Ladies and Gentlemen, and those who identify as neither, thank you for the honour you have bestowed on me today. It speaks volumes for the South West Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and the thinking of so many of you who work in the fragile, vital, complicated domain of mental health care that it was not a member of parliament, a celebrity or even a royal that you should have asked to do this wonderful thing, and officially open your new Unity Centre at this historic hospital. Instead you chose a former patient, an inmate, as we sometimes thought of ourselves, a service user, in the official vocabulary, to cut this ribbon. In doing so, you said, look – what we do may be hard and painful, it may sometimes be difficult and stressful for everyone involved – but it works.

I can only speak from my own experience, but what you do does work; it is working for me, it is working for friends I have made who have been through your system. I came to Fieldhead one night in winter, in a police van, accompanied by a paramedic I suspected was a famous actor, and a young policeman I believed was a stand-up comedian. I thought we were going to transfer to a helicopter and fly to London, for a performance at the National Theatre, or that we were going to take part in a live broadcast. I was very ill. When we arrived, the young policeman said, ‘I’m going to hold your arm now,’ and he took a firm grip, and escorted me to Stanley Ward.

The people who are escorted into this new Unity Centre will go through much of what I did in the following couple of weeks. I was frightened, lonely, frustrated, angry, anxious, insecure, suspicious, guilty, tentative, self-loathing. In psychosis and coming out of it, you run a gauntlet of paranoias, delusions, regrets and despair. Held against their will, the patients who will come here will know great highs and lows. With great luck and your first class care, many of them will make recoveries, and join the world again, shaken perhaps, somewhat changed perhaps, but infinitely better, vastly healthier than they were when they were brought in.

I know those of you who work here and those of you who train, monitor and appoint the people who will work in the Unity Centre do your utmost to make sure that the very unwell people who will be brought through the doors will get the best treatment and attention our society is capable of giving to those who need it most.

If the measure of a society is the way it deals with its most vulnerable, then in a deep moral sense, the Unity Centre, and the wards of Fieldhead, are a true measure of the kind of people we are, of the kind of country this is, and of what kind of time is this, in which our lives will be numbered.

Being sectioned introduced me to some of the most remarkable people I have ever met, in a life which has allowed me to work and travel in over fifty countries. In Calderdale, in Halifax and here in Wakefield, I have met people, from the ladies who made our toast, to the nurses who administered our care, to the executives and chief executives who dispose of multimillion pound budgets, who impressed me beyond all reservation. Your kindness, your effort and your skill are priceless. I salute you. On behalf of the hundreds, thousands and hundreds of thousands of people who your work touches – thank you.

Sometimes on the ward I looked at the nurses and the assistants and the cleaners (who also serve the meals, and deserve more pay) and the therapists, and the staff and thought – we patients have no choice, but these people choose to come here. Every morning or evening, through the rain, they come to this place where none of us want to be, and they try to help us. That is heroism: unsung, vital, straightforward heroism. So I wanted to say, to all of you, well done.

And I want to encourage you to be as brave as some of your patients and their families and friends have to be. I saw tremendous bravery on Stanley Ward. As you know as well as any patient, nothing in acute mental health is simple. We are all, always, even the consultants – perhaps especially the consultants – feeling our way. And when lives and health are at stake it is right of course that you go cautiously. But remember, going by the book is all well and good until in twenty years’ time they are looking back at the book and ripping chunks of it out. Sometimes it will be on the tip of your tongue to say something, at the tips of your fingers to do something, about which you have a feeling, and with which you suspect the book cannot help you. At that moment, please, be brave. Be radical. Try something new. If you can see a better way of doing something, stand up and be counted.

I have interviewed people across the mental health care spectrum and you all say the same thing. Austerity and social inequality are driving people insane – or into crisis, as you put it. You, as the people who make up the NHS, one of our most beloved and knowledgeable and trusted institutions, cannot be muttering this into your cups of tea. It needs to be shouted from the rooftops. You need to be briefing journalists, telling your friends, getting the story out there. Press officers and politicians are wonderful things, but they are there to serve you, not the other way around. If you see things that are wrong or less than right, blow the whistle. I believe this is one of the best facilities in the country, perhaps in the world. But I know of and am investigating another, in a distant city, where terrible abuses have taken place. That starts with someone seeing something wrong and keeping quiet about it. In London I was told about a generation of drugs that work for people, of mental health patients who are experiencing effective treatment with minimal side effects – but those drugs are being withdrawn, not because they are ineffective but because they are not profitable to their manufacturers. Why don’t the public and the politicians know about it?

We desperately need you to tell us these things, or they will pass unchallenged. Here, at the other end of the scale, I hope and expect you are much more likely to see something imaginative, something smart or daring or unusual that works. Please don’t keep quiet about it.

The last thing I have to say comes from the wonderful, skilful, thoughtful woman who sectioned me. She said, of people in psychosis, they have lost the thread, the story of their lives. What we are trying to do is help them find that thread again, pick up that story and go on. She defended your right to believe in aliens, to be eccentric; she said she was eccentric herself. But she was ready to step in, to use the frightening power of the mental health act to deprive you of your liberty and most of your rights, if your beliefs meant you might harm yourself or others. And so what you will do in the Unity Centre, this brave new chapter in Fieldhead’s history, is to repair and change and create better and stronger and happier stories for people who will desperately need you. It is a mighty responsibility, and when you do it well, you do the best kind of work there is. I wish you every success. I thank you for your vast kindness and skill. And I salute all the great good that you do. Thank you very much indeed.

And without further ado, I declare the Unity Centre, OPEN!