

PLAYING WITH ILLUSION: A Sequence of Interviews

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This case report describes eleven clinical interviews between myself and Jack. These occurred during a two-week period in a residential intensive treatment setting. In the first moment of our meeting, I was bewildered by the contrast between Jack's dignified, engaging presence and the ominous intake summary of his pathology. This mystery sparked curiosity about our potential work together.

Jack is an unmarried man in his late twenties. His tall, muscular, well-proportioned body reflects a great deal of exercise and attention to diet. He is a handsome man bursting with vitality. He speaks as if he is preaching, Elmer Gantry style. He uses driving, persuasive rhetoric for even the most mundane topics. His forehead, framing large blue eyes, is thickly muscular from years of flexing his eyebrows to make a point. Jack's social contact is minimal. He projects a pervasive, aloof arrogance. His style struck me as a caricature of the dramatic, often confused, urges of psychotic patients to realize some meaning in their lives and to teach those insights to others.

Jack was one of five children of a transient military family. The father, an Air Force colonel, was a tall, imposing man, demanding rigid obedience from all family members. The mother was a devout Christian, a delicate, retiring alcoholic. Jack was severely beaten during his early years by the father, who was observed by a younger brother to have ". . . a peculiar mental sickness of deriving pleasure from mixing child abuse and drinking." Jack spoke of an incident of being held down in a bathtub in this way: "My heart was filled with water and I came within a hair's breadth of dying, but I survived by praying and God rescued me."

The father's persecution aroused in Jack enormous fear of being overwhelmed by powers beyond his own. Trust in the inherent goodness of human relationships was undermined and he regarded simple human intimacy as life-threatening. Jack shifted to a search for divine, indestructible security. These became the seeds of his psychotic predicament: developmental vulnerability, persecution, glimpse of divine security.

Jack ran away from home at age fourteen, after vandalizing his father's car. He lived as a transient for the next fifteen years, often incarcerated in jails or psychiatric hospitals. In his early twenties he spent two years in a "spiritual" religious community, an experience which affected him deeply, later providing rich content for his delusional system.

Jack had lived in a small Western town for the past few years. He reported to me his extensive alcohol and drug use during this period. He was arrested approximately thirty times for displaying his religious righteousness in public places. He felt a divine dispensation allowing him, for instance, to enter a restaurant and upbraid people for eating meat. Violent struggles would often ensue with the arresting police. Even when locked up, he would continue raging, smearing feces and smashing furniture. While held in restraints, he would take pride in being indomitable. The jail's staff agreed he was the "worst schizophrenic" they had ever seen. Jack's violent defiance of authority suggested a repetitive compulsion of his struggles with his father. These were reenacted in the arena of social mores and institutions. His insatiable thirst for retribution and transformation drove him beyond the boundaries of ordinary life. The result of one of these episodes was a conditional release from jail to the local mental health facility. At intake, he presented these opening statements: "I don't belong in this world. I'm a good-for-nothing with no skills. This world isn't for me. I've tried suicide but that's not going to do anything due to reincarnation. All that matters to me is the white light. I just want to stay there and not have anyone bother me. My million-dollar thoughts are far above your nickel-and-

dime concerns. I'm not this body, but a more subtle body and the most pleasurable aspect is white light." This statement sums up Jack's drive toward psychotic transformation to a spiritual body. The dilemma, in Jack's view, was how to join himself with the "white light." From the cultural point of view, his problem was a wild defiance of social control.

THE SESSIONS

1. Balance and Paranoia

Having been assigned as Jack's caseworker, my role was to provide short-term therapy to control his psychosis and settle him into stable community living. At our first meeting, I found Jack sitting alone, quietly reading a spiritual text. He ignored my presence. I told him he would need to take stelazine, a major tranquilizer, as a condition of treatment. This immediately provoked him into angry paranoia. He accused me of attempting to control his mind and interrupt his "balanced calm." He gazed at me with piercing eyes and challenged me to return him to jail, and he threatened me verbally.

I then offered him some valium along with the stelazine, which he agreed to take, since that medication apparently increased the stability of his balanced calm. This was a gesture of aligning myself with his paranoid position. Jack said he did not know who to trust, that he had "experienced the power of mental health . . . being tied down in isolation and given tranquilizing injections . . . a horrible night of the living dead." This session ended on a note of resentment and mistrust. I had learned to interrupt Jack's states of self-absorption only with the greatest caution. This meeting set the tone for further sessions in which I unconsciously succumbed to Jack's control in order to maintain our fragile connection.

