

## Ability and Disability

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It is difficult to explain to people how my schizophrenic illness makes me disabled. I tell people that I am an artist, a nice thing to label myself because it implies a lifestyle of indeterminate work hours and an indeterminate income. In short, no one can tell just by looking how successful or unsuccessful an artist is. And because artists are stereotyped as being a bit odd or fey, the eccentricities of a schizophrenic personality are attributed to a creative, rather than diseased, mind. If a stranger is kindhearted, then they imagine the best and are comfortable in conversation, treating me as an equal. Needling questions about my lifestyle are usually passed by for more exciting topics—the immediate favorite is always “What do you paint?” Few try to ascertain my productivity or scale of talent. Because of my illness, I can only make 4 or 5 paintings a year. And because of my reclusive nature, promoting myself socially is a difficult and almost abhorrent task. I do make a little money as an artist. But most of the money needed to buy paint, brushes, canvass, and frames is donated by family members.

My commitment to making art is strong. Naturally, like any artist, I would like to be sought after and sell paintings. But like most artists, all I can do is my quiet best and quietly hope for a better day. Over time, I discovered one hard fact about being an artist with a schizophrenic thought disorder. My disease stunts creative growth. A person can be born talented, but without hours of practice and hard work that talent most likely will not become significant. The artist will not stand apart and above the crowd. If a mental disability limits the hours of peak mental concentration every day, then natural talent matures very slowly. The production of complex, sophisticated artwork creeps along. Without emotional discipline, the alternative of making quick, simple artwork is very attractive. It is my observation that nondisabled artists have better opportunity for creative experimentation, art education, and giving a gallery the number of paintings needed for a one man or group show. Art dealers and collectors want to view talent that is mature, style that is cohesive, and work that has conceptual, or labor-intensive, weightiness.

While it is difficult for the disabled person to be commercially competitive with nondisabled artists, it is not impossible. I believe that the best hope for a schizophrenic artist to make money and gain recognition lies in the use of modern technology. Art reproductions, on posters or cards, compensate for a slow production rate. Also it helps if the schizophrenic is aware of their inherent limitations. For instance, I compensate for my slow production rate with the general rule of painting every day. Like the victorious tortoise might have said once to the defeated hare, “slow and steady wins the race.” And because I am mostly self-taught, the library has become a favorite place of study. In books and magazines, I am introduced to artwork from around the world.

My husband is a gentle, average man who works full time and was for many years a single father. He has no psychiatric troubles. We are matched with so many gifts and abilities: creativity, intelligence, and humor. How, then, to explain the differences that schizophrenia is responsible for? For me, normalcy and mental illness has nothing to do with good people vs bad people or talented people vs untalented people. The first, most basic judgment that I would make about a person with a schizophrenic thought disorder has to do with raw brainpower. Between my husband and me it is not so much what we do with our time that is mismatched but how much time we are each allotted to do with as we wish. My productivity is always at risk from my illness while his productivity is steady and strong.

We explain our differences in ability and disability with a metaphor about pennies. We say that in the morning when we wake, we are each given a different amount of pennies to spend throughout the day. A single penny is a measure of mental clarity, a little burst of coordinated energy that will see you through the accomplishment of one small task. People like my husband who are rich with mental health are blessed with 100 pennies, while I, having a thought disorder, only get 20 pennies. During the day, my husband can spend his pennies far and wide, enabling behavior that seems smooth and effortless because he has been gifted with a wealth of brainpower. From my point of view, when someone has been given the gift of 100 pennies to spend, they live life full of extravagant emotion and activity. At the end of the day when we lay our heads on a pillow, usually, we have spent all our pennies and are tired because the mental bank is empty. A good night's

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sleep will magically restore all penny wealth for the next morning.

My disability is real because I do not have the same abundance of clear, focused thought as a nondisabled person. One of the simple differences between me before the onset of schizophrenia and after is just power, or, a number of pennies. The consequence of having less mental endurance does eventually trickle down and cause changes in personality and identity. But theoretically, because a penny is a penny, I have a lot of access to normal behavior. The only question is, “can I afford to pay the price to get done all the activity that I desire?”

In the morning, I can take a shower and spend my penny. Or I can skip the shower, have hair that is a little greasy, and save a penny. If I cook a breakfast and read the newspaper, then I will lose more pennies. An alternative is to eat cold cereal and stay ignorant about world affairs. Often there are small, ordinary chores that I do not do so that I will have more time to work and make art. Before I commit myself to almost any sort of action, I often silently calculate: how much will this activity drain me? Every sundry task costs. My endurance is quickly eroded as I pay the price for each distinct place I direct my concentration and will. In one evening, I can drive to the grocery store, listen to music, make a phone call, get angry at my husband, make love to my husband, watch a movie, and walk the dog if there are enough pennies in my account. Usually, an extensive list like this is only possible if I have taken a several hour long nap beforehand. When I show reluctance toward certain behavior and pull back or slow down the basic reason is almost always fear. I am afraid to run out of pennies.

