

## **Max's story**

### **What is personal agency?**

By Jeffrey Johnson-Abdelmalik

I have a friend, who I will call Max, who has mental health issues. He carries a diagnosis and an involuntary treatment order. Max is lucky in that he has a close family who give him a lot of support. But Max has been challenging over the years. Sometimes he has been affected badly by his condition, and there have been consequences for the family.

At the worst times Max rarely leaves his house, and spends a lot of time sleeping or sitting out back smoking. If I ask him what he would like to do he returns the question, "What should we do?" When we do go out to do something, say go for a walk or to the gym he's very introverted and turned in on himself. And yet it's clear that he appreciates the company. He invariably thanks me for the effort I've made.

A couple of years back his friends and family put together a circle of support, and far from just accepting it passively, Max took ownership, gave the circle a name and began to think of possibilities for his life. At the same time he hasn't shown a lot of interest in becoming independent or self-sufficient. Perhaps the boundaries of his life embedded in his family, despite the occasional stresses and tensions, give him a sense of safety and security.

One day he came up with a project plan that went far beyond the warm confines of family. He told us that he wants to go on a trip overseas. We jumped on it as sign that Max was taking control of his life, but we overreached.

Once we started to talk about some of the ramifications of overseas travel, like having to make and save the money, he said he wasn't ready to look for a job. But while perhaps it isn't the time for practical action to make the aspiration real, the idea of the project itself reaches beyond the boundaries towards a new type of future.

Because of my own circumstances I was not able to see Max for nearly a year. When I reconnected I found that he had made a decision that I considered bad at first. It upset me because he had decided not to do anything new, go anyplace or try for anything. He told us that he "Has a mental illness" and he needs to spend all his time dealing with it and the voices that he hears.

That goes against everything that I have grown to value, submitting to the condition and giving up on what I think of as good things, good relationships, good place to live, good income and the things that money can buy.

But I stopped myself and thought about it. What really was the meaning of his decision?

### **Personal agency**

The capacity to think and then make decisions that we carry out is known as *personal agency*. It is the power to *Do*, and includes taking control of our lives.

Mental health issues may sometimes rob us of this capacity, leaving us drifting in bad thoughts and feelings, with a sense of powerlessness and “futurelessness”. This “futurelessness” is a key to thinking about personal agency.

Sociologists normally think of personal agency as something that comes in partnership with structure; structure being the world as it is given to us with all its buildings, institutions, habits and customs, combined with where we find ourselves within it, in terms of our status and wealth, our families and cultures, our ethnicity and colour and so on. The structure that we are born into determines to a great extent how we live and how we decide to act.

We find ourselves, as Martin Heidegger once picturesquely said, “thrown into the world. Of course, after we are born and attain a certain independence of thought and movement and action, we are beginning to affect that picture. Margaret Archer (2003) sees our lives as trajectories where we are constantly thinking and reflecting on ourselves and the world, and making decisions which we then may enact.

If I am a student leaving school, for example, I may be thinking of becoming a nurse or an artist. If I “weigh” my opportunity cost of choosing one or the other, I might decide on one course or the other, and choose a direction.

Of course, how I come to that choice is another matter – for example how much of what I have learnt over my life influences the decision to become an artist. Perhaps because it would be exciting. Or alternatively, *not* to become an artist, because becoming an artist is risky? Even the ideas around what it means to be an “artist” are highly institutionalised ideas (Romantic! Revolutionary! Or Risky!), that is, they are part of the structure. By making that decision and then acting on it creates a new objective structure outside of me, my “career”. Although I will continuously keep reassessing my future and my present, it is now built on a new structure, that is, that I fulfil the artist role.

So, what if I cannot see clearly the choices in my life? What if there is no horizon? What if I am “thrown” into life like into an ocean and there are no landmarks and only waves around me?

Depression, in my own mental health experience has included severe depression and part of this experience has felt like if I had lost my sense of having a future, like if I were “futurelessness”

To have no direction seems worth it. No direction offers hope. There is only the dull/sharp pain of the heart, or no feeling at all. Nothing amuses, or at best for a moment. The colours of the world are washed out. It is as though as if there was a thickness between the world and me.

I remember for me that depression was like a knife twisting inside me, and the pain of it meant that I could not see the way forward. I was blind to the obvious, until my own death loomed and it became clear that I had to make a decision. I had to take control again of my life whatever my fears and dread. And when I did, though I was scared witless with the prospect of plunging into a difficult and different future.

It was just like they say, a weight dropped from me. And although it was a number of years until I had healed, that moment of reclaiming my own agency marked the beginning of the return.

That moment was tiny. Just a drop in the huge Amazon River of time. But in my world it was enormous. Instead of being a leaf swept on to the waterfall, if I can corrupt the metaphor, the leaf decided to turn around and make for shore. It took probably seconds, although of course there were months of internal agonising and deliberation and internal conversation to prepare for it.

Mental health issues can rob us of our experience in the world, of our sense of belonging and of our personal agency. We fulfil the roles that we have been given or have accepted or have been thrust upon us, but we do not own them. In fact, like an abused partner, we want to escape them all. The path forwards is not clear.

So, the work of personal agency is embedded in time. It's in the present moment that it happens. But it happens within a larger temporal landscape.

### **The temporal landscape**

Our progression through life is part of the structure. When we go to school we begin in Childcare and end up in Year 10 or 12. The progression occupies most of our early youth. It is a given and not disputed, and simply moves ahead. Most people, on leaving school, look forward to earning an income and becoming independent. That seems to be a generally accepted goal; it certainly is pushed by politicians. And whether we have families or not, there is a time window in which it occurs.

