

## Poetry and Self Recovery

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** "What do you do for a living?" Traveling from Brisbane airport to the city in late 2005, my response that I was a psychiatrist led to a conversation that ultimately resulted in the taxi driver and author of this article presenting two sessions at the Creating Futures conference. What Trevor Clark described during that short trip was how he had found his own way on a much longer journey from illness to recovery. While this was largely without formal direction or consumer group support, the approaches he developed through his self-directed recovery resonate with principles of common sense and best practice, drawing on the twin strengths of supportive relationships and creativity. This is Trevor's story.

Ernest Hunter

## Poetry and self recovery

Trevor Clark

**Objective:** *The author, a mental health consumer, describes key elements of 'self-directed recovery' central to which was the writing of poetry. Examples of poetry through the recovery journey are presented and provide a means to identify other resources to this end.*

**Conclusions:** *The periodic reflection of poetry as a recovery tool, coupled with the support of family and peers and other recovery realizations such as self talk, can make the recuperation from mental illness less debilitating and something to embrace.*

**Key words:** *mental health, poetry, recovery, schizophrenia.*

Before I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, I would invariably find myself writing poetry that was somewhat dark and a little obscure. I did not think anything was amiss with my thoughts and continued with my life. It was not until 1996, on a visit to my parents' home, that my father realized that there was something wrong with me and it was from there that my journey with this disease started.

After several admissions to hospital between 1996 and 2000 my condition was recognized and so began the journey of recovery. In 2000, the year of my last admission, I decided that I either had to come to grips with this mental illness or continue to suffer. I chose the former and since then have adjusted well enough to continue working at a variety of jobs. However, it wasn't until late 2004 that I knew what I *needed* to do, so I went about fulfilling a life-long dream of becoming a writer.

From the time I was in my late teens I have enjoyed writing poetry. In what follows I have attempted to track my recovery from mental illness and have included poems from the pre-admission stage, and during the recovery process. I will illustrate and discuss the meaning of each poem as I see it (the reader may find something else and that is fine) and will conclude by summarizing how this links with other elements of my recovery.

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### REALIZING KNOWING

Always trying to explore the concept  
that is blinking around the edges of your brain.

It comes and goes with fighting velocity;  
edging round corners and peering places  
with its opportune eyes.

Holding onto the key that clicks  
the learning process on,  
you fight its force and overcome.  
The barriers of realism lift into one whilst  
you launch your thumb in victory of  
the fight you succumbed to periodically.

Entering the cavern of understanding,  
you explore its might and instantly realize that  
all your troubles are gone when  
the rudiments of a character are as one.

This poem was written in 1994/95. During this period I was smoking marijuana intermittently during the day and reflecting. I guess I was trying to self-medicate. I would often find myself lost in conversations, seeing double meanings and getting fixed on one word at a time. This impacted on my social interactions and I withdrew inwards.

The poem describes the process of learning, which I was interested in albeit in a very rudimentary way. I had finished some studies the year before in education but was struggling (due to poor attendance – I slept a lot in 1993!). This was my way of holding on.

I would have moments of clarity and this poem describes one of those moments. I re-read this piece from time to time and can see exactly what I was thinking at the time. Even though I did not know I had a mental disorder, I believe the last line describes my determination to be accepted as a ‘normal’ person, however futile that was in the circumstances. It was this aspect of the poem that I would later draw strength from during the recovery process.

### ANY LIES THIS?!

I used to regard myself as a man;  
then I was a boy.  
I sometimes like to be alone,  
but that was dreaming.  
I walked and thought I understood;  
that was a cloudy time,  
full of cloudless ties,  
large land mines and  
corporate back door lies.  
I wonder now whether it was then or  
now that I comprehend;  
why we never try to mend  
the actions of then and how  
we still persist pretending we are one.  
We are all components of the machine;  
only some get spat out,  
left to flounder about,  
in a sea of paranoia and doubt.

