

MY BREAK OF INSIGHT

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OVERVIEW: In 2007, during a clinical trial of an experimental drug, Hank was hospitalized for a psychotic break. Over time, Hank successfully recovered from his psychosis. His curiosity led him to research and explore the workings of the mind which has helped him better comprehend his break from reality. Hank will be sharing his experience and understanding of that psychosis.

In July 2007 I entered a clinical trial using an experimental drug to treat Waldenström's Macroglobulinemia, an incurable blood cancer that I was diagnosed with in 2005. To my great joy, the drug appeared to be quite effective and I was seeing astonishing results in my monthly blood work. However, the side effects of the drug were horrendous. I quickly developed chronic back pain and painful swelling of my left knee and both feet. I was on several pain medications and was having severe adverse reactions to those meds. I developed insomnia. On a Monday in November 2007, I had a violent psychotic break at Walter Reed Hospital in Gloucester, VA prior to my first ever blood transfusion. Four days later on Friday, I had two more psychotic breaks, one extremely violent, and ended up involuntarily committed for 11 days in the psych ward of Rappahannock General Hospital (RGH) in Kilmarnock, VA.

I returned home from the hospital a very different person. My abilities to perform tasks that I previously could do without thinking, E.G., driving a car, performing electrical, plumbing, and carpentry chores around my house were severely impaired and foreign to me. I had difficulty operating my television, using my computer and keeping track of my bills and finances. On the other hand, I was overwhelmed by feelings of love and compassion. I also had intense feelings that my home and community were somehow part of God's wonderful master plan for me, that I was exactly where I should be in the universe and that flooded me with a sense of euphoria. However, my feelings were not all euphoric... I often felt extremely worried and frightened, especially that I might relapse into the violent psychoses I had experienced two weeks earlier.

As a condition of my release from the hospital, I had agreed to attend outpatient group therapy sessions at Bridges Outpatient Services, an offshoot of RGH. I initially attended three times per week, and then quickly tapered down to twice and then once weekly before stopping altogether. At first the sessions seemed helpful, but it did not take long for me to feel that I was one of the most mentally healthy people there, amongst so many that were suffering from severe mental illnesses. When I decided to stop attending the group sessions, I did agree to weekly private counseling with one of their licensed clinical social workers. It did not take very long for me to realize that the sessions were not helping me a great deal and I decided to see him only on an "as needed" basis. I made one such appointment

Gradually, over about a year, I reacquired those abilities that were impaired as a result of my psychotic breaks, i.e., my ability to drive, perform manual tasks, operate equipment, and think clearly. I also stopped being fearful and worried. The euphoric feelings of being at one with the universe dissipated, but were replaced by a deep appreciation of life. My Christian beliefs, which were rekindled from my childhood after nearly 40 years of adult agnosticism by those breaks

from reality, evaporated. I began the task of piecing together what I did believe in, and read many books on spirituality in the context of non-organized religion. I also searched for a suitable place of worship and found the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock (UUFR).

Late last year, after a talk that I gave about my cancer, Diana Jamison recommended that I read a book entitled *My Stroke of Insight* by Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist who suffered a massive stroke on the left side of her brain and after an 8 year recovery wrote about it. Diana knew that I had long been curious about what happened to my brain during my psychotic breaks and thought I would find this book helpful. I found it not only educational but also profoundly inspirational. In February I sent an email to Dr. Jill, which said in part, "Although I have not had a stroke, just over two years ago I had three psychotic breaks within 5 days and was committed to the psych ward of a hospital. Much of what you went through was, albeit to a greater degree, remarkably similar to my experiences. It would take pages for me to describe all of the many, many similarities..." and "I have been fascinated by my many memories of the events of my psychotic breaks and my subsequent recovery and have long thirsted for information that would help me to understand physiologically what occurred during my breaks and exactly what caused the obvious damage to my brain. I would be very interested in any insight you might have into this and also would greatly appreciate it if you could point me to any resources that might help me to understand what happened to my brain as a result of those psychotic breaks. I'm thinking how great it would be if someone with your knowledge of the brain were to have gone through a psychotic break, recovered from it and wrote a book like yours. I doubt that such a book exists anywhere."

