*I wrote this in April 2025, without the benefit of any long-term perspective of how events will unfold or hindsight. I debated about including it in the website. It might not age well. I decided to include it anyway because so many people in the mental health world, including me, are struggling to find any perspective or any hope or any power. Ultimately, I decided to stay true to my recovery principles – even if our hopeful vision doesn’t come true, we need some positive, believable vision to give us enough hope to move forwards to recover.*

**Hope for Rebuilding our Mental Health System Differently**

**(2025)**

We are in the midst of a destructive “forest fire” in America today. Whether you admire or detest Donald Trump, we can probably agree that he has unleashed a massive transformation in our society and its structures. In some areas, he has a vision of the future he is heading us towards (which, once again, we can agree with or disagree with, believe is realistic or not), but mental health seems almost an afterthought, caught in collateral damage. All I can really find about his views of people with mental illnesses is that they are “dangerously deranged”, “lunatics”, and “monsters” who should be reinstituionalized or less expensively, exiled or moved into tent cities. Regardless, cuts to many things including SAMHSA, Medicaid, housing, social security, education, and Veteran’s services will bring loss and suffering to people with mental illnesses, the people who live alongside them, and those who try to help them.

In the middle of a conflagration, it’s hard to focus on much beyond the destruction and the tragedy and trying to defend and preserve as much as possible. But forest fires can also be useful. When the forest has become overgrown, tangled, and depleted, burning can open opportunities for new growth and a more healthy, productive forest.

We have been through periods of profound destruction before in mental health. You’re likely thinking about deinstitutionalization, but I don’t think that was the actual fire (though it may have made us more vulnerable). I believe the actual fire was rather similar to this one: In 1980 Reagan as president massively cut public housing, community mental health, block granted and cut Medicaid, dismantled welfare and antipoverty programs broadly, directed Social Security disability to take most people with mental illnesses off it, and accelerated the War on Drugs using mass incarceration. The increases in homelessness and incarcerated people with mental illnesses didn’t occur until after those events beginning in 1981 and have been increasing since.

Our mental health system adapted to that destruction by promoting three strategies:

1. Creating a pervasive narrative that the cause of the crisis was deinstitutionalization, rather than the dismantling of social and mental health supports and protective factors.
2. Emphasizing a “modern”, scientific, biochemical, Medical Model of mental illness, promoted by the newly reimagined DSM 3, and relying on the power of increasingly pervasive medications, repressing almost all other causal understandings and treatment approaches.
3. Allying with political and criminal justice systems promising more humane, though still often coercive and repressive systems, to keep people with mental illnesses from disrupting and endangering society.

These three strategies interact synergistically and form the foundations of the forest we have today. It’s not that there aren’t some other strategies and strikingly successful programs scattered around our country. It’s that they’re invariably “innovative” outsiders, struggling for resources and inclusion within the mainstream system. Our forest is undernourished and those dominant three strategies are controlling the resources we do have and starving out other strategies.

Many of us have been working, literally for decades, to reform and restructure our forest, but it’s very entrenched and has gotten more and more so. Perhaps, this destructive fire will give us an unexpected, tragic opportunity to rebuild differently.

Here are the three “replacement” strategies, I recommend:

1. It is far more important to know a person than their diagnosis. We need to know their stories and how they’ve gotten stuck, their challenges and their strengths, more than their symptoms. “Put their diagnosis in parenthesis.” We need to have caring, emotional, long-term, *personal,* relationships with people to be helpful. Treating illnesses with medications, though often helpful, isn’t the most important thing to rebuild their lives for the vast majority of people with mental illnesses
2. People heal and recover when they are empowered, not when they are coerced and repressed. The life force within them is what needs to be nurtured – by welcoming, engaging, respecting, motivating, encouraging, and supporting them, not by threatening, segregating, and controlling them to get them to comply and conform.
3. People can only grow when they are not in survival mode – living stuck between fear and neglect, avoiding, isolating, deadening and distracting with drugs or even medications. Everyone needs a reasonably secure home, a job and/or other purposeful activity, and social connectedness. Without those three things they’re lost.

All of these strategies currently grow in our forest if you look hard enough. Some of us know how to do them quite well. But we’re pushed aside and stifled by the mainstream funding, public and professional education, and systems’ design.

My hopeful vision is not of rebuilding locked institutions or neglectful tent cities to keep dangerously deranged monsters away from society. My vision has people listening to personal stories and finding meaning in their struggles, sharing meals, pursuing dreams and rebuilding families and community… in clubhouses, drop-in centers, home and street outreach, living room and Soteria model crisis programs, halfway houses, and supported housing, peer, family, and volunteer support programs, healing centers including compassionate medications, emotional and spiritual services, and reintegration / rehabilitation centers. If we nurture these strategies, skills, and programs, people will come, and they will recover.

I hope there will be a time when this destructive fire burns out and we can all get out of survival mode and rebuild differently together.