**Creating change for our communities.**

**Graham Morgan**

**Moray Wellbeing HUB**

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Hello everyone.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today. As Heidi has said my name is Graham Morgan.

I currently work for the Mental Welfare Commission in Edinburgh, which is quite a formal organisation based in Edinburgh that exists to promote and uphold the rights of people like you and me, I love my job there and spend much of my time wandering around Scotland meeting people such as yourselves, finding out your opinions on a whole range of different things. However up until 3 years ago I was the manager of HUG (action for mental health) your close neighbour, in the Highlands. I left Nairn three years ago to go and live with my love and her family in Cardross near Helensburgh, it has been a wonderful three years but I miss so many people who I used to work with when I lived in Highland, so it is lovely to be back and to see Heidi again and to meet all of you.

I remember when I worked for HUG some of our members were kind enough to say that they loved it when I was explaining what we did and said that between us we were trying to change the world for the better for people with a mental illness. They said the idea of changing the world was so optimistic and ambitious and idealistic; a lovely thing to look forward to.

And yet I think I need to qualify that.

When I was a young man 35 years ago and indignant about the way people like me and my friends were treated in the local asylum I wanted to change the world so much, I didn’t want to feel patronised and ignored, I didn’t want to be told that I was too young to feel despair, I didn’t want the friend I had made there who apart from having mental health problems also had learning disabilities and addictions issues to have to sleep on the bare floor boards of a night shelter after he was discharged.

I didn’t want so many things to happen to the people I knew, But if someone had asked me what I wanted to change I am not sure what I would have said though. I would probably have talked about forced treatment and about medication and being told what to do. But mainly what I would have talked about would have been my distrust of services and that in itself is not really a solution.

Out of that distrust of services all those years ago people my age at the time, which was about 20, got together and we talked with each other and we shared our stories and dreams and ideals and with the encouragement of a community development worker we came up with the idea of a drop in centre or crisis centre for young people run by young people. We were going to have crisis beds in it that people could come in and crash out in and women only days and all sorts of things to do. I was, to start with, the director of the organisation we set up. We didn’t get the crisis centre and we did not get lifts for disabled access but we did get one of the first ever comic relief grants and ended up creating a drop in centre run by young people with mental health problems for young people with mental health problems.

And I need to remind myself of things like that: we really can make tangible change for the better.

Now 35 years later I am weary about change and the certainty some people have about solutions to the things we go through. I am as sceptical about mindfulness as I am about medication and as worried about some of the ideals of recovery as I am about some of the ways we are treated in hospital. As cynical about some aspects of peer support as I am of the power imbalances in services.

And I really doubt my vision and ability to know what we need to do to create change for our communities – I know that if someone handed over the mental health budget for Scotland to me that I would create the most unholy chaos amongst the services that are there to support us if I were managing them. That despite being fed up with many of the services that we get and don’t get that I would be no better at running them than the people I currently grumble about who are actually running and providing them.

And I think I am glad of that realisation. We have been looking for solutions to distress ever since we were able to communicate. We have been seeking ways out of injustice and despair for thousands and thousands of years. I strongly believe that anyone who thinks they have the answer to such things and who is given the power to make the changes they would want to see, should be wary of accepting such power. That what we believe would make a positive difference just now is likely to be seen as desperately outdated and unhelpful a few years on from now.

So, although I am here talking about changing the world for the better for people like us I am not going to give any vision about what would make everything better. I have no ready made theory and no vision that if only it were implemented, all would be fine and dandy and that is, I think, good, because we can be very arrogant when we think we have the answer to anything.

But we can still change the world but maybe in different ways. We can still have the faith that we can make a difference; that we can improve things despite the services that support us working on a shoe string, despite the community facilities we may use shutting down, despite the horrendous consequence of the years of austerity that we are living through.

When I helped set up McMurphy’s; that drop in centre I was talking about, I was young and lonely and lacking in confidence, I had just failed my final university exams, I slept for much of the day, had almost no money and saw very little point in my life but getting together with other people made such a difference, just the fact that we shared our stories and came up with an idea for what we wanted to do, that between us we found different skills; an artist to create our brochure, organised people to create funding applications, enthusiastic people to wander the streets to find empty buildings we might one day renovate, and inspiring people to talk to the funders who might listen to us and in the background that community development worker who made sure that we had rooms to meet in and funders to speak to.

