



Einar Belck-Olsen, Fontenehuset i Oslo

"Dear God, if I could ask you for just ONE thing; I ask that you make me into a wise man."

I am lying in bed in my childhood bedroom. At Sunday School I had learned about King Salomon, the king from ancient times who was so wise and learned that even the Queen of Saba came to ask his advice. I was very fascinated by this and thought that *that* is the goal in life; to become a wise man!

I was a nerdy child. I was passionately obsessed with computers, video games, comic books and superheroes, dinosaurs and the reformation. I loved discussing philosophy with my father's theology colleagues and I played in the school band. You could call me a multidisciplinary child with a broad knowledge base.

And I shared gladly from my trove of fun facts with enthusiasm and immersion to anyone who would listen. I could give lectures about Star Wars for hours. About Luke, Han and Leia and their struggle against the Galactic Empire. And Yoda, and the Force, and, and, and, X-Wings and Lightsabers! But often I would be talking to no one. The other children couldn't always keep up with my tempo and after 45 minutes they had had their fill of science fiction trivia.

The grownups where also constantly fed up with me and I learned at a very early age to recognize body language and signals that meant I had spent my quota. Or facial expressions that said: "Uch, what an annoying brat!"

At school I got the opportunity to learn even more about all the things that fascinated me, but I also learned that I had ADHD, which meant that I was stupid, lazy, bad and ugly. I was a problem child, and when I was myself no one wanted to play with me. So, I gradually learned to restrict myself, to keep *me* on the inside and fit in with the others.

And as I grew up and got bigger, a darkness started to grow inside me as well. As I reached puberty this depression grew into something bigger, darker and stronger and I started to use drugs and self-harm.

I took the step into adulthood by attempting suicide. The darkness had grown so large that it was all I could see, and my life was put on hold. While my peers continued with their lives, finished their educations, got jobs, got married and had kids, I was left standing in my darkness. The Norwegian Welfare State did what it could to help me, but after years of work training, work placements and courses in how to write a resume I just got confirmations on what I had learned in school; I was stupid, lazy, bad and ugly. After a while I lost faith.

My general practitioner, who is a very charming and capable doctor, said that he could apply for me to receive Young Disability support. Since I was under 25 years of age, I was qualified for that, but that wasn't what I wanted. I too wanted to be a contributing member of society; I wanted a job like everyone else.

My appointed social worker recommended I should try going to Fontenehuset, but it sounded like a dreadful place to me. I imagined a day center where people sat around tables drinking sour coffee, played cards and discussed medication and who among them had it worst.

But I was a dutiful young man and said I would check it out, and what I found was something entirely different from what I expected. On my first day at the clubhouse I participated in a work meeting at the facility management unit. One of the tasks they where discussing at the meeting was to buy a grate for the entrance doorway so that people could kick off the snow from their shoes before coming into the clubhouse.

They had looked in several department stores without finding anything that fit the doorway. I raised my hand and asked if they had tried having one custom made for the house? Because I knew there were workshops that did that kind of work. The staff member leading the work meeting then asked me if I could take care of ordering a custom-made grate for the house, and so I did.

This was a crucial moment for my time at the clubhouse. In many ways it can all be led back to that moment. I was taken aback by the enormous trust that was placed in me as a stranger by simply handing me the full responsibility of the task. No one at that meeting really knew me at the time, and knew nothing about my skills or qualifications, but they trusted me. This made me feel welcome and included in the clubhouse community from day one. And I felt that what I had to contribute to the house was valued and appreciated. What a first day!

From that day I launched myself at the work ordered day. I soon spent 40 hour weeks at the clubhouse, participated in building up the *Employment and education unit*, made a book about the clubhouse, started a wellness program with physical exercise, created a structure for managing our TEs and traveled with our clubhouse to the European Seminar in Austria.

I finally found a place where I could be me. A workplace where I could rediscover myself, grow, develop and focus on the things I was good at.

After a couple of years at the clubhouse I had the courage to apply for a job again so I asked one of the staff members if he could write me a recommendation. When he handed me the paper with his recommendation, I read through what he had written. He wrote nice things such as that I was dutiful, eager, did my work well; which I thought was nice of him to say, but then I saw that he had written that I was "a very systematic and structured person". THAT could not possibly be true! I've got ADHD, and if there is anything, I've learned in life it is that I'm a total mess when it comes to order and structure.

"You can't write things that are untrue in the recommendation!" I told him, but he said he hadn't written anything untrue in his recommendation. And he sat me down and explained to me why he had written those things about me, and he mentioned specific examples from the clubhouse to prove his point. Little by little I was convinced by what he said, and I started to have faith in myself again.

Some years later I decided that it was time to get an education and I enrolled at the university. I had a lot of doubts if I would even be able to finish or if this would be yet another failure in my life, but it turned out university went very well. Just before the end of my first year I received an e-mail telling me I had been nominated for the *Student of the Year*-award. Because someone had said I had done a lot of good for my co-students and performed well in my studies.

I was very touched that someone thought I deserved an award and was very thankful to be nominated. What a nice sentiment I thought, "But there are so many more deserving of this award than me", and I left it at that. It was therefore a huge shock and an unreal experience to get up on stage in front of 5000 first year students the next fall and receive the award. All I could think was "Someone, somewhere has made a huge mistake!"

It's been a few years since that day. I've finished my education and am now working full time as School environment coordinator at a high school in my home district of Østfold. I'm engaged to be married next year, and life is good. I no longer participate in the work ordered day at the clubhouse, and I rarely have the opportunity to visit, as I am busy with work during the opening hours. But I carry the clubhouse with me every day. The lessons I learned at the clubhouse have been immensely useful for me in navigating university and my professional career. And the values of the clubhouse model color and influence my work with the youth at my school.

As I recount the highlights of my life it might seem my journey has been a relatively easy one, but I can assure you I've had my share of dark moments. For every sunny hilltop, there has been a valley of shadow, for every climb there has been a descent. The shadow of depression still lives inside me and has become a faithful companion on my journey through life. But it does no longer choose the trail we follow. I could spend my life resting on the memories of pain and stay in the comfort of my sorrow, but I have nothing to gain by that. Regret and bitterness will gain me nothing.

That is why I choose to use my experiences to help others, and offer my council, understanding and support to those who want it. Doing this does by no means take away the hurt and pain I experienced, but it makes it easier to carry; knowing that my experiences of pain can bring comfort and consolation to others.

This is in many ways the essence of the clubhouse. We come together because of a shared history of pain, but we do not let that define who we are, or what we can do. And with these shared experiences we support, comfort and help each other to keep heading forward and let the past be the past.

Standing here today in front of this huge international crowd I am reminded of my childhood prayer. I am no king Solomon, but since you've come all this way I'll give you a word of advice: don't let your pain define who you are, acknowledge it, feel it, then let it go and take back your life.

I am honored and thankful that you would listen to my story and it is my pleasure to welcome you all to Norway and the 20th International Clubhouse Conference.