

The Spectrum of Sanity and Insanity

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Schizophrenic thoughts have a life of their own. They arise seemingly out of nowhere when a person knows the difference between sanity and insanity and emerge initially as small ideas. When I first began experiencing insane thoughts, they seemed normal and plausible, if only a bit more creative. During this initial stage, it would have been very difficult to detect anything out of the ordinary, for my close family and friends or even for myself. After all, very few suspect that they will develop schizophrenia, especially in my case with no family history. Furthermore, insane thoughts usually come into being after 20 years of sanity for men and a few years longer for women. Because the initial schizophrenic thoughts are benign, they are simply taken for granted as real. When these ideas and theories came about in my case, I looked for confirmation that they were true and was able to find subjective evidence. When I looked hard enough, with a little imagination, I was able to substantiate these somewhat skewed ideas. Eventually, my thoughts lost all bases in reality, and I scrambled to hold onto new insane thoughts as a way to find meaning and explanation once again. Actually, however, the only way to regain sanity is through correct treatment and medication, which I was lucky enough to receive. After medication, my schizophrenic thoughts dissipated, and I was once again able to get a grasp on reality. During a schizophrenic break, one moves between the spectrum of sanity and insanity and is gradually pulled from the clear light of reason to that of madness. I hope that the nature of this progression becomes clearer as I recount the story of my path from sanity to insanity and back again.

My break began in the winter semester of 2007 during my junior year at the University of Michigan. My life had taken a turn for the better. I had finally decided that I would go into architecture; I had been accepted into an exclusive architecture history class going to Tokyo, and I had a new girlfriend for a few months. One year prior, I had broken up with an old girlfriend and had

sunk into a depression. My grades likewise took a bit of a dip. With my sadness behind me, everything was looking up. However, in hindsight, one might have been able to tell that something was amiss. Thoughts tainted by the beginnings of schizophrenia began to appear in my mind in the form of strange theories, the most prominent of which I will call “color theory.”

Color theory was my idea that one could determine a person’s feelings, thoughts, and even their personality by the color combinations of their clothing. Earlier, I had developed this theory to analyze art films, like those by Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard, or David Lynch, which were marked by their vivid use of color. For instance, red symbolized power; black symbolized the dark side of human nature; blue, perception; white, purity; yellow, self-awareness; etc. I first applied this theory to analyze architecture and modern art, and then, when I was convinced of its validity, I began applying it to real life. Engrossed in this simplistic notion, I put my studies at school at the wayside, so I could develop this theory further.

Despite this distraction, I was still functioning rather normally, and I could keep up with my course load of 5 classes. And in some of my courses, in particular, my introductory architecture drawing course, I was excelling. In that class, I had even become something of a teacher’s pet and my instructor, notably a young woman, seemingly fawned over my work. My peers noticed how my teacher appreciated my work as well and began using some of my ideas, such as putting abstract pictures behind the overall composition. Being a bit of a loner and a quiet person, this sudden attention quickly went to my head. I began believing that I had a great future as an architect. This marked the beginning of some delusions of grandiosity that would more fully develop later. Teachers in my other classes were likewise paying a great deal of attention to me. My physics teacher seemingly singled me out when he lectured and often looked my way during class. The idea that I was special somehow was given extra credence by my entrance into an exclusive class about the history of architecture in Tokyo. Only a dozen students were allowed into the course, and during spring break, we would be traveling to Tokyo.

