

Emerging From Schizophrenia

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If you had passed through Yale College in the early 90s, you might have noticed that a poster appeared on all the poster boards and public spaces. If you read the poster, you would have been taken aback—the author of the poster believed he was the subject of a movie taken in secret. This movie was supposedly very embarrassing. The author was using this poster to defend himself against this supposed underground scandal.

I was the schizophrenic who put up those posters. My delusions began in 1984. I was a 26-year-old programmer working in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I thought of myself as a little odd, but sane, and so did the people I worked with. This was soon to change. One night I walked into a building in Harvard Yard. There were a few men and women rehearsing a Greek play, and one of them seemed to be my former girlfriend, who I will call “Crystal.” Crystal seemed very hostile, and she looked at me and uttered the words “The Gods Will Strike!” I left the building, bewildered, but the thought hardened in me that I had indeed met her. This was the beginning of years of delusions.

Shortly after the encounter with Crystal, I seemed to run into hostility by strangers on the streets of Cambridge. This hostility included people spitting at me (or were they just clearing their throats?) and people calling me names. I tried to understand why they were hostile. Did they believe something bad about me? Was a rumor being spread about me? Or worse yet,—was a film of my x-rated past being shown secretly and then being passed covertly from person to person?

My parents tried to reason with me—but did not succeed. I definitely wanted to talk and argue about what I believed was happening, but our debates persuaded neither them nor me.

A few weeks after the posters went up, and 10 years after I supposedly met Crystal, my mental illness took a strange turn. I came home to my apartment one day with a bottle of Poland Spring water. I drank some, and put the rest in my refrigerator. Then I read the paper, and made my daily phone call to my parents, and then went to sleep. The next morning, I got dressed, ready

to go to work, and then remembered to drink the rest of the water in the bottle. This innocent act became a dramatic delusion. Within 5 minutes of drinking the water, I was hit by violent and extreme symptoms. This experience convinced me that someone had entered my apartment secretly and had drugged me. This person must have put a drug in the water bottle during the previous night. The symptoms were strange: I felt like punching the walls. I felt pains in my kidney area. But the strangest symptom of all was that my sex drive climbed to the roof and beyond. I said to myself that some mysterious and evil group of people, perhaps a mafia or a “hate group” drugged me. And the choice of drug made sense—an x-rated drug for an x-rated person.

The symptoms did not go away after a day or two. They lasted over a month. I ended up in front of a psychiatrist who prescribed Zyprexa. The Zyprexa had an interesting effect—within a short time it stopped me from acting on my delusions. I stopped putting up posters.

The paranoia, however, accelerated. For instance, when I saw a dead bird under my mailbox, I thought the “bad guys” had put it there to send me a message.

One day, I walked down Edgewood Avenue with a portable radio in my hand, listening to the Michael Reagan show. A caller named “Crystal from New Haven” called in and then hung up. I took this as evidence that Crystal (my angry former girlfriend) was mocking me.

I hired a detective to find Crystal. The detective eventually found Crystal, but he told me she lived quite far away, and thankfully, I did not pursue that angle.

At night—at 2:00 AM, I would ride a taxi to work, and sleep in my office to temporarily escape the bad guys, who I was convinced were poisoning the air in my apartment. I believed the “bad guys” even followed me to Switzerland on my bike vacation, and that they used a drug on me there too.

I felt like I was in an ever-tightening vise, as the “bad guys” sabotaged more and more aspects of my life.

Back in New Haven, I paid a poor black man to show my photo to as many people as possible, in hopes that one of them would tell him (and me) the “truth” about the movie. In addition, I taped a paranoid speech on cassette that I distributed in various colleges. When I told my brother what I had done, he said “There’s no movie, but now there’s a tape!”

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I would have run away from the “bad guys” if I could have, even if that meant not seeing my parents and brothers ever again. But I did not have the money to do that successfully.

Even now, I am not totally cured. But I have improved. It may be the electroconvulsive therapy that I was pressured into taking that cured me, it may have been the Zyprexa, or it may have been a natural rebound. So now I can look back, and think about what happened. I was acting like a detective who was seeking clues to the conspiracies that I believed were real. I was in a frame of mind where the conspiracies loomed so large that I seized on innocent events as corroboration. An event with many possible interpretations took on only one, sinister interpretation.

I should say that many of my experiences were very realistic, which was one reason why it was so hard to let go of them. I did not hear disembodied voices telling

me to do things, and many of my experiences seemed to fit seamlessly into my day.

I have emerged (mostly) from the type of thinking that led to a waste of years in a paranoid haze. Much of the time my mind was not very active, in fact, it seemed to go in the same rut over and over again.

My disease almost cost me my job, and it prevented me from taking opportunities that did arise. I was not able to hide my disease from my coworkers.

One last lesson I took from all this was that it does not hurt to argue with a schizophrenic. I wanted to tell my story, and when people did object to parts of it, it did force me to think. And eventually, as I got better, their arguments made more sense.

Recovery to me means that, even if the delusions are not completely gone, I am able to function as if they are. I am even able to joke about something that obsessed me for almost 20 years.