

UNSHRINKING PSYCHOSIS

JOHN WATKINS



The fact of the psychoses is a puzzle to us. They are the unsolved problem of human life as such. The fact that they exist is the concern of everyone.

That they are there and that the world and human life is such as to make them possible and inevitable not only gives us pause but makes us shudder.

Karl Jaspers

General Psychopathology (1963)

“To one degree or another this applies to all of us, for madness is everyone’s concern: if you have a mind, it can go mad.”

Edward Podvoll (2003)

Recovering Sanity: A Compassionate Approach to Understanding and Treating Psychosis



“BUT IT’S A *MEANINGFUL* DISTURBANCE”

Maybe there is a disturbance in your brain. But if that is so, then it must mean something about your brain, that it’s indicating something about your emotional state. What is it indicating? What does it mean?

My feeling was that the psychosis was there to teach me something. And it *did* teach me something! It did show me things and I did change through it and because of it I understood many things - things I suppose had always been wrong which perhaps I never would have come to understand if the psychosis had not happened to me, if I hadn’t been through that absolute process. Maybe I would have gone on without ever really changing that much.

It is a disturbance of course, but it’s a *meaningful disturbance*, something that has to be understood before you can change and before it will go away.

Maryanne Handel

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED FOR SYMPTOMS

“The patient has a strong psychological need he must satisfy: he must solve his psychological problems. He attempts to do so through his symptoms.

He would probably not attempt to solve his problems in this abnormal way if he were not inclined to do so by a biological predisposition, or an unusual conglomeration of psychological factors, or a mixture of psychological and physical factors. At any rate, *even if these factors are necessary, it is important to understand the psychological need for the symptoms.*”

Silvano Arieti (1981)

Understanding and Helping the Schizophrenic

“In part (possibly entirely) the overt symptomatology certainly represents the expression of a more or less unsuccessful attempt to find a way out of an intolerable situation.”

Professor Eugen Bleuler

Dementia Praecox or The Group of Schizophrenias

New York: International Universities Press (1950)

“Quite often, after a detailed analysis, we had to pose the question whether we are not merely dealing with the effect of a particularly powerful psychic trauma on a very sensitive person, rather than with a disease in the narrow sense of the word.”

Professor Eugen Bleuler

Dementia Praecox or The Group of Schizophrenias

New York: International Universities Press (1950)



SOMETHING HAS UPSET THE FOUNDATIONS OF ORDINARY REASONING

“I see two main classes of insanity. In the one case there is some organic trouble, a defect in the brain tissue, some disorder in the nervous system, some disease of the blood.

In the other there is no organic difficulty. The body is strong and the brain in good working order. The difficulty is rather in *disorganisation of the patient's world*. Something has happened which has upset the foundations upon which his ordinary reasoning is based.

Death or disappointment or sense of failure may have compelled a reconstruction of the patient's world view from the bottom up, and the mind becomes dominated by the one idea which he has been trying to put in its proper place. That, I think, has been my trouble and is the trouble with many others who have been forced off the beaten path of common sense and have travelled through the little-known wilderness of the inner life.”

Anton Boisen *The Exploration of the Inner World*

MANY OF THE MORE SERIOUS PSYCHOSES ARE ESSENTIALLY PROBLEM-SOLVING EXPERIENCES

“Certain types of mental disorder are not in themselves evils but problem-solving experiences. They are attempts at reorganisation in which the entire personality, to its bottom-most depths, is aroused and its forces marshalled to meet the danger of personal failure and isolation.

Even those whose beliefs have been warped in the effort to interpret some unhappy life situation in terms favourable to their self-respect may, through the disturbance, find release and emerge into new life and hope. The emotional disturbance thus serves to break up malignant sets and attitudes and to make possible a new synthesis.

Even in definitely psychotic cases emotional disturbances may be purposive and constructive. They may, and sometimes do, succeed in setting an individual free from what has been blocking his development, and in effecting re-organisation of the personality.”

Anton Boisen (1971)

The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience

THE REAL MEANING OF THE EXPERIENCE

“The descriptive groupings are not without significance but we would probably be better off if our psychiatric staffs would stop giving so much attention to a meaningless classification and more attention to the attempt to understand the real meaning of the experiences with which they are dealing.”

