

Chapter 10

Don't Hide the Madness

Undoubtedly, schizophrenia both distorts and fragments the usual experience of one's self as well as the perception one unceasingly creates of other people, the world, and life in general. It dramatically disrupts the feeling one has of the ordinary. However, when someone asks me directly what schizophrenia actually is or means, I tend to answer that schizophrenia is essentially a relational fact. It is relational because it does not belong to the single individual but to one's subjective experience of feeling strange, estranged, and even alienated. Invariably, this is in relation to someone else and/or physical objects, places, animals, and nature, all of which become infused by the self with special, in some cases rather worrying, significance or connectedness. It is also a "fact" because it starts off, and then tends to persist, as a relational experience, that is, an experience that originates in the individual's most troubled relationships with real significant others. This more existential perspective on psychosis clearly echoes the ideas proposed by Berne (1961/1975) and other original thinkers and clinicians such as Laing (1959) and, more recently, Bollas (2015). Their works stem from the more general view that a psychotic breakdown could be a potentially creative and transformative response to real relational struggles that the psychotic person faced—and usually continues to face—in the family and microsocial milieu and in the absence of corrective relationships (and identifications) outside the family. Thus, psychosis is understandable and meaningful from within patients' relational and social (including familial) vicissitudes.

For these reasons, there is no such thing as a "schizophrenic ego" in the same way that there is no "diabetic ego" or "arthritic ego" and so on. Instead, there is an individual with schizophrenia or diabetes or arthritis—the person, therefore, as subject before any other reduction, definition, or diagnostic category. And this must be our fundamental priority: preserving the real self, that most vital and irreducible part of our being-in-relation-to-the-Other and Otherness, which survives even the most severe mental and physical suffering and which I have called here the "naked self."

But let us return to schizophrenia and its etymology, deriving as it does from the apposition of two words from Greek: the verb *σκήζειν*, meaning "to split, divide," and *-φρενία*, which is related to *φρήν φρενός*, meaning "mind.". Therefore, "schizophrenia" is a way of saying, incorrectly, "divided mind." And it is a way of not saying many other things, such as what schizophrenia ultimately brings to the person who suffers from it, including the ability to feel, imagine, think, act, and relate to others and the surrounding world.

In essence, schizophrenia makes us return to being, or perhaps makes us more than usually unprepared for life, for everyday life, especially for living among other people. A patient of nearly 50 with schizophrenia, whom I met several years ago during my first years of specialist training, described in a few poignant words what suffering from schizophrenia meant for him: "I feel like a grown-up child, grown-up certainly, but still a child." I think his words sum up the

essence of the schizophrenic experience, one that we may all face on our journey of life in an equally sensitive epoch of our development as human beings: the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This phase of our life story harkens back to another transition in the life of every individual: from childhood to early adolescence. It is no coincidence that schizophrenia mainly affects those periods in our life in which we have the chance to demonstrate to ourselves, and those around us, whether we are ready for the present and the future, for what we do not yet know, for the unknown, for encountering the new others who await us just beyond our family group, for what life in general can bring us in terms of suffering but also joy.

Schizophrenia is, in other words, an attempt to move forward in life, trying to respond to personal, family, and social urges in the present moment and doing so despite the unshakable fear of relationships with others, despite the fear of the future, the fear of suffering, and, paradoxically, the fear of joy.

Thoughts not shared with others become thoughts that others do not share, that is, thoughts that others do not understand and ultimately do not accept. Thoughts like these are given the name “delusions,” that is, ideas that deviate from others’ thoughts and move away from other persons. Feelings not shared with others become “hallucinations,” that is, feelings that others do not perceive. Little by little, we stop having healthy illusions about reality and also stop imagining and even really hoping—which is more terrible still—that someone is knocking on our door, is coming to seek us out, is there for us.

The body can also send signals that the person does not understand, thereby adding anguish about his or her physical as well as mental integrity. People sometimes become frozen in their own movements, often silent and even mute, almost paralyzed by the fear in being in the world, or, conversely, they feel lost, in constant motion, although they do not have an actual goal or destination to reach.

