



## Remarkable lives: Rachel Taylor in conversation with Jerome Carson.

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Review

**Title: Remarkable Lives: Rachel Taylor in conversation with Jerome Carson.**

**Authors: Rachel Taylor and Jerome Carson.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to provide a profile of Rachel Taylor.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Rachel provides a short biographical account and is then interviewed by Jerome. In her biography she discusses her search for happiness and belonging.*

**Findings** – *Rachel talks about focussing on what we are good at, what we love and how discovery can ignite that spark of hope that there can be better than what has gone before.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *Rachel's story shows the potential that lies not just within some of us, but all of us. It is but one story, but its message is sure to touch many.*

**Practical implications** – *How do services promote hope and build resilience and wellbeing? While another service user said recovery was about "coping with your illness and having a meaningful life," (McManus et al, 2009), services have perhaps focussed too much on symptom reduction and not enough on helping people find meaning and purpose.*

**Social implications** – *Rachel asks the question is Positive Psychology a movement for all or is it just for the elite?*

**Originality/value** – *Rachel is someone who has discovered for herself the benefits of Positive Psychology. Hopefully her own discovery will lead to her bringing this promising approach to people with mental health problems*

**Keywords** *Recovery Narrative Discovery Positive Psychology Joy Hope*

**Paper type** – *Case study*

## Introduction

It is only when we get to know people that we fully appreciate their uniqueness and talents. The developing field of Positive Psychology is very much about looking at what works for people and developing their talents, rather than focussing on what is wrong with people and dealing with problems. It was through a mutual interest in Happiness that I first became acquainted with Rachel. The psychologist Martin Seligman suggested there were three routes to Happiness; the pleasant life, the engaged life and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002). He later revised this theory to include relationships and achievements (Seligman, 2011). Rachel is more impressed with the concept of Joy as a way to Happiness. As I got to know her, I was amazed by her own life journey and her remarkable life.

## Brief biography of Rachel Taylor

How can a person be remarkable when they are not? How is light sustained, when all around is heavy, exhausting, suffocating darkness? When a person feels so unlovable, so unwanted, that they give every part of themselves away just to feel that somebody on some level wants just a little bit of them. Eager to prove that inner voice wrong, that critic, conditioned into them that no one would ever want them, that they are flawed, that they need to change to be even close to acceptable to the human race. That anything good about that person was overshadowed by the overwhelming flaws in their design.

Imagine walking through life feeling like an imposter, listening to how different you are to your clan, how if people knew what you were really like they would not want to be around you. Growing up feeling somehow wrong, learning to survive rather than live, developing coping mechanisms to help to protect from pain, hurt and more damage but paradoxically being open and sadistically willing to experience yet more pain, hurt and damage. This probably could be termed as character building and to be completely honest it more than likely was, in the hardest possible way. Looking back though, there is nothing that I would change, because those roads led to here.

