First Person Account: A Personal Experience

by Elizabeth Herrig

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 those 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.

When I was (age 12), I asked my parents if I could see a psychiatrist and they agreed. I asked him if he thought I might have schizophrenia. He told me that he would not make that diagnosis; he said that schizophrenia caused a person to have hallucinations and delusions and that I appeared to him to be rational. At the time I had not experienced anything that I would call a hallucination. I had intense fears and I was often depressed. I hated going to school and made up many excuses to stay home.

At 15 I began seeing another psychiatrist at the recommendation of a school counselor, who had noticed my strange and reclusive behavior. The problems I remember talking about with her were mostly feelings I had when I was at school. I felt different and alone. Seeing so many people in the school halls made me wonder how my life could be significant. I wanted to blend in in the classroom as though I were a desk. I never spoke. I didn’t participate in any extracurricular activities or have any close friends. I loved to read. I especially enjoyed books that were not on the curriculum. I liked to read J.R.R. Tolkien’s books about Middle Earth. I enjoyed writing papers for my English classes, but I was not thought of as an exceptional student.

The high school graduation ceremony was a painful event for me. I stood alone and only one girl came to say goodbye to me. After graduation I enrolled at a college near home. I stayed only 2 years. It was difficult for me to deal with ordinary situations, such as a problem with a teacher.

My major was to be in English with an emphasis on writing. I remember thinking that I would make it through all the courses but when it came time to have my writing portfolio evaluated (a graduation requirement) I would be found lacking in writing ability and refused a diploma.

I remember those years at college as a time in which I was

Reprint requests should be sent to Ms. E. Herrig, 622 N. Fair Oaks Ave., Oak Park, IL 60302.
very angry. I couldn’t understand where the anger was coming from or where it should be directed. Strong feelings of fear, anger, and depression battled for dominance within me. I decided to quit school and find a job.

During the summer after my sophomore year at college my psychiatrist decided that the drug haloperidol might help me. I remember her explaining to me that if I read about the drug I would find out that it was used to treat severely ill people. She said that she did not regard me as severely ill, but that the drug would reduce my fears. However, I remember that after taking the drug my fears intensified. I became fearful of children I saw walking down the street. I also suffered from uncontrollable jaw movements until I was also given another drug to correct it. The haloperidol had the effect of making me restless. I couldn’t tolerate the effects it had on me and I was taken off it. I stopped going to see the psychiatrist because I began to doubt that seeing her would bring me any relief from the problem of being myself.

I found a job through an ad in the Chicago Tribune. I settled into the work. I was regarded as strange by my supervisors and co-workers, but I was soon given more difficult duties because of my ability and willingness to work.

I became obsessed with my diet and wanting to be thin, even though I had never been overweight. I began to eat only fruits and vegetables. I wanted to be weightless and to float on air, more like a spirit than a human being. Because of too much fiber in my diet, I developed an intestinal blockage and had to be rushed to the hospital in excruciating pain. The doctors in the emergency room were surprised to see my skin had turned a deep orange. It was later concluded that this was the result of too much carotene from carrots in my diet.

The resident doctor called a psychiatrist to see me. He happened to be the same man who years earlier had told me I didn’t have the symptoms of schizophrenia. This time he was called in to determine whether or not I had anorexia nervosa. I weighed 84 pounds at this point. He didn’t diagnose me as having anorexia nervosa. He diagnosed me as having “avoidant personality disorder” and as suffering from “anxiety.” The blockage in my intestines cleared up and I returned to work.

That summer was a horrible time. Life took on a hellish quality that is incomprehensible to the average normal person. A book I read at about this time had a profound effect on me. The book was Native Son by Richard Wright. I came to identify strongly with the main character because I believed that he and I were both good people who were just misunderstood by everyone. His crime, killing a young woman, seemed logical to me under his circumstances. I also enjoyed reading classical literature such as The Iliad and The Odyssey by Homer.

It is difficult to remember the progression of my illness chronologically. The world became a more chaotic, frightening, and inexplicable place. I think it must have been in February 1984 that I began to have the perception that my thinking was beginning to change. It seemed that my mind had two parts. One part was the part that had always been there, but the other part was filled with voices that talked in the background of my thoughts. I became distracted listening to the voices and found it difficult to concentrate. As my illness progressed I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. I would sit at my desk and listen to the voices. My life with my family seemed different. I remember a strange conversation while sitting in a restaurant with my parents. My father said, “Your mother is getting old.” I looked at her and saw that she was crying. I can only suppose that she was sad about the changes in me and didn’t know what she could do.

Going to work was pure hell. I continued to hear voices. One day while sitting at my desk I saw a fly land on my arm. It was the biggest fly I had ever seen. It could not have been real, not in February. One of my duties was to read information intended for military personnel. I remember reading about Hellfire missiles. I imagined the manmade hellfire killing people. I became convinced that I was reading top secret information and that someone would try to have me killed so that I couldn’t talk.

