RUFUS MAY

My name is Rufus May, I am 39. I have a partner Rebecca and two children Gregory (8) and Nathan (6). When I was 18 I was treated as an inpatient in East London for my unusual beliefs and bizarre behaviour. I was diagnosed with hebephrenic schizophrenia. After fourteen months of treatment I stopped taking the neuroleptic drugs (against medical advice). I used drama, dance, art and part-time employment, as well as the support of a close friend, to recover. After a number of different jobs I eventually studied psychology and trained as a clinical psychologist. I now work as a clinical psychologist with people in adult mental health services. I did not find being given a diagnosis of schizophrenia helpful; it stopped many people trying to understand my experiences or see me as a full human being with abilities and potential.

For as long as I can remember I have had a good ability to daydream and this has helped me to develop creatively. It also meant during stressful times, I was able to separate off my consciousness and, to some extent, escape into a dream world of heroes, monsters and special powers. I was an expert daydreamer, filling boring moments with such dreams. Sometimes it was intentional but, at other times, I got lost in my own thoughts when people were trying to talk to me. The dream would grab me and, meanwhile, I would pretend to be listening to the other person, and guiltily nod in what I thought were the right places. I also dabbled with drug taking in my teenage years, smoking cannabis quite heavily from the age 15 to 17.

At the age of 18 I found myself in a boring job as an office junior. I was anxious about my future – I had failed in my education and I had failed to get into the advertising business. On top of this, emotionally, I was struggling to adjust to the fact that my first girlfriend, who I had been with for a year, had left me. This left a big hole in my life. In hindsight this emotional loss echoed an earlier experience of abandonment I'd had when I was 11 years old: my mother had had a brain haemorrhage and had suffered some brain damage. Although she recovered, she had some personality changes which I found difficult to adapt to. My educational achievement went markedly down after this event (and stayed low for the rest of my schooling). Also, I found myself socially isolated; my best friend was in Germany and I was trying to avoid my former dope-smoking friends. I felt socially 'left out in the cold'. My ex-girlfriend and all her friends were planning to go to university, while

I seemed to have chosen a very boring career as a trainee draughtsman. Instead of getting depressed I gradually entered an alternative reality that had spiritual undertones. My experiences also included the television and radio talking to me and beliefs that I was a spy, involved in a science fiction-like battle between Russia and England. I was eventually admitted to hospital after I complained that I had a gadget in my chest that was being used to control me.

I found psychiatric treatment very oppressive; the drugs I was being given slowed my thinking down and made me weak and impotent. Nobody talked to me about my experiences and ideas. They thought this would encourage them and make them worse. Because my grandfather and aunt had been given diagnoses of schizophrenia, doctors were convinced I had a condition they assumed was genetic. My parents were told I would have to take the drugs for the long term; I could not bear this idea and this put us into conflict. During my hospital admissions I started to pick up on the behaviours of the other patients. I would act very mad and seem dangerous in order to protect myself. During the first admission I felt very frightened and demoralised. However, during my second hospital admission my close friend Catherine returned from abroad and started to visit me almost every day. She showed me an acceptance that was deeply healing. She believed I would get through this 'breakdown' and make a recovery. Her positive and accepting approach had a dramatic effect on my attitude towards my situation. My rebellious nature was also helpful in that I refused to accept the schizophrenia diagnosis. I refused to accept that my 'madness' was a meaningless product of a brain disease. I felt my unusual experience and ideas were part of a spiritual journey and made sure I avoided people who treated me in a patronising way. I witnessed fellow patients being neglected while doctors focused on medicating away their unusual experiences. One friend took her life while on heavy doses of neuroleptics and I became determined to try and challenge this narrow-minded approach to her problems.

I had a strong story of hope in my own family. I had witnessed my mother making a strong recovery from her brain haemorrhage and resulting disability through a combination of her own will and determination and support from others. I think I used this as a blueprint for my own recovery. I sought out community centres, churches, drama classes and later dance classes as places to connect with others and express myself. I used prayer and chanting to try to heal myself. Being detained under the Mental Health Act made me feel I was being punished. I believed that I needed to change myself morally in order to climb out of the psychiatric system and back into society. I vowed to make myself useful to the community so that it would not lock me up in future. At the same time I was always convinced that my ideas and experiences made sense in some way. I gradually came to see them as an emotional reaction to the break-up of my relationship with my first girlfriend, which had triggered some deeper emotional conflicts. This realisation came through a number of conversations with different friends.

While I did not agree that I had a serious mental illness, I did believe I was emotionally exhausted and had to relearn social skills and new ways to express myself that would not get me locked up. I knew I had to keep occupied to help my mind get back on an even keel. I tried lots of things and, if they didn't work, I moved onto something else, refusing to give up. A pastor at a local church supported me to set up a youth club. When I ended up getting readmitted, he visited me and prayed with me. I started doing odd jobs as voluntary work in a community centre. I tried to exercise regularly, though I found this difficult on the medication I was on. I eventually managed to get a part-time job as a security guard in a cemetery. The job involved walking at night in the heavily wooded Victorian cemetery. I think this was a very healing activity, being close to nature and having to face my fears of the dark and the unknown. I did a lot of art work in hospital to try and express what I was feeling and thinking, and I used some of this to get into art college, where I went for a few months. I had been on a fortnightly injection for about six months due to my reluctance to take medication. I had a hand tremor that was affecting my painting. I also felt emotionally blocked. I asked the doctors to take me off the medication. They refused, so I did it independently. I had by this time left home and was living with friends in a fairly liberal squatting community. When I had some sleepless nights and a few unusual ideas, people were pretty tolerant, whereas my parents might have panicked and notified mental health services. I got a job as a motorcycle courier, which kept me occupied. After a couple of years, I decided to return to education so that I could eventually train to be a clinical psychologist. I was determined to try and be part of a movement that would try to change the way society approaches mental health problems. This quest to go back into the psychiatric system as a professional – and to show that there are alternatives to biological psychiatry that are more helpful – became an important source of meaning in my life.

I now live with my family in a small village in Yorkshire. I work in mental health services as a clinical psychologist, which I have done for the last nine years. Since my breakdown in my late teens, I have been pretty healthy, physically and emotionally. It was as if it released something for me and allowed me to make important changes to how I live my life. I did have a bit of a problem with sporadic anger outbursts in my twenties and early thirties which only my partner generally witnessed. I have largely resolved that problem in the last five years using mindfulness meditation practice. I still enjoy creative activities, including dance, drama and storytelling. Over the last eight years I have become quite involved in the hearing voices movement, setting up groups, doing individual work and training. I do not use psychiatric diagnosis when I am helping people but instead focus on helping them to develop a framework that respects their unique experiences and life story. I share the hearing voices movement's values that voice hearing, visions and unusual beliefs are meaningful experiences which need to be listened to and made sense of. In my work listening to people's accounts of their voices, I have learned a great deal. I see people's voices as messengers of meaning. The voices often have clues to, or information about, injustices the person has experienced that they have not been able to come to terms with. The difficult voices often seem to be a challenge to the person to gain a greater sense of authority and authorship in their lives. I spend some time on public education work, where I try to share stories of people's recovery journeys through various media. I believe that, if we can educate people to respect voice hearing and other unusual experiences, there will be a big pressure on psychiatry to change; to stop just trying to repress these experiences, rather than understanding them and helping people to live with them and get on with their lives.