To my great pleasure, in May I got a reply from Dr. Jill, which said "Hi Hank, thanks for your kind message. You might enjoy reading *Of Two Minds*, by Fredric Schiffer. I think it will give you the information you are seeking. I wish you all the very best along your journey."

I quickly purchased and read *Of Two Minds*, and I believe I now have an idea of what happened inside my brain during my psychotic breaks. I'd like to share this understanding with you. Fredric Schiffer, M.D. a Harvard psychiatrist and researcher, believes (quoting from the book's cover) "That advances in scientific study prove what many of us have always sensed is true. We are of two minds, each one with a different degree of maturity, each associated with the left or the right brain and which influence our responses and attitudes in very different ways. Schiffer presents overwhelming evidence that each side of our brain possesses an autonomous distinct personality with its own set of memories, motivations, and behaviors. His book illustrates how the interaction of these two minds – whether they sabotage each other or work together in harmony – actually determines our psychological nature and the emotional problems we may experience in life. Furthermore, the friction created between these two sides can sometimes lead to emotional breakdown, trauma and depression."

The research findings presented by Schiffer are substantial. A few memorable examples involved two individuals in a study of individuals who had suffered from epilepsy who had their corpus callosum severed thus isolating their left and right brain hemispheres. Before the two hemispheres of his separated brain learned how to get along with each other, one participant in the study who wanted to smoke cigarettes found that each time he lit up with his right hand (controlled by his left brain), his left hand (controlled by his right brain) would grab the cigarette

and put it out. In a different study, long after a participant's two hemispheres had adjusted to their separation, the participant was asked a series of questions and was asked to respond on a scale of one to five by placing pegs in appropriate holes using each of his two hands separately. Both hands were hidden from his view. For most questions concerning the like/dislike of different activities, foods, people, etc., both hands responded similarly. However, when asked questions about being bullied as a child, there were significant differences in the responses of the two hands (each controlled by a different brain hemisphere.) One hand consistently showed responses indicating that the bullying no longer troubled his mind while the other hand showed responses clearly indicating that the childhood bullying remained troublesome and anger provoking.

In a different study of patients who had never undergone a split-brain operation, one patient who suffered from seizures had also been observed to have dramatic personality changes. When his right brain was put to sleep with sodium amytal, he remained his usual pleasant, well-adjusted self. When his left-brain was made inactive, his belligerent personality returned. In fact, he became so verbally and physically abusive that the doctors had to inject him with an antipsychotic medication.

Schiffman's analysis of existing brain research led him to the conclusion that each of us possesses two separate minds, each with its own separate personality. Based on solid scientific evidence that the left-brain controls the right side of the body and that the right brain controls the left side, Schiffman began a series of fascinating experiments using his psychotherapy patients. He designed two pairs of glasses - one that would allow vision only out of the extreme left of the left eye (stimulating the right brain), and one that would allow vision only out of the extreme right of the right eye (stimulating the left brain). He would then ask his patients to rate their level of anxiety on a 5-point scale first looking to one side and then to the other. Approximately 60% reported differences in their feelings of anxiety wearing the different glasses. This phenomenon suggested to Schiffman the existence of an immature mind that was troubled by childhood traumas and a separate mature mind, which was less troubled, and more in touch with present realities. Schiffman hypothesized an ongoing struggle for dominance between the two minds – patients who responded best to therapy were generally those who possessed dominant mature healthy minds, but would find themselves often habitually reacting to certain situations in ways that were destructive to their own well-being (influenced by their more immature troubled minds.) His most difficult patients were those whose two minds were both troubled.

