

Judi Chamberlin (WNUSP Co-Chair)

Welcome, friends.

It is very exciting to be here together with people from so many countries of the world who are united in a common purpose. As people who have experienced psychiatric treatment, we know from our own lives about stigma, about discrimination, and about the powerful forces that discredit our voices. But we also know, from the experiences of our own lives, that we are strong and valuable people who have an important message for the world.

Being labeled “mentally ill” carries with it enormous social and legal consequences. In many countries, we become almost “non-persons,” denied basic rights like the right to marry or to parent children. Even in countries that are supposedly more “enlightened” or “progressive,” we face many barriers.

Nearly everywhere, we can be “treated” against our will, be confined in institutions, and be subjected to mistreatment and neglect. We have seen too many of our brothers and sisters damaged and destroyed to allow these conditions to continue unchallenged.

By joining together in local, national, and international organizations, we are providing a strong voice that says, very simply, that things don’t have to be this way. We know that at times we are troubled. We may want help, but the kinds of help we want are often unavailable. We have developed our own self-help programs to reach out to one another. We carry a message of empowerment, hope, and recovery.

Over these next few days, we will do important work. We will learn from one another, and we will develop positions on a number of issues of mutual concern. But we will also be doing another, equally important kind of work, which does not necessarily need to take place in meeting rooms and formal sessions. We will be getting to know one another, across boundaries of nationality, culture, and language. The time we spend with one another at meals, recreational activities, and social affairs is just as important as our formal meetings. I urge everyone here to speak, whenever you can, to people you do not yet know.

Over the years, I have found that, wherever I travel, I find deep commonalities among people who have experienced psychiatry, commonalities that transcend language and culture. I have made many friends, in many countries, and I know that, here in Denmark, I will make new ones.

There is serious work to be done here, but there is also time for joy. Let us rejoice that we have overcome so many difficulties to be together here for these few days, and let us resolve to bring the message home to the millions of others who are not here with us, but with whom we have a deep bond. And let us never forget those who are not here because they died in institutions, or locked away in attics and basements.

We have been told that we are voiceless. We are not.

We have been told that we are powerless. We are not.

We have been told that we have nothing of value to say to politicians and policy makers. We have important things to say.

We have been told that we are weak, that we are ill, that our brains are damaged, that our thoughts are nothing more than “symptoms,” but we know that we are strong, that our brains work, and that our thoughts and ideas have the power to truly change the world.