



It is a real honor to be here today to tell you how a small village in Western Massachusetts under the name of Gould Farm and cheese making there, has transformed my life from real misery and self-harm to one in which I am able to experience the full span of feelings normal to the human experience.



You see, there was a time when my therapists would ask me about my feelings and all I could point to was that I felt hungry. I had no clue that hunger was not a feeling, like a drunk to the bottle, there were days in my life when I would eat compulsively and then purge up to 10 times a day. For most of my life I felt hostage to confusion, worry, anxiety, extreme depression, feelings of grandiosity and feelings of utter despair.



I felt a total disconnect with myself and the world around me. I felt utterly alone and isolated. To put it simply I felt like a mistake of nature.



In 2009, a young man by the name of Michael MacDonald allowed me to join him in cheese making at Gould Farm where I was a guest at the time. This meant that we had to start work right at 4 am every Monday. I remember how I felt at that time. Besides being groggy, I was mentally unavailable to really carry the weight of the assignment.



However, Mike time and time again would describe the entire process without making me feel stupid.



He believed in me when I didn't. He was never condescending or even talked down to me even though I clearly was experiencing major cognitive issues.



The work I did began with very simple tasks like pouring the milk into the tank, stirring it, putting the curd into the molds and washing the equipment. Over time, I began to grow in my understanding of the process and the different stages of cheese making. There were nuances in temperature and time and the feel of the cheese pressing in your hand. We had to learn the crumble test by hand, by feel.



The magic behind cheese making is that you have to learn to trust your senses such as taste, touch, texture, smell, timing and color to make a good cheese. You can't trust your senses if you're not in your body, so I had to be there, not just show up and follow orders, but be there and turn milk into cheese. The more I became part of the cheese making process, the less I felt hostage to the confusion, anxiety and despair which used to consume me. This was the beginning of my recovery.



With the help of many people at Gould Farm, I finally felt ready to move away from the farm. I spent time at our transition house in Boston and trained to become a certified peer specialist. In 2012, I returned to Gould Farm as a volunteer hoping to give back.



Surprisingly, the opportunity arose for me to take the lead in cheese making. For the first time in my life, I was responsible for instructing others and responsible for making good cheese. I was familiar with the process, but never was responsible for it.



To complicate matters, I was not really confident about what a good cheddar tasted like. This cheese was not available to me while growing up in Venezuela, so it's not exactly in my blood. To add to my anxiety, it takes 3-6 months for cheddar to age and develop flavor, which means I might not know for a half year if I was even doing things right.



Now flying solo, I needed a new mentor to guide me to the next level, and I found Matt Rubiner, just one town away. Although Matt was not a cheesemaker himself, he helped to teach me what a good cheddar should taste like. On a weekly basis for months, my assistant, who herself was a guest at the Farm, and I, would visit Matt with our creation. His take was dismaying at times. He would say the cheese smelled like alcohol or ammonia, or that it tasted like plastic, but we kept going back.



Over time, all these defects were dealt with and we gained Matt's full confidence. He didn't lower his standard for us. He patiently guided us to reach the standard of quality he would accept. After two years, he stopped scrutinizing our cheese and accepted our delivery at face value. I'm happy to report that our Gould Farm cheddar was awarded the top prize at a small local fair.



What gives me the greatest joy is not our wonderful cheese or its presence on the shelves of a world class cheese shop. My greatest joy comes from the responsibility I now hand over to the guests who stand in the shoes I once stood in. The relationships that had such a healing effect on me can now be passed on to the guests in the cheese room. They might start with pouring and stirring, but soon confidence and competence grows. I see new guests arrive with the same anxiety and self-doubt that I had, but it slowly ripens into confidence and pride in a job well done. Some of the guests even take over for me when I need a day off and can give me and the farm the great gift of their skill and enthusiasm.



For some, it's not their thing and they move on to baking or growing vegetables.



For others, it becomes a step in the chain of recovery leading back to hope.



They get a chance to feel they can give back to the world because they have a role, they are given responsibility,



and we take a risk believing they have great things to offer.



I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to share my story with you today. I hope you will come and visit us at Gould Farm.



We always love visitors.



And please come by our table at the idea jam, and taste our delicious cheese. Thank you.