

## Lies and lessons: Ramblings of an alleged mad woman

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This article is a reflection from the lived experience of psychosis while examining the factors which may have contributed to ongoing mental distress. I endeavor to articulate the processes and emotions experienced over the duration of my time as an “alleged mad woman”. I also critically analyse the bearing of past events in my life and the impact and behaviors they produced in later years. In common language I share the intimacies of “madness” and the explanations that I invoked to make sense of what was happening to me. Seeing the madness as a “coping strategy”, rather than a “bio-medical response”, I invite readers to examine the notion of “psychosis” and place the client into the role of “healer”. I also invite readers to reflect on their practice and confront their ability to share people’s distress without being overwhelmed by the desire to “fix it”. In the busy clinical environment is there sufficient time allowed for clients to tell their complete story? What are the consequences if that isn’t allowed to happen?

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I often wonder when it began, this ascent into madness. Was there a date, a time, a word spoken? Was it an event or place that precipitated the ascent? I have searched, but so many of my memories are untrustworthy or inaccessible that there doesn’t seem to be any recollection of a clear singular event or notion. Rather a kaleidoscope of bumps and bruises and harsh words which blend and melt into each other and depending on what perspective you take it reforms every time you view it. This collection of life circumstances have combined to guide me into a world which I felt I needed so much protection from.

One of my earliest recollections is an overwhelming feeling of not quite “fitting in”; at school, within my family and within my environment. A sense of being on the outside looking in, of watching my life being lived as an observer, rather than a participant. Over time I was to have numerous experiences which would reinforce this sense of “detachment” from others, and the more I experienced it the more I craved to experience the feeling of connection to others.

I discovered, quite by accident, that I was adopted when I was seven. I remember being consumed by an overwhelming sense of rejection. I was told the story of my adoption. I had been adopted by another family first who became concerned that I may be brain damaged when they received the medical records of my birth.

The possibility of having a child that was less than perfect when they had gone through such a process procedure was too much to endure. I was returned to the adoption agency after spending six weeks with this family. They did not bond with

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me, they did not wish to have a damaged child; they did not love me enough. Now I knew that there was nothing you could be certain of in the world, there were no anchors. People could not be relied on or trusted, I discovered that people were commodities and could be disposed of at whim. My fate would always be controlled by others and their opinion and judgments of me would determine my life.

I was to learn the importance of being connected and attached to people. That it was imperative for survival, because if one didn't have that connection then one was of little or no value. I was told my adoption was a private matter and not to be discussed at anytime with anyone including my parents.

**Lesson:** It is alright to *live* a lie as long as the truth is kept secret.

I recall family holidays, but one in particular stays with me. The family was staying with relatives and I was invited into my uncle's bed for "cuddles". After several occasions we "got caught" and I was slapped and beaten by my aunty while she raged at my uncle. I remember being taken aside and spoken to about "touching" and "private bits", whilst instinctively knowing that that it was wrong and best for everyone to lie about this and deny anything "inappropriate" happened.

It was clear from the way the adults acted that this was what they wanted to hear and I obliged. I couldn't understand why they wished to deny me the feelings of warmth and pleasure derived from "cuddles"? I also couldn't understand that why, if I hadn't done anything wrong, I was punished, so clearly implying I had done something wrong. My parents never again looked at me the same way and I knew they could smell the badness festering inside me. I could only pretend to be good, in their eyes. I could never be good.

**Lesson:** It is alright to *tell* a lie as long as the truth is kept secret.

My locale didn't have a high school so I had to attend a school in another district. It wasn't until I attended this school that I discovered that my neighborhood was considered the poorest, crime-ridden, culturally diverse and therefore the least desirable area to live in. Teachers appeared to treat those of us from the "wrong side of the tracks" differently: there was always an atmosphere of possible unpredictable or explosive behavior from "those students". I recall a teacher telling me in front of the whole class that all I would ever be was "queen of the dustbins" and not to forget where I came from.

I remember the shame, but more so the knowing that he was correct, that my future was preordained and who was I to think that things could be any different for "girls like me". Fellow students wouldn't come to my home as they weren't permitted by their parents. There was nothing I could do to fit in because that was predetermined by where I lived. I was destined to be isolated and marginalized by my peers. If I wanted to fit in to make friends I had to be more like them and lie about my home address and my heritage. So I watched and observed. They were easy to impersonate, so I did. I surrendered parts of myself to become acceptable. I never got those parts back. (They were good parts.)

