

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Donald A. Krill

It was a rare experience for me to work with a “genius” in psychotherapy, especially one with a decidedly antisocial intent and threatening a homicidal-suicidal pact from the outset of therapy. His bizarre letters to public figures and the news media suggested a paranoid psychosis with grandiose claims that cast a shadow of doubt upon his self-acclaimed “genius.” I saw him eleven times at a public outpatient psychiatric clinic, serving primarily a poor and vagrant population, and have remained in written contact with him since that time. His turnabout after the sixth session indicated a significant shift, similar to a religious conversion, from an allegedly destructive stance to a life-affirming one.

Sam Steinhold (fictional name) had seen an intake social worker once, before seeing me for ongoing therapy. He had been referred to the clinic by a distressed local TV station. The station had done a program on suicide, focusing upon an artist who had planned, announced and finally committed suicide. She had presented her decision as ethically justifiable. The program had emphasized that help was available to people contemplating a similar fate. Sam had seen the program and responded by letter. Following are excerpts from his writing:

I think what Mrs. Roman did was brilliant, creative and right. A person should have the right as to ending his life when and where and how . . . What's with you people that life should be lived no matter what? You are the monsters and the torturers who make people suffer all their lives just to live. Life IS NOT WORTH LIVING when you have to suffer all your life. I suppose you give out awards to the person who can live the longest while being tortured the most. Life SHOULD BE LIVED WITHOUT SUFFERING. GOD put us on the earth to SUFFER and we should not have to let GOD make us suffer. We should have a way out from all

of GOD's suffering. GOD is the biggest monster of all . . . Do you know what it is like to be depressed all your life (40 years) because you don't fit in with the rest of the world? And not because you are stupid. But because you are smarter than everyone else in the world? Now I must die in four months. Why? Because all you **JERKS ARE KILLING ME**. You morons are at fault because you won't accept me for *what I am*. It's society that causes suicides. That's right, you and others are what cause all suicides and you morons are saying there is help. Help? What a laugh. I would like to see you help me . . . Can you get me a job, can you get me money to exist, can you get me a family and friends?

I have none of that . . . no one will have anything to do with me because they can't take my being superior and I can't take their stupidity. *Even the greatest minds around today are inferior to me*. And you're going to help? Ha, Ha, Ha . . . You haven't the minds to perceive a solution.

But when I die the world will know about it. And they will know I turned to you and you said get lost and drop dead . . . The world will know there is no help for no one. Then all the world will commit suicide . . . There is no help from God. God is the devil and the angel. And I am the only person in the world who knows the whole truth about God. And when I die the whole world will know the truth and then the end will come for all.

The clinic wrote to Sam saying they had heard from the TV station and invited him for a talk. He shared his isolated stance with the worker: he had never been employed steadily, his unemployment compensation would be depleted in less than four months. He had no family or friends to turn to. When he was no longer able to pay rent he would wait for the police to try to evict him. He would shoot it out with the police and then kill himself. He had guns in his apartment. He would be interested in talking with someone at the clinic. His diagnosis: paranoid personality with grandiose thinking.

I saw Sam the next week. He was talkative, though soft-spoken, and appeared dejected. He wore a soiled and faded short-sleeved sport shirt and wrinkled pants. With shoulder-length brown hair, a moustache and unkempt short beard, he had the appearance of a middle-aged hippie fallen from idealism. Except to express curiosity and interest, I said little

during our first three sessions. I was orienting myself to his view of the world and looking for patterns, conflict areas and potential sources for motivating some hope for change in his bleak outlook. There was a new twist of contracting a specified number of contacts: his outside limit being the moment when his money ran out.

He was from a Jewish family in New York City, where his mother and siblings still resided. His father left the family when Sam was three years old and he described his mother as always rather protective of him. She had never remarried and he had lived with her for eight years after an unfortunate experience in the Navy. He was never close to his siblings as they never seemed to understand him. Even when living with his mother, he avoided the rest of the relatives and claimed to have isolated himself in his room most of the time when not working. He denied being close to his mother yet admitted accepting financial help from her at times. He had sporadic written contact with her until she recently stopped writing. This was in response to his sending her a copy of his letter to the TV station. His aunt wrote back scolding him for upsetting his mother and telling him not to bother her anymore.

Even as a child, he never had friends. He acquired a college degree in mechanical design and engineering and then joined the Navy. He was unhappy, feeling himself a social misfit, and went AWOL, ending up in jail and finally with a dishonorable discharge. Following a period of time with his mother he met Dolly. He had never dated and a fellow told him he should meet Dolly because "she'll go to bed with anyone." He did and she did. Their friendship went on for ten years. Sometimes they lived together and other times separately because of their cyclic conflicts. She was the one person who believed in his abilities, although not consistently. She was sexually promiscuous (as he expected) and would often whimsically deplete their meager financial resources. They lived in various places in California and finally broke up two years ago in New York City, after she spent money given to him by his mother.

