarded Scottish Nurse of the Year. Aside from this prestigious accolade

Jenifer, has been the catalyst to me writing and performing to influence reform in the NHS. Recovery champion Dr Rachel Perkins OBE talks about moving from ‘services to service.’ Jenifer embodies this in her commitment, compassion and extraordinary skill as a nurse.

Mental health has dominated my life as an adult so most of my inspirations relate somehow to recovery, advocacy and humane treatment. I am not alone in admiring the holistic approach of Glasgow-born psychiatrist RD Laing. But it is only recently, after reading Dr Allan Beveridge’s excellent **biography** of Laing, *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man*, that I have become aware of the range of his literary, philosophical and spiritual influences. Reading about this made me proud to belong to the Scots generalist tradition of education that informed his enlightened practice.

A key **event** which has inspired me was the passing of the Scottish Mental Health (Care and Treatment) Act in 2003. This was the first law of its kind internationally to include the right of access to independent advocacy. It may not be the most progressive piece of legislation but it has given us a voice.

Like other social movements, mad people have become increasingly conscious of recording our own history. The **place** which has led the way in developing a narrative that shapes our identity is Ryerson University in Canada. Learning about our history in an international context has inspired me to wonder what legacy will my modest efforts to change the world of mental health leave behind?

Recovery is the buzz word driving current mental health policy and it is broadly defined as ‘living well in the presence or absence of symptoms’, or to quote Nigel Henderson of mental health charity Penumbra: not waiting for the storm to pass but dancing in the rain. The **concept** of recovery has given me hope in the possibility of leading a rich, purposeful life even though I doubt the inevitability of a cure any time soon.

In any case perhaps it is not I who require a cure but the fucked up state of the world that has driven me mad. Like most survivors of abuse I learnt from an early age to internalise the shame and blame that made me want to kill myself. Maya Angelou's beautiful **poem** *And Still I Rise* turns that on its head. In it she asserts the power of her own journey from victim to selfhood (leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise into a daybreak that's wondrously clear). Perhaps I too can escape the slavery of 'illness' which society imposes on me because I have been hurt.

Likewise a **song** which has inspired and brought me comfort is Sinéad O'Connor's *This Is To Mother You*. Feminism teaches us that oppression always intersects with gender. Likewise women hold the key to our own emancipation. When I feel lost this song finds me and brings me home.

An **organisation**, or collective of saints as I like to think of them, which has inspired me and at times saved my life, is the Samaritans. Like many charities it is run entirely by volunteers but rather uniquely they are all anonymous. It takes a lot of courage to support people through their 'darkest nights of the soul' but to do it with no expectation of thanks or public recognition is truly heroic.

You will notice a pattern of stoic endurance emerging in my inspirations, perhaps because it is a quality with which I little identify. One of my favourite **films** is Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) not just because of its evocative black and white cinematography, but because the protagonist – a young man sent to borstal who finds an outlet for his anger in running – does not neatly turn his life around and become integrated into the society which has rejected him. Neat endings abound in literature and film but they rarely correspond to our real lives. This story is notable because the protagonist takes advantage of the sporting opportunity afforded him by the system but remains 'his own man', using the solitary pursuit of running to forge his rage rather than as a get-out-of-prison-quick card. This reminds me of the way community educators use public resources to foster critical consciousness in people rather than as a means of co-opting them. In a context of

diminishing funds it is more important than ever to remember that those of us who work for change are agitators rather than agents of the state.

So there you have it: Ten inspirations that have shaped my view of the world and which inform my work as an activist poet. Most of them relate to my experience of madness because, as any Community Education graduate worth their salt knows, the personal is always political!