

TWO ACCOUNTS OF MENTAL DISTRESS

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This paper is a 'cut and paste' of excerpts from my journal and hospital file written during one of my episodes of mental distress.

I wrote most of the journal entries during my last stay in hospital while I crouched in the safety of a locked toilet. With enormous effort I created coherent sequences of words out of the chaos inside me and recorded them in tiny faint handwriting. This was one of the most intense and profound experiences of my life - but down the other end of the long polished corridor, others recorded their own version of my distress in the course of a very ordinary day's work.

Several years later I read what they had written about me and I couldn't believe that my journal and their notes referred to the same person and events. The incongruity between these two accounts of my mental distress is disturbing and I believe exposes the fundamental reason why mental health services so often fail to help people.

My journal entries are in italics. The psychiatrist's and nursing notes are in plain text.

Today I went to see a psychiatrist. He is a little man with a beard and glasses and he wrote his notes in small tidy handwriting. He stared right through me. I kept thinking he could see into every corner of my mind. Every time I moved - the way I sat, where I put my hands - I thought would be used as evidence of my badly diseased mind. I was afraid he had the power to trick me into letting out my biggest secrets. I was too terrified to talk to him.

Mary is a 21 year old Caucasian university student who has a recent history of Manic Depressive Psychosis. Now appears to be entering a depressive phase. Withdrawn and quiet. Dresses unconventionally. Not an easy patient to relate to. She plays her cards very close to her chest.



I stand alone, unable to move inside a dark bubble. I have no face or hands or feet. My veins are broken and my blood has nowhere to travel. Outside the bubble it is day. A rainbow appears but I cannot see it. I remain in the bubble, broken and hidden from the life around me.

Mary has an inadequate and confused sense of identity. She also has a long standing picture of being an isolate; tending to live in her own world and always finding it difficult to fit in. In this way she presents a schizoid personality picture.



I went to see the psychiatrist again. I asked him "What do you think a well functioning human being is?" "Why do you ask that question?" he replied. "Is it because you are worried I will judge you?" I agreed I was worried about that and added that I wanted to know if his

ideas on human beings were compatible enough with mine for us to be able to talk about me. Then I asked him "How do you know your values won't impose on mine?" He assured me it was not his job to judge me but that he was there to help me get to know myself better. Then I said "But what if you judged me without knowing it?" He laughed. "That question was below the belt!" he said. "You do need a high degree of control in your relationships don't you".

Then, somehow we got onto sex. The whole time he just kept gazing into me. I felt terribly uncomfortable and was trying desperately to hide it. The sex talk stripped me right back to the raw. Now all I want to do is shrink back into myself. He had all the power.

Requesting my views on life, sex, religion etc.

(1) Why she needs to know my views? Feeling of powerlessness that she knows little about me and my beliefs. Theme of control in relationships and how vulnerable she feels when she cannot label people.

(2) Problems with sex relationships - feels loss of control.

(3) For further discussion - importance of her control issues.

(4) Blood levels satisfactory.



Today I wanted to die. Everything was hurting. My body was screaming. I saw the doctor. I wanted to collapse against the wall and cry out and show him how I feel about things but I said nothing. Now I feel terrible. Nothing seems good and nothing good seems possible.

I am stuck in this twilight mood where I go down like the setting sun into a lonely black hole where there is room for only one.

Flat, lacking motivation, sleep and appetite good. Discussed aetiology
Cont. Li Carb. 250 mg qid. Levels next time.



I am lying face down behind a chair in the waiting room of the hospital.

I am a long piercing scream All screaming on the inside of me and out of the pores of my skin. My screaming and myself are one. This is pure pain.

The doctor comes along and snaps at me to get up. He tells a nurse to put me to bed. I have never ever been in so much shame.

Guilt swoops down on me and pecks my sense of being good to bits, as I lie here snared between my sheets like a whimpering animal.

I am full of red hot blame at myself for everything. I cannot bear being so thoroughly bad. I am carrying hell around inside me.

On arriving on the ward - spent the entire day curled up on the waiting room floor behind a chair. Could not talk. Impression of over dramatisation but with underlying gross psychological turmoil. She is difficult to engage and to that effect I have admitted her for a period of two weeks in order to consolidate her working relationship with us.



I am locked in here alone in this black box. I used to hide its blackness with colourful decorations. On its walls I painted windows with pleasing views on them. Now I have been stripped right back to the bare boards of my mind.

My world has been emptied out, as if burglars broke into my mind and stole all my power. On their way out they pulled down my blinds. Now, I cannot see the world and the world cannot see me.