After they separated he came to Denver and she went to California. They wrote occasional letters but none recently. In Denver, Sam hoped to settle down to write a book about his personal philosophy. For a time in California he had become a serious member of a Jehovah's Witness community. This had ended when they seemed "too narrow" for some of his developing personal religious ideas. His book was to be an expression to the public of many of his "genius" insights on religion and society. Apart from an outline of ideas, rejected by the first publisher he sent it to, the book was never written.

Sam claimed to be multi-talented, although his jobs were primarily as draftsman and technical illustrator. He enumerated his other talents: architect, artist, designer, photographer, sculptor, poet, builder, inventor, cabinet-maker, electrician, plumber, machinist, mason, and more. He claimed to be expert at two hundred occupations presently, and said that if he were around for forty more years, he could master any and all jobs. He displayed a scrapbook with an array of artistic photographs, designs, blueprints, pictures of inventions, games and furniture he had created. While he had made no money from these projects, they were obviously creative enterprises. He had received outstanding recognition in a local photo contest within the past year.

While he had spent considerable time with many projects over the years, his employment was a series of short-term jobs. Sam's latest job had lasted a year and ended three months before I saw him. Immediately prior to that he had had three jobs, each for about three months duration with short periods of unemployment in between. He would usually seek jobs of limited duration. Occasional longer jobs ended when either Sam or his employer would be troubled about Sam's poor interpersonal skills. He saw himself aloof from others and either envied by them or shunned for being an "oddball." Now he was discouraged and "fed up." He felt he was unrecognized and his many talents unappreciated. He was tired of the pain of social reactions that accompanied the rather "dull and mediocre" jobs he was forced to accept in order to earn a livelihood. Accompany-

ing his despair were physical complaints. He had had terrible back pains for several months. With all this, he decided he would work no more.

He claimed to have desired either suicide or "getting lost in the world" since the age of eight. He enumerated several suicide plans and attempts over the years, all of which had gone awry. Here again was a flavor of exaggeration, a flair for the dramatic. One such example was learning to fly a plane so he could nose dive into the earth. Yet on the day of his solo flight, he so enjoyed the excitement of flying that he could not bring himself to suicide.

In talking about his early life he reported a strange, dream-like memory. The only time he remembered seeing his father was when he was twelve years old. He had had a bike accident and was laying on the ground. His father appeared, took him to the doctor's office, paid the doctor and departed, not to be seen or heard from again.

In our second and third meetings, Sam showed me letters he had written. The first was sent to the local newspaper and the second went not only to the news media but to public figures as well, including the Governor and President. Both were gestures of grandiosity, hoping for some response. In writing the first letter, he was hoping to be asked by the newspaper for an interview in which he would reveal publicly his talents and unrecognized accomplishments. The second letter was signed "The Messiah." It threatened the forthcoming destruction of the world, blaming an overly materialistic society and its negligence of the environment and depletion of resources. He would be one of the few survivors and would provide spiritual leadership for a new world beginning. One newspaper commented briefly in a small news item on his "kooky" letter. He'd also sent a copy to Dolly, who responded by telephone, warning him that he might get locked up if he was caught.

In these early interviews he rejected inquiries by me as to his interest in improving his social skills in relation to work and potential friendships. I sensed a twofold therapeutic challenge: first, how to affirm his life stance within a framework that

might encourage positive engagement with other people; second, how to challenge the destructive aspects of his grandiosity from a position of shared understanding of his world view. The major risks were of his bolting from treatment if I encouraged social conformity, or of my frightening him by facilitating too much intimacy between us. He reported three efforts with therapy in the past. He had tried group therapy once and left after the first session, scoffing at the quality of the experience. On two occasions with individual therapists he said he got no help directly, although coincidentally something positive had occurred in his life each time, so that he had no longer felt the need for help.

It was difficult to assess the objective reality of either Sam's history or the desperation of his present plight. His stories often seemed melodramatic and exaggerated. I felt as if I were being set up to supply answers or reassurance that would be quickly rejected. He seemed very much in control of how he wanted me to view him, as well as of the management of our time together.

My main interventions occurred during the next three sessions, interspersed with his further elaborations about his job struggles and frustrations over lack of appropriate recognition. The techniques I utilized might be termed normalizing, provocative, paradoxical, or dereflective, depending upon the reader's orientation. Whatever its label, Sam felt the full impact by the end of the sixth session, when remarkable changes suddenly seemed to blossom forth.