So, what happens to a person when there are no more pennies left? The answer is familiar to both the abled and disabled—exhaustion, vulnerability to stress, loss of control over emotions, and logical thought processes. A lot of my schizophrenic symptoms are just a magnification of what happens to a normal person when they are tired. You know that you are stressed and low on mental power when you get emotional over something that is small and silly, or if you lose the ability to count your change, forgetting basic arithmetic. When we are mentally drained, we turn into different people—a weaker person, spend all of your pennies, and different part of the self emerges, one that is not very much in harmony with the world. When a person feels that they “just don’t have much left in them,” that is when damaging things happen. Bone weary people say things they do not mean to loved ones, they misinterpret social signals, get mad, paranoid, inappropriately silly, overly critical, or simply want to give up and hide.

If I am not careful, I can spend all my pennies by 12 noon. Frequently, I experience the shift of Karen who is capable to a Karen who barely exists. My identity goes from feeling real and solid to someone who is made of mist, a silent ghost. When I am completely

drained, my physical movement slows and it becomes very difficult to talk or make eye contact with people. At this low point, my general outlook on life changes. The world turns dark and threatening, and all my earthly delights and good fortune are forgotten. This type of irrationality, it is so foreign, strange, and lonely that it hurts. Subjectively, becoming overly symptomatic is very uncomfortable. So I pace myself throughout the day, saying “no” to a lot of people and opportunities as a form of self-protection. This disease makes me reclusive by choice and that is difficult for some people to understand. They mistake my withdrawal from social and worldly activity as being antisocial, or worse, laziness.

A small gallery owner and I once had a friendly acquaintance that lasted several years. He professionally framed several of my painted canvasses. When I visited him in his shop, I was always at my most attractive—showered, rested, and a paying customer. The new car I parked in his lot had been bought for me by my husband. This man could not see anything wrong with me. My creeping rate of artistic production baffled him. And I think, he was curious about my new marriage—why would a man willingly take an unemployed, sick woman as a wife?

One day, he said to me, “You have a nice personality. You would interview very well. Why can’t you get a job at the kennel down the road?” What the gallery owner hoped to do was to prove my status of being disabled wrong. His theory that I was strong enough to become a contributing member of society, earning a wage, was intended as a compliment. In an attempt to find a normal place in the world for me, he had thought of a menial job that required no education and minimal intellect. What I would be doing at the kennel was vague, but the implication was that I should clean up after caged animals. The intent was to prove that my psychiatric disability could be overcome by simply finding the right task for me to do. He imagined that a job that was purely physical, washing excrement off concrete floors, would not tax my brain or invoke the disability of schizophrenia.

Perhaps, for several hours every day, I could use my best hours of clear thought and concentration working at a kennel. Here my acquaintance was also challenging my resolve for recovery. If I declined to apply for such a job then the fault must lie with me and my personal values and not my illness. But the assumption that physical labor somehow bypasses my thought disorder is incorrect. In my world of pennies and necessary cost, the act of directing my body in coordinated movement is just as mentally fatiguing as sitting in front of a computer and typing. Bending language, as I have done in this essay, and bending my body are very different tasks but they both involve my person as a whole.

A good friend once said to me, “Karen, you become the book you read.” It often seems that my mind is like a light switch that can only be turned on or off and it is seldom

able to roam in-between. Sometimes, I wonder if the main feature of my illness is not just an abnormal intensity of experience. I am too much in the world, concerned with the world, and consumed by the world. In my household, I am the slowest dishwasher and the slowest with the vacuum cleaner and the dust rag. However, I am also the best dishwasher and the most thorough cleaner of every nook and cranny. One might say that I take life, and everything in it, too seriously. But to be more accurate, perhaps, I burn out so fast because I am not splintered into parts, lacking the agile ability to project or withhold concentration. My existence is not filtered out into more important or less important parts, and so, I am vulnerable to life's abundance of stimuli.

My choice is to use what limited mental power I have to the utmost. I have chosen a career in making art be-

cause I find painting to be a joyous wedding between the concrete and tactile and the abstract and intellectual. As if I were conducting a musical symphony, when I work all parts of my brain are engaged, connected, and coordinated. There is nothing, ever, boring about making art. Technical problems concerning color, shape, and the painted surface are very real to me, and the adventure to solve them is exhilarating. Some of the pictorial mysteries I am involved in, by studying what other artists have done, will take years to unravel. Don't many people secretly dream that they could one day find work that they feel passionate about? The balance of my life is fair and good because in the midst of disability I have found moments of ability that are sought after, cherished, and repeated from one day to the next.