Poor eye contact, slow speech and movements. Stated her head felt empty and fuzzy; vision disordered, things appearing very ugly. Mentioned need to find meaning in her depression - not just a wasteful experience.



A nurse came to me and said "Go to supper". I said "No". She growled at me for not making an effort, but all my effort is going into making these thoughts and writing them down. The nurse punished me saying, "Well, I'm not bringing you any supper you know"

Sitting in ladies lounge with her head in her hands. Very difficult to involve in conversation. Not responding to activity around her.

Is attending the dining room with firm encouragement and eating small meals. Remains very withdrawn but occasionally gives vent to an incongruous sustained laugh - although says she isn't happy. Rx Chlorpromazine BD & Nocte as appears to be preoccupied with thoughts - hopefully medication will break the chain.



Last night they came to me with Chlorpromazine. I refused it. I am afraid medication will dull my mind and the meanings in there will escape forever.

Refusing medication. States she hasn't been taking it because it doesn't do her any good. Not persuaded by explanations or reassurance.

During the night between sleeps I felt bad. I was on the rack. Every thought set off a shrieking alarm in my head. My body would jerk and go rigid As if electric shocks went through me every few seconds.

I nearly didn't make it through the night. I nearly asked for Chlorpromazine.

Awake at frequent intervals during the night. Found whimpering and thrashing around on her bed at 2.15 am saying "No, leave me alone". Said she was frightened. Kept holding and massaging her head.



Every morning the night nurses pull off my blankets. They are rough. I can't fight back. Even their softest touches bruise me.

*A nurse said to me "Face the world". But I am facing all the pain inside me.
I cannot face both ways at once.*

Mary is not to hide away in her bed. She is to be encouraged to get up for breakfast and engage in ward activities.



*My back is hard like a shell. My front is soft like jelly. I hate to stand
because I cannot shield my front from the jabbing gaze of the world.
I must lie curled up or front down.*

Lying in bed under blanket. Face covered by hands. Wouldn't leave bed to talk - "not safe".
Brief whispered conversation from under her hands. Sleep worse than usual - can't eat - too
frightened - body aching all over.

*Everything hurts. I am burning. All the life in me blazing out from the core of me is getting
stuck. I can feel it trying to burn through my skin. I am almost on fire.*

Experiencing frightening hallucinations, burning sensations, also seeing brightly coloured
shapes when eyes shut. Request Sunnyside notes for EEG. Repeat EEG to exclude Temporal
Lobe Epilepsy.



I have lost my self. What is my name? I have no name.

All I am is shape and weight, rapid shallow breathing and a black space inside my head.

Misinterpreting at times. Obsessed with the feeling of not wanting to be in her body -
wanted to be a speck of dust. Also concerned as to her purpose of being alive. Describing
feelings of 'emptiness'. Sleep poor, appetite poor.

*My mind is a pile of broken up smudgy thoughts. I am searching for one
that is clear enough to have meaning. But as soon as I find a thought
it gets sucked into the blackness. Before, my thoughts were sliding off into nonsense. This
terrified me so I tried to make some sense of things by taking bits out of nonsense and
putting them into a story.*

*An old woman and her grand-daughter lived by a great ocean. Every day the old women
went fishing. She yelled in awe to the ocean, 'Let me take the life out of you with my net.'
She always returned with fish and cooked them for herself and her grand-daughter. One day
she gave some of the fish to her grand-daughter and said 'Cook these for yourself'. The girl
wailed 'I can't'. The old woman replied 'You must find your own power'. But the girl didn't
understand and went to bed hungry. That night the girl woke from her dreams to a booming
voice from the sky: 'You have the power of the old woman and the great ocean flowing into
the core of you. Now, take meaning from the rawness of life and cook it for yourself without
fear'.*

Remains psychotically depressed. Reported hearing voices but no other bizarre symptoms noted. Thoughts still coming in "fragments". Unable to complete them. Still spending most of time on bed. On 150mg Doxepin nocte.



Sometimes a speck of light gets into my black hole. The speck is a thought that has come back into focus.

I am coming up a bit but I feel all weak and wobbly from being on my bed for days. Before I looked up. This took courage. It was like coming out of a cocoon; the light was strong; it was strange. The next thing I did was walk around and say hello to people. It feels good to be halfway back and looking up.

Is beginning to interact. Says she is feeling much better. Asked permission to go out which was refused. Accepted this well. Enjoyed a game of Scrabble, giggling at times but this was mostly appropriate eg at mildly humorous antics of other patients.

Mary is to be discharged. The family have intimated that they would be glad if I continued to manage Mary. I will be ready to step in if she has any further psychotic breaks and needs the control of this ward.