At the start of the fourth meeting I said I wanted to share some ideas I had about his predicament. His depression and utter despair were perfectly understandable, I said. To believe oneself a genius and yet not to have found a place in the world to express this and be appreciated by others was indeed troubling. One could not really be creative without having some arena in the world wherein his productions would be seen as useful contributions. Not only was he unappreciated but he had no affirming relationships in his life at the present. He

could feel neither fulfilled nor cared about, so his depression was no surprise. I would feel the same in his shoes.

Secondly, I said, the way he had tried to solve this problem did not work. The very way he sought attention and acclaim resulted in people thinking he was a nut. If he really wanted to play out the role of a nut, he could do much better. He could get medication, or go into a hospital, or apply for disability support for mental incapacity. Then he would not have the rent problem.

His response to my "lecturette" was a look of puzzlement. Then he said he would be fearful of getting stuck on medication. I said even if he did, he would have a source of financial support and we could spend more time together trying to improve his relationships with other people while he gradually weaned himself from the medication. After further discussion about the process of getting "meds" and securing disability, he requested that I help set both processes in motion. As he was leaving he looked at me, again puzzled, and asked, "Do you think I am crazy?" I laughed and said, "Of course, why else would I be doing all this for you?" He chuckled as he left.

At the next session I noticed he was talking to an attractive woman in the waiting room. When the office was closed I commented on the woman and asked if he would prefer to talk to her a bit longer, that we could delay our interview somewhat if he liked. He declined the offer, although he said maybe she would be around after the hour. He had seen the clinic psychiatrist for antidepressant medication (the psychiatrist's diagnosis was "borderline personality") but the "meds" didn't help. They just made him constipated. He spent the rest of the session talking about past difficulties with employment and spoke as if he might consider a job if one came along.

The sixth session began with his reading aloud a letter he had composed to Dolly. It was a series of self-evaluations and uncertainties, taking the form of opposing forces he saw in his personality. He was caring, yet avoided others; creative, yet apathetic; peaceful, yet with violent fantasies; a genius, and still a failure; loving life, and considering death. Finishing the

reading, he looked at me and said, "What do you think?" as if hoping I could make some sense out of his confusion.

"If you knew Zen," I said, "I'd wonder if you were describing the enlightenment experience." He asked what I meant and I said that *satori* or enlightenment, was commonly described as a totality of experience that included the polarities of life. He reflected a moment and asked what Zen was and how he could learn more about it. I said something about its Oriental roots and gave him the titles of three books he might explore. "Most people reading about Zen find it fascinating, yet elusive and puzzling," I said. "Of course, if you're a genius you might understand it better than most."

He then told me a story about meeting a woman on a bus and talking with her. She had been aggravated by a self-styled preacher at a bus stop warning about damnation. He chuckled as he commented that he didn't have the heart to tell her he was "the Messiah." She got off at his stop and it turned out they lived in the same apartment house. Later, he was disappointed to learn that she was living with a man.

Before leaving he checked on how I was doing in setting up a disability program for him. I said I was exploring the procedures. He was to see the psychiatrist for a medication follow-up the next week. I would be gone that week on vacation.

The next time I saw him, I had been alerted by a secretary only moments before that I would not be seeing Sam Steinholt but Sam Satori. He greeted me with a broad smile and announced his new name. He also quickly assured me this was no joke as he had already gone through the process of having his name legally changed.

He spent half the session on glowing reports of how his life had turned around. He said he was grateful to me for introducing him to Zen. The other half of the hour was spent listening to a cassette tape he had brought along. Each day he was recording tapes of reflections on his new insights into the world and himself and how these were affecting his life. Part of his new plan was to record tapes regularly and eventually use them as a basis for a book.

With delight he told me how this had all come about. After our last session he had gone to the library and found one of the books I had suggested. As he read it, there in the library, he had become increasingly excited, finding many of the ideas he had discovered in his own thinking. But the major revelation for him was the notion that each person creates his own "reality," his own idea of how the world is. He had spent all his life perpetuating a negative view, blaming others, feeling sorry for himself. But he could just as easily create the world in positive terms! He realized that he had been "a Zen" all along without realizing it. He had known what life was like, except for choosing this positive twist instead of his negative one. He had solved the koans (meditative, nonlogical questions) as he came upon them in his reading. "How does the goose get out of the narrow-necked bottle without breaking the glass? The problem exists only in the mind of the person who imagines the goose to be imprisoned. We create our own barriers and impediments in life!"