Anton Boisen

*The Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of
Mental Disorder and Religious Experience.*

HYPERSENSITIVITY

“All schizophrenics are, at least originally, more sensitive than the average person. It is likely that increased sensitivity and heightened responsiveness to sensory and emotional stimulation is present from an early age, possibly from birth.

Schizophrenia may be characterised by a genetic hypersensitivity that leaves the patient vulnerable to an overwhelming onslaught of stimuli from without and within.”

Kaplan and Sadock (1981)
Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry

EARLY CHILDHOOD IS LIVED INTENSELY

“The early environment of the child is certainly important and affects the rest of his whole life, including his proclivity to develop schizophrenia.

Among the psychological causes of schizophrenia we must include the way the child experienced his environment. An undue sensitivity or special biological predisposition probably made him react too strongly to some stimuli, especially to unpleasant ones. In addition, we must see how the child's experiences of the environment were assimilated, that is, became parts of his psyche. If the experiences were unduly strong, it is possible that they remained as disturbing components of his psyche and promoters of trouble and unrest.”

Arieti,S. (1981)

Understanding and Helping the Schizophrenic.

Self-Protective Withdrawal Emotional Shut-Down

“The child is aware of his own sensitivity, and he reacts to it. He uses both outward and inner defences to protect himself.

His outward defence is the avoidance of the stimuli which hurt him on account of his sensitivity. He achieves this by *withdrawal*. He isolates himself, and so avoids the company of others, where he is exposed to psychological hurt.

He also develops a complicated inner defence against his sensitivity. This really amounts to *inhibition* of feelings. In order to save himself from his sensitivity, a kind of obliteration of all feelings is induced. He cannot be hurt now. It simply does not matter whether they tease him or not. He does not feel it anymore.

Both these methods of defence, by isolating himself and by blotting out his feelings, protect him from the hurts of the world.”

Ainslie Meares *The Introvert* (1977)

“False Self” and “Façade of Normality”

“Many schizophrenics recall their childhood as haunted by a vague feeling of being somehow *different*. This difference was not celebrated as a tribute to the uniqueness of the individual human spirit, but as a humiliating stigma best concealed from view.

In the childhood of such a person, there often develops an exaggerated need to dissemble, to assume roles that are socially appropriate but do not reflect what he truly feels.

Concealed behind this papier-mâché armour is soft flesh of a child for whom the consensual world is untrustworthy, of an adolescent whose raw sensitivity confers an exquisitely felt vulnerability to rejection, and of a young adult who sees through the superficiality of others, whom he despises and envies for their social grace.”

Nelson, J. (1990) *Healing the Split*

PSYCHOSIS and the “NO EXIT” SITUATION

Acute psychotic episodes often occur at a time when a person has become “stuck” at some crucial point in their life with little hope of coping with or escaping from the emotional dilemmas they face.

Conflicts regarding the following are often especially relevant:

- *Individuation*
- *Independence*
- *Relationships*

The “straw that breaks the camel’s back” and provokes a state of emotional panic which heralds the onset of a psychotic episode often comes in the form of a blow to self-esteem. Thus, a person may reach a crisis point in which they feel trapped in an emotional dilemma they can neither fight nor escape, i.e. a “no exit” situation.

DESPAIR and PANIC PRECEEDING PSYCHOSIS

“Sooner or later the person reaches the conclusion that the future will not redeem the present or the past. He comes to believe that the future has no hope, that the promise of life will not be fulfilled, and that the future may be even more desolate than the present.

He is excluded from the busy, relentless ways of the world. He does not fit; he is alone. He experiences ultimate loneliness; he becomes unacceptable even to himself. It is at this point that a state of panic occurs.”

Arieti,S. (1981)

Understanding and Helping the Schizophrenic

PSYCHOTIC PREDICAMENT

“There is almost always a *psychotic predicament*. No one goes crazy without first having arrived at a predicament.

