

# Patienthood to Personhood

## Jacqueline Peckoff

Jacqueline Peckoff is a member of Fountain House in New York.

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Before coming to Fountain House, I had a 21-year work history, with only a few jobs. Each lasted between 6 and 8 years. I always enjoyed working because it gave so much structure and meaning to each day. Weekends, holidays, and vacations were special, and I enjoyed my leisure time. My last job before coming to Fountain House was a supervisor of what was called the order department. This was at a large company that manufactured jeans. This job entailed processing orders that were sent in by retail stores when they needed more jeans. I would figure out how many of each size were needed by looking at previous orders that we had filled for them. This would tell us how many jeans they had sold. I would use a comptometer. For people who were born in the olden days, like myself, that was a sort of computer that was used in those days. I also supervised six other people, people who did similar work.

During this job, I became ill several times and needed to be hospitalized due to severe depression. I was able to return to work as soon as I was discharged from the hospital and it was good to know that they still needed and wanted me. I was very grateful, but often wondered why they were so understanding. I found out when I came to Fountain House. We had a transitional employment slot at this very company.

After working at this company for about four years, I had to be hospitalized once again. This time things were different: I had lost all my confidence and developed a terrible fear of working. For about a year, I was going in and out of hospital, and then there were no more holidays, weekends, and vacations; every day was the same and no longer had any special meaning. At the end of the year, I was sent to a state hospital, where I was told that not only would I never work again, but that I would spend the rest of my life in a hospital.

Well, that got me real mad, and that was because I knew that in spite of all the shock treatment and heavy medication I had taken, I still had a life to live and needed out. In a relatively short time, I got better. But to be discharged, you needed a place to live, which I already had, and a discharge plan. I was sick and tired of making elephants out of clay. They said I had a real talent, but little did they know I went to camp when I was 10 years old and that was the only thing I could make. I had already made enough trivets so that not only I, but both my sisters, could each serve ten hot dishes at a time and never have to worry about burning the table. I was sick of groups, and no I'm not against therapy. I was just tired of having it every day. So what was I going to do?

As I pondered this, all of a sudden, I remembered that during one of my hospitalizations, I had met a woman that I shall never forget; who said she was a member at a place called Fountain House. I couldn't remember anything that she told me, except

you could return to work if you went there. So I told the doctor that I wanted to go to Fountain House. This was arranged, and I went to orientation while I was still in the hospital. When I first came to Fountain House, I was extremely quiet and withdrawn (this is where I usually get a laugh) and sat in a corner in the Clerical Unit for about 4 months.

During this time, I was always looking around and noticed members and staff working on the switchboard, the newspaper, research projects, and attendance. Members and staff would try to encourage me to get involved, and, though I did not at the time, something was going on because I came in mostly every day even though it took me an hour and a half to get there. One day, one of the staff members came over to me and asked me if I would like to go to a tour guide meeting. That was the last thing I wanted to do. But because she had helped me to get financial assistance when I needed it, I said okay. That was almost 14 years ago, and I'm still a tour guide.

Now you know how long I've been a member, but don't worry, I'm not going to take you through all 14 years. I've done many different things at Fountain House during the years: operated the switchboard, worked with my colleagues during their training, worked the copy machine. I could probably go on all day telling you all the things I've done, but I won't. I also worked on several transitional employment (TE's) and did return to independent employment, but became ill again. At one time, I also went to typing school through VR services.

When I was on TE, most of the time I also came to Fountain House for the other half of the day. When I was not working full-time or going to school, I would come in as I still do today, for 6 hours or longer. Now I spend so much time at the clubhouse because I am doing real work, and know that I am expected and needed. To be needed, to me, means more to me than anything else in my life, and it also means that I am living a meaningful life. I share many responsibilities with others, and when I don't come in, it's nice to know I'm missed.

Until 2 years ago, I still had a strong need to be a patient, and did many things so that I could be hospitalized. I realize now that this was part of my illness, but I still have a hard time talking about it. I took overdoses and faked heart attacks and appendicitis; I would say I was hearing voices, although I no longer was, just so I could get the attention I thought I needed. All this did was confuse me because I was so convincing that the doctors believed me, and I myself no longer knew what was real and what wasn't. One evening when I was once more hospitalized and was lying in bed and feeling extremely depressed, I decided that I had to change my ways. The very next day, I told my doctor what I had been doing all these years. That was the beginning of my emergence from patienthood to personhood.

When I returned to Fountain House, I felt awful about what I had done, but was unable to share this with staff members I was close to. During the last year, I have been able to tell my family (actually it was 2 weeks ago that I told them) and some friends.

And today, I choose to tell all of you because I know that you'll understand and I can finally let go.

I am now doing more work at Fountain House than I have ever done before. I am a co-manager of a switchboard placement agency at the Village Voice, which is a really fun place to work. I still work with colleagues, and for the last year have been on the faculty of the National Clubhouse Expansion Program. I have done many consultations at different clubhouses all around the country. For the last two months, I have worked very hard at helping to get the agenda together for the seminar. I also made phone calls to the clubhouses and worked on the computer so that the presenters would know which workshop they were part of. I won't tell you how I pressed the wrong button one day and wiped out the whole program. Now you know why I had to make phone calls and you never got your printouts in advance.

At the very moment I wrote this, a very special friend of mine was in the hospital. She was discharged, so she is home now, but this was the fifth time in a year. I felt that part of the reason is that she has been going to day treatment programs for a long time, where they focus on your illness and not what you can do. They had all kinds of groups to keep you busy, but no real work so that you can feel needed.

This is the first time in six years that I have been out of the hospital for more than a year. I am now getting a great deal of positive attention from other people. I'm the happiest I have ever been in my whole life, and I sincerely believe it's because of the work-ordered day and the opportunities offered to me at the clubhouse.

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