

Schizophrenia and the Self

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When I had my first psychotic episode, I was sick for seven long months without contact with other human beings. Very early in my psychosis I broke with family, friends, and school and moved into the heart of the city where I lived to engage in what I believed was a mission to help save the world. So, I had no mediating influence or stability to check any of my beliefs or to question the direction or validity of my behavior. Consequently, I built up a fantasy world of spies and war and a desperate attempt to save the world I loved from a terrible evil that I thought wanted to take over the continent of America and someday the rest of Europe. It was a time of sheer dread. It was painful and frightening to a degree I hardly think exists outside the night terrors of madness or torture. Yet through all this sheer drama, horror, and outright craziness I kept a part of myself that inhibited me from violence, not toward myself but toward others. My self as I knew it was gone, shot through with delusions, paranoia, and sheer insanity. But a little part of me remained, a foundation of me, who I was and am, that stayed true throughout the nightmare of mental illness. I don't know how this could be true. I only know I experienced the dizzying delusions of schizophrenia through the lens of a little sanity. I held on to my moral standards and compass through outrageous delusions like an evil entity who had power even over the gravity of the earth.

I can't explain it. How could I still be me while my mind was broken into pieces and shattered into a million little bits? Let me share one prominent example that may illustrate how I feel. About a month after the illness started, my consciousness began to break down. Terrible, hateful thoughts and words came to the forefront of my experience. If I saw someone who was of any ethnicity (I am Eastern European Jew and Lutheran German), I insulted them in my head. I called them every name in the book and more. I was hateful in a way that is usually reserved for the Klu Klux Klan or Nazis. It didn't matter what color someone was or their background. If they looked Italian or Irish, I came up with insults. If they

wore clothing, I disliked I criticized them. This was true for everyone I passed or encountered. If they looked to me like child abusers, I was vicious. My head bubbled up with hate and invective toward nearly everyone. I couldn't stop it. I tried hard to suppress it, but it burst to the surface like a well of magma.

These words, these thoughts were against everything I ever stood for and had believed in life. I had, and have now, friends of all races, all ethnicities. And although I personally felt no hostility toward others, especially strangers, I couldn't stop the words from yelling out in my brain, almost like a Tourette syndrome phenomenon. At a certain point in my delusions, I understood (or thought I understood) that everyone could read my mind though I was unable to read theirs in return. It was sort of like having God peering into my head, condemning all my thoughts. It was almost unendurable. One day I took a taxi and thought the driver looked like he had abused his child. In my head I excoriated him. I flayed him for his moral culpability. All the while I thought he heard every thought that echoed through my head. I was crushed and dismayed. How did I know he was guilty I asked myself? Just because he appeared to be a movie-style villain did I really know he was one in reality?

Why is it that I didn't embrace this hatred that reverberated so loudly in my head? Why is it I didn't agree with it? It was torture to shout obscenities in my mind that I thought other people heard too, just as if I'd spoken out loud. But I never accepted the words and vituperative hatred that broke open my brain. I resisted it with every bit of moral fiber I had. To the people I thought I had insulted, I apologized (again in the vast fissures of my mind) again and again. I begged for their forgiveness, told them I really didn't feel this way, didn't wish evil on them as it appeared. It was an exhausting process. In one minute, it was as if I called you a bad name and then tried to take it back in the next moment. I was mortified, embarrassed, and sick at heart. I literally entreated people in my head to forgive me.

Never once did I embrace the hatred I discovered inside. Instead, I contended against it with all my strength and I never identified with it. In truth, I experienced it as a bombardment of evil in myself that was unwanted and desperately painful. I despaired of the things I thought I said. As this continued over the months I was ill, I began to avoid people altogether hoping to break the cycle of brutishness I seemed to find in my heart. It was the me that was alive that hated these words and phrases. It was that me who resisted them and fought to keep them from being brought to the surface of my attention. I embraced the delusions altogether: I never once doubted that a world war loomed on the horizon for my country. So, why did this particular, repulsive content affect me so? I believe it was because my mind stayed whole deep, deep inside. And I, my heart, was offended. Part of me stayed alive inside the whirlwind, inside the tempest that had become my conscious experience of the world. Although I believed in the existence of magic and an objective power that could overcome the physics of our world, I never agreed with the inhuman lack of moral standards the illness fostered on my attention or awareness. It was always alien to me, even when the rest of the illness appeared as so much common sense and logic.

In fact, there were other instances when I believed I was being told to become an assassin with particular individuals in mind to be targeted for elimination. And again, though I fully accepted the delusions and followed what I thought were instructions to break from my circle of individuals and a graduate program I loved, I rejected this direction altogether. I realized very quickly

that I could never kill someone, perhaps even if I were in mortal danger. Therefore, I declined to pursue what I thought was a directive from authorities I otherwise embraced. I would have nothing to do with it, even when I obeyed what I thought were instructions to give away all my possessions, leaving me pretty much penniless but for money that was supposed to be used to pay for college tuition.

Some people say that you can never do in insanity what you wouldn't do when sane. If my experience of this is true, I believe it's because deep inside insanity the individual lives, bombarded by evil and sickness, tormented by delusions and terrors that have little resemblance to ordinary horrors. Someone is still there experiencing that upside-down world of insanity. Someone who can't speak. But someone who is nevertheless there, still alive, still aware. May doctors seek that person in all they do for their patients. May we learn methods to reach the individual with a balm and help for their despair at what their world may have become.

Perhaps we each have different experiences of mental illness. I can only hope my own was more terrible than average. I'd hate for this depth of suffering to be a common occurrence. But I also hope that others may still be alive inside as I feel I was. I pray for that little bit of sanity to help redeem others from a world gone absurd. In the end, I believe this little bit of sanity saved my life and helped me to trust a psychiatrist who came to my aid, while keeping my heart untouched by the ravages of brutishness and invective that came loose in my mind.