

**ROGER STRAUSS' ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR THE
NARMH 2008 HOWERY AWARD**

I have to admit that for years I've coveted the Howery Award.

What better recipe for Cognitive Dissonance than Learned people giving Learned talks while everyone is trying to eat their dessert.

When I got on the board my Desire for the Howery finally overcame my good judgment and I did what every good red-blooded American Boy does in our un-regulated society. I resorted to Bribery.

All my hard earned money flowed under the table to my fellow Board Members. But to show you how honest they are, I never got the Howery.

They kept the money. But I never got the Howery.

They did give me one special honor, though. They made me Chair of the Bylaws Committee. Talk about being damned by faint praise.

And Marcy Moran offered to put me up, . . . if I just happened to be passing through South Dakota, ha, ha, ha.

So that was a close as I came to getting the Howery while I was on the Board.

Then I retired, and after five years, suddenly I get the Howery—for Meritorious Service.

What kind of a world is it when you get an award for Merit and not for Money?

I was stunned. I'd never merited anything in my whole life. Well, nothing that could be repeated in public.

My staff at Washington County Mental Health did give me a plaque once. You know the one that says "The Floggings will Continue until Morale Improves". I took it as a compliment and hung it over my desk. What did I know?

So what did I do to deserve a Howery? I had to analyze my past very carefully to figure this one out.

When I did, lo and behold, I suddenly realized that based on my life of non-accomplishments, anyone in this room could earn a Howery, using my Ten Simple Principles.

And so, I am titling my talk today, "How anyone in this Room can Earn a Howery Using my Ten Simple Principles.

Let's start at the beginning. When I came to Washington County Mental Health Services in the summer of 1970 I had no idea what a Community Mental Health Center was all about. I had spent my professional life on Psychiatric Wards at VA Hospitals.

But being a sly fellow I conjured up a fool proof plan.

I would come up two months early and spend the day asking the staff and Board what they wanted their Community Mental Health Center to be to make it the best in the state.

I talked to all the staff and all the Board and **all but one said exactly the same thing.**

“Fire the Receptionist.” The one, being the receptionist, said “Fire the Business Manager”.

When I returned two months later to begin my duties, the Receptionist had gotten pregnant and resigned.

Well, there I was. I hadn't done a thing and as far as the staff and Board were concerned I had made the agency the best mental health center in the state. Now if that doesn't make you believe in a personal God, I don't know what will.

Which brings me to my First Principle for Getting a Howery. **Do not listen to your peers, they don't know what they're talking about.**

So here I am, on the job and I know from nothing. I decide to talk to community elders, parents, advocates, consumers and consumer organizations.

My opening remarks always began with, “I'm from the Community Mental Health Center and I'm here to help.” Not a good beginning.

Three months later, after recovering from Physical, Mental and Emotional shock I looked at the notes I'd taken, or, to be more exact, the notes that were taken for me.

I realized that it would take me 30 years to do everything that everybody wanted. So my professional life was completely taken care of and I could say, at last, what Community Mental Health was all about.

Which brings me to my Second Principle: **Ask the community, the consumers, the parents and the advocates what they want. And Then Give it to Them!**

We could end the talk right here and forget the other Principles, but many of you are only half way through your desserts and I have been told to keep talking till there is no food left behind. So you'll either have to put up with the next eight principles, or eat a lot faster.

Anyway, I've now got a plan. I've got the community, the consumers, the parents and the advocates all in my back pocket. I got no money. Where do I get it? Well in Vermont (and I guess in many other states) there's just one major source, The State. It gives grants, it launders Medicaid and it provides money from it's general funds.

And if you have a County style government, you can just substitute County for State.

So, I flounce into the Office of the Commissioner of Mental Health with all my notes and all my plans.

Back then the Commissioner was a Visionary named Jonathon Leopold. I just gave him my little talk, telling him about the needs of our rural community and how I got my plan from the

consumers, parents, advocates and community leaders, and would you please just allocate all this money for all these rural projects, and thank you very much.

After I gave my little talk, Jonathon looked at me and paused for a time. Then he said, “Serve the most severely disabled adults and children. Take them out of Institutions. Do not put them into Institutions. If you do that I will pay you modestly, never enough, but enough to serve the rest of the rural community’s needs if you manage your funds properly.”

“If you do not serve the most disabled, you will get the change that accidentally falls from my pocket, and you will spend the rest of your professional life whining that no one is serving the needs of the rural community”.

“You will write tomes on unmet rural needs. You will run statistical studies that show no one is being served in rural areas. You will become famous and your center will remain poor. My suggestion is to STOP WHINING and start serving the people who need it most.”

As you can see, I make immediate, positive impressions on people.

So, Principles #3 and #4. **#3. Find a Visionary who knows the system and tells it like it is. If you hate what he says, you know you’re on the right track.**

And Principle #4: **De-institutionalize, de-institutionalize, De-institutionalize. Treat those with the greatest disabilities in your communities. Manage the money you make to fund the other rural mental health needs you’ve got and STOP WHINING.**

Okay, so we make a deal. We’ll serve the needs of the most disabled.. We’ve got the communities needs in a plan. And we’ve got a promise for modest funding. What’s next?