In the psychotic predicament one takes the opportunity of the explosion to ‘switch’ into another dimension of concern and another plane of activity. This new domain is vaster and endlessly more fascinating than ordinary circumstances. It is filled with a sense of insight and power, electric with the play of energy, perception, and messages, a compelling drive toward completion that offers promises of bliss and happiness of all kinds. One’s attention is thoroughly absorbed away from the pettiness of the mundane world from which one has switched-out.”

Edward Podvoll (2003)

*Recovering Sanity: A Compassionate Approach
to Understanding and Treating Psychosis*

TRANSFORMATION and REBIRTH IN ACUTE PSYCHOSIS

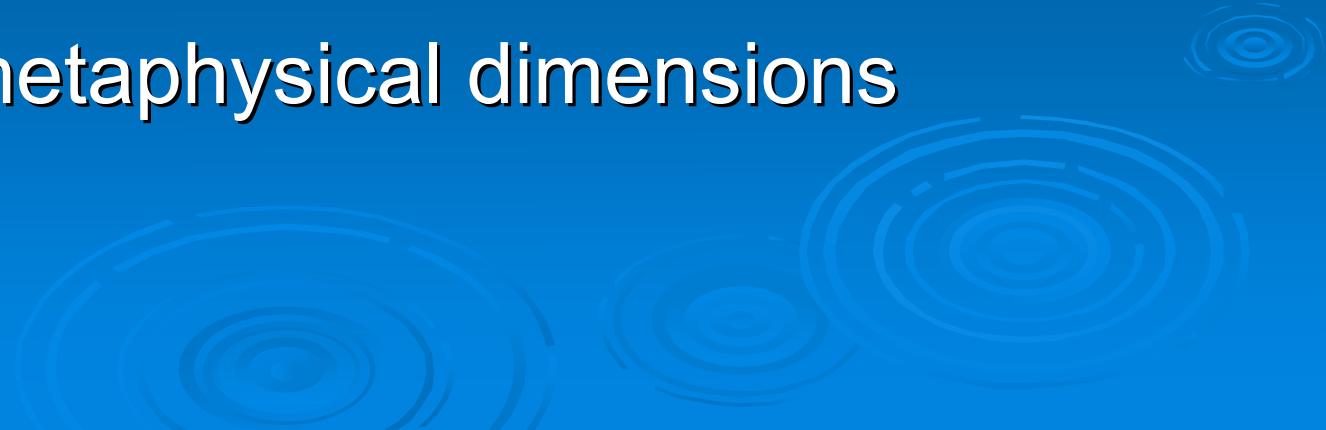
“The urge to transform is usually a motivating factor long before a predicament arises. This desire to become someone else has been ‘cooking’ since an early age. An ordinarily hidden hope and conviction grows that a transformation might come upon one suddenly, as can happen when falling in love.”

Edward Podvoll (2003) *Recovering Sanity*

“For a patient, the psychotic experience carries with it hopes of passing beyond, renouncing, or destroying the self that is felt to be incompetent and diseased by imperfections.”

Edward Podvoll (1979) Psychosis and the Mystic Path.
The Psychoanalytic Review, Vol.66, No.4.

EVERY PSYCHOTIC EXPERIENCE IS UNIQUE

- ❑ Timing of episodes
 - ❑ Individualisation of symptoms
 - ❑ Variability of outcome
 - ❑ Spiritual/metaphysical dimensions
- 

The clinical term “psychosis” encompasses a diverse range of extreme mental states and conditions which, while involving overtly similar behaviours, vary greatly in form, cause, and personal significance.

Though persons displaying typical psychotic symptoms (hallucinations, delusions, loss of contact with reality) may be having *radically different inner experiences* and grappling with *very different personal predicaments*, once diagnosed as having a psychotic “illness” they tend to be treated in a strikingly uniform manner, with most being given psychotropic medication they may be advised to take for lengthy periods, possibly indefinitely. Such medication is likely to constitute the only significant component of ongoing treatment for many.

Many of the problems that befall affected individuals and their helpers are a direct result of widespread failure to appreciate these critical differences and respond to them in adequate and appropriate ways.