**Lesson:** It is alright to *become* a lie as long as the truth is kept secret.

I had been hearing voices for a long time, since early childhood. My first voice was maternal, kindly and nurturing; all the things one wanted from a mother, and she

helped me sleep; she was the lioness who would protect her cub. She was proud of me and she helped me make sense of difficult situations when my emotions would wash over me and my brain wouldn't work properly. In those times, when I became confused and fearful, she was my constant, my mentor, my wise, reliable, beautiful companion, the antithesis of what I had experienced of adults previously. She was mine alone, I didn't have to share her with anyone, and the best way to keep her mine was to not mention her existence to anyone.

**Lesson: Keeping secrets keeps you safe**

Although I loved the learning environment I didn't do that well at school – the consequences of existing in this way day-to-day started to exact a toll and cracks began to appear. My school days were marred by frequent parental trips to the school for my “behavioral issues”. Teachers were concerned by my constant emotional outbursts in class, and my restlessness and distraction to others. My parents were never called to school to discuss either my academic ability, or my potential. I was labeled a problem student and sent for a mental health assessment. This was my introduction to mental health services. This was the beginning of my vocation as a service user.

I sat in front of the psychiatrist and we spoke of private, personal things with no introduction. I was twelve, he was a hundred. He asked me embarrassing questions about sex and boys, trying to extract answers that I didn't want my parents to know about: I knew that everything I said to him would be repeated to my parents so I lied profusely.

Later when the session was discussed with my parents, they told me what he had reported back to them. I discovered that all the lies I told him, he believed; all the truths, he didn't. Maybe he was right, maybe I had got it wrong. My judgment was impaired. Once again I discovered people can't be trusted, not even myself. I concluded I could not be helped. My parents were not happy with his evaluation of my mental state so I simply did not return. The status quo remained both at home and at school and my distress compounded and accelerated.

I can still evoke the restlessness I felt. The desperation to escape, to get out, to run away, to be anywhere but where I was. Trouble was, I felt that way as soon as I reached wherever I ran too. There was no sanctuary for me, no sense of safety, the only place I did feel remotely safe was at home, because at home I was alone with no-one to cause me any problems. I didn't have to live up to people's expectations; there was no experiencing the looks of disappointment and disapproval. I didn't need to change my character or my personality to merge and blend with the people I was currently with. I could breathe at home, but I was alone. Feeling safe meant being alone. Yet I didn't wish to be alone because I knew that to be alone was to be irrelevant, that I didn't matter, and not mattering to anyone is a terrible feeling. I did so want to matter to someone; I so wanted to be loved. How do you make people love you when you can't bear to be around them?

How do you risk exposing yourself to such a risk, the ultimate risk, the risk of rejection, knowing with absolute certainty that you are not worthy of being loved? Please, don't ask me to do that. It's far too dangerous.

These were the lessons I gained as a child, and through the eyes of child, I developed childish beliefs and thought processes. They remained throughout adolescence and were deeply entrenched by adulthood. They were the filter that flavoured my taste of the world, and those who occupied it.

When my schooling concluded I embarked on a frenzy of seeking “loving” relationships but instead found unsatisfying and often demeaning ones. I married young to a person who while extraordinarily clever also experienced great difficulty in determining fact from fiction and would draw me into his imagined world, one of his, which was one of privilege and specialness. The marriage was not to last, but the visitation to the world of fantasy (named psychosis by mental health services) was to remain, and I became rather than a weaver of stories, an embroiderer. I had the ability to fill in all the gaps, to not leave out details; details are the things that catch you out when discerning the truth, but not me, this was my forte: details. This is how you become convinced of the magic, by filling in the gaps with the minute details which give it life.

My world was now one of voices of spectacular friends who were charming, clever, and witty who wanted to be around me, who enjoyed my company and sought me out every day. But these friends would turn me into their victim. The voices became nasty, critical voices; since I had opened the door to one I had inadvertently opened the door to the others. It was these voices that were to overwhelm me, these voices that would dominate; the others began to fade and finally dissipated and became almost non-existent. Only one remained, my bastion of strength, my valiant heroine from my childhood, she stayed; she ensured they wouldn’t destroy me.

This desperation I had experienced in my early days at school, in fact I can’t recall it not ever being there, this restlessness I now knew as anxiety. This pervasive, all-consuming emotion is pure unadulterated fear. To this I became a servant: fear was to be my master and it would rule with cruelty and malevolence. The tools it used were the voices. They were pawns in this game of control, a game I had long given up playing, a game I had resoundingly lost. This realm was to be my future and where I would live for eighteen years. I was governed by voices who told me lies and truths, and both were delivered with brutality and inflicted wounds that scarred me forever.