Many of the thoughts I had at this time would seem embarrassing to me now if I looked at them in a judgmental way. Some thoughts seem evil or just petty and childish. I accept them all the way people accept their dreams. I couldn’t control them so I don’t blame myself for any of them. Only by thinking of them in this way can I tell the story as I am doing. I hope that the average person’s understanding of mental illness will become such that such episodes will be regarded as altered states of consciousness and...
won't be used to judge mentally ill persons as bad people.

The morning of the day I had to be hospitalized I told my mother that I didn't want to go to work because someone there would shoot me. She asked me a question and I answered in a rhyming phrase that made no sense. I left the house without letting her know and decided that I would go to work after all. I believed that I would pass every person in the world that day and that each of them would share a secret with me. I believed that the gestures of people had a special significance. This was how they told me their secrets. When I heard people talk I thought they were talking about me. At work I punched in at the timeclock, oblivious to the time. It was the middle of the morning. I sat at my desk. I don't know if I tried to work.

Someone came and handed me a note that said, "Call the doctor." I saw this note as coming from a mysterious force that was giving me directions. I left work and took the train to see our family doctor. It was a miracle that I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know what was going to be done for me. I started to talk about something I had read about Moses and the Ten Commandments. She asked that I just be quiet because she didn't understand. I signed myself in without realizing I was in a hospital. I trusted everyone as though I were a small child. I didn't think of asking anything, such as how long I was going to have to stay or what was going to be done for me.

My hospital stay lasted 3 weeks. I was started on medication right away. I was given haloperidol. I don't know when the medicine started having any effect. I wanted to see if I was there and she had pretended that she was calling from the doctor's office. Even though I had developed a fear of them I went with them willingly. They put me in the car and drove me to a hospital. I remember the nurse in the emergency room asking me what the problem was. I started to talk about something I had read about Moses and the Ten Commandments. She asked that I just be quiet because she didn't understand. I signed myself in without realizing I was in a hospital. I trusted everyone as though I were a small child. I didn't think of asking anything, such as how long I was going to have to stay or what was going to be done for me.

My hospital stay lasted 3 weeks. I was started on medication right away. I was given haloperidol. I don't know when the medicine started having any effect. I wandered up and down the hall watching people. I told the nurse that there was a force leading me to hell. I had many bizarre delusions. I believed I was Eva Peron, the wife of the Argentinian dictator and the subject of the musical Evita, which was popular at that time. I believed that my mother had died of lung disease from smoking cigarettes. My heartbeat became so rapid that I thought I was in the hospital awaiting a heart transplant. I thought that a heart that was pounding so intensely could surely not last much longer. I listened to the radio in my room and interpreted each one of the lyrics as a message intended for me.

I believed that it was possible for a person to leave his or her body and inhabit the body of another person. I heard people I knew speaking through the mouths of the strangers around me.

As the weeks passed and the medication began to take effect, the world became saner. The voices stopped. Things started to seem ordinary. Before releasing me from the hospital, my parents were called in for a session with me, my psychiatrist, and a social worker. The social worker stressed the importance of my learning how to live independently. I decided that seeing the psychiatrist was necessary but that seeing the social worker was an unnecessary interference in my life. I now regret that I didn't get the help of a social worker at that time.

One pleasant aspect of being in the hospital was that it gave me a chance to think about what I really wanted to do with my life. I no longer wanted to continue working at a dull job where I was unhappy. It seemed that there should be more to life. I had a catalog from the University of Illinois at Chicago. I learned that the university had a classics department. I wanted to study about ancient Greece and Rome. I considered earning an advanced degree and teaching. My interest in the classics has been replaced over the years by stronger interests in other subjects, but I am glad I had the interest then to motivate me.

When I got out of the hospital I returned to work, or I should say
I made the attempt to return. The medication had the effect of making me restless and my job required that I sit in one place all day. I would come to work and have to leave 20 minutes later. My frustrated attempts to do an ordinary thing, to stay at work, were very difficult for me. What made it harder was that no one understood my problem. I was called to personnel where I had to explain why I couldn't work a full day. The woman wouldn't believe me and insisted on calling my psychiatrist to see if it was true.

Nine years have passed since I was hospitalized. I went on to earn a bachelor's degree in political science. I tried to earn a master's but I found the course work in library science too difficult. These 9 years have been filled with many disappointments. I've gone through long periods of unemployment. At 31 I am single and unable to support myself. I live with my parents. I am searching for a job that I will really enjoy.

Even though I am struggling, I feel that the worst is behind me and that the illness will not return. I regret that I went so long being ill. The time I lost would have been better spent having friends and developing my skills and talents. I hope that in the future it will be much easier for a child or young adult to get help for emotional problems so that they do not have to have an experience similar to mine. As mental health care is now, people can go without receiving the treatment they need until their lives are devastated.

The Author

Elizabeth Herrig is employed at a sheltered workshop for the disabled.

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