John Watkins

Unshrinking Psychosis: Understanding and Healing the Wounded Soul. Melbourne: Michelle Anderson (2010)

THE VARIETIES OF PSYCHOTIC EXPERIENCE

Acute psychosis occurs for many different reasons and can take a wide variety of different forms.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISES:

- Psychosis as a Psychological Breakdown
- Psychosis as a Psychological Irruption
- Psychosis as a Psychological Coping Strategy

PSYCHOSPIRITUAL CRISES:

- Psychosis as a Self-Healing Process
- Psychosis and Spiritual Emergency

There are no sharp boundaries between these categories - there may be some overlap between them or even admixtures of different elements in any particular psychotic experience

THE CHRONIC STRAIN OF A PSYCHE AT WAR WITH ITSELF

“The possibility of a future psychosis has everything to do with whether the individual can stand a certain panic, or the chronic strain of a psyche at war with itself.

Very often it is simply a matter of a little bit too much, of the drop that falls into a vessel already full, or the spark that accidentally lands on a heap of gunpowder. It is quite consistent with such a state of mind if some particularly unruly parts of the patient’s psyche then acquire a certain degree of autonomy.

It is as if the very foundations of the psyche were giving way, as if an explosion or an earthquake were tearing asunder the structure of a normally built house. I use this analogy on purpose, because it is suggested by the symptomatology of the initial stages.”

Jung, C.G. (1907)
The Psychology of Dementia Praecox

THEY SHUT THEIR EYES AND DRIFT

“A considerable number make little or no resistance. They do not fight. They do not attempt to turn over a new leaf. They do not try to do anything about it. They merely shut their eyes and drift.

Very commonly they resort to easy modes of satisfaction. They withdraw into a world of fantasy, often hastening the process by a resort to drink or to drugs. Eventually they reach the point where the dream world has become for them the real world. The drive for self-realisation is thus short-circuited and the individual becomes more and more listless and ineffective and unable to take care of himself. He thus becomes so peculiar and so much of a burden on his family or friends that they find it necessary to have him committed to the hospital.

Such patients seldom show great emotional disturbance. They have no marked hallucinations and their ideation is not particularly bizarre. But they drift down toward dissolution and destruction.”

Boisen,A. (1971) *The Exploration of the Inner World*

PSYCHOSIS AS A COPING STRATEGY

“In part (possibly entirely) the overt symptomatology certainly represents the expression of a more or less unsuccessful attempt to find a way out of an intolerable situation.

The patient renders reality harmless by refusing to let it touch him (autism); he ignores it, isolates it, withdraws into his own thoughts. For these patients, autism has the same meaning as the walls of the monastery have for the monks, that the lonely desert has for some saints, and their studies for some scientists.

This type of reaction can only succeed completely if the isolation of reality is effected or if it has been transformed in accordance with the patient's wishes. Thus the patients try to help themselves in the same way as the daydreamers or the poets.”

