

How a Series of Hallucinations Tells a Symbolic Story

Milton T. Greek^{1,2}

²PO Box 475, Athens, OH 45701

Hallucinations as Symbolic Stories

Hallucinations can combine to form a symbolic storyline of personal and seemingly universal meaning. Hallucinations occurring over time on the same themes often build in a manner which seems to indicate a reality hidden behind the reality that most people know. This is especially true after the person in psychosis has experienced hallucinations over a period of months or years and a delusional framework based on these experiences has taken hold in the mind of the individual.

As the process of schizophrenia unfolds, hallucinations gradually increase in severity and duration. At first, hallucinations are often small or momentary and can be as small as the appearance of eyes or a whisper of a voice. Hallucinations often blend seamlessly with normal reality, especially during the early stages of psychosis. After psychosis has fully taken hold, hallucinations may sometimes become much more distinct and have the quality of visions like those found in the first chapter of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelations. In this mode, hallucinations resemble the very dramatic form that is seen in mechanical hallucination simulators.

As one means of understanding the psychotic state, thinking of the person as experiencing a “waking dream,” as my mother referred to my psychosis, is helpful in understanding the state of mind that ongoing hallucinations create. Like consciousness during dreams, static and apparently random images are mixed with meaningful symbols. However, because the person is unaware that he or she is in a waking dream, the hallucinations are taken literally as physical events. Symbolic images which are often exaggerated expressions of one’s personal life and the larger world are taken as a deeply important aspect of reality. In short, in psychosis, one experiences metaphorical ideas as concrete reality and thereby enters into a highly symbolic mindset as if it were actual reality.

Hallucinatory reality is analogous to dreaming in the same room where a television is on. The physical reality of the television is translated into the idiosyncratic symbols of the person’s dreaming and the person’s consciousness experiences the dream, not the television. In the same way, the themes and events of the individual’s personal world become projected into the symbolic hallucinations of the psychotic state and create a highly exaggerated symbolic framework that parallels the actual reality of the schizophrenic.

Example of a Hallucinatory Story

An example of this is a series of 3 hallucinations which occurred over a period of 6 weeks about 2.5 years after my first clear separation from reality. During the earlier phase of my psychosis, the gradually increasing hallucinations had slowly widened my separation from daily reality, causing me to misinterpret events and develop unusual explanations for events. Some of the hallucinations I experienced provided a storyline that mirrored my personal life in highly exaggerated and symbolic form. Meanwhile, my real personal life was increasingly filled with crises, because my inability to cope with daily reality, mixed with personal dysfunction that was the legacy of family, community, and world problems, created a series of poor decisions and increasing inability to handle adult responsibilities. In this context, I began a long bus trip from my college town to my home town several hundred miles away.

In the first hallucination, which lasted less than a minute, I was walking toward the glass double doors of the bus station with a small lunch when I looked through the doors and saw a street person looking at me. The street person’s eyes were highly unusual—they seemed like landscapes that went back into the man’s head infinitely far, stretching on for eternity. I thought to myself, “That man has eyes like God.” I walked through the doors and the man asked me if I had a cigarette. I said no and sat down to eat my snack. The man wandered off and another man strolled by, laughed, and said, “You must be waiting for someone.” He then walked off. An hour or two after I left the station on the bus, I concluded that the man had been God and was waiting for me to offer him some of my food as an act of charity and good will. I supposed that God would have then offered me help with the problems I was facing.

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed; tel: 740-593-2141, e-mail: mgreek1@hotmail.com.

The second hallucination occurred 2 weeks later when I was hitchhiking back to my college town in a state of agitation. The trip back, which took a day and a half, was filled with minor hallucinations and odd experiences. Reality seemed in flux around me and I decided that I would try to find Jesus to help me. I began to talk in code to my rides, hoping that Jesus would respond to my coded prayers. I was traveling toward a highway numbered 33, and since Jesus was 33 when he died in the year 33 AD, I decided that I would ask those who picked me up to “Just let me off at 33.” I continued to do this, even after I reached 33.