He went on to say that Orwell's *1984* was already here and had been for many years. We were a society of people brainwashed into consumer roles by the media. As "a Zen" he would show how a man can live in this world free from all social shackles. He had made a commitment and was already living it out. He would sell all his belongings (electronic and photographic equipment, guns, tools, etc.) and leave the country. Starting in New Zealand he would gradually make his way to Asia and eventually Europe. He would earn a living by doing simple jobs, like restaurant work. He would be a "Zen pilgrim" and tell others about Zen, while at the same time seeking to live his daily life from its newly acquired perspective.

He was now free of all physical pains for the first time in more than a year. He had seen the psychiatrist again and told him that he no longer needed "meds" or disability assistance since there was nothing wrong with him. He would remain in town for three more weeks to complete the sale of his belongings and would see me each week to report on how he was

doing. He said he was seeking people out to talk to and enjoyed conversing with them.

During the final three meetings he maintained his commitment, although his elation subsided and he talked of some realistic doubts about carrying out his plan. He did sell his belongings, giving away what he could not sell and keeping only a small cassette recorder and enough clothes to carry. He contacted his mother and other relatives by phone, apologizing for his previous behavior and briefing them on his travel plans. His mother sent him some money to help pay for plane fares. He invited Dolly to travel with him, but she declined. He read more Zen books. He wanted me to listen to a few tapes between sessions so we could discuss more of his experience.

Our conversation settled into pragmatic discussions about his plan as well as clarifications, from a Zen perspective, of some of his continuing problematic attitudes. I said Zen seemed to emphasize the centrality of compassion for others and a detachment from one's own ego preoccupations. In his contacts with others he was already having frustrating experiences in that they did not understand his Zen perspective nor did they seem to be much interested. This aroused Sam's sarcasm and resentment over not being appreciated and he was tempted toward his usual grandiose thoughts and disdain for others. I identified this very process as the ego strivings he would be struggling with for some time. I also suggested he make contact with the local Zen Center. A recurring theme in his personal struggle was his wanting to be able to affirm the world, even though he would not be able to change it.

In our final talk he asked if I would someday help him write the book of his past and future life adventures. Would I listen to all the tapes he would accumulate and help sort out what to write about? I declined, although I said I would be willing to read over his manuscript once he had completed the first draft. He had no idea how long he would be traveling the world, probably years. He figured the only way to be "a Zen" was to totally live it. This would require encounters with whatever the world presented to him. He had little faith in meditation cen-

ters. When he had gone to visit the local center, everyone was away on retreat in New Mexico.

During the next three months I got post cards from San Francisco, New Zealand, Melbourne, Singapore, London and finally New York. Then a letter came from New York, where he was temporarily living with his mother. It was full of the same negative, grandiose protestations and gloomy forecasts about the future of the world that had characterized the letters he had sent to the media and public figures earlier. I wrote back saying he was back to his crazy talk and I was more interested in what had happened during his travels. He responded with a two hour tape, totally lacking in grandiose and paranoid complaints. Instead, he detailed his experiences and his efforts to make sense out of them.

The first half of the tape revealed a discouraged mood. His travels up to Singapore had been generally disappointing. People were not interested in Zen and he had finally given up talking about it. There were no jobs available for aliens. There was much rain and swarms of flies and he sometimes felt "betrayed by God." He had returned to New York as his money was depleted and he saw no way of earning a living and he did not want to go to jail. In New York he became ill with a lung infection, his only illness in three months of travel. He did not want to go to work, as his brother suggested, but hoped soon to return to Europe.

In a note accompanying the tape he mentioned briefly that in Australia, he had met and fallen in love with a twenty-seven year old nurse. He had considered marrying her but it did not work out. There was no further explanation on the tape.

The second half of the tape told of an unusual experience that had occurred in Singapore. A Chinese man had befriended him on the street, being quite interested in Sam's tales of Zen and the woes of traveling. His name was Lee and he was an artist, married and with a family. He invited Sam to his home for dinner. The next night Sam went to Lee's apartment but heard loud arguing from inside. He left without knocking. A few days later they met again on the street and Lee apologized

for the marital discord from which Sam had withdrawn. Lee complained that his wife did not appreciate his artistic abilities, that they had fought and were on the verge of separation. Lee was quite depressed and was even thinking of suicide. Sam was the only person Lee could talk to about his dilemma. Sam did not know how to respond. If he gave a suggestion, Lee said it would not work. Finally, Sam realized it was useful to simply listen, and did so. A couple of days later Lee was hospitalized for a serious heart condition. Sam spent a few days in the hospital with Lee before flying to London. One plan they both had considered was that if Lee was divorced by his wife, he and Sam might meet in Europe and travel together as artists, living by making paintings from post cards and selling them to tourists.