Bleuler, E. (1950) *Dementia Praecox or The Group of Schizophrenias*

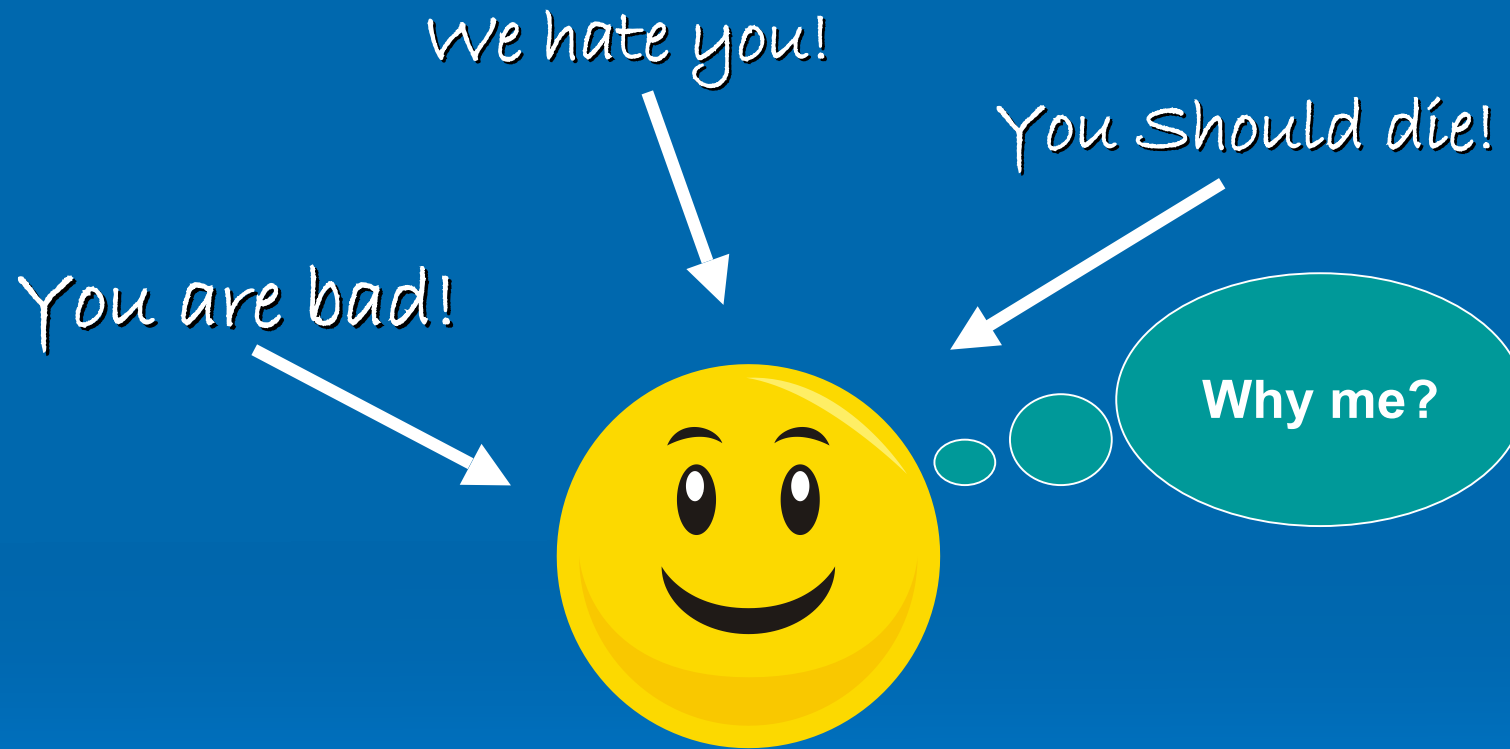
INTOLERABLY LOW SELF-ESTEEM



I hate myself.
I'm bad.
I should die.

INTOLERABLY LOW
SELF-ESTEEM

DEFENCE MECHANISM OF PROJECTION: BADNESS IS EXTERNALISED



**INNOCENT VICTIM
OF PERSECUTION**

THE DANGER IS TRANSFORMED INTO AN EXTERNAL ONE

“If we go a little deeper into the matter, we recognise that the *transformation of inner conflicts into symptoms that refer to the external world is advantageous to the patient.*

As unpleasant as it is to be accused by others it is not as unpleasant as to accuse oneself, to be unacceptable to oneself. The patient who believes he is accused feels falsely accused. Though the accusation is painful, it is not injurious to self-esteem. On the contrary, in comparison to the state he was in before the patient often experiences a rise in self-esteem, often accompanied by a feeling of martyrdom.

The danger, which used to be an internal one, is now transformed into an external one.”

Arieti, S. (1981) *Understanding and Helping the Schizophrenic*

OVERWHELMED BY THE UNCONSCIOUS

“[Some types of acute psychosis] can be understood as an overwhelming of the ego by the forces of the unconscious.

The unconscious expresses itself by powerful images that are autonomous; that is, they have their own life and vitality. Ordinarily the ego is able to screen out these images so that during waking hours we can function correctly, deal with the outer world, and keep a distinction between inner and outer reality. But in certain cases the inner images may be too strong, the defences of the ego too weak, and the threatened invasion takes place in the form of a psychosis.

In this state the difference between inner and outer reality is obscured. It is like living in a dream when awake: the ‘dream reality’ is so strong the individual loses the common psychological perspective of his fellows and so becomes ‘crazy’. This is especially likely to happen if the person is psychologically isolated from others.”