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3 Now I would probably be termed of as in recovery, however, I would prefer it to be  
4 termed as discovery, because I am not sure that I would want to recover the  
5 fractured sense of self, the conditioned person that I was, looking for the Holy Grail  
6 of love and happiness in quite the wrong places. There were definitely good parts of  
7 myself, but rather than recover those as they were, I chose to discover how they  
8 could be enhanced, how they could be improved and how they could become a  
9 major player rather than a weak ray of sunshine on an extremely stormy day.  
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18 I have always had a thirst for knowledge, any kind of knowledge. I was told that I  
19 learnt to read at the age of two and then preferred to be engrossed in a book than  
20 engaging with people, pure escapism if you ask me, but educational all the same. I  
21 was interested in the ancient deep thinkers, and how dangerous it was for them to  
22 make public many theories and proposals, that today we take for granted. The very  
23 notion, that what is taught in schools, to sometimes unwilling pupils (probably  
24 thinking “what’s the point, when will I ever use this again?”) had come about through  
25 persecution, people being willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, spoke  
26 volumes to me. I suppose, my passion for learning, for discovery, is the one thing  
27 that I have always had that has kept me going, given me hope and been a steady  
28 companion amongst the chaos.  
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39 My first and only hospitalisation came at the grand old age of 19 years old. My first  
40 diagnosis was depression, however in retrospect, I struggle to understand how this  
41 could have been the obvious solution given the limited time that the consultant saw  
42 me for, and the fact that none of my background was even part of the equation. I  
43 think I was actually given a choice as to whether I wanted to be treated in hospital or  
44 whether it would be better for me in the community. At that time, I had no stability at  
45 all at home, so I opted for hospital because surely, I would feel better there, after all,  
46 is that not what hospitals are there for? Seventeen years later, I can look back and  
47 laugh as I have the benefit of wisdom. I now know why on occasions I was having  
48 conversations with a man who earnestly told me about his meetings with Jesus, I  
49 can appreciate why I was isolated (as a non-smoker) when everybody else  
50 congregated in the smoking lounge They needed to mark the endless days by their  
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3 habit. I didn't question what their diagnoses may have been, because I just assumed  
4 that they were just like me, lost, unloved and broken. I can also fully understand why  
5 I was so drawn to these broken, fragile, needy people, who in their own way were  
6 just coping with what life had presented them with. Yes, making their own choices,  
7 but often with resources that were less than useful, and, were no more mature than  
8 those owned by a child. I was there 4 weeks before I actually thought, I can't stay  
9 here, I thought it would fix me, but it took me 4 weeks before I knew for certain I was  
10 not going to feel better from being there.  
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19 From that time, my life has been littered with success, failure, mistakes and often  
20 going off plan. I have been in and out of various mental health services, finally in  
21 2013, receiving a different diagnosis, that, although didn't feel quite correct, certainly  
22 was helpful in that it triggered a whole lot of buried memories, which meant I could  
23 finally discover why I had been the way I was and why I felt the way I felt, and  
24 created more understanding of myself.  
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32 The need to explore and discover oneself, is an integral part of Positive Psychology,  
33 a relatively young, evolving area within psychology, sometimes coined as being the  
34 science of happiness. When I first came across Positive Psychology, it spoke  
35 volumes to me, it gave a framework to what I suppose I had been doing as part of  
36 my discovery. Find your strengths, be optimistic, un-earth your passions. The focus  
37 totally on what are you good at, what do you love? A complete opposite to why are  
38 you feeling so bad, what can't you do? Maybe it could be deemed a little simplistic  
39 for a life aspiration, I just want to be happy, I just want everyone to be happy. How  
40 many people though, know what their happy is? I found my happy all those years  
41 ago at the age of two and totally discounted it as being un-useful, not being  
42 something that would assist in my quest to belong, to just feel part of something, so  
43 that I would matter to someone. I struggled with things that at times were completely  
44 wrong for me, that assisted me in making monumental mistakes that did not show  
45 me for who I really was, but who I was desperately trying to be in order to get that  
46 ever evasive belonging.  
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3 I believe that discovery is a vital part of any recovery, that's not to dismiss the pain of  
4 the past, but to embrace the possibility of the here and now, to ignite that spark of  
5 hope that there can be better than what has come before. Helping to make positive  
6 psychology completely accessible to all, to help others become explorers as they  
7 traverse new ways of thinking, new ways of being and discover for themselves the  
8 infinite possibilities of their very own happy, is making the unremarkable remarkable,  
9 helping all light shine brighter and making sense out of all the chaos. That for me, is  
10 definitely my happiest happy.  
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### 19 **Rachel in conversation with Jerome**