In either case, the final outcome is alienation: the desperate renunciation of relating to others and therefore of the reality—which is above all psychological—that others represent. This produces a deep pain that comes from the feeling of the lack of others, a relational—and thus also intrapsychic—void that the person sometimes try to fill with alcohol and drugs or behavior that endangers both themselves and other people.

But there is some good news. Schizophrenia, precisely because of the suffering it brings, paradoxically teaches us all at least two life lessons: first, that human beings’ fundamental condition is that of depending on other human beings for their own mental and physical health, and, therefore, for their own happiness; and second, we are not children for just a part of our lives, but a child part of us, our inner Child, hides behind this suffering and endlessly hopes to be sought, wanted, and ultimately found by others.

Consequently, when encountering a so-called “schizophrenic”—particularly in clinical and analytic settings—the true challenge is to find out where his or her “real” self or inner Child lives or hides, despite the psychosis. And most importantly, the challenge is to discover which parts, extensions, or fragments of the patient’s actual self come to stay and even reside within ourselves. But that is the rub: to find the patient’s real self, we need first to acknowledge that we ourselves live, from time to time, our own schizophrenic moments. We, too, generate, as our patients do, schizophrenic worries about other people, including families, friends, and work

colleagues as well as, on a larger scale, other members of the society we live in and/or people belonging to other communities, such as foreigners or, even more simply, strangers.

In this way, every time we impose our ideas on others, every time we anticipate their thoughts, every time we claim to feel emotions in their place, or force them to swallow an emotion that we ourselves do not know how to digest, we are colonizing other people's minds. Every time we stop being open-hearted with that person by shutting ourselves away in stubborn silence when we could, instead, talk, those times that we could admit to being weak and yet insist, at all costs, that we are strong out of pride, shame, fear, hate, or suffocating grudges that we hold within us, we are preventing both ourselves and others from being truly intimate with one another. All the times we make others wait an absurdly long time through our repeated absences, every time we lie or we attribute liability to third parties, saying they are at fault when we, ourselves, could shoulder the responsibility with just a modicum of courage and humility, those are times we are raising high walls between us and others. Every time we cast aspersions on others' behavior and their intentions because we would like them to be as we wish them to be, every time that we presume we can substitute that person when formulating a belief, a doubt, or, more to the point, when making a decision that does not primarily concern us, we are abusively intruding into someone's inner and relational world. Every time we use words as swords and we call it "love," every time we caress someone when, in reality, we would like to hit them, especially when that person also depends on us for personal growth and differentiation and individuation as other-than-us, particularly if this occurs in sensitive phases of life such as the end of infancy and early adulthood: These are all the times when we are psychoticizing that person's experience of life. These are all the times when we are making other people live a terrible, schizophrenic moment, we are fragmenting the continuity of their being and therefore their being, or becoming, a unique and inimitable individual.

If we really think about it, we all do these things every day, in a discontinuous, distracted, more or less surreptitious way. There are endless reasons we give ourselves or others, including our victims, for why we are behaving in such ways. Meanwhile, we are sowing seeds of madness capable of savagely occupying the mental and relational life of those who are at our side, in front of us, or under or even above us in age, role, authority, and power.

And, on the other hand, when we live our schizophrenic moments, we often discover with great terror how there are two main ways of escaping from reality—*in primis*, from the reality of the Other—that psychosis offers us: paranoia and body-mind dissociation. Paranoia allows us to pull off the miracle of transferring omnipotently the beam that has ended up in our own eye to the Other's eye, thereby transforming it into a bad eye, an "evil eye" against which we must guard ourselves with ceaseless suspicion and scorn. And dissociation is a kind of reduction into fragments and evacuation from the mind to elsewhere, outside one's own body, toward the body of the Other or toward other bodies, even those that are a long way away (such as the celestial bodies of Mr. Blake) or an eclipse of the mind within one's own body (such as what happened to Abena), a hiding place for one's own self out in the open and in the presence of the Other.

To My Patients—and Others Facing Schizophrenia

The final words of this book are directed at you, my dear patient with schizophrenia, and at those who are by your side, with responsibility, at times with difficulty, and, at least I hope, with unconditional love. I want to end by opening my heart to you, never really knowing how to remain silent about the hopes for your welfare and mental and physical—and also spiritual—health, which I wish to nourish for you and your life today and tomorrow.