Sanford, J. (1977) *Healing and Wholeness*

SUDDEN REMOVAL of VEIL OF 'FALSE SELF'

“The observable behaviour that is the expression of the *false self* is often perfectly normal. We see a model child, an ideal husband, an industrious clerk.

What is called psychosis is sometimes simply the sudden removal of the veil of the false self, which had been serving to maintain an outer behavioural normality that may, long ago, have failed to be any reflection of the state of affairs in the secret self.

Then the self will pour out accusations of persecution at the hands of that person with whom the false self has been complying for years. The individual will declare that this person (mother, father, husband, wife) has been trying to kill him; or that he or she has tried to steal his 'soul' or his mind. That he/she is a tyrant, a torturer, an assassin, a child murderer, etc.”

Laing,R.D. (1965) *The Divided Self*

PSYCHOSIS AS A SELF-HEALING PROCESS

“Certain types of mental disorder are not in themselves evils but problem-solving experiences. They are attempts at reorganisation in which the entire personality, to its bottom-most depths, is aroused and its forces marshalled to meet the danger of personal failure and isolation.

Even in definitely psychotic cases, emotional disturbances may be purposive and constructive. They may, and sometimes do, succeed in setting an individual free from what has been blocking his development and effect a reorganisation of the personality.”

Boisen,A. (1971)

The Exploration of the Inner World

A DESPERATE ATTEMPT AT SOLUTION

“In all of our cases we find evidence of some *unsolved problem* relating to the patient’s role in life – a problem which arouses intense emotion. Nearly always this problem involves some sense of personal failure and guilt. It has usually been on the patient’s mind for many years as a source of distress and uneasiness until finally, in cases of this type, there comes a desperate attempt at solution.”

Boisen,A. (1947) Onset in Acute Schizophrenia. *Psychiatry*, Vol.10.

“It is justifiable to regard the term ‘sickness’ as pertaining not to the acute turmoil [psychosis] but to the *pre-psychotic personality*, standing as it does in need of profound reorganisation. In this case, the renewal process occurring in the acute psychotic episode may be considered nature’s way of setting things right. Even though this compensatory process may become a massive turmoil, the turbulence is a step on the way toward living a more fulfilled emotional life.”

Perry,J. (2005) *The Far Side of Madness* (Second Edition)

AN OPPORTUNITY TO HEAL IN A DEEPER WAY

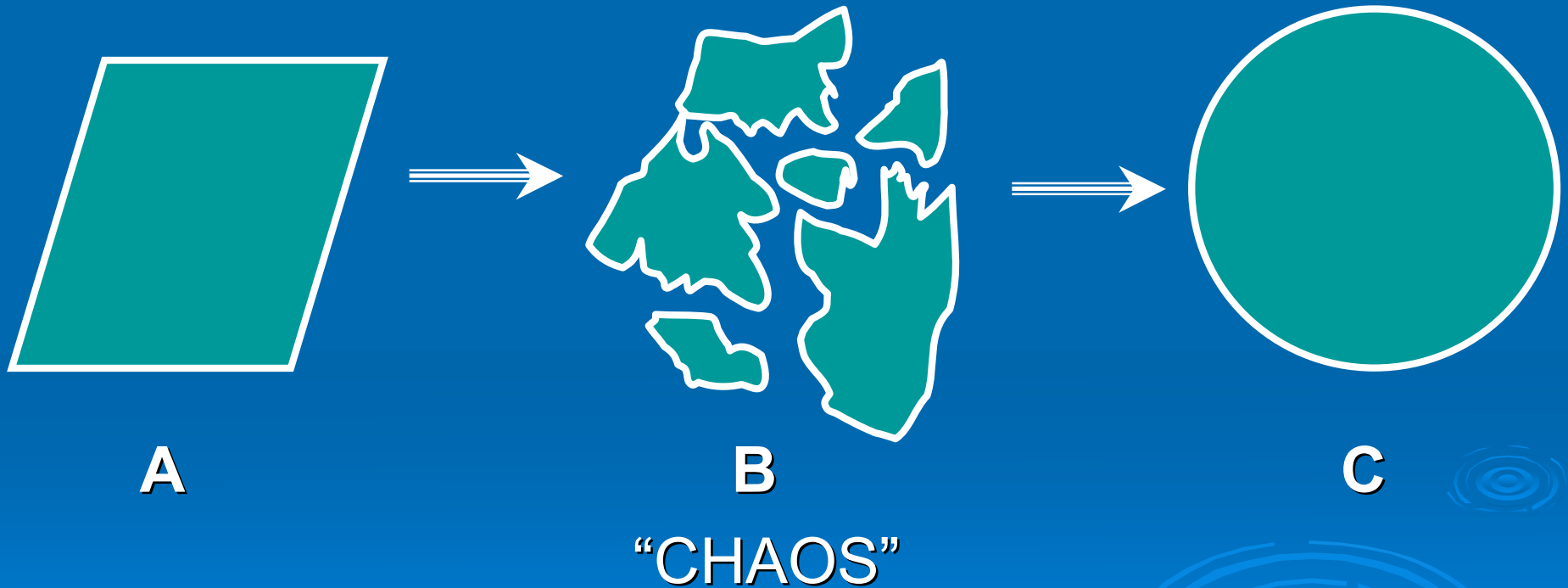
“My sense is that people often become psychotic because they have constructed a personality that is not congruent with who they really are. This happens because they are sensitive children who perceive things going on in their environment that are not confirmed by the people around them. Thus the child builds up a personality for the sake of adaptation that is quite incongruent with his or her true nature.