Just having something to believe in and look forward to made such a difference, we found some joy and hope in what we did and we made friends and found out that we were not the failures that we had thought we were. By setting out to change the world we changed ourselves and in a small way that is what changing the world is all about: the shifts in our own attitudes and emotions we found; by creating our own small community we found ourselves changing our own personal landscape.

And we did in the end have something all those years ago, maybe not the vision we had first of all but a beautiful place that young isolated and sad people could gather and gain sanctuary and the chance to grow and find a better life.

I think I have spent most of my life doing things like this, nearly all my working life has been about speaking with people with mental health problems and people with learning disabilities about what we can do to make the lives we lead in our communities better and more rewarding ones.

We created change over the years in HUG where I did most of my work; sometimes at a very high level – the Milan Committee on which we were represented, came up with a mental health act which at the time was seen as the most forward looking legislation in the world. See Me of whom we were one of the original five partner organisations was, in its early days, seen as the most effective anti- stigma campaign in the world. Our work in schools and our plays that we took round the schools started well over a decade before many other people realised that young people and mental health are a vital issue. Our work in the arts and mental health with Moniack mhor writing centre and others started way before the Scottish mental health and the arts film festival started. The work we did in the Highlands was talked about in many different countries with work in Catalonia, Poland, Portugal Romania and the Czech republic using HUG as a model of how to organise and create change.

We made a difference to policy and to services and to the law and yet the real place of inspiration was with the members of HUG. The real place of change was when a person found out that by having a voice they could make a difference, that by sitting in on a meeting in Achiltibuie and maybe speaking a few sentences they were going to influence policy across the country, and that by sitting in the office and saying almost nothing but occasionally making other people a cup of coffee they were building the bedrock of that community. That by looking out for each other and treasuring each other’s contribution we were and are making life better for all of us, ourselves included. Someone like me speaking at an international conference may sound very good but it is pretty meaningless unless what I say and what I do is rooted in the community I come from.

And that community comes from people smoking in the garden outside the office, from the people who planted to plants in the plant tubs, from people getting passionate about something and those people who provide order and structure to take the passion forward, from people painting pictures, taking photos, writing speeches, making films, writing stories, telling the story so many of us have, people stuffing envelopes, posting on facebook, cleaning up after a meeting.

We can all make change happen; we are all part of changing the world if we choose to be, we do not have to be the brightest sparkiest most charming people to change the world in fact as I said the biggest change we can make in the world is when we make small changes ourselves. When, after wondering if ever we could do it, we go to our first ever meeting and say hello to the person sitting besides us, make that small connection. It is when we put a poem in an envelope and hand it over for publication in a newsletter and it is when we go on a facebook page and click like on a post we believe in and the person who made the original post realises that they are not alone.

And that is in some ways what my job with the Mental Welfare Commission is also about, I am meant to involve people with mental health problems, personality disorders, learning disabilities, autism and dementia in our work. And our work is all about rights and without people such as you it is meaningless.

When we visit a hospital ward to see what it is like we won’t get anywhere if patients and friends and family don’t talk to us about it.

If we are talking about freedom and compulsory treatment there is no point to it if we do not involve the very people whose freedom is in question and when we carry out a themed visit on people with experience of eating disorders or homelessness or borderline personality disorder our reports count as nothing if the visits don’t include the people the reports are about.

When we are creating a good practice guide around such things as care plans or rights or advance statements then we need to speak with the people that these guides are about.

I love my job, one day I might be in Dumfries and another day in Mull the next day in Arbroath and the next in Galashiels, today I was up here meeting some of you, finding out some of the things you would like us to do. This is a different way of changing the world, our reports and our work in small and sometimes big ways can make a big difference. Your contribution and your own groups help make that difference and your willingness to contribute to that much longer lasting and more profound change that I hope this talk has mainly been about is what thrills me, means that as I set off home tonight I will be delighted to have been with you instead of groaning at the long night ahead.

Thank you so much for listening to me – I hope the Moray Wellbeing Hub thrives and grows and develops. That the many possibilities there are despite the ravages of cuts and the like, can continue to be built on and celebrated and lastly I hope that I can come to visit regularly through the year when I have issues that I would love to have your input to.