As the semester progressed, my teachers began to take an even greater interest in me, and I thought I had found out why. I had discovered how to charm people into

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liking me using my color theory. If I waved around a red pen, the color of power, eg, I would gain some power over those who saw me wave the pen. By using people's natural sensory biases toward these colors, I could control them, to the extent that I could give people a favorable view of myself. I believed that these new powers were some type of magic. Additionally, I had begun to see hidden meanings in everything, from graffiti to architecture and to everyday speech. People in Ann Arbor were so intellectual that they used symbolic speech! This was a great discovery for me, and I henceforth began an attempt to discern what people actually were talking about behind their banal conversations. Initially, thinking this way was beneficial to me in my architecture classes, where one analyzed every little detail, but it soon led to great distortions when I began applying it to everyday life. My interest in magic also led me to search for those rare others who seemed to also use magic or were called wizards or witches. Consequently, I began to love the story of Merlin and the music of Yoko Ono, who had just released an album entitled, "Yes, I'm A Witch." From these sources, I thought, I would gain a better understanding of what was happening to me.

I also began to develop an interest in stone circles, like that of Stonehenge, for I believed that they were a symbol for opening up a portal to a new world, one of magic. Contemporary architecture also interested me, especially the work of Maya Lin because she used some elements of stone circles, and her famous Vietnam Memorial has often been described as a barrier between the world of the living and the dead. If she could effectively use portals, such as this barrier between worlds, she must know magic as well.

One of the biggest distortions in my thinking up to that point occurred one day in my architecture class in Tokyo. My teacher had worn a black outfit, the color of the darker side of humans, with a green scarf that seemed vaguely snake like. Also, from the way she glanced at me during class made it seem to me that she was trying to seduce me. Not only could I charm people but also I could induce them to have romantic feelings for me. Furthermore, she seemed to have used the same color theory as I to have created such a getup. She could do magic as well! Magic was clearly more common than I had thought. Perhaps, one day, I would be able to learn more of magic from her.

It was not long, however, before my magical powers began to run away with themselves. First, in my architecture drawing class, as I began work on some doodle, I noticed that all the girls were looking on me longingly and that the guys were trying to see what I was drawing. Without trying to, I had single handedly charmed an entire class. Then, in my physics class, my professor, whom I had previously only thought of as a nice, quirky old man, began to use hidden messages in his speech to make a pass on me, in the middle of class no less. Needless to say, I was quite shaken by this development. Soon, be-

ing so preoccupied with magic and hidden meanings, I fell behind in my schoolwork and was forced to drop at least one of my classes. I chose physics partly because it was one of my more difficult classes at the time but mostly because I had a lecherous pervert for a teacher. I had also begun to notice that I was being followed. My guess was that the university had assigned bodyguards to protect me because I was such a valuable student with unique magical powers.

I needed to know more about magic if I was to save myself from my out-of-control powers. Thus, I decided to approach my Tokyo architecture teacher in her office hours. There, I spoke to her of my interest in portals and the work of Maya Lin. My teacher also was a great of fan of Ms Lin, and we got along famously, at first anyway. From our conversations, I began to believe that our relationship could become romantic; after all, she had been the first one to suggest the idea by sending flagrant hidden messages via her snake scarf costume. I began to try to use magic to make passes on her, mainly by discreetly waving around my trusty red pen or by dressing in colors I thought she would find attractive. Then, I thought it best to let the magic work and tried to stay as close as I could to her.

Nothing happened at first. Maybe she was a little confused. Eventually, though, she got the idea. She told me that she had a boyfriend. However, we had spoken at length about Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and after buying the book and looking at all the pictures, I knew its hidden messages. The book was an explanation on how to use magic. The more a person refused to give into romance, the greater the power of the magic. I eventually pushed the boundaries with her too far by sending her an e-mail asking to meet me one night. Because of my advances, she dropped me from the class and forbade me to enter the building where she taught. Luckily, I did not have any other classes in that building and so could easily avoid her. Still, this was not at all what I had intended on happening. How was I ever to learn how to use magic? What hurt most, however, was that I would no longer be allowed to go to Tokyo. I had lost one of my crowning achievements at the University of Michigan and my first chance to visit another country. I had pinned so much of my hopes for my future architecture career onto that class. What was I going to do now?

