

## Creativity and Schizophrenia

Roberta Payne

When I was a small child, I worked on fistfuls of clay in my grandfather's pottery factory. I learned how to fashion a figure with my thumbs and fingers; use slip, paint, and glaze; and surrender the object to the red-hot kiln, which returned it to me a permanent thing. Back home, I painted, drew, painted – a bright-green crocodile, a gold genie, a purple baboon on walls in our basement. Later, an illuminated “medieval” manuscript, my own Latin in Gothic letters on faux vellum; a heavy mosaic of a saint in brightly colored stones, complete with a golden halo; a needlepoint tapestry of a dozen exotic birds; papier mache sculpting; and drawing, drawing: I knew creativity and trusted its truth and knew I could count on its presence in myself long before I became mentally ill.

After a “nervous breakdown” (as they called them back then) when I was 22, I spent 15 years in depression, anxiety, alcoholism, and nearly full-time marijuana use. All those years I created nothing but the scrawled poems of a silly, grandiose drunkard.

I got the better of alcohol and drugs because I had to, and I had to right when I did: I couldn't have borne one thing more when, in my mid-thirties, I became bewitched. I choose that word carefully. With it I mean nasty, mean paranoia with its anger and terror; delusions of Alien Beings, of Rules (I must tell no one about this; I must go completely insane; I must be killed...), and of Evil Ones from the ends of the farthest galaxies; and, above all, a separate reality, one that wreaked pain and offered only contorted dead ends each time I tried to escape it.

I began drawing again, after so many years. I drew never-before-seen plants, terrified horses, dragon-like birds—creatures not of “your” universe or its myths. My concoctions were connected to each other in ways not of “your” universe. I felt driven to draw them, even when paranoia forced me to hide the drawings from others. But when I finally did show them to my psychiatrist, my psychologist, and eventually a few close friends, they could not readily tell what I meant, what my psychotic reality was like. They could see only that it was dark, complex, and convoluted.

I am one of the fortunate people with schizophrenia who can often tell that my psychotic reality is not the same as consensus reality. But just knowing that fact is

not enough, since I am, after all, a social animal, and I have needed to tell “you” what my psychotic reality is like, beyond the darkness and convolution you have seen in me. This need to put into words, to communicate with “you” has been overwhelming, very much like the human need to love.

I know that stating my psychotic reality to “you” is one of the keys for getting out of that reality. The act of saying it, so that it is no longer a secret laced with paranoia, disarms it to a huge extent. And I want to stay out of my psychotic reality badly (as I have written in my memoir, *Speaking to My Madness: How I Searched for Myself in Schizophrenia*) “even if the bizarre glamour of gleaming psychotic reality and its terror calls like a Siren.”

But how to truly say that reality? I once tried to say it to my psychiatrist, by writing a list of my thoughts on the subject:

1. It is the texture of the air that I take notes about.
2. Schizophrenics all over the world, in hospital beds, under bridges, on sofas like me, taking notes, making notes. To put into *your* words what there are no words for.
3. I disentangle spider webs in my brain, but there are no words caught in them.
4. What Will I Do for Words?

When I gave my psychiatrist this list, I added, “My mind doesn't contain just *my* thoughts. You see that, don't you, Dr. Llewellyn?”

Of course she did, I smile to myself so many years later. She knew that what I called the “texture of the air” and those “spider webs” were what I had to free myself from, and that the rest of my thinking takes place in consensus reality.

I taught literature and languages in various universities during my working career, so fortunately I have had some language tools at my disposal to aid in my search to state a psychotic thought in “your” reality’s terms. All words are embodiments of a reality, it seems to me; in other words, symbols. But symbols, by their very nature, both add information to, and lose information about, the reality to which they refer. Think of the word, “horse,” for example, and what it might mean to you and what it might mean to me. This feature of symbols is true for

phrases and images too, I reasoned. Thus, I can use ordinary words and put them together in ways that make some sense to “you” but still capture in some way my schizophrenic reality. The result might be small, but it would not be nothing, as in my phrase “the bizarre glamour of gleaming psychotic reality and its terror.” Of course “you,” in consensus reality, can’t truly “get” the message. And the part of my mind that is in psychotic reality can’t totally reveal it. Nevertheless, a communication that is true and real *does* occur; and I, and perhaps you, find that incredibly comforting because it lessens my isolation.

It also seems to me that metaphor helps bridge the 2 worlds. A metaphor posited by the sane part of my mind about the insane part of it helps you see my mind in its various workings. Thus, “the bizarre glamour...and its terror calls like a Siren.” One sees Ulysses, tied down by his sailors—at his own request—to the mast of his ship as they pass the land of the Sirens, whose mellifluous, heart-piercing, irresistible song promises inescapable captivity.

But I find the greatest satisfaction as I attempt to convey my psychotic reality when I move one step past metaphor and the word “like.” Thus, the direct statement, “I disentangle spider webs in my brain, but there are no words caught in them.” That is the closest I can come to fully communicating what is in my brain. And who is to say that the image of spider webs isn’t *almost* that psychotic reality? You simply have to believe me about that.

The notion of translation is a similar way of looking at the task. One reality sometimes needs translating into another, and its language then needs translating into that other language. Thus, I might say, “Schizophrenia is a disease of translation.” I think that the following passage from my memoir shows how much, how little—yet how very much—the person with schizophrenia can relay using ordinary words and metaphors, with or without spelled out comparisons:

As I walked down my alley, I felt possessed by the extraordinary power. The Force was from a different universe, older than time. It would have been a black steel sting ray, sleek and huge as a galaxy, if it had been in these dimensions. It was as real as a childhood night terror, the next morning still realer than real. I had no power to disobey the Force. *Do as*

*you're told! Do as you're told!* encased me in the dark. The Force was pushing me down the alley at 2:00 in the morning so that I might be killed. By a hooded thug stepping silently from behind a dumpster, or a wiry old man with a shining blade.

No one, not even a policeman, ever saw me.

Glad I wasn’t killed, sad I wasn’t killed, glad and sad.

This was an actual journey I took years ago, in my night-gown, down a seamy alley; and it is as well a journey through my mind as it winds through psychotic delusions and the possibility of suicide.

But that was long ago and, much recovered, “today, I have a foot in each world, but I lean as far as I can into your world,” hoping you will accommodate my need to speak at times in images and metaphors as I lean toward you creatively.

### Author biography

Roberta Payne has had 2 fairly long hospitalizations, one in 1968 and one in 1989. Since her first hospitalization, her schizophrenia has expressed itself in episodes of varying lengths preceded by longer prodromal periods. She has been relatively symptom free for several years now. She has spoken to classes of medical students at the University of Colorado each year for about 20 years and is on the Board of the Mental Health Center of Denver. She has undergraduate and advanced degrees from Stanford (BA, Classics), University of California Los Angeles (MA, Italian), Harvard (MA, Romance Languages), and the University of Denver (PhD, Comparative Literature). Her professional work includes 19 years of teaching Latin at the University of Denver and Latin, Italian, English, and Greek privately. Creativity is important to her: she has published 5 books of translations from medieval and modern Italian as well as her own short stories, and she is an active “outsider artist,” with cover art appearing on *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. She has recently published her personal memoir, *Speaking to My Madness: How I Searched for Myself in Schizophrenia* (2013, Amazon/Kindle), in which she describes her struggles with alcoholism, schizophrenia, and cancer.