They told me, and I believed them, that I was going to receive a message from God and that this message would free the world of tyranny and bring lasting peace to the world. Because I had been chosen, these voices would test my integrity, my worthiness, my incorruptibility and would determine if I was a fitting recipient of such a message. I saw signs of my “calling” everywhere: on the television, on the radio, seemingly inconsequential events, though all were clear signs to me that I was the chosen one. I had to remain humble though. It was imperative that I keep this monumental event secret, then and only then everyone would know of my specialness. I had been picked because it was known that I was very good at *keeping* secrets. The voices taunted and tested me. I kept failing, but still they persisted: they encouraged me to be more committed and more focused on them, to be better, to be good and to be perfect. Every day was a day to prove my incompetency at almost everything. Every day I was fed more threats, more demands were made of me, and I was force-fed huge rations of fear.

It became impossible to function, to think and to participate in the world. I needed this to stop this turmoil. When would they accept I had failed them, that I could never be what they needed me to be? Why they couldn’t just leave me alone to rot? They had got it wrong, I couldn’t be “the one”. How much clearer could it be that I couldn’t be “the one”?

I came to the conclusion that I couldn’t do this anymore. I had had enough. I was going to take my own life to bring it all to an end. Having finally made a determined and decisive move there was a fleeting moment, a tentative and fragile moment when

I took control. It was an instant, just an instant of feeling that I could bring myself back from this. It was a spark, a moment, but it was enough to ignite a flare that would allow me to take charge and orchestrate my own recovery. During those years I had been a client of mental health services. Under their care I subjugated myself to their ways, their pills and their hospitals. They witnessed my decline and told me how lucky I was to have a family that could tolerate me and that everything was just fine. They told me the lie because they believed it, and because they believed it, so did I. They told me the lie because they didn't know better.

Of all the things that I was to experience over the years it was the anxiety that proved the most destructive. With that glimmer of hope I experienced I was able to think about the here-and-now, what was going on now. I raised the question "If there was one thing in my life that I could change what would it be"? Easy! Not to feel anxious. There was our starting point, my heroine and I would address: the anxiety and that is all. We will take the beast by the tail and take it on.

That's how the journey began. I slowly exposed myself to the things that made me fearful and allowed myself to "feel anxious" for short periods of time, and then extended these periods until I was able to extract the thinking necessary to tolerate the fear. I learned that fear was something I had endured for years: its effects had become my normal mode of being. I had totally and entirely submitted myself to it. The high level of anxiety was constant and it took very little to be overpowered by it. It was this revelation that made me question the advice long given by Mental Health services: "avoid stress". Well intentioned I'm sure, but the only way to avoid stress is to not live, and that was exactly what I was doing: not living. This single notion was to prove pivotal. If one wants to live the life they choose one has to be exposed to stress and learn how to deal with it. Essentially this is the art of growing up and dealing with an adult world in an adult way; I hadn't mastered this. I lived my life fuelled by childish notions and ill-conceived beliefs.

The skill I had mastered to perfection was the skill of covering up, of concealing the madness. It takes a lot of energy but you just simply forget that you do it, and it becomes your refuge. I must say there was some solace in that, to know I could still go there if I chose. Though now the choice is not about going there, the difference now is knowing how to come back.

It was only when I felt confident in my ability to cope with the anxiety that I decided to take on the voices. I approached this based on the same principles which had enabled me to work so effectively with my anxiety. I addressed them. I didn't confront them; they were too clever for that! I realized that the voices played an important part in my life, they were my everything: confidants, tormentors who never played truant. No-one could be involved in such an abusive relationship and not become enmeshed with the abuser or the thoughts of the abuser routinely. I decided I would change my relationship with the voices – I would treat them as allies and welcome them with love and kindness. I surmised that this would hopefully disarm them and they would have to approach me quite differently. This proved an astute observation on my part and indeed my relationship with them changed.

I began to be able to filter the less desirable and make some sense of what was behind their content. I engaged the voices as friends, as if they were trying to help me, but they had very poor communication skills. It was my responsibility to interpret what they were saying into something that was helpful and useful for me. I became very proficient at this and in a short period was able to gain some relief from the negative impact of the voices. Coincidentally by reducing my stress levels the voices also

receded, so I was able to focus much more on getting my voices under control. The most startling revelation to me was discovering that the only power the voices had was the power I gave them. This allowed me to regulate the negative voices and evaluate their content and ascertain if what they were telling me was significant.

I started with the benign voices, as the common repetitive ones were easier. Based on the same ideals used from working with the benign voices, I worked on the more intrusive, intensive and unique voices until I finally honed the technique. One of the natural consequences of dealing with the voices was subtly and covertly the beliefs that supported the voices began to weaken and I was not so convinced of their accuracy. Just as I had observed that voices don't always tell the truth, I noticed that my beliefs were not necessarily reliable and I needed to give them some considered thought and often problem-solve before embarking on any action. This is a laborious process and I was not practised at it, but eventually I was to accumulate the adequate skills that it became much more intuitive.