I'd like to share a few paragraphs directly from Schiffman's book." For a few weeks before being taken to the hospital by the campus police, Mark had been losing his contact with reality. Slowly and then rapidly he was slipping into a psychosis; he had been losing his mind, his rational mind. It began with some difficulty concentrating and studying, then feeling anxious most of the time. Most frightening was his not knowing why or what was happening to him. Soon he wasn't able to attend class because of his mental discomfort – his sense that he did not belong, did not fit in, could not make it – the inability to concentrate. More anxiety. Now a constant sense of impending humiliation. Ridicule. "You can't make it," chants throughout his mind. He was becoming terrified. "Asshole, asshole" distantly rang in his ears. After two weeks he could no longer leave his apartment; he was too disorganized, too confused, too terrified. He was immersed in an overwhelming pain that enveloped him without boundary. He was drowning. He

felt he had no way out, but then a thought emerged – a simple thought, a thought that he might be superior. Perhaps he was mistaken, his suffering was exceptional, unique, misunderstood. Perhaps it was not he who was failing; it must be the world that was upside down, not him. There was a ray of hope, a relief from the storm. The world was crazy; he was safe. And so gradually he began to realize that he was Jesus. The parallels were all there: the misunderstanding, the misplaced ridicule, the false accusations, the lack of acknowledgment, the ultimate superiority and triumph, sustaining the success, love, and adulation he needed to assuage his anguish.

I met Mark a week after he was admitted to the hospital. He was referred to me for psychotherapy after he had settled down and was back to realizing that he was a broken man who had experienced a mental collapse. It was he who was crazy, not the world. He was embarrassed that he thought he was Jesus and avoided talking about those thoughts with which he tried to rescue his life.

We sat together; he mired in pain and confusion. I tried to let him know that he was not the first to become mentally undone. Sometimes when we feel overwhelmed with life, the fuses in our mind can blow.

He did not know what might have overwhelmed him. He was under some stress, especially by one professor whom he felt ignored him, but he wasn't feeling so much overwhelmed as undermined, as simply sinking into a mud hole, a pool of quicksand, in which the more he moved and tried to help himself, the more quickly he descended.

Growing up, Mark was constantly ridiculed and bullied by his peers. On the school bus from elementary school through high school, he endured chants of "Asshole, asshole." Panic filled him especially when he had to go to the cafeteria or gym class. He was chronically terrified, and the terror on his face was a signal to others to attack him with impunity, with taunts, insults, pushes, and punches. There was no escape, and there certainly was no understanding or help.

When Mark arrived at college, he was surprised to see that he was respected and included. For the first time in many years, he was treated without abuse, and for the first three years, he thrived in that environment. But in his last semester, he began to sink; he mentally reexperienced feelings of terror and helplessness, which in his therapy he could see resembled the chronic feeling of his earlier life.

Perhaps the uncertain prospect after graduation or the stress with the professor triggered his dormant memories to explode and overwhelm his mind. I presented this as simply a hypothesis, trying to offer some possible insight into what at first seemed chaotic and incomprehensible."

Schiffer did not share the view of the hospital psychiatrist who diagnosed Mark with manic-depressive illness. Rather Schiffer felt that he had had a psychotic episode largely because he somehow couldn't bear life as he saw it in a part of his mind. Given enough distress anyone could possibly become separated from reality. In therapy, Schiffer focused on helping Mark appreciate the pain and trauma he had experienced in childhood, and then to teach a part of him they called the "little boy inside" that he was now safe and valuable. After many months of therapy, Schiffer tried his vision limiting glasses on Mark. The effect was quite remarkable –

when Mark donned the glasses that activated his right hemisphere, he immediately shouted, "I don't trust you, Doctor". Schiffer quickly urged him to try the other pair allowing him to look out his right side (left brain). Mark did this and almost immediately said with a very friendly smile, "Of course, I trust you." The glasses aided Mark to locate and arouse the two distinct personalities of his mind: one healthy and the other irrational, terrified, and suspicious. Mark's troubled mind was besting his healthy mind for control and Schiffer's task was to help the mature part learn to lead, protect, and comfort his frightened side; essential work because Mark's troubled side did not have the maturity or mental capacities to run his life in a safe, intelligent manner. Mark made slow progress, but over time they eventually succeeded in establishing the leadership of his mature side as they worked to discipline and comfort his troubled side.