Principle #5. **Hire tough, committed staff who are sold on your goals and ready to treat the most difficult people you can find.**

We ended up making the hiring process so hard that dealing with persons with disabilities was a song in comparison. And if you’ve got the right staff everything else falls into place.

So there you have it. You have just “Created” a community mental health center. It’s the Brahma thing, in Eastern Religions. The Creative Piece. And if you just let everybody who knows something tell you what to do, that Creative Piece is relatively easy to accomplish.

Now comes the hard part. A year later everything is starting to work. So how do you maintain what you’ve got. That’s Vishnu. That’s Maintenance. And that’s a Bear.

First things first. Get to know your Legislature (or your County Commissioners). Because if all those Institutional dollars you’ve saved the state go into fixing pot holes or filling the taxpayers wallets, you’re a dead duck. Look at New York and California in the 1970s.

So line up your community leaders, parents, advocates, consumers and the mental health administration and get involved in politics.

Principle #6 Get the Legislature (County Commissioners) to understand the simple formula that money from one treatment site follows the client to the next treatment site. Or Else! It's as simple as that. Don't try to make it more complex.

Okay, the system is now going to be around for a while.. What's next?

You get uppity staff, of course. You hired them tough. They're doing a tough job. So why is the pay so lousy? Why are the benefits so meager? What are you going to do about it?

Principle Seven: Empower the staff any way you can. And get out of the way.

The majority of your funding is going to come from public bodies of one sort or another, states, counties, feds. Nobody is ever going to get rich on those funding sources. Well, nobody at our level anyway.

So every year I had to dole out the pittance we received for skimpy salary raises and even skimpier benefits, if we were lucky. Sometimes we gave nothing. Sometimes we cut.

Everybody hated me (except my mother) and all I wanted was to be Loved. Is that so Wrong?

So I did what any insecure person would do in the same situation. I gave it all away. This time to a Committee made up mostly of direct service staff and some Board members. They had the entire responsibility for setting their own wages, determining their benefits and working conditions.

This was not an advisory committee. This was giving up the whole kit and caboodle. Who needs the grief? Not me.

We opened the books and our Director of Finance and Administration taught a course on how to read a financial statement. When all was said and done the staff ended up more conservative than I would have ever been. There were times when I had to actually threaten their jobs so they would raise their own salaries and benefit package.

All right. First you deal with uppity staff. Then you have to deal with uppity consumers.

Hey, what did you expect? You get clients better, and suddenly they want more!!! It's a helluva system, I agree.

"What kind of gratitude is that?" I asked them.

"I didn't sign on to get yelled at by the people I serve," I told them.

They answered me with a lot of Raspberries.

So, once again, it was time to drop back and punt.

Which led me to Principle Eight: **Empower the consumer any way you can. And get out of the way.**

Put them on Policy Committees. Send them to the Legislature. **Hire Them!** They make great therapists. They're tougher on their fellow consumers than I ever was.

Let them be part of the problem. Not you.

By the way, if you think the statement should read “part of the solution”, don’t you believe it. In public, rural, mental health there are only problems, never solutions.

So now everything is running OK, not perfect, but OK. Vishnu is a happy camper.

But subtly, slowly, along comes Shiva, the destroyer. “Everything is changing,” he whispers, “Everything.”

And he’s right. Over the 30 years I was at Washington County we changed our treatment philosophies three times. First we started with a typical Medical Model. Then we switched to a Rehabilitation approach.

Finally, we morphed into a Recovery model, in part because those clients got uppity.

Principle Nine takes into account Shiva’s good advice. **For whatever you’re undertaking, don’t start at the beginning. Take the latest approach. Right now, for Treatment, that approach is probably Recovery. Go with it. There are lots of good Recovery models around. Use them. And remember that the Latest Approach to whatever, is itself Becoming something Else.**

When you learn that. e.g. whatever you do is Becoming something else, and you go with the flow instead of sticking in your heels and putting up roadblocks, you will be a happy person and just as great as the great Philosopher, Hegel. Which is almost as good as getting a Howery.

Which brings me to the last Principle, #10, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE OF ALL.....

Take no blame. It’s not your fault. It’s always the other guy’s problem.

This system is foolproof.

“It’s not my fault: The Consumers, the Advocates, the Community made me do it.”

“It’s not my fault: the State won’t give me funding unless I serve these difficult people.”

“It’s not my fault: the Staff/Board Management Committee set those ridiculous salaries and benefit packages. I don’t even get a vote.”

“It’s not my fault, Sigmund, the consumers forced this Recovery Model on me and they won’t let me hire you to do Psychoanalysis.”

Yes, folks, I’m just an innocent bystander. I do what I’m told. My heart is pure, and, by the way, I do feel your pain.

So there it is. Ten Easy Steps to Winning a Howery.

Go for it. You’re guaranteed success. And you will get your rewards in Heaven, I promise.

I wish you all luck, and next year, when they give out the Howery Award while I'm eating my dinner.....

I CAN BLAME YOU FOR RUINING MY DESSERT!!!!!!!!!!