As life goes on, this discrepancy between the adaptation and the real person becomes greater and greater, so a rather large split develops. Often in psychosis it is as if the ego dissolves - an ego that is brittle and not connected in a human way to what the person *is* deeply. This kind of psychotic episode is an opportunity for a person to heal in a deeper way.

Dallett, J. (1988)

When The Spirits Come Back. Toronto: Inner City Books.

CHAOS: THE NAME WE GIVE TO AN ORDER WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND



FACE TO FACE WITH THE GREAT REALITIES OF LIFE and DEATH

“My own experience is by no means an isolated one. Those strange ideas that came to me, ideas of world catastrophe, of death, of rebirth, of cosmic importance and of mission, are found in case after case. They tend to occur in conjunction with one another. Where we find one we are apt to find the others also, and the presence of one of these ideas is sufficient to establish the presumption that the individual concerned has made this grim journey to the lower regions and has stood face to face with the great realities of death and life.

We have also discovered such ideas are not to be found in all cases but only in those who are trying to face their difficulties. In many of our cases such an attempt was hardly in evidence.”

Anton Boisen (1971)

The Exploration of the Inner World

ARCHETYPAL / MYTHIC (“COSMIC”) THEMES IN PSYCHOSPIRITUAL CRISES

- *Centre*: location at world centre or cosmic axis/meeting point of ‘ordinary’ world and underworld/spirit world
- *Return to Beginnings*: return to beginning of time, origin of life, Garden of Eden, reliving of evolutionary process, primitive tribal societies; regression to infancy
- *Death*: being dead/in afterlife (Heaven, Hell), meeting the dead and/or Death, sacrifice/dismemberment
- *Rebirth*: resurrection with new perfected identity (hero, leader, saint); apotheosis to god, king or messiah
- *Journey*: feeling called to undertake crucial journey or sacred mission
- *Cosmic Conflict*: cataclysmic event (world destruction, Armageddon, Last Judgement) associated with cosmic battle between elemental forces – good/evil, light/dark, order/chaos, God/Devil, male/female, etc
- *New Society*: radical transformation of society/advent of New Age, utopia, world peace, New Jerusalem, etc
- *Sacred Marriage*: ritual/mythological union (with God, Goddess, Christ, Virgin Mary, etc)

A LONG AND ARDUOUS JOURNEY

“Man’s spiritual development is a long and arduous journey, an adventure through strange lands full of surprises, difficulties, and even dangers. It involves a drastic transmutation of the ‘normal’ elements of personality, awakening of potentialities hitherto dormant, raising of consciousness to new realms, and a functioning along a new inner dimension.