The title was not intended to sound like ‘analyze this’, but looking at it, I think my subconscious was playing tricks on me once again. However, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate recovery. After my last admission, I decided to go forward.

I have re-read this and my other poems numerous times and this one in particular has shown me the progress of my illness. I can look at this piece now and see where I was at that time, where I had been before that and, in the end, I can see the poem for what it was – and where I was. Obviously, I was still paranoid but, on reflection, this became one of those poems I could and still openly have a chuckle about.

With my illness came anger and this poem describes the frustration typical of mental illness. I am a pacifist and I used poems as an anger management tool. I experienced a myriad of emotions when first diagnosed with this condition. Initially disbelief and denial were the primary emotions. Later in the recovery process I began to form an understanding of myself. When moments of recognition of where I had been came through to my thoughts, I found that poetry was a non-invasive way of expressing my emotions. I believe that it was from moments such as these (that is, by putting pen to paper and transferring emotions and thoughts from mind to page), that I began to recover.

From the period before my first admission in 1996 to the recovery time of 2000 to 2005, I employed some strategies to help with recovery. Obviously, I wouldn’t re-read my poetry on a daily basis, so I would like to explain what I believe were the cornerstones of my healing.

First and foremost is the great support I received from my immediate family and friends. The understanding and love that meaningful people can provide is critical, and I relied especially on my father Bill for support. It was my father who spent much time with me and introduced me to a number of the methods I used to recover.

To overcome an obstacle, you must first notice that it is there. By this I mean accepting, owning and dealing with mental illness. In my case this led to other strategies, but I think that this point is the start for recovery and without it I would still be a regular visitor to mental health wards.

The aim for me was to recover and rejoin the workforce. My self confidence had been eroded by the onset of mental illness and I had to reconstruct it. One way I employed was to set a high bar for myself, but do one jump at a time. By this I mean that while there is nothing wrong with having big aspirations, to achieve your goal it is easier to break it down into manageable parts.

So I set myself up to succeed, not to fail. A success was measured – for example – by simply walking through town and not getting paranoid or developing other signs of psychosis. Each time situations such as these occurred, I would address the ‘voices’ and quickly put them in their place. I would use my inner voice to say to myself such things as “they are not real, ignore them” and, by doing this each time, I found that these

negative aspects began to happen less frequently. It was better for me to confront and address these thoughts, and I believe that if let to rule, the hallucinations would have become worse with time.

The steps for self talk assume that I can recognize the 'voices' when they occur. Phrases such as "this is not real", "the voices are wrong", "you know you are hallucinating" and "hold on, that is not real" were the first steps in recognition of the 'voices'. By continuing the inner conversation to a positive conclusion with phrases such as "you can get on top of them" (the voices, that is), "you have recognized another one" and "keep on their back", I am openly acknowledging

the achievement of addressing the 'voice' and putting it in its place. So there is certainly no harm in challenging aberrant thoughts as they occur and to question and address them was an invaluable tool for me and continues to be.

I would like to end on a positive note and share a recent poem which is written about a woman and the time we shared. I find this poem an interesting contrast to the other two presented. It has more structure and the overriding tone of the poem is exhilarating. I think it is a good example of my journey and progress with schizoaffective disorder and is one of my favorites.

### SUGARY SWEET

sweet, sweet  
when exactly did we meet?  
sittin here thinking of your .....  
sweet sweet

sweet, sweet  
the world at your feet  
imagining your neat (hmmnn)  
sweet sweet

greet, greet  
all I seem to do with the fleet  
seeing you and thinking .....  
sweet, sweet

meet, greet  
words become complete  
sittin there hearing your  
sweet sweet

sweet, sweet  
your exquisite shape I greet  
if only for 10 minutes .....  
sweet sweet

sweet, sweet  
sharing your seat  
wondering what you think .....  
sweet sweet

sweet, sweet  
nothin's concrete  
a little discreet  
sweet sweet

sweet, sweet  
kiss me to sleep  
passing remarks to keep  
sweet sweet