Before concluding his tape, Sam had some comments on his Zen perspective. He scolded me for judging him in the letter I had sent him for his “crazy un-Zenlike comments.” He said that the living of Zen was far more difficult than reading about it, implying that was what I did. The living of Zen, he pointed out, was not a matter of having a positive attitude all the time. It was rather a total acceptance of life. Furthermore, to accept life you had to live it, experience it in its many forms—joy, misery, anger, love, boredom, etc. Living life was the basis for understanding, and he now realized it would take him a great many years to more fully comprehend it all—maybe a lifetime. He knew he had a lot of “ego” left as well as illusions and fantasies he had to live through. There would be times of misery and he knew he would have to accept much more than he could so far. Much of life one had to suffer through, simply by the living of it.

Sam had printed himself a name card. In addition to his name it contained the following messages: I am Zen, I live Zen, I breathe Zen; True Zen—Teaches about life and how to live a happy life; Address: The World; Telephone: The Wind. A month later he returned to Europe.

EVALUATION

Varied opinions as to what actually occurred in the treatment process came forth when I shared this experience with three different professional groups.

First, perhaps nothing new occurred for Sam. His own expectation of therapy, judging from past therapy experience, was that he would learn nothing new from a therapist, but that while in therapy some remarkable event would coincidentally occur to reorient his life. Then there would be no further need for therapy as his self-doubts would be resolved. This fits with the "placebo effect" (power of suggestion) commonly seen in therapy. My activity as therapist could be seen as facilitating this process by playing into his expectations. My "normalizing" techniques implied that he was really not a "crazy" person. My suggestion, and somewhat double-binding idea, that if he was indeed a genius he might understand Zen in a way that eluded others, may simply have set the stage for his "remarkable" happening. But his new Zen perspective could be seen as just a different way of reorganizing his grandiosity that would serve him well for a while, until confusion and stress would eventually undo him again. Despite the negative picture he had portrayed of his past, there were obviously times of stability and creative, life-affirming activity in his history. So the change was not as radical as it appeared. This perspective concludes that I had done little more than help him through a time of crisis so he could return to a former level of stability.

A second opinion was that a new and validating experience did occur in therapy. A kind of spiritual alchemic reaction, or dialogical meeting, occurred between us. It was not my technique that helped so much as his finding in me a "spiritual brother," who shared his experience and understood many of the problems of living in a way similar to his own perspective. The very encounter with empathy, positive caring, and willingness to take continued interest in his life may have provided a positive human experience that raised his own level of human

sensitivity and hope about life in general. This view suggests that his symptoms of desperation were not signs of a "sick" mind, but rather a natural, creative effort on the part of someone who did possess insights about life above the cut of the norm, and finally found his wisdom appreciated and affirmed. It is not uncommon for people of high intelligence to lack social skills and feel themselves to be misfits. Psychosis, here, is not viewed as a regression and decompensation. Rather it is an honest effort to break out of the dehumanizing forms of personal and social forces.

A third opinion was that our therapy experience enabled Sam to resolve the long-standing conflict of having been abandoned by a father who might otherwise have helped free him from a possessive mother. He did indicate a hopeful expectation, by the memory of his father appearing, helping and disappearing. At the time of my departure for vacation, his response, instead of anger, was his conversion-like experience. This might be seen as his identification with and even incorporation of me in relation to the Zen idea that I had left with him. Such an identification was further evident in his wanting to involve me in the writing of his autobiography and adventures.

Aside from explanations, what seems important to me are the results. Sam did make a radical and adventurous decision, going beyond what most of us would risk, in selling all his possessions and striking out on a journey into foreign territories. He occasionally involved himself with others along the way in a caring fashion. He reopened contacts with significant others from his past. He continues to affirm life with some humility in an effort to deal with times of suffering. He differentiates himself from me, chiding me a bit for being a "reader" of Zen while he lives it out.

NOTES

1. Unknown to Sam, while I have been a long-time student of Zen, my personal religion is Christian. Unknown to the reader, in addition to being a Social Worker I am also a practicing magician of the trickster

variety. I include this information for the reader's continued speculation about the meaning of what occurred between Sam and myself.

2. Readings related to this normalizing view of the client's apparent pathology are the following: David Williams, "The Gifted, Social Necessity and Social Problem," *Social Service Quarterly*, 41 (2), (1967), 67-70, and Donald F. Krill, *Existential Social Work*, (New York: Free Press, 1977), Chapter 4.