We should not be surprised to find that so great a change, so fundamental a transformation, is marked by several critical stages, which are not infrequently accompanied by various nervous, emotional, and mental troubles. *These may present to the objective clinical observation of a therapist the same symptoms as those due to more usual causes, but they have in reality quite another significance and function and need very different treatment.*

The incidence of disturbances having a spiritual origin is rapidly increasing, in step with the growing number of people who, consciously or unconsciously, are groping their way towards a fuller life.”

Roberto Assagioli

Psychosynthesis. Wellingborough: Turnstone Press (1975)

SPIRIT CONSTANTLY SEEKS RELEASE

“Spirit tends constantly to seek release from its entrapment in habitual, routine, or conventional mental structures.

Spiritual work is one of liberating this dynamic energy, which must break free of its suffocation in old forms: old emotional patterns, such as the complexes engendered in the family system; assumptions about the nature of the world and human life; values that need revision from time to time; and cultural forms derived from family, subculture, or dominant cultural conditioning that must change with the times.

If, during a person’s developmental process, this work of releasing spirit becomes imperative but is not undertaken voluntarily with knowledge of the goal and with considerable effort, then the psyche is apt to take over and overwhelm the conscious personality with its own powerful processes.”

John Weir Perry

Trials of the Visionary Mind.

Albany: State University of New York Press (1999)

REACTIONS TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

“The opening of the channel between the conscious and superconscious levels, between ego and Self, and the flood of light, joy, and energy which follows often produce a wonderful release.

But in some cases, not infrequent, the personality is inadequate in one or more respects and is therefore unable to rightly assimilate the inflow of light and strength. This happens, for instance, when the intellect is not balanced, or the emotions and imagination are uncontrolled; when the nervous system is too sensitive; or the inrush of spiritual energy is overwhelming in its suddenness and intensity. An incapacity of the mind to stand the illumination, or a tendency toward egotism or conceit, may cause the experience to be wrongly interpreted.

Instances of such confusion, more or less pronounced, are not uncommon among people dazzled by contact with truths which are too powerful for their mental capacities to grasp and assimilate. In other cases the sudden influx of energies produces emotional upheaval which expresses itself in uncontrolled, unbalanced and disordered behaviour.”

Roberto Assagioli

Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques.

Wellingborough: Turnstone Press (1975)

THE CONCEPT OF “SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY”

“Many difficult episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness can be seen as crises of spiritual transformation and opening. Stormy experiences of this kind – ‘spiritual emergencies’ as we call them – have been repeatedly described in sacred literature of all ages.

Spiritual emergencies can be defined as *critical and experientially difficult stages of a profound psychological transformation* that involves one’s entire being. They take the form of non-ordinary states of consciousness and involve intense emotions, visions and other sensory changes, and unusual thoughts, as well as various physical manifestations.

These episodes often revolve around spiritual themes; they include sequences of psychological death and rebirth, experiences that seem to be memories from previous lifetimes, feelings of oneness with the universe, encounters with various mythological beings, and other similar motifs.”

Grof, C. and Grof, S. (1990) *The Stormy Search for the Self: A Guide to Personal Growth through Transformational Crisis*

SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY: CLASHING REALITIES

“People who are in such a crisis are bombarded with inner experiences that abruptly challenge their old beliefs and ways of existing, and their relationship with reality shifts very rapidly.

Suddenly they feel uncomfortable in the formerly familiar world and may find it difficult to meet the demands of everyday life. They can have great problems distinguishing their inner visionary world from the external world of daily reality. Physically, they may experience forceful energies streaming through their bodies and causing uncontrollable tremors.

Fearful and resistant, they might spend much time and effort trying to control what feels like an overwhelming inner event. And they may feel impelled to talk about their experiences and insights to anyone within range, sounding out of touch with reality, disjointed, or messianic.”

Grof,C. and Grof,S. (1990) *The Stormy Search for the Self*

TYPES OF SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY

- **Episodes of Unitive Consciousness**
- **Kundalini Awakening**
- **Near-Death Experiences**
- **Past-life Experiences**
- **Psychological Renewal**
- **Shamanic Crisis**
- **The Crisis of Psychic Opening**
- **Communication with Spirit Guides**
- **Close encounters with UFOs**
- **Possession States**

Unshrinking PSYCHOSIS

*Understanding
and Healing
the Wounded Soul*

John Watkins