After a few rides on 33, a pickup truck pulled up to give me a ride. When I opened the door, I saw a man with shoulder-length hair and sandals. His eyes were similar to the man’s eyes I had seen a couple weeks earlier. They did not stretch back into his head as far, but they had a depth that seemed to imply an ancient spirit. “Just let me off at 33,” I said. “I’m 33,” he replied.

I got into the pickup and wondered what to do. I was not sure that the man who seemed to be saying he was Jesus really was Jesus. It seemed unlikely, in many ways, that this would be true. I looked out the truck window and saw beautiful evergreens covering the rolling countryside. Finally, I decided to say something that might work: “Lord, it’s a beautiful world.”

“Pardon,” the man replied in a strained voice. I looked at him and saw that his eyes were marked by extreme pain, as if recalling the agony of crucifixion. His eyes seemed to be saying, “This world crucified me.” I immediately decided that this was Jesus and that he was forgiving me for doubting who he was.

“Lord,” I repeated, this time using a tone that clearly addressed the man as the Lord, “It’s a beautiful world.”

“It can be,” Jesus replied, “It depends on which way you are going.”

Instantly, I realized that Jesus was saying that my soul was in jeopardy. “I haven’t been a very good person in my life,” I said.

“Pardon,” Jesus replied.

“I haven’t been a very good person in my life,” I repeated.

“All you can do is go on from now,” Jesus said. I realized that Jesus had fully forgiven my sins, and now he was saying the future was in my hands.

In retrospect, I believe the man driving the pickup was becoming very nervous. He indicated that he would have to get off at the next exit and that “There was a small town past these woods.” I interpreted the small town to be heaven, and, due to personal symbolic ideas too complex to explain here, I believed that Jesus was saying that if I went into the woods and starved myself to death as penance I would go to heaven.

After he dropped me off, I went into the woods by the road for a short time, but after thinking a while I decided to stay on Earth and do good works. As I returned to the

road, I heard a voice say, “This means I will carry your cross.” My right forefinger touched my left wrist, as if marking where a nail would go in. I thought I was receiving a message teaching me sign language.

A couple weeks after returning to the college town, I attended a meeting of a self-help group. I had become very nervous in the interim since I was constantly wondering, “If I’m not going to heaven, where am I going?” During the meeting another member of the self-help group and I went into the hallway to discuss how to approach counseling others. The other person touched her right forefinger to her left wrist and looked at me, making me think that I was about to be crucified in some way and she was offering to help me with my trial.

After a short conversation, we returned to the meeting and after a few minutes events became very personal and powerful. The self-help group turned its attention entirely to me and the leader, and the leader and I had a long dialogue about my personal problems. The person I had met with privately fell silent, but her eyes became extremely pained and glazed over, as if foreseeing tremendous suffering. From the conversation that I had with the group leader, I came to believe that I was to be punished for disobeying God and Jesus and not fulfilling my penance. I left the meeting in an agitated state and began to believe that I was in jeopardy of going to hell.

I did not know at the time that everything that occurred from the moment that the woman and I went into the hallway until the end of the meeting was a 20- to 30-min hallucination that had blended seamlessly with reality. Without this knowledge, I became very agitated. After concerned friends called her, my mother made an emergency trip and took me home. I was hospitalized for the first time a few weeks later. At the time, I interpreted the events of the hallucinations literally and believed that since Jesus had returned to Earth, the rapture was beginning to unfold and I was in jeopardy of damnation.

After spending the next 12 months believing that I had actually been condemned to hell with no chance of repentance, I called the group leader and another member of the self-help group and described what I had experienced. I found out what I thought had happened at the meeting had never occurred. I had not any clear knowledge of what happened after the hallucination began, how long the meeting lasted after that moment, or anything else connected to consensus reality. In retrospect, all I know for sure was the 20- to 30-min memory was a symbolic message which I misinterpreted as actual reality.