Avoid those who want to refute or ignore your delusional thoughts. Instead, find in those thoughts the multiple meanings they conceal. Talk out loud with a dear friend or confidant, a family member, better if also with a psychotherapist, about what at first sight seems bizarre to you or concerns you in some way. Share the emotional impact of these ideas, especially if they become insistent and keep recurring savagely in your mind. Set these thoughts free. Make sure they don't carry on being repeated in the same way. At the end of the day, act in such a way that another engages with you in what you most fear, your madness, so that your ego can blossom from the most precious frailties of your being.

Likewise, make a treasure of your solitude, which is not isolation but preparation for intimacy, for new encounters with others, for new returns home, refinding from time to time the Others of the past who reside within and without us.

Do not fear medication as long as it is prescribed by someone who is caring for you as a person. Always give yourself a good dose of art and music. Walk in nature. Learn, if you don't already, to love animals.

Avoid those who think you are someone whose feet aren't firmly fixed to the ground, a dreamer. Humanity needs those who know how to see reality with the eyes of a child, who know how to immerse themselves with wonder in nature because we are part of it in the same way that part of it is our psyche. The psyche is like a house: It is made of rooms and places and memories and feelings. And it is in the places we visit and in the people we meet. The only place that is relevant to us is, time and again, a piece of the other and therefore a piece of ourselves.

There is no need for you, therefore, to hallucinate reality, but instead reinvent it with illusions. Like poets—that's right, like poets—reduce hallucinations to illusions, bring fantasy back to where it started and where it is destined: to reality, which is always multiple and inexhaustible, as are other human beings that we meet, infinite despite their own finitude, each of them frail or injured in their own way and with interesting and resilient lives.

Remember also—and this is no small thing—that your psyche is also made of flesh and blood, of skin and viscera, of breaths, of tears and tremors, of laughter and intentions, and it feeds on sights and sounds and smells and flavors and a handshake. So look after your body. It knows everything. It is the extension of your being and of your whole mind, conscious and nonconscious. It is the proof that we are also the legacy of someone else who has come before us. It is the proof that we are not enough by or for ourselves, that we have insurmountable limits. Not even extending our gaze helps us to see ourselves in our entirety, because entirety means multiplicity and therefore infinity. And thus it means allowing many others to view us from many angles and from many perspectives in order to capture the infinity that is in us and in others.

Having a body also means coming face to face with our imperfections and injuries on our skin. It means remembering. It means recognizing that we do not decide everything ourselves and that deciding something means bringing in discontinuities with the past. It means personally welcoming in new traumas and new crises with painful respect for the suffering they bring. Our body is also the substance of which our aspirations are made, that is, the acts of drawing to us, thus of aspirating and respirating what is around us. Our body reminds us that the greatest aspiration are others, Nature, the Cosmos, and that we can only take it in as well as release it a little at a time. In being a body, we are truly naked and innocent, like newborn babies and children who chew reality into small pieces and chunks, learning with effort to digest life a bit at a time, contributing to the continual discovery of themselves, joining in with the play—that's right, the play—in the wonder and the mystery of being and of being in relation to others.

So look after this “naked self” that is hidden within all of us and who always yearns for the Other. And remember that we all, from infancy, have an innate need to pretend reality, that is, create it and share it with others. Every one of us needs an “I” and a “you” and a “we”—a multiplicity of faces—in the same way that we need a multitude of seasons and colors and melodies and different places to give meaning to our everyday existence and to make us distinct from and therefore recognizable to each other.

Be wary of anyone who wants to view your schizophrenia as a mystical experience, an almost supernatural gift, and watch out too for anyone who wants to reduce it to a mythical experience, almost legendary and therefore false. Talk, instead, about your truth, albeit in the midst of suffering.

Finally, I want to tell you that, while I do not live it personally—although I do at times and in the occasional dream—I know that if you could lessen this suffering, or if you could at least alleviate it a little, you would do so because you are a human being just like me. As such you are called to life and death and, in the meantime, to live in this world with responsibility, hope, and joy. And, if you want, also with me by your side.

References

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