Before I could make any decisions, I was summoned to the assistant to the dean of my college, Literature, Science, and the Arts, to speak about what had happened between my teacher and me. As I waited in the lobby, I observed a few interesting details. Some posters displayed students dreaming and had text saying, "At the University of Michigan I learned of worlds that I had never known to exist." This was clear proof that magic, ie, the other worlds, existed. I had simply been summoned to the assistant to the dean to be shown a world where magic existed. This was my lucky day. I was not in

trouble; I was being introduced to a whole new world. I told the assistant to the dean all about my new powers. Surprisingly, he was a bit taken aback by this, and after the meeting, I was led to the Counseling and Psychological Services of the university. This was not what I had expected. Instead of a warm welcome, they were trying to suggest that I was crazy. I chose not to tell the psychologist working that day anything that had happened to me, and eventually, they had to let me go.

My delusions quickly grew more convoluted and scary. Everyone I passed on the street would give a personal comment about me or insult me. It was clear that they knew the details of my personal life. From these detailed comments, I deduced that I had been on a secret TV show all of my life, similar to the Truman Show. At first, this did not bother me that much. But soon, it became quite clear why I had been televised. People thought of me as the next incarnation of Jesus Christ, and I was destined to take my place as the god of the earth. Now, this bothered me. Although I had been born and raised Catholic, I personally have no religion and consider myself to be an atheist. So, I vehemently contested the fact that I was god on my MySpace page, updating it every few days with another diatribe against those who believed me to be god. After a few days of this, I began to believe that I had angered the world's population of Christians by declaring myself to be a normal guy, and they would take their vengeance upon me somehow. From this point on, every bump on the wall of my apartment and every cry in the distance were directed toward me. These were some of the most frightening times of my life. I started to feel as though everyone had it in for me and that they were planning my murder. Every moment could be my last. I confessed these feelings to my girlfriend, but she did not understand why I would believe such a thing. She did all she could to try to convince me that I was safe. But I did not believe her.

Spring break was soon upon me. A few days earlier, near the time of the Tokyo class debacle, I had broken the news to my parents that I had been dropped from that class and would be spending spring break as I had done every other year, at home. I think my parents were confused about what exactly had happened, but my parents, always supportive of me, welcomed me back. Because I did not have a car in campus, my mother would be driving my sister, also a University of Michigan student, and me back home to Port Huron. That was the plan anyway. During lunch in Ann Arbor, my mother was telling us how she would be taking my other younger sister to Canada to see her favorite band. But I knew that this was not the whole truth. After all, I could see the hidden messages behind things. My mother and my sister would be attempting to escape the coming apocalypse by fleeing to Canada. I had caused the end of the world to come, and I had only moments to live before I would be tortured to death by an angry mob for having

caused all this. Still, I had some business left to finish before we left Ann Arbor for home. My physics laboratory had not yet officially been dropped. I needed my instructor's signature before I could withdraw from the class. My mother would drop me off at the laboratory, circle the block, and pick me back up. When I got out of that car near my laboratory, I thought that my mother had abandoned me. I saw her leave and drive past me. I knew I had to find my own way out of the apocalypse.

From the physics laboratory, which I did not even bother to enter, I rushed into the middle of campus, the Diag. Here, I saw groups of people walking from place to place, groups I thought were of a religious nature and were preparing themselves for the coming apocalypse. Not everything was a bad omen, however. I also saw children playing Frisbee. I concluded that the hidden meaning of the children playing foretold that life would go on after the apocalypse, and perhaps, there would even be a heaven on Earth, as is prophesied in the Bible. People were gathering everywhere. It was only a matter of time before they found me and literally ripped me apart. I knew that action must be taken. I had to kill myself. First, I decided to jump off a building. I considered the library, which was big but not quite high enough to ensure my death from falling. After deliberating a bit, I chose Dennison, a veritable tower of a building. When I got there, I climbed the 10 or so stories; elevators after all might get stuck if someone knew I was in one. Finally, out of breath, I reached the top. There, some rooms were open, and they were filled with machinery. All the windows up this high were bolted shut. I would need to break one. Although I considered breaking a window with a piece of machinery and then jumping off, I was now shaking with fear. There was no way I could jump. It was simply too frightening to contemplate. I would need a new way to commit suicide.

