Abstract

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Accounts series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized, and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals.

Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to First Person Accounts, Division of Clinical and Treatment Research, NIMH, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rm. 18C-06, Rockville, MD 20857.—The Editors.

My name is William D. Bowden. I am 35 years old. I'm a paranoid schizophrenic. Many psychologists and psychiatrists have told me this over the years, but I am just coming to the point where I actually believe it. This reluctance to believe that I am schizophrenic is due to the intensity of my belief in my "delusional system." My delusional system leads me to believe that I am not schizophrenic; I believe that I am a psychic, that I "broadcast" my thoughts to anyone who is—what? In my immediate vicinity? Mentally focused on me? Maybe even anywhere on Earth? I don't know. I have believed all of these possibilities and more, but presently I believe that people can "read my mind" only if they are in my immediate vicinity.

I am going to try, in this short essay, to explain how I came to believe in this psychic phenomenon. My belief has withstood attack from anyone I've shared it with. It is also something that I truly wish would stop. I also wish, even if this phenomenon is true, that I did not believe it, because I can find no other person who will admit that I am psychic. Most people I talk with claim that it is an entirely erroneous belief.

I now know that I started to become schizophrenic before I realized anything out of the ordinary was taking place. I was a boiler technician in the Navy when I first started to become schizophrenic. I was 19 when I started a pattern of thinking that would lead to full-blown schizophrenia, paranoid type. I began taking an interest in psychic phenomena and also in religion. I did not have a clearly defined faith then; my religious beliefs were a composite of scraps picked up from intermittent attendance at church, psychic claims read in supermarket tabloids, and the then popular view among myth-believers that extraterrestrials were visiting Earth and psychically altering Earthlings'
minds. I had a smattering of "knowledge" picked up from a thousand different sources, and I began to try to alter my consciousness by "sending out my astral spirit." I thought that I would send my soul to God in heaven. However, because I had read somewhere that "astral travel" is very dangerous, I armed myself by praying. My interest and faith were not sufficient to read the Bible; I just figured God would understand and protect and guide me.

I continued to do this exercise every night before bed. I would recite my prayers and then try to project my astral spirit. My plan was to reach God on a personal level and have him endow me with spiritual gifts, namely, cause me to project my thoughts upon others so that they would also believe in my God and in psychic phenomena, in which I believed wholeheartedly. I planned to prove that it was not only possible, but likely, that Jesus Christ had performed the miracles ascribed to him.

My purpose was not, of course, wholly religious. I thought I would receive riches and honors beyond measure for this power. I hadn't read the Bible, so I didn't realize that prophets usually suffer a bad end. My faith was so ill-founded that I did not even realize that achieving such a gift would amount to prophecy. Also, I didn't embrace this possibility of power without reservation. I told God all the limitations and restrictions I would demand if such power were given to me. One such limitation was that I would have control over the power. It turned out I didn't.

That is the gist of my Navy experience as it pertains to my schizophrenia. When I was discharged from the Navy I began to experience the fruits of my labor, so to speak. I had spent the past 9 months at sea, only going ashore for short periods of time when we were in port, so I did not meet or see many people outside of my acquaintances on board ship. When I got out of the Navy, I almost immediately began to experience the sensation of being the center of attention everywhere I went. I could not explain this, and when, a month later, I attended a university, I continued to think that people were "staring at me." This was soon accompanied by auditory hallucinations in which I heard people say—just under their breath as I passed by—"He knows." I didn't know what it was that I knew, but I did not know what they knew, and, most important, I didn't know why no one would simply come up to me and tell me what was going on. This made me feel paranoid.

Well, after a month of this I decided to read the Bible. I learned, in the first reading, that most of what I thought about my religion was 180 degrees wrong. (The Kingdom of Heaven is within, not out in space, for example.) I also read the book of Revelation, which succeeded in making me extremely paranoid. Some people read the book of Revelation and can attribute the whole thing to an ancient fisherman's reaction to bad fish. They say they see the end of the world at night after eating pepperoni pizza. Others interpret this book as the Word of God, written to warn future generations of coming trials and tribulations and a final, second coming of Christ. I was, and am, in this second category.