2. *A Human Being Has To Be Somewhere*

I returned an hour later with the intention of diminishing any further power struggle. I bluntly agreed with Jack that we were, in fact, attempting to control his mind with medications, to level his psychological extremes and potential violence. With this honesty, his paranoia softened, his demeanor relaxed, and he reported feeling “peaceful and balanced.” He spoke steadily for the next hour about his “spiritual problem.”

Jack explained that he had experienced the highest bliss and knowledge by opening his heart center through chanting a mantra. This brought him “transcendental pleasure, the ultimate taste, the highest nectar.” He then described four of his recent visions of saints. One was of a golden, luminous figure in saffron robes exuding complete protection and care towards Jack. The experiential outcome was a “profound balance” between himself and the world. Jack explained that he had perceived a vast, synchronized pattern in which he was united with everything in an atmosphere of living generosity and knowledge. These glimpses of the “highest heaven” became unforgettable reference points in Jack’s psychotic journey.

In contrast, Jack perceived our ordinary world as a pale, tasteless, uninteresting illusion. He claimed to have had two-hundred women, tried every intoxicant, flown in gliders, and traveled the world, but to have found all this just fleeting pleasure. He regarded this ordinary rat-race of materialism, of everyone chasing their puny, selfish dreams, as a tremendously depressing cosmic joke. He stated, “There is no real joy in this shadow of a world, this world of death.” He explained the role of *Maya*, the player of illusion, the ruthless thief who gives a taste of pleasure then capriciously removes it with a wake of disappointment. He stated, “I’m living in this world of *Maya* with tremendously bad karma I’ve inherited from a previous life. I must get to that spiritual plane.” His path became living purely, as a vegetarian and devotee. He claimed he could

neither live in this world nor in a religious temple, yet “a human being has to be somewhere.”

While he spoke in a murmuring tone, Jack rhythmically rocked in his chair, fluttering or closing his eyes. I found myself dozing; this became a recurring experience with Jack. He asked me if I thought he was crazy and would I strap him down. He felt no one understood him, yet he expressed the beginning of trust in me, perhaps due to my allowing him to control the situation. I asked to stop our session as he had presented a great deal for me to listen to and understand. I was left with a vivid sense of Jack’s lifetime of inadequate attempts at healing his spiritual problem. Personally, I found myself without thought and physically exhausted.

This session highlighted Jack’s personal disciplines of body, of speech, and of mind. These mindless practices functioned to desynchronize his mind and body to allow for the free-play of his creative imagination. The result was that thought became personal reality, as if in a waking dream. In terms of body, Jack had transcended our material world by renouncing meat, sex, drugs, and alcohol. His characteristic sitting posture was slouched, with bobbing head and fluttering eyelids, his speech, a hypnotic drone. These measured rhythms often gave way to a pressured agitation as he raced about the residential facility with wildly frantic eyes, his speed fueled by excessive coffee drinking. One had the sense of Jack’s self-absorption and loss of environmental contact.

In terms of speech, Jack used an array of Sanskrit mantric words to induce what he thought were sacred experiences. He repeated these syllables under his breath during conversations or to himself when alone. As Jack related the feeling in his heart when repeating the mantra, he pursed his moist lips in a voluptuous manner, as if he were kissing something. He said, “This is the most delicious, beautiful, blissful mantra . . . beyond conception.” The previous day when he had uttered a mantric syllable an electric trembling filled his body and he fell to his knees with tears of devotion. Repeating a second syllable

he perceived soft, white light radiating around him while his eyes projected laser beams.

In terms of mind, Jack paid rigid attention to daily activities. Eating, washing, and working were carefully performed and were deliberately turned from self-reference to “transcendental offerings surrendered to God.” Jack called this “devotional service.” The intensity of these concentration exercises tended to induce states of autohypnosis. The outcome of these practices was “balancing,” the absence of irritation, conflict, and fear. Jack explained that avoiding extremes in, for instance, diet or emotional expression could result in a balanced flow with his surroundings. This was the realm of “white light” where he dwelt in a body of pleasure.

Jack’s exertion in these practices was tireless and I respected his single-minded pursuit of purity and personal discipline. Yet, his desire for a pleasurable outcome was passionately materialistic. An interruption of these god-seeking activities and absorption states could provoke paranoid anger, as we have seen. His tenuous hold on the pleasure of “balance” required continuous maintenance by additional practices of mindlessness. Further, he had learned to subtly dominate people with his droning voice which induced in me a sleepy impotence. Paradoxically, this helplessness in his therapist seemed to allow him to relax and speak more openly.