Leaving Dennison, I passed a large decorative anchor. There, I heard a voice, telling me, "Oh, he decided not to jump." Someone had spotted me! I needed a sign and fast. Of course! Why would an anchor be there if not to give me a hidden meaning? This made some sort of twisted sense. After all, what was happening had been foretold in the Bible. Naturally, there would be signs for me to interpret. The anchor spoke of a Björk song, called *The Anchor Song*. In this song, Björk sings about herself diving to the bottom of the ocean and dropping her anchor there because that is where her home is. At the time, I thought she was speaking literally and that the song was a sign for me to drown myself.

From there, I made my way through the graveyard to the river in Nichol's Arboretum, a large park on campus. Although the banks of the river were frozen with ice, the vast majority of river was still flowing water. I remember ducking my head into the shallow water, waiting for the ice-cold water to enter my nose. After trying this

numerous times, I realized that this would not do. There would be no way I would be able to die like this. I simply always came back up for air. Lost, I looked around for a hidden message. On the railway bridge over the river near me, a piece of graffiti simply said, "Pray." So, pray I did, kneeling in the freezing water. After a minute or 2, I got the idea into my head that I was supposed to jump off the bridge into the water. It was only about 10 ft high, but I thought I might be able to jump headfirst, lose unconsciousness, and die by drowning. It was an easy climb up to the top of the bridge, but I was still nervous about doing the deed. From a distance, I could see a person on the opposite side of the bridge, whom I believed was aiming a rifle at me. It was now or never. I jumped headfirst into the river.

Although I did not lose consciousness, I did hit my head and my back on an icy spot in the middle of the river. With an aching back, I looked down at myself and realized that I had torn and bloodied my shirt. With all my options exhausted, I shuffled through the water slouched over to the underside of the bridge. There, the most horrible graffiti of mutilated people stood to greet me. Had even my botched suicide attempt been foretold? Now I was petrified and freezing because the temperature was in the teens. Giving up any chance I had to kill myself, I decided to get help. Maybe there were some people who would still help me out there. I walked out of the park toward some buildings. Luckily, one building was University of Michigan's Veterans Affairs Hospital. There, they took off my soaking wet clothes, warmed me, and sent me by ambulance to the main hospital.

Greeting me at the main hospital was my mother and my sister, who had been frantically trying to find me. They had known that something odd was going on with me because I had previously told them some of my hidden messages and my belief that I was being followed, but neither of them guessed that I would have tried to end my life. My delusions did not stop in the hospital either. Instead, they kept getting more elaborate. In the hospital that night, I began to believe that I was being tested for my new role as Jesus Christ. If I failed, I would be, like the beings of Dante's Hell, frozen in a block of ice for eternity. On TV, each show carried some hidden message of sex. I had to find the show that would foretell what the next world would be like, but I could not find one to fit my vision of a utopia. I could not even find one that did not broadcast sexual innuendos! I settled on a boxing show, despite the fact that such brutal masculinity was not to my taste at all. I would be frozen in ice for sure. As tomorrow came, however, it seemed as though I had passed the test. The next day, I spouted ways for how people could improve the world. What this world needed was more green energy and green ways of living! From the outside of my room, I could hear nurses say things such as, "Oh, he thinks he's

God or something." Apparently, I still had to prove to them that I was the next Christ. I began to get into religious debates with my aides who were watching me. One, an African American man with dreadlocks refused to believe me when I told him that women were not evil and were equal to men. Later, however, I was told that no one in the hospital matched this man's description and that I had hallucinated him. Speaking as the sane person I am now, I do not believe this to be very likely. I concede that he might have been a hallucination because I was not in a right state of mind then, but I have never experienced any sort of visual hallucination before and very limited if any auditory hallucinations.

