

The Quest for Reality

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Becoming aware of delusions in one's mind is a complex process, if it happens at all. It is fortunate that we have medications that effectively treat delusions in today's day and age. However, in my experience whether delusions go away is still a matter of more or less time; sometimes seemingly no time at all, while at others longer than one would hope. In what follows I describe the temporal course of three varieties of delusions I have suffered: delusions of reference, delusional perceptions, and paranoid-persecutory delusions. In the case of the first two types of delusion, my experience was a variety of what Eugen Bleuler described as "the frequent 'forgetting' of delusions" in the book where he gave schizophrenia its name. Whereas the third type of delusion was chronic and required me to take a more active role in eradicating such beliefs from my mind.

All three types of delusions started at roughly the same time during what became an acute psychotic episode, and after the passage of roughly one month I started a significant dose of the antipsychotic olanzapine. While all 3 types of delusions began as incorrigible beliefs that I held to doggedly, after starting my course of antipsychotic medication, doubts began to arise in my mind, and all of the delusions became what have been called "partial delusions." This has been my quest to get back in touch with reality.

I experienced delusions of reference in many forms. I would overhear a conversation where I could barely make out the words, and yet it seemed to me that the speakers were of course talking about me. I once came out of my apartment building and a police officer was parked in his car just beyond the stairs. I started to approach him because, surely, he was there for something having to do with me. Fortunately, I thought twice about confronting him and I walked away. In talking to others who have had delusions of reference, I am always flabbergasted that we have shared the perplexing experience of having the

television or radio talk directly to us. From the time my acute psychotic episode began to the time when the delusions of reference dissipated were about 2 months. In this time, I experienced: my own television in my single room occupancy making fun of me; the personalities on the television in the hospital carrying on a conversation with me through subtle aspects of body language; the radio on the rides from my board and care to my outpatient program broadcasting messages that were clearly derived from reading the contents of my mind; and, the television in my room at my board and care constantly addressing me and clearly knowing things about me that implied mind reading.

So, how did these come to an end? Well, one therapist suggested that I simply avoid television and radio broadcasts altogether. But I think that would have been a mistake. Instead, I began watching television regularly. It was certainly uncomfortable at first, but also fascinating. In therapy, I drew a picture of a "control room" of the sort they have at NASA to guide the launches of rocket ships. Only my control room had a staff dedicated to reading my mind and then updating broadcasts to correspond with this data. But this fantasy gradually became fanciful even to me. And, the main programs stopped "speaking to me"—now only the commercials seemed to be directed specifically at me. With more exposure, I began to see patterns in the commercials that were repeated or the themes they were advertising and so fewer commercials affected me in this way. Finally, no content on either the TV or radio triggered me, and to this day I have never had this experience again. But I remember it well.

By delusional perception I understand the finding of meaning in an otherwise normal sensory experience, not a hallucination. Over the course of my psychotic episodes, I have had many instances of delusional perception. Once, in my initial psychotic episode (mostly not described herein), I made my psychiatrist very uncomfortable by

informing her that her blinking eyelids were sending me covert messages. In two separate psychotic episodes, I have seen blinking green lights as one finds on a smoke alarm and I have interpreted the rate at which these lights blinked to be morse code (even though I have no idea how to interpret morse code). But my most salient experience of delusional perception came when I started to hear car, helicopter, and jet noises as attempting to influence my thinking. This only ever occurred to me at the same time as the delusions of reference from my television but outlasted those delusions by roughly one or two months. Indeed, I like to think of these instances of delusional perception related to engine noises as “stubborn.” Why? Because I realized fairly early on that it was ludicrous to think that these noises literally meant to impart to me a message about whether what I was thinking at the moment was good or bad, right or wrong. Nevertheless, every time I heard a jet fly overhead, I would start to become concerned about whatever I had just been thinking. The experience felt so invasive that I had the instinct to go and hide. But this type of delusion simply faded away as well. At first, I didn’t even register the difference. But I distinctly remember once standing in my backyard and a helicopter flew overhead. I was so pleased because the noise didn’t affect me at all other than to remind me that I used to be disturbed by such sounds.

Now paranoia is something I have been dealing with for years, and that proved harder to handle successfully. Ever since my first hospitalization for severe depression, I have been paranoid that the record of that hospitalization would come back to haunt me. Once I became a law student, I started to worry that a psychiatric record would bar my entry into the profession or hurt my chances at employment. But these were relatively mild apparently prodromal symptoms. Right before the conclusion of my legal education, I became possessed of the idea that the government would label me a domestic terrorist threat because of my hospitalization five years earlier for a suicide attempt. This initiated my psychotic break. On and off, I suffered persecutory delusions. My brother was a beach lifeguard and I once went to his tower suggesting that the government was out to get me. He kindly reminded me

that lifeguards work for the local fire department and so are, technically, part of the government. This paranoia would continue to ebb and flow right through the acute psychotic episode that is the main subject here. And then something completely unexpected happened. While I was living at the aforementioned board and care in 2015, there was a terrorist attack in Southern California. This was horrifying, but what happened to my persecutory delusions was something I marvel at to this day. They went away, and stayed away for several years. What I believe happened is that, the government’s failure to stop this terrorist attack engaged my “delusional logic” and I came to the conclusion that I couldn’t be under persecution for my mental health because there was no way the government would look at me as a terrorist. Why I had not come to that conclusion earlier I don’t know, but this “clicked” for me. The irony of this situation was not lost on me.

As I alluded to before, however, my paranoia has been chronic and was due to return. Again, I was focused on a government agency; this time a local agency I thought was spying on me. I started reading intentions into people’s sideways glances at me and other ideas of reference. I became so troubled that I hardly left my house for months. Then I got sick of it. I started reading books of first-person accounts of schizophrenia and paranoia. I started reading textbooks of schizophrenia and delusions. And it worked, though not how I would have expected. I identified that I had a sense of shame about my mental illness and that this guilt was driving my persecutory delusions. This helped. But I also read about trying behavioral experiments as part of taking Cognitive Behavioral Therapy into your own hands. So, I resolved to get out of the house both to join a clubhouse and attend a support group. I got a bus pass. And when I boarded that bus, somehow, my paranoia lifted. Seeing people going about their business, in addition to the change in setting, seems to have worked wonders. I can now exercise in my neighborhood without fear of being spied upon. These persecutory delusions and other delusions could return, I know. I’m steadily lowering my antipsychotic dosage, which poses a risk of relapse. But for now, at least, I’m winning the quest for reality.