I dropped out of the university and went home to live with my parents, who, fortunately for me, took me in. I believed that somehow I had managed to send out my astral spirit and was unable to get it back. I thought I'd somehow managed to become psychic and could broadcast my thoughts. This, as has been explained to me, is a delusion of grandeur. I also thought that no one would tell me of my power. This was, and is, my delusion of persecution—that people read my mind and are unwilling, for some reason, to admit or tell me about it.

Of the two delusions, my delusion of persecution has caused me the most difficulty. My religious fantasies were only exacerbated by the thought of persecution. I first thought that I was the seventh angel, described in the book of Revelation, but after a year at home (holed up in my room most of the time) I began to believe that I was unwittingly being forced into the role of the Antichrist. This thought caused me no end of concern. I would rail at my parents, trying every means to get them to admit that I was psychic, but to no avail. They always denied it, and thus, I thought at the time, they were sealing my fate.

Here was where rational thought eluded me. I thought that if I could just get someone to admit that I was spiritually gifted, I would stop the broadcasting, return to normal, and, if it was time for the Antichrist to appear, it wouldn't be me. That was the reason I didn't just forget about the whole thing. I was sure that the most frightening part of Revelation was coming true, and I was becoming the most frightening part. Thus, I reasoned, not only would life be worthless, but afterward I would go to hell.
As I look back at what I was thinking at the time, it seems far-fetched. However, if I am psychic or spiritually gifted, and someone were to prove it to me, it is conceivable that I would begin to go through the whole process again. God forbid!

I've had many different "crazy" thoughts over the years since then, but my main delusion of grandeur—psychic phenomena—and my main delusion of persecution have remained constant. These delusions are supported by hallucinations so vivid that I usually cannot distinguish them from reality except by telling myself that none of this is real, that what the people I love and trust the most are telling me is true, that I am extraordinary only in that I am schizophrenic, and that anything I think regarding the supernatural is the result of a disease.

I am now about to enter the job market for the first time since I was discharged from the Navy. I don't know if I will succeed in holding down gainful employment, but I feel that I am ready. I go out among people almost every day and, although I still feel "stared at" and occasionally talked about, I do not believe, even if I am psychic, that I am an agent of God. This can change from day to day, but generally speaking I mainly believe that I am suffering from a mental disorder.

In closing, I would like to state that anyone who currently has a belief system like mine was or is now will probably not be changed by reading this. It's the old story—"He's not Jesus, I am." But I do hope if any paranoid schizophrenic with similar delusions reads this, he will realize he is not the first, and he is not alone.

The Author

William D. Bowden is 35 years old and was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 1977. After receiving treatment at two private psychiatric hospitals, he now receives Prolixin injections when needed at a Veterans Affairs Clinic.

Announcement of Available Resource Funds

The Theodore and Vada Stanley Foundation in collaboration with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill welcomes applications for its 1993 grant awards program. The purpose of the awards is to support research directly related to the causes of serious mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression). The grant awards are intended to attract established scientists from other areas of biology and medicine (e.g., biochemistry and neurology) into research on serious mental illnesses, as well as to provide support for innovative research by established scientists already in the field whose funding sources are limited. Grants are for 1 or 2 years and may be up to $50,000 per year. In 1992 a total of 25 grants were funded out of 137 applications.

Applications must be submitted by April 1. Notification of awards will be presented in June and funding will begin in August. Application forms, which should be requested from the address below, consist of a brief outline of the proposed project, a budget, and a list of current and pending sources of funding. Funds may be used for salaries, supplies, or equipment; but it is the policy of the Stanley Foundation not to pay indirect costs. The grant applications are reviewed by a professional selection committee. Requests for applications and questions should be directed to:

E. Fuller Torrey, M.D.
or Ms. Kelly Peck
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