So, while there is some room to move, the temporal landscape is there to be "accepted". Choosing not to accept it has costs, some of them severe. Dropping out of school early, for example, may blight your future and limit what jobs you can get. In essence the temporal landscape establishes boundaries and borders.

Mental health issues often disrupts the progression of people through the culturally acceptable temporal landscape. Your plans to be, say, a mother, may be disrupted by inner turmoil or a sense that "I cannot do this".

## Trajectories

Trajectories are our personal ways of negotiating the temporal landscape – so they are our own temporal landscape! They are our way of engaging with the options that the world presents and choosing what our future will look like.

Margaret Archer says that we do this through an Internal Conversation that we carry on with ourselves throughout life, evaluating our options and our successes and failures. A bit of reflection on how we talk to ourselves “Oh my God, why did I do that?” points to the commonsense realisation that we are doing this constantly. And how the script that we listen to can assist or harm us: “I’m such a loser!”

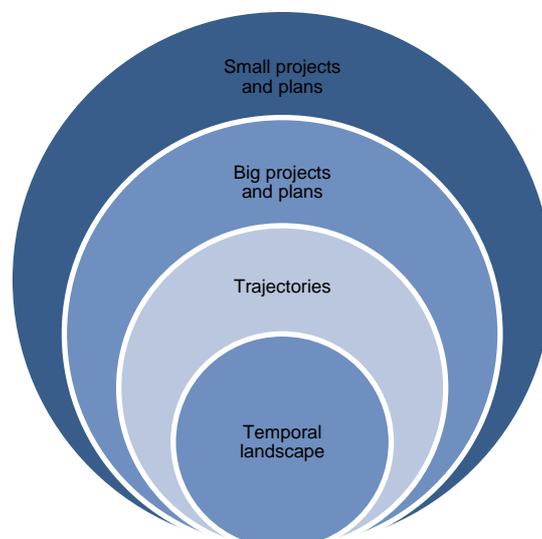
Let’s say that the thought occurs to me that I would like to become an artist. To date I have done some hobby-type work in painting but I have no confidence that my work is good, even if my family members are encouraging. So I dismiss the thought. But it keeps coming back. I turn it over and over in my mind until I, one day decide I will take some classes. And so on until suddenly I am in a position to put pictures in an exhibition. I built this up through small successes but also talking to myself about it over and over, and building up the confidence to put my work out to the world.

To choose our own trajectory through life we put together projects. They don’t have to be huge but surely we will find that the bigger project “Become an artist” has embedded inside it millions of smaller ones like “Start taking lessons”.

## Projects

Our trajectory is a life-long project, but each life-long project has within it many sub-projects nested inside them.

## Projects diagram



Going to art school might be a big project to put me on the trajectory of being an artist, but every day I get my coffee ( micro-project) before I go to class ( small but important project), in preparation for my exams ( big project), and so on.

### **Max's trajectory**

My own experience fighting depression has given me a set of values: I know that I can recover and can be happy; I know also that it takes a lot of work and sometimes a huge amount of pain; I hate it when the person I want to see succeed decides not to go down this path. If we put aside for a minute the enormous arrogance in thinking I know better than Max how he should live, I have to ask myself "Is this truly what is going on?"

Max's personal life trajectory followed the preordained path of school until his final year. At that time mental health issues began and his ability to follow the course laid out by the world was compromised. He lost his network of friends, and as often happens with mental health issues he fell back on family, which in his case was there for him. So right now, Max is sitting outside the temporal landscape of "success".

The circle of support has great ambitions for him, which Max is not ready to accept. Our aspirations for him are in the Big Project domain – like having a job and living independently. But I think that what we have to realise is that he is reclaiming personal agency at his time and in his way. When he tells us he's not ready to leave the house; when he tells us that we cannot control him, is not Max asserting his right to direct his life?

Travelling overseas is perhaps a Big Project, and it stands like a flag and aspiration, but where Max is demonstrating the recovery of his personal agency is in such assertive decisions. If I look closely I see that he is busy in a different kind of work, a "microwork" of participation in his close circle of family and friends, such as reading the minutes of the circle of support meetings and cooking lunch for the participants.

It would be easy for us to say "OK. Well, small steps and eventually we'll get him back on track", but that is not the meaning of personal agency. Only Max can do that, and as he does reclaim his sense of personal agency we may not actually recognise what it looks like.

### **Some final thoughts**

Falling "sick" sometimes puts us into the hands of others. Perhaps like Max we fall into the hands of the clinical mental health format. Although there may be positive results from treatment it usually includes the loss of personal agency. For example, an involuntary treatment order, by very definition, removes a significant right to self-determination in regards to medication.

I have argued in this essay that this rediscovery and reclamation of personal agency is a critical part of the wellbeing and recovery of a person. In fact it may actually represent that recovery.

The best we can do is simply be true to our own trajectory, travelling our own life, in company and solidarity with friends, not laying traps to fix them up to convert, push and cajole. For those of us who are allies and supporters of people on a path of recovery and discovery it is always tempting to try and take control and to impose our own vision of what the person is capable of, even if that is subconscious and we voice the opposite. That actually works against the rediscovery of personal agency. Hard as it is, we have to recognise that the “personal” in personal agency means exactly that.

### **References**

Archer, M. S. (2003). Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation. Cambridge, CUP.

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