When I did reclaim my role as a citizen on reflection, the whole process had taken approximately nine months. It is not without some gravity that I liken it to the gestation period and all the associated process of labor and birth. There were times when it felt I had emerged from a cocoon to breathe fresh air at last. A time when I could finally embrace life and the vibrancy of the world.

I have had the luxury to reflect on my experiences choosing as I do to work in mental health with others who have had similar experiences to myself. I have the opportunity to frequently discuss, analyze, assimilate and articulate the most significant and insignificant incidents in my life, but only I hope to enhance my own self-awareness for the possible benefit of others.

Those reflections have led me to the following premises:

- I was just simply being who I was I didn't know how to be different.
- Others determined that I was without reason, I never ever felt that.
- I was living on instinct so deep and so profound it never occurred to me to question it.

There are so many things that do not require explanation as a child, and the accumulations of explanations contributes in no small way to the loss of innocence and the idea of magic, which makes all things possible. When I was bored I would retreat into a world of fantasy: I would become totally immersed to the point that the fantasy became more real than the reality around me.

Mental health services do not permit such survival skills in adulthood. Adulthood strips you of the ability to break free from captivity. I have no wish to feel so captured and confined. I wish to be free to allow my mind to be creative and productive.

I am a thinker and I maintain that it was my thought processes that lead me into despair, and equally it is my thinking and changed thought processes that will lead me out. I am convinced that visionary thinking is crucial. The ability to visit a private realm in your head is an essential, even natural part of thinking. An innate problem-solving gift we are all given if we choose to use it. Perhaps it takes us deeper into our psyche, into parts of the mind that allow us to see problems from a different perspective and to solve them in novel and imaginative ways.

There is some pain which is too great, too awful, too distressing to even contemplate to revisit. It is a pain from so deep inside that a mere brush with it paralyzes you. It is too painful for tears, too painful to understand, and to keep it suppressed is to deny its

very existence. The question is raised: is it not unreasonable to compensate by allowing ourselves to be transported to another tolerable position?

The need to escape is not confined to mad people; all of us at some stage in our lives have craved to be invisible, to disappear, whether to a tropical island or a castle, or mountainous forest. I consider my madness a reasonable and rational response to situations and events that I was ill-equipped to deal with. I have learnt that there is no comparison to real affection from real people; nothing competes with the pleasure derived from personal relationships, being liked and even loved. The real risk is not trying. The fear of rejection, criticism, even possible harm and the feeling of being defenseless can exclude people from the very things that will improve their lives. These things can be overcome by accessing the resilience and courage that service users have in abundance and so infrequently gets acknowledged or sought out.

The truth does not free you from lies when that truth is defined by those who were not told the lies. I choose to believe what is most helpful to me. It does not matter if the information is a truth or a lie: what matters is how I choose to interpret it. All information can be construed as truth or lies. My role is to decide which is the most beneficial to me, which causes me the least distress, and which allows me to function in the way I wish.

I have looked for the “golden answer”, the “golden event”, the “golden incentive” so I could say “this is it”, because that is what services want: the proverbial “golden cure”. I wonder if my readers have endeavored to unearth from my writings the “cure”, hoping I would divulge a key issue or provide an “insight” into retrieving sanity. I have purposely not revealed my “secrets”: my wish is to share my thoughts and not to be analysed nor pathologized, but to be listened to.

If you can listen to my complete tale and allow me to tell it without casting your own interpretation upon it, every clue and every nuance is there. Discerning the meaning behind my circumstances is a gift consciously and generously shared, and by having someone in your corner to share the burden, together we may free ourselves of the shackles.

I give warning that searching for the cure is the greatest deception of all, for the search is an internal one. One of reconnecting to the self, discovering that you are entitled to be, and if you don’t like that self, then it is your choice to change things. I am talking about a change in attitude, a completely new way of being, accomplishable when you’re resolute; this is life’s journey, not the journey of madness.

This is the on-going struggle of human beings.

A car’s speed is limited only by how well it can stop. I have learnt how and when to apply the brakes; this allows me to pursue life and to grab it with both hands. The lure is there sometimes to renege on my pursuit of well-being, but I have sufficient resolve that I haul things back when I’m starting to build up a bit too much speed. The reason I choose to do this is simple: because I can. Because that is what I expect from myself.

I share with you my last life lesson:

**Lesson:** Lies remain a sanctuary *only* if you allow them to define your world.