To treat my back, which x-rays showed to have a minor fracture, I was moved to the Trauma Burn Unit. I believed, however, that the Trauma Burn Unit was where the torturing of other patients took place, through trauma and burnings. There I was given a brace for my broken back. I looked like a turtle, with a chin piece that kept my head in place. It was very uncomfortable. At first, I believed my parents to be evil, denizens of hell. This was clear to me in their hidden messages in their speech and in my father's reddish skin. He was obviously a devil in disguise. They were doing their best to kill me, but because I was in a secure place, a hospital of heaven, they could do nothing. Here, at the Trauma Burn Unit, I overheard doctors telling me that they might need to fashion a halo for me. This halo was surely a torture device meant for people who thought that they were god, people like me. I could not trust anyone in this hospital. Each aide I had was trying to kill me somehow. One brought a bomb in her bag; another just told me of the movie "300." In this film, an ancient Greek army of 300 men was able to stop a horde of Persian enemies. I believed that the 300 men symbolized me, and the horde of Persians symbolized the world who was trying to kill me. Why they had not done so, I could not make out clearly, but it was clear that some vast power was on my side protecting me. Perhaps, it was God himself. I was next moved to a Sleep Center Unit of the hospital. Because it was on a higher floor of the hospital, I believed it to be closer to heaven. There, glancing at the day's newspaper, I saw a picture of a statue. Another hidden message! If I acted like a statue, I would be moved to the next reality: Heaven! Instantly, I went as still as a statue, closed my eyes, and would not wake up. The medical staff was uncertain of my state and thought that I might have had some head injury. After many tests were performed on me, I realized that I had misinterpreted the statue bit. I woke up to the annoyance of some of the nurses, who knew I had been faking the whole time.

Finally, I was moved to the Psychiatric Ward. This was the scariest place of all for me. I would be locked here forever, never to be released again. My whole family had come to comfort me as I was moved in. I told my sisters to try to

understand my struggle, but other than that, there was nothing more I could say. During that first week, I happened to pass by a TV broadcasting Oprah. She was announcing something along the lines that this would be the last time a guest would ever appear on her show. This was clearly yet another hidden message. Oprah was telling me that I had one last chance to escape the ward and have another chance to kill myself. Quickly, I sidled by the locked front entrance of the ward and waited for someone to come in. After waiting a few moments, a nurse entered the ward, and I took advantage of the open door. I rushed through, complete with my back brace. It so happened that my family was visiting that day. As they were walking toward the ward, they saw hospital attendants rushing in the same direction. My sisters had a gut feeling that it was due to me, and they were right. When they reached the ward, a tranquilized version of me was there to greet them. Also, instead of being in my normal ward room, I was in a quiet room that was very bare. The only furnishing to that room was a small cot. Although my mother believed that I was in a straight jacket, she did not say anything to my sisters, in order not to frighten them. I eventually tried to escape 2 other times, but only one other time did I make it outside the ward's doors. A couple of days later, I attempted suicide again, this time by slitting my wrists. Sharp objects are in short supply in mental institutions; however, so I had to be creative. First, I found a light bulb that was free of its protective plastic casing. After removing the bulb, I broke it in the bathroom and quickly cut my wrists. Fortunately, I was stopped from going any further by an attendant.

Still, for the most part, my days in the ward were pretty boring. There is not that much for people to do in a psych ward. To pass my time, I ate. I consumed one peanut butter and jelly sandwich after another, I gobbled down the treats brought to me by my parents and girlfriend, and I plowed through every breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Luckily, I have an active metabolism, and during my entire stay in the psych ward, I only gained 10 pounds. Along with food and daily visits from family and friends, music helped keep me relaxed, even when I was receiving messages from all around me. One song in particular helped to calm me down, Björk's *All Is Full of Love*. Once, I remember an attendant complimenting my taste in music, which made me feel like a person again. Unfortunately, due to my bad behavior of escaping and trying to kill myself, I was not allowed to listen to music for quite some time. Apparently, there is a reward system set up in psych wards, in which you get benefits for behaving well. This does not make much sense to me in the case of not allowing me to listen to music. This was the only outlet that made me feel safe when I was alone, and in my disturbed state, I did not understand that there was even a reward system going on. In retrospect, this seems to me to be unnecessarily punitive.

