



Laura Newbould-Jones Schwartz Round Ashgate Hospicecare December 2020

I am very lucky to have had a loving, safe and secure childhood and as part of this I have had some of the most fabulous Christmases that were all about spending time with family and generally having a magical time. Christmas itself still means as much to me today as it did as a child - I am filled with nostalgia when I hear that first Christmas song (often played by me – way too early) and I'm often far too excitable about the whole situation for my husband to bear!

But this is my 23rd Christmas in nursing and my first Christmas working at the hospice. I'm quite aware that not everyone feels the same way about Christmas as I do. Christmas can be one of the toughest times of the year for a lot of people – especially as we are bombarded with messages of festivity and hope everywhere we turn. Having worked for many years in acute mental health services, homeless services and youth justice services, I have found that people may not feel hopeful – and Christmas can indeed exacerbate the feelings of disconnection, loss and of being lost.

As I think back through the Christmases I have spent at work, they have been some of the most personally challenging times for me. I have left my own family to look after others, I have felt frustration, upset and if I am completely honest, there have been times when I have felt a little bit angry about it all. Everyone else appeared to be enjoying and joining in their family festivities while I was missing out – at work... I suppose really, I too had feelings of disconnection and loss.

But as I think of these Christmases, they have also been some of the most rewarding shifts (particularly on an acute mental health ward) I have ever worked. Being able to offer some sort of hope in the time we spend together – both of us in a place where we wouldn't necessarily choose to be, reminds me why I came into mental health nursing - and it certainly wasn't for the cash!

On the flip side of that situation, there have also been Christmases when at times I have felt completely useless and at times unable to offer any meaningful hope.

I'll tell you John's story:

John was homeless, I had worked with John for approximately 18 months on and off - and by Christmas he had been visiting our homeless service daily. I knew John quite well by now and I was familiar with his presentation, which could be challenging to manage at times – and there were times when I was filled with dread as he presented at the door.

However, I also knew that he had suffered numerous traumas in his life, he had been abused as a child and was placed in care to offer him a better life. However, following the breakdown of numerous foster placements he was then placed in a children's home.

John told me about his experience in the children's home which consisted of years of further abuse, and he told me how his behaviour spiralled as a result – and then as result of his increasingly aggressive behaviour - he believed the abuse also spiralled.

John lived with the involvement of services, both social care and the criminal justice system for many years before finding love and going on to have a family of his own... and it was many years after this that he presented at our service. He had been 'kicked out' of his family home following allegations that he was a perpetrator of abuse towards his own child.

The whole service could be difficult to manage when John was in the building, as he would at times be angry and argumentative – often using me as a sounding board following a meeting with a statutory service. John struggled to manage his behaviour when working with statutory services, which came from a deep-rooted mistrust of them – and who could blame him? He had suffered terrible trauma in the very service he was placed in to offer him protection.

It wasn't long before John's behaviour prevented him from entering any of the services that could help house him. He continued to present with us because he trusted us – it wasn't an easy relationship and we needed firm boundaries. I drew up a contract of behaviour that we both signed, and we moved forward in the quest to address his health needs and find accommodation.

However, it was Christmas Eve when after presenting at and being turned away by all statutory services that he presented at our door at two minutes before we closed for the day - I answered the door and explained that the only thing we could offer was a sleeping bag. It was cold and wet, and John was already upset that he had been turned away by services that were closing for the festive period – and here I was, yet another service closing the door on him.

He took the sleeping bag and I handed him details of a Christmas dinner that was provided by another charity the following day. He continued to talk as I explained that I was closing the door and that I would see him when our service reopened on the 27th December – he became angry and shouted through the letterbox before leaving - walking off in the rain.

I felt terrible, I felt sad, but I also knew that I could not offer any more. I also carried a worry of what John might do without our support. But again, I knew that we could not do anymore. I travelled home that Christmas Eve with a mixture of guilt and hope – I felt guilty that there were so many people who were not born into a loving family – as I was.

But I also felt hope that even though some people have suffered trauma, there are people out there to offer support.

John did come back on the 27th December and I continued to support him, offering time and non-judgmental support.



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