OK, enough about Mark. Let's get back to Hank. Does he have two separate minds, and if so, what is the nature of each? I absolutely believe that I have two separate minds. Let me tell you about them. My immature mind, which I will call Little Hank, has been shaped largely by my childhood experiences and traumas. As a child, I had a mother who was both loving as well as physically abusive and that physical abuse was extremely traumatic in many ways. I also had issues with my Dad, whose love and approval I desperately sought. Unfortunately it was difficult for Dad to express love and approval. Dad was quite adept at criticism, occasionally constructive, however that was not what I longed for. Becoming a stutterer in the first grade and the feelings of shame and ridicule that came with that took its toll on me as well.

Fortunately, I also possess a more mature, adult mind that I'll call Big Hank. As an adult I feel loved by my family and friends. I value my intelligence, ambition, and responsibility. I feel successful and feel there is not much I can't do if I put my mind to it. For the most part, this part of my brain dominates my overall personality, even though Little Hank is there in the background with his occasional doubts, worries, and uncertainties about life.

So what happened in November 2007? I believe that three months of chronic excruciating pain and adverse reactions to the prescribed pain meds got to be more than my dominant mind could handle. Like Dr. Schiffer's patient Mark, my immature mind, Little Hank, got stronger and eventually gained dominance as my mature mind, Big Hank, became badly worn down. The straw that broke the camel's back occurred on that first Monday of that psychotic week in November. I required a blood transfusion and was told by the nurses that premeds were necessary, one of which was a steroid, the use of which would disqualify me from further participation in the clinical trial. That dilemma proved to be more than I could handle. Big Hank's fuse blew and Little Hank, now in control, attempted to make some sense out of all this. Little Hank became convinced that the good doctors and nurses at Walter Reed Hospital were part of Satan's gang and were trying to take his soul into Hell and that a fearless trust in God was the only thing that would save him. So the vulgarities flew freely from Little Hank's voice, as did the belligerence and occasional punch to anyone who tried in any way to help.

After being sedated and receiving my blood transfusion (without the steroid) my mature mind successfully struggled to temporarily regain control. My wife, Nancy, not wanting to see me taken by the police and transported to a mental facility, was successful at getting Walter Reed to release me on the condition that I seek immediate therapy. However, between that Monday and Friday, the struggle for dominance continued. On Friday morning, Nancy told me it was time for

my Prilosec pill, which I take for GERD. At this point Big Hank's fuse blew again and Little Hank became certain that Nancy had been holding me at my house against my will and that the pill was poison. I pretended to swallow the pill, but concealed it in my hand and walked down to the pier where I laid down and dropped the poison pill into the creek along with my wedding ring. At that point I closed my eyes and refused to move and would only utter the words, "I trust in God". Nancy called the sheriff's office and Rescue Squad and they took me to RGH.

At RGH the struggle for dominance continued and my mature mind again regained temporary control. I was taken to a private room where Nancy stayed with me and where I was visited by her minister. I was frightened by my thoughts and the mental struggle that was going on in my brain. Then a nurse came in and said, "Mr. Stupi, I need to give you some medication." That was it! Little Hank came back and knew that Satan's gang had returned and went crazy - vulgar, violent and ready to fight. After a long battle, I was tazered by the local sheriff's deputies, restrained, and drugged. That began my 11-day involuntary commitment.

So, what have I learned from this? A few things. For one, I've learned that I'm not a stoic and I cannot handle too much pain for too long a time. It is very important for my emotional stability that I seek help to relieve chronic pain and not try to "tough it out". I've become aware of the existence of my immature mind and the importance of not only dominating it with my mature mind, but also helping my immature mind to learn that the reality that it knew as a child no longer exists. Big Hank needs to teach Little Hank that the world is a safe place and that there are people who love him and will gladly help him when he's in trouble or in need.

I read "Of Two Minds" late this spring and prepared my notes for this talk at that time. I've developed a passion for introspection and self-help books and read 2 in particular this summer and fall that, although based on cognitive therapy and explain emotional problems in terms of schemas or lifetraps, are not at all incompatible with the duality of mind