3. Let’s Be Friends

Jack began the session by explaining that the previous evening he had been roaming the facility, gulping his inevitable cup of coffee, tensely figuring out how to focus his devotional service. A staff person said, “Jack, stop torturing yourself, just be friends with yourself.” This simple advice provoked a gap in Jack’s frantic speed and during the night he repeated these words as “the mantra of the world.” Jack then described to me his discovery of “natural psychiatry.” He had realized that “a person can transcend sleeping at night with a heavy heart

saturated with selfishness, to reach an eternal loving relationship with God, expanding forever.”

As he spoke his body rocked, his head bobbed and his eyes fluttered and rolled up. He murmured on and on in a hypnotic flow of images: “. . . be here now . . . help myself and the world . . . stay centered in this spiritual heart . . . nothing to prove . . . forgot what it was like to feel this calm . . . insanity is not making friends with myself.” I became lulled into a hazy numbness and was unable to remember the session’s end.

4. Mystic Doctor

Today, Jack was pulsing with manic enthusiasm. He engaged me with his eyes wide and bright, claiming, “I’m going for it!” He insisted I was a privileged witness. Gazing at my body with his “x-ray vision,” he described my internal organs. He had a book of curing world diseases. He pleaded with me to arrange a television appearance to enable him to demonstrate his “kundalini power” to move objects at will. He insisted we all wake up to these mystic powers. With a disarming smile, he said he was as “healthy as a horse.” My sense of spatial proportions shifted and his face seemed to expand towards me. Caught again in disorientation, with a suspicion that I was being seduced and dominated, he again “looked through me.” It was obvious to both of us that Jack was in charge. He ended the session by leaving the room. Within hours his messianic enthusiasm to heal the world dissolved. I felt both discouraged by his narcissistic speed, and uplifted by his wild compassion.

5. Again, God . . .

The next session consisted of Jack’s droning rhetoric on his relationship to God. I again felt a suffocating oppression and listened speechlessly to his rhythmical weaving of logic, images, and sounds. His mood was somber, our communica-

tion minimal. I was left with the startling sense of having been hypnotized.

6. *Mystic Boxer*

The following day Jack rushed into my office uninvited, feeling an “unbelievable energy.” He insisted I arrange a match between he and Muhammed Ali. He began shadow boxing, claiming he would win by punching Ali “in an invisible auric weak spot.” He then challenged me to arm-wrestle with him. We stood on either side of a line and he pulled me across easily. He rushed breathlessly from the room with expansive arrogance, fueled by the thrill of victory. With a sigh, I shook my head, unable to communicate to him my feeling of defeat.

7. *Freedom and Hypocrisy*

We met again the following morning. He was hungover, filled with remorse, and unusually grounded. He had become intoxicated with his brother the night before, drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. Realizing this to be violation of his vows, he had angrily rejected his brother as a servant of Maya. Later that night, he was sitting by a creek, “meditating on God’s great arrangements,” when he was approached by a “power cop.” Jack, in defiance, had insisted, “You can take my body to jail, stick me full of needles, but you’ll never take my spirit-soul.” He had expressed a powerful faith in the essential indestructibility of his honor.

When I interpreted this situation as transference repetition of his struggle with his father, he immediately entered in to a tirade of indignant rage at his father’s cruelty. Again he became somber and expressed dismay at his hypocritical efforts at “purification” leading him into “illusion.” With a tone of disappointment, Jack explained that he was tired of endless talking and the chaos he created by his actions. He planned to enter “deeper meditation and purify further.” He expressed an urge to simplify his life, to “balance” his extremes of energy, and to

“resist Maya’s seduction.” He reported never having felt such caring attention, and asked me and the staff to help him remain “balanced.” I experienced an unusual sense of sober contact and clarity created by his disappointment and revulsion for his actions. The heaviness of his hangover and depression comprised a temporary collapse of his manic defensiveness. Within several hours this openness became the ground for renewed paranoia.