I cannot stress the importance of having a supportive family and girlfriend during my time in the psych ward. My family was first in helping me come to realize that I suffered from schizophrenia. The book, *Diagnosis Schizophrenia*, which my family gave me, was particularly helpful. In this book, many different stories of people with schizophrenia were given, and it helped me understand that I was not the only one who suffered from this disorder. I believe that books such as these should be in psych wards everywhere for patients who need to understand what has happened to them in order to get better. Luckily, my major was in brain, behavior, and cognitive science at school, so I at least understood what schizophrenia usually entailed. My girlfriend also helped me to realize that my life was not over. I was still a normal person who could be loved by another, even in the disturbed state that I was in.

Finally came the day when I was released from the hospital and able to go home. I had been in the hospital for almost an entire month, an unusually long stay for a mental patient. Needless to say, I was forced to drop all my classes for that winter. When I first got back home, I was heavily drugged and still had my back brace on. Due to the heavy doses of medication I was on, I simply felt like sleeping all the time. A few hours after I got up in the morning, I would announce that I would be taking a nap. At home, I was still receiving the occasional message, from a magazine or the TV. These messages told me that I had done something personally wrong, which had given me schizophrenia. I asked my mother again and again if I had done something wrong. After my continuous questioning, she decided to make flashcards for me that conveyed her repeated answers. For example, the cards said that schizophrenia is a biological illness, schizophrenia affects 1 in 100 people, and I would eventually get better. After about a week, I had the liberating experience of being able to remove my back brace. When my doctor told me that I could remove it, I ripped it off in glee. I could now go out to places like a restaurant without feeling like some sort of freak. Eventually, my medication dosage was lowered. With this, came a decreased need to sleep. Now the only thing left to get back in shape was my mind. I could barely concentrate for a few minutes, let alone the prolonged focus necessary to be a successful student at University of Michigan. To get back in shape, I decided that I would read *East of Eden*, quite a lengthy book and a rather ambitious goal for me at the time. During the beginning, I could only read a few pages at a time, but later, I was able to read entire chapters without losing my focus. Eventually, my concentration went back to normal. Home was not that interesting, and I looked forward to getting back to University of Michigan, which I did the next fall. In the meantime, I visited friends in Ann Arbor and regularly attended a multifamily support group with my mother.

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Currently, it has been more than 2 years since my first break, and I am happy to say that things are going well. Upon my return to University of Michigan, I have earned almost all A's with full course loads. I have switched my career choice from architecture to clinical psychology, graduated from University of Michigan with a 3.5 (not too bad considering all the time I spent on my bizarre theories) and have been accepted into graduate school. Also, I am still with my girlfriend who helped me through my troubling times. I am proof that people with mental illness can live normal lives and deserve to be treated as such. My psychiatrist believes that I have had a few things going for me in my almost complete recovery. I was given medication very soon after my symptoms began, I have had the best support possible from my family and friends, I always make sure to take my medication every day, and I probably experienced only a minor form of schizophrenia because I heard only a few auditory hallucinations

and no visual hallucinations. I also plan to write a more extensive and illustrated memoir of my experiences with psychosis. Although I have not experienced the stigma of mental illness much personally, possibly because I am able to hide my illness well, I learned in a clinical psychology course that stigma often prevents people with schizophrenia from taking their medications. Perhaps, my upcoming book can in some small way reduce the stigma of schizophrenia and psychosis by showing that recovery is possible with the correct treatment and medication.

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