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21 Jerome: I share your enthusiasm for Positive Psychology, but I know you have some  
22 reservations about the approach as it is currently applied. Would you mind sharing  
23 your thoughts on this with us?  
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27 Rachel: I don't feel that at the moment it is an inclusive application of psychology, it  
28 seems to be to be primarily pitched at people who are already achieving, who  
29 already have some semblance of the good life and who understand what meaning is.  
30 From my experience of working with many disenfranchised people from all walks of  
31 life who are more concerned with survival rather than flourishing, the concepts of  
32 positive psychology, as described at this moment are not relevant and certainly not  
33 easily applicable. I think that more needs to be done in making in translatable for  
34 marginalised groups, that it is truly exciting and transformative when you get away  
35 from the surface level sensationalism such as, "you don't need to be rich to be  
36 happy, but if you follow the concept of Positive Psychology your income potential will  
37 soar," or "you don't need anyone else to be happy it comes from within, but follow  
38 these easy guides and you will attract the person of your dreams." For someone who  
39 is facing challenges in every aspect of their life, who has been placed in a box and is  
40 either frightened or simply cannot get out of it with disillusionment thrown in for good  
41 measure, that kind of rhetoric really gets filtered straight away as "Oh it's not for me."  
42 This is sad, as positive psychology should be for that person so that they can start to  
43 believe that they can live, not merely exist, and to believe that they may have  
44 potential for more.  
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3 Jerome: In your story you talked about an ever evasive sense of belonging? Do you  
4 feel you belong now?  
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7 Rachel: For the majority of my time now, I do belong as I discovered my sense of  
8 self, that I belonged to me, to my values, my ideals, my beliefs and my hopes. I have  
9 no desire to belong to anything or anyone other than myself anymore. The concept  
10 of the free spirit can sometimes be interpreted in a negative way, as someone who  
11 just flits through life with no consideration of others, just with their own aims in sight.  
12 For me, my spirit is now free of the constraints that had been placed upon me by  
13 others, and that I still carried, conditioned that this burden was part of me. I take the  
14 responsibility of being a free spirit seriously in that I strive to ensure that my actions  
15 have little negative impact on others, however with the caveat that I am no longer  
16 responsible for their feelings and emotions, with the outcome being that I am now  
17 making decisions that are for the best outcome for myself. So, ironically, my sense of  
18 belonging came from freeing myself of all the old bonds, ties and attachments of the  
19 past.  
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32 Jerome: What does the concept of hope mean for you?  
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34 Rachel: I see hope as a little flicker of light in the darkest hour, that no matter how  
35 bad things seem to be, that it is only momentary, that whilst hope is there, things will  
36 get better. My hope goes hand in hand with my resilience, they are intertwined, it is  
37 there when my resilience needs a little break from the hard work it does most of the  
38 time. Hope can be the messenger for change and it can also be the guardian of what  
39 is. Sometimes, I thought there was no hope, and what is there if there is no hope?  
40 But, then I would get a reminder by seeing the hope of others' that told me that just  
41 because I was unable to see, hear or feel hope that didn't mean it had abandoned  
42 me completely. Sometimes people don't want to see hope, as hope is painful, that it  
43 may mean moving away from their current state, that although terrible and painful, at  
44 least is comforting in that familiarity, or we may feel that we don't deserve to be  
45 hopeful, that we are too terrible a person to have the beauty of hope. That is the time  
46 when we need hope the most.  
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3 Jerome: What changes would you most like to see in mental health services?  
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5 Rachel: That providers have the time to be caring as well as providing the support  
6 that people need. That consultants listen and don't judge or pre-diagnose with little  
7 understanding of their patients and that compassion is fully understood as a healing  
8 tool.  
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15 Jerome: What are your views on the use of medications for mental health problems?  
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17 Rachel: Sometimes they seem to work, sometimes they don't. I suppose they are  
18 available to relieve symptoms in some cases, not all cases. I personally have had  
19 some wild journeys on a variety of different medications, when I had lost hope in my  
20 ability to manage myself and expected a doctor to perform miracles or at the very  
21 least just get me feeling 'normal'. Medication didn't work for me, I wasn't me when I  
22 took it and to be honest nothing alleviated any of my symptoms so now I have  
23 developed my own management system, that has at least the same if not better  
24 efficacy than any of the prescribed drugs I was given.  
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33 Jerome: How do you think services can best help promote recovery or in your own  
34 words discovery?  
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37 Rachel: Appreciative enquiry, effective listening, compassion, and collaboration.  
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42 Jerome: Have you been inspired by any mental health professionals you have come  
43 across?  
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45 Rachel: A registrar that I saw in 2013, inspired me with his willingness to sit for over  
46 an hour to listen to my story. This was the first time that had ever happened within  
47 the medical profession. A clinical psychologist also inspired me with her belief that I  
48 actually was not a failure, that in fact I was indeed the opposite.  
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55 Jerome: In terms of people with lived experience, have any individuals impressed  
56 you?  
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3 Rachel: I use to facilitate a behavioural change programme with offenders, those  
4 individuals impressed me. The life stories that they had were often heart-breakingly  
5 harrowing, filled with abuse, neglect, violence, pain and negativity. They were often  
6 on all manners of prescription drugs sometimes supplemented with street drugs or  
7 alcohol. It was a miracle that they could even get out of bed! The very fact that these  
8 people attended workshops that were voluntary, not court-mandated, on time and  
9 with a willingness to look at changing their lives, even now fills me with awe and  
10 admiration. The change that these people went through was nothing short of  
11 extraordinary and all through their own hard work and openness to look even just at  
12 a small part of themselves.  
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23 Jerome: What challenges lie ahead for you? What do you most want to achieve in  
24 the future?  
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26 Rachel: I want to bring joy to the socially disadvantaged. I have a keen interest in the  
27 notion of joy being the missing link in assisting to both develop and sustain  
28 happiness. I wish to complete a PhD that looks at this proposal, focusing on what  
29 interventions of joy we both have and could be developed into not just a therapeutic  
30 tool but also one for everyday life. The notion of joy is really only around for many at  
31 one time of the year and the absence of it amongst the pretence of commercial joy is  
32 a source of distress to many. I want to break down the barriers for joy and bring the  
33 message that joy can be there for life. I also wish to help to develop a Masters in  
34 Applied Positive Psychology that looks to how it could be used for all, not just for the  
35 elite.  
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46 Jerome: What would you most like to be remembered for?  
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48 Rachel: My passion for knowledge.  
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## Conclusion

Gordon McManus penned the definition of recovery as being “coping with your illness and having a meaningful life,” (McManus et al, 2009). This short definition encompasses the clinical and personal meaning elements of recovery from mental health problems. While Resnick and Rosenheck were the first people to suggest a possible synergy between Positive Psychology and recovery, this work is still in its infancy (Resnick and Rosenheck, 2006). Rachel is an individual who is in a position to bring both approaches together and who wants to share her insights with those whom the approach has not yet reached. She does so from a position of having suffered herself, as have other pioneers (Akhtar, 2012). I firmly believe she will do this and I hope I will be able to work with her on her vision.

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## About the authors

Rachel Taylor is in the final year of her Psychology Degree at the University of Bolton, Bolton, UK.

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