8. *Acute Psychotic Paranoia*

The following morning, I found Jack in a state of explosive paranoia. He bitterly complained that the previous evening, in the midst of his remorse and vulnerability, a staff person had asked that his visitor leave and Jack take his medication. He felt her “enter me with her negative, malicious vibes, to lord over me and take my soul.” I was accused of involvement in a CIA plot which monitored his room, watched with telescopes, and had men following him with radios to collect information, upset and take him over. With furious defiance he said, “You can take my body but you’ll never take my spiritual choice.” He then made an abrupt threatening gesture towards me and I jumped back with a gasp. Jack snapped out of his delusion noticing my fright and apologized. Yet he insisted we were deceiving him with our care.

I again verbally interpreted his paranoia as transference repetition of his original childhood environment of annihilation. I intended interpretation to cut through his recycling of paranoid states, whereas Jack perceived it as confirmation of my threat to disarm and take him over. In this way, by therapeutic action I unwittingly intensified his angry accusations. At that point, I became noticeably distressed. With a flicker of concern he inquired, “Are you all right?” adding, “I’ve just never had real love from anyone. How can I trust?” We ended the session and entered a group therapy meeting together.

9. Paranoia to Compassion

The group issue was trust and paranoia. Several patients began talking simultaneously about delusional paranoid plots. The group atmosphere became chaotic and emotionally charged. I began to lose my composure as group moderator and, unable to maintain order, I became nauseated. Jack expressed his concern quietly to me, and I responded, "I just can't handle this." He softly suggested I relax and perhaps take some valium and lie down. Patting me on the back, he announced he would take on the "group karma" for me. The other patients gathered around, and everyone's paranoid fear simply dissolved into this generous affection. Later, Jack apologized for "laying a heavy paranoid trip" and revealed his worry at having made me ill. He explained, "My heart is hard as a rock. I'm the worst, most fallen into Maya." I felt touched by his concern.

10. Bliss of Loving Enemies

Jack entered the session in a blissful complacency preaching love for one's enemies, saying, "This is a very special day for me, I'm going home to the heavenly realm." He explained he was using the kindness extended towards him by the staff as a stairway to a "transcendental home." He began mumbling prayers, rolling eyes and head, calling to his lord as the "reservoir of all bliss and pleasure." He said, "Life can be completely blissful if you can just control your mind." Jack then spoke with obvious pride of a young man he had met on the street the previous evening who was intoxicated and provoking fights with passersby. Jack saw that this man was "going crazy just as I had," and was creating trouble for himself. Jack then spent the night giving him food and sober advice. He outlined for the young man the vicious cycle of senseless belligerence inviting counter-attack, and asked him to stop torturing himself and the

world. Jack's initially sincere passion for being useful to others deteriorated into a means to regain the white light.

11. Alchemy

Two hours later, Jack rushed into the office gripping a plate of food, his eyes blazing with confident enthusiasm. He proclaimed his discovery of producing gold by melting mercury and bell-metal together. Beyond that, he claimed he understood the secret of transmuting ordinary food into transcendental food, by his magical use of yellow spices. Jack showed me the plate of curried rice and kernels of corn and peas. He insisted these were golden nuggets. Holding the plate close to my eyes, he demanded I look more closely. I began to experience the sensation familiar to me when with Jack, of spatial disorientation and disorganized visual proportions. I glanced at the spoon on the plate and for a moment I thought I was seeing a spiritual being! The figure in the spoon was clearly Jack's reflection, an image that portrayed Jack's entrapment in a world of massive projection.

My work with Jack ended soon after this session. He was arrested at a religious conference after a violent scene, and was transferred to a forensic unit of the state hospital. Upon his release, he left the area in hopes of making a fresh start. We exchanged a warm parting handshake.

A year later Jack returned to the residential treatment facility. The staff remarked on his increased maturity in many areas of his life. To describe the next, encouraging phase of treatment is beyond the scope of this article. Jack recently stated, however, "What has been most helpful to me is that you people have never given up on me."

Discussion

Jack brought to our relationship a history of childhood abuse. His ensuing panic and repetitive manic attempts to

attain the ultimate security of the “white light” inevitably deteriorated into angry paranoia.

I found myself dominated by Jack’s practices of impenetrability. This produced in me a taste of his experience as a vulnerable child. Rather than resolving this uncomfortable experience by re-asserting my professional authority, I simply paid close attention and gave him room to reveal himself. This attendance was grounded in genuine respect and unwavering friendliness.

My tendency is to want to neatly conceptualize this case material. However, this is simply a presentation of the beginning of a human relationship. The value of this way of relating is obvious and remains untouched by illness.