

Schizophrenia, Poetry, and the Redemptive Image

by Samuel Prestridge

I was in the funeral director's office, writing my mother's eulogy. A verse of scripture she'd quoted to me for most of my life came to mind: *Be sure your sins will find you out*. I searched the phrase and found it's a partial quote from Numbers 32: 23. God is telling the Israelites what kind of society he expects them to build and the consequences if they don't:

And the land [shall] be subdued before the LORD: then afterward ye shall return, and be guiltless before the LORD, and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before the LORD. But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out. Build you cities for your little ones, and folds for your sheep; and do that which hath proceeded out of your mouth.

The passage is a call to stewardship, responsibility, and community. All I got from my mother, though, were the consequences, not the mandate.

I was only mildly surprised.

When I was around 40, my mother was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. While the onset of her illness is uncertain, her continual erratic behavior, accusations, cryptic pronouncements, and social isolation suggests that the illness began when I was as young as ten.

There was a passivity in our household regarding my mother's behavior. My father, I'm sure, did what he thought was best, but largely, my mother's rants, obsessions, her occasional soliloquies to persons not present—odd as it may sound—were ignored. Her illness was thus untreated through most of my personal development, and my socialization took place at the hands of someone actively hallucinating.

It did *not* make for a satisfying adolescence. It did *not* make for a graceful transition into adulthood.

As a writer, however, there were two fundamental characteristics—I can't necessarily call them "gifts"—that my mother gave me. I'll hasten to add "inadvertently" because I honestly can't see her willing to impart anything that would help her children adapt to what she called—in the best Pauline sense—the world.

First, I think I owe my mother for the gift of my facility with language. The language of schizophrenics, as is often argued, constitutes a private mythology. That which cannot be articulated becomes poeticized. Jung noted this tendency and remarked on it in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

Through my work with the patients I realized that para-

noid ideas and hallucinations contain a germ of meaning. A personality, a life history, a pattern of hopes and desires lie behind the psychosis. The fault is ours if we do not understand them. (Memories, Dreams, Reflections 127)

Through listening to my her, even at a young age, I learned to break my mother's "germ of meaning."

She often used the expression that someone *put dogs on her*. The accusation would be leveled at my father, at her relatives, at her invisible interlocutors, and at a dizzying variety of invisible visitors to our house. One day, summer in Mississippi, around 5:00, I was at her house when the man next door arrived home. He was a mechanic, and he was greasy and sweaty from his day's work. My mother told me she hated him, and I asked her why.

"He puts dogs on me," she said.

I looked out the window, and I realized that my mother grudged the empathy she felt for the man. She was in an air-conditioned house and cared for, while he was out in the heat, working with his hands, getting filthy, getting tired, and dealing with people my mother would have feared, hated, and found incomprehensible.

I realized that her expression simply meant that someone had made her feel badly. She had no idea as to how or why the person did this to her. She assumed the reasons were personal, perhaps retribution, though she had no clue what she'd done to deserve it. I learned to listen to my mother's speech more carefully, to wait for the next jump, the next twist in her conversation—if only to keep from being blindsided by some harangue about dogs, scars, some member of her family or my father's, or her understanding of the mandate she'd received from angels she'd seen, from visions sent by God.

There was a large dose of the messianic in my mother's visions. She drew constantly and repetitively. She claimed that she was designing a new Kingdom of God, which would be located on land that my family owned. The pictures would be framed with the names of plants, semi-precious jewels that would need to be procured. She claimed that God showed her exactly how that kingdom was to be established, and when I sold that land to get money to support her, she saw the sale as the victory of dark forces allied against her.

Taken altogether, of course, my mother's various emblems, metaphors, accusations formed a very private sort of mythology, one that had to be protected from those who might use it against her. She was private, evasive, and remarkably agile in her evasion and deflections of questions, responses, or requests. Asking *What do you mean by that* would be met with a suspicious stare, a change of subject, or verbal acrobatics. Eventually, she began to develop what I referred to as the *Evil Twin Explanation*. If during a phone call, I'd disagreed with her or said that which was irksome—and there was no predicting what she might find irksome—she might call me back almost immediately.

Did we just talk, she'd ask.

Yes.

What did we talk about?

When I finally asked her why she did this, she said it was because every person on earth has an evil twin. When she speaks to someone, she said, she has to then test that person to see if she was speaking to the *real* person or the evil twin.