Placing Hallucinations in Personal Context

Applying the cultural symbols of these hallucinations to the circumstances of my life is essential to interpreting the hallucinations’ meaning. The cultural belief systems in my background were a mixture of atheism and agnosticism in my nuclear family surrounded by a fundamentalist

Christian community. The Christians in the community were actively hostile to me and my family, citing our religious and liberal political beliefs. It was commonly said by those in my community that I was going to hell because I “didn’t accept Jesus as my savior” and because of my family’s acceptance of evolution, political liberalism, and other beliefs that rejected cultural traditions that the community associated with Christian teachings. The appearance of God and Jesus, rather than other religious figures, such as Buddha or Allah, in the story reflects my cultural background. The implicit distance and hostility I assumed that these deities had toward me are reflective of my personal history with those who claimed to speak for them.

My personal life at the time of these hallucinations was seeing an unfolding of family, community, and world dysfunction. This unfolding was creating a moral dilemma and causing me to alienate many people. This dynamic was independent of the schizophrenia, though the confusion caused by psychosis was increasing the severity of my personal crisis. The personal and character problems I had were being reinforced by a group of peers who, albeit well-meaning, were helping to perpetuate the negative patterns. The problems that were discussed in the 20- to 30-min hallucination at the self-help group were very real, though exaggerated by the symbols of the psychosis and made much more dramatic for that reason.

At the same time that one peer group was perpetuating negative patterns of behavior, I was befriended by a group of older individuals who understood both the dysfunction and its consequences in my life. This group was seeking to support me in changing my life and the intergenerational patterns that were the origin of the dysfunction. These individuals were part of the self-help group in the third hallucination, during which I conferred with a woman in a hallway and then was the center of attention of the group for nearly half an hour.

In terms of meaning, the symbolic significance of the central hallucination involving Jesus was a reflection of the 2 potential directions for my life: a negative path (“going to hell”) that was the perpetuation of family and community dysfunction in the first peer group and a positive path (“going to heaven”) that arose from following the direction of the older group of people who were befriending me. In retrospect, following the dysfunctional path was having and would have continued to have very negative spiritual and material consequences would have damaged my life, spirit, and all aspects of my future, even without the schizophrenia. To use a familiar phrase, my life was “going to hell in a hand basket” and while the schizophrenia compounded these problems, the dynamic would have remained and caused severe problems for me had I not changed.

In looking at the concrete application of the hallucinatory message to my life, it is important to note that the three hallucinations delivered a very powerful emotional message to me which has affected me for years. Despite

the intensity and the trauma associated with the literal interpretation of the symbolic hallucinations, the message of the story helped alter my life course for the better. As time went on, I moved increasingly away from the peer groups that were perpetuating my dysfunction and into peer groups that reinforced a new, positive personality. This included years during which the group of older individuals were my closest confidants and role models and years of working with activists seeking to improve community and world conditions. I also attended many years of self-help groups and professional counseling.

Choosing to follow a path of doing good works, as I have tried to do to some degree in the past 20 years, has brought very positive spiritual and material consequences. Following the poetic words of the hallucination with Jesus, I now find this to be a beautiful world, which contains the hope for an improving personal and spiritual life despite existential challenges ranging from the death of loved ones to enormous world problems and crises. There is a distinct possibility that, if I had not developed schizophrenia, I would have continued on a negative and spiritually damaging path. If I had been capable of going on with my life, it is likely that I would have continued to draw peers into my life who would have reinforced numerous negative behaviors, leading to the potential for far more serious consequences. For that reason, I view my passage through schizophrenia—however difficult—as a gift that has aided me in many ways.

Implications for Postpsychotic Counseling

Placing the symbolic themes and hallucinations experienced during psychosis in the personal, community, and world context holds potential for postpsychotic counseling. After the person who has been in psychosis has clearly stabilized and fully accepts his or her diagnosis, it is possible to review the person’s real life and to come to understand the meaning behind the dramatic images created by hallucinations. In doing so, it is possible for one to gain personal insight into his or her life and to find meaning in the seemingly bizarre and irrational nature of schizophrenia.

Counselors of postpsychotic schizophrenics can help them undo some of the trauma experienced during psychosis by reviewing their hallucinations as personal and cultural symbols. Contextualizing these symbols in the life histories of individuals allows them to re-interpret their experiences, relieve anxiety caused by these events, and glean meanings that can help identify areas for improvement in their adaptation to the world around them.

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