

## Making Meaning

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Ah, another clue! I bent down reverently and picked up the piece of blue plastic that was lying innocently on the sidewalk. It was the shape and size of a bullet, signifying by the Deep Meaning that I was going to be sniper shot soon. Alarmed, I walked on, faster, and then—another one. This one was a piece of wood; a minute later, another plastic bullet shape. I was in grave danger.

Insight into the Deep Meaning had been with me for a while, around the time I had stopped taking the 1400 mg of daily Seroquel I was supposed to take for my paranoid schizophrenia. I was being messaged by various things I found on the sidewalk: a red elastic band, intact, meant that I would not have to open my wrist and bleed out again; a yellow strip of plastic prophesied that my body would become a crime scene with that “Do not enter” warning. I collect them, keep them in a little drawstring bag.

Soon, I found myself in the wastelands of suicide ideation again. It is a place devoid of meaning, mediated by hopelessness. Why bother taking my medications? Compliance has left and the Deep Meaning settles in.

Before long I end up in hospital, where no one understands the Deep Meaning. They wanted me to use society’s designations of what is meaningful. “Occupational therapy” was supposed to engage me in what the professionals deemed meaningful activity. So I painted, I glued, and I sewed. I was occupied, but where was the meaning? Certainly, the Deep Meaning was absent. Yet I was praised for my participation in making “meaningful” things (a trivet, a puzzle, and a doll) out of raw and various materials.

A mental process analogous to the arts and crafts is the essence of making meaning. Our senses, emotions, and intellect feed us with the “materials” we can then use to “build” meaningful insights of the world around us. We construct meaning under constraints of perception, ideation, and reflection that are all shaped by our society’s definitions of meaningfulness.

Consider this: I hear my voices telling me to make meaning out of that “bullet” piece of plastic. But my culture

does not support such an inference and I am labelled crazy, delusional, paranoid, and schizophrenic. “Erin,” the doctors and nurses say. “These ‘signs’ do not mean anything. They are garbage litter.” However, think what the same society makes of so-called modern art. Were a respected artist to make a showing of pieces of litter that are in the shape of bullets and call it “Shot on the Streets” people would accept that as meaningful. They would pay money (arguably the currency of shared meaning) to view it, comment on it, and leave feeling profound.

A cardinal feature of schizophrenia is the auditory hallucination. My voices certainly told me what to view as Meaningful—but, alas, it was insanity, they told me at the hospital. Now, cross barriers of time and culture. Auditory hallucinations are at some times, in some cultures, revered as messages from gods or God: prophecies, enlightenment, and transcendence. Or they are witchcraft and heresy. As a neuroscientist, I believe that hallucinations are the result of random but coordinated activity in the brain; in short, they are meaningless synaptic messages. But of course, when ill, my voices are no senseless firings inside my head. I can hear them clear as day. They have meaning.

The goal of my treatment seems to be the eradication of my meanings and the acceptance of my society’s. I am supposed to learn “insight.” Medication is supposed to suppress my Deep Meaning and replace it with saneness. But no one tells me the feelings of loss I will feel in between the place of no meaning and not yet any meaning. Here lurks suicide, a noose around my neck and tied tightly to the bathroom’s doorknob; sitting on air, I begin to suffocate. (I am rescued by nurses who realize the length of time I have been in the ward’s bathroom.)

Slowly, normal meaning-making winds its way into my mind. Apathy lapses. Suicide means death and loss of meaningful life. Living once again in my culture reminds me, then shows me, and finally convinces me that I do not need the Deep Meaning. I trade the Deep Meaning for family and friends, art and science, and reading and writing.

I regain the joys of meanings both simple and deep that I used to know. I revel in the fact that, in our culture (as in

most), eating is often a meaningful event. A birthday has a cake with candles, Thanksgiving has a turkey; we celebrate meaningful passages of time with food and that food, by association, has meaning. Perhaps, I reminisce, it is not surprising that my delusions of the Deep Meaning included dietary demands. I ate carrots (a car rots the environment), juice, but only “from concentrate” (to concentrate is good) and cereal (to see [ce] what is real). The difference? Eating with others, sharing the meaning, is so much more thrilling than the isolating and restrictive Deep Meaning.

There is a study years ago in which 3 patients at a psychiatric hospital each believed that they were Jesus Christ. So 1 psychiatrist thought to bring the 3 together;

surely this would challenge them out of their delusions. Instead, each patient told the psychiatrist that he was the real Christ and the others were simply deluded. How interesting: they were making meaning, the only meaning that their delusions would allow. For whatever biochemical reasons, schizophrenia’s meanings far outweighed the meanings of society that they were supposed to make. For me and my biochemical reasons, I have a world of Deep Meaning skulking in my synapses pushing me to make meaning where there is none. Medication, I have learned, pulls me back and I am each time surprised at how much more meaningful it is to love my baby niece, to awe at sunsets, and to simply share coffee with a friend. And, I write.