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This tendency escalated as did all of her obsessions. The last time I saw my mother alive, she said, *You're not even Sam. You're some big, stupid idiot who's come to fool me.*

I learned from my mother's illness what linguistic grace I have. Also, I inherited, the assumption that the figurative can and must stand for that which cannot be stated referentially. Call it a continuing faith in myth making. Ernst Cassirer addressed this idea in his book *Language and Myth*.

The spirit lives in the word of language and in the mythical image without falling under the control of either. What poetry expresses is neither the mythic word-picture of gods and daemons, nor the logical truth of abstract determinations and relations. The world of poetry stands apart from both as a world of illusion and fantasy—but it is just in this mode of illusion that the realm of pure feeling can find utterance, and can therewith attain its full and concrete actualization. Word and mythic image, which once confronted the human mind as hard realistic powers, have now cast off all reality and effectuality; they have become a light, bright ether in which the spirit can move... This liberation is achieved not because the mind throws aside the sensuous forms of word and image, but in that it uses them both as organs of its own, and thereby recognizes them for what they really are: forms of its own self-revelation.

If we consider the delusions of the schizophrenic as an attempt for “pure feeling [to] find utterance” or as “forms of [the mind's] self-revelation,” then I'd have to credit my mother's illness for much of the compulsion toward writing, and especially towards poetry, that I have.

However, if I learned to listen, to express from my mother, I also learned that it was better not to: *Be sure your sins will find you out!* This is the down-side of the mythmaking gift. I had the ability to express, to make my own small myths, but I had a suspicion that what I said, that what I did was wrong. *Be sure your sin will find you out.*

I had not yet read Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. I had not yet heard her Haze Motes's shouting from the street corner *Blasphemy is the way to truth.*

I lived with the inherent contradiction of my upbringing for decades. On the one hand, there has been an urgency to capture the images that arise and seem to locate me in the world. On the other, there was a fear of wrongly expressing the matter, which created a creative reticence. Being *sure my sin would find me out* resulted in an odd sort of fear of expression, an inevitable creative blockage, a timidity that resulted in an aesthetic hedging of bets. Poems were left half written, highly elliptical, or merely cynical. Further, somehow the combination of *do / don't* created in me a furtiveness. My sin could not find me out, the logic went, if I could not be located.

This was not overt. I wrote, I sent out poems, but there was a fear of *location*. Poetry depends on acceptance of that which makes itself available, but how could I be unilaterally accepting of the images and impulses that arose if I was *sure my sins would find me out?* In this way, I believe, my mother's illness limited my openness to the very images and impulses that are the essence of good poetry. What if I spoke that which ought not

be spoken? What if I failed to express that which ought to be expressed?

I don't know how deeply beneath the surface these feelings lived. I don't know even as I write about them now.

Happily, this has changed, and I think that the fundamentals of the change were two separate authors whose emphases were on plurality, rather than the monochromatic paradox I'd inherited. The first author was James Hillman. I found his comments on polytheism central to my difficulties. If every aspect of humanity has its own deity, it follows that every aspect of humanity has its proper arena of expression:

If there is only one model of individuation can there be true individuality? The complexes that will not be integrated force recognition of their autonomous power. Their archetypal cores will not serve the single goal of monotheistic wholeness. Babel may be a religious decline . . . and it may be a psychological improvement, since through the many tongues a fuller discordant psychic reality is being reflected.

Hillman's ideas provided a completely different context for my express / don't express paradox. My sins could not find me out if those sins were actually one or more of the “many tongues” by which a “fuller discordant psychic reality is being reflected.”

Hillman's insight was reinforced when I read Dr. Iain McGilchrist's remarkable book *The Master and His Emissary*. His ideas on the brain's hemispheric interactions provided an entirely new way of looking at the creative act. I'll not reduce the complexity of his volume by attempting to frame his argument in a few sentences. I will say that his ideas regarding the will towards the new—and the simultaneous efforts to limit that expression—reframed the central paradox with which I've lived for most of my life.

The paradox, I'll add, has not only been reframed. It has been eliminated.

After a long time, after much effort, I feel free of the dual influences I inherited. I write now more easily. I write without fear. The very riot of the creative act is enjoyable in ways that I'd found impossible to imagine just five years ago.

Beyond that, I can't say. I feel that my writing has improved, but I've also lost, happily, the impulse to measure what I do against others. Having lost the messianic notion of the poem's importance, I can enjoy the expression itself. I can live with the riot of the senses. I can be just human.