

Community Engagement

Two poems by Jo McFarlane

All my grassroots experience of community engagement has been as an activist – someone from within the community being ‘done to’, or ‘done for’ in some cases. My particular area of involvement is mental health activism. Having been a psychiatric patient for 27 years, I know only too well what it is like to be on the receiving end of power, and the culture of dependence that can come from that – where any scraps from the rich man’s table are welcome. So co-option, the process by which we become subsumed into the agenda of those in power in order to legitimate their policies and decisions, is a very real danger. As community workers supporting people to effect change, it is something you have to be particularly aware of, and to make explicit when you see it happening. Knowledge is power and to acquire that knowledge we have to retrace our steps and identify what went wrong and, most importantly, what we can learn from it. So that is what these poems are about.

A Lesson in the Making

They squeezed us into spaces *they’d* created.
They dictated all the terms of our engagement
and the means by which we’d happily collude.

We understood what they were doing
but we felt compelled to keep pursuing
their approval in the face of overwhelming lies.

They sized us up as easy to manipulate;
congratulated us on our involvement,
saturated us with promise after promise

that our views would make a difference

to the outcome. Sometimes they appeased us
when it wasn't going our way;

teased us with small compromises,
tweaked around the edges of our call for change
But always *they* arranged the agenda

so we couldn't help but meekly be manoeuvred
into spaces *they'd* created, choices *they'd* dictated.
"Co-production", they called it; but we were co-opted

to legitimate their policies,
accept their lame apologies
and rubber stamp their will

Still, when it all went belly-up for us,
they tried to rectify our righteous anger with Reviews
But they weren't really interested in our views,

only in the cost-effective consequences
of their bold ring-fences, only in the savings they'd accrue.
True to their word, which to us seemed quite absurd,

the landscape changed forever –
but not for the better.
Services *we* thought were vital

now were surplus to requirement
in the best laid schemes of managers and men.
If we were to do it all again,

what would we do differently to make our voices heard

and bring about the changes *we* demand to see?
We'd reconfigure round the table – not *their* table

But a space, a time and an agenda of *our* choosing
The cost of losing one more victory must be to get on side
with our community and fight with all we're able.

Consultation and Involvement

We asked them to contribute
and they cared enough
to tell us what they thought.

They sought the simplest things:
a place to be that held their dignity,
support of self and family,
fulfilling things to do,
respect and being listened to.

We took their big ideas on board,
took small steps forward to achieve
what seemed impossible to us.
Budget cuts, practical logistics,
cultural resistance,
all the barriers we faced along the way.

And then one day,
a revolution happened in our thinking:
let's take the consultation further,
ask the people how they think we can
achieve the changes that they want to see.

The answer came like manna from the gods.

They said: “Involve us, Don’t just listen.

Let us be the architects, the builders
and the artists of our vision.

Give us tools, resources,
and the hope to realise our ambition.

Don’t just talk to us,
walk with us the road that leads to change”

We found that soon
the labels *service users* and *providers*
were redundant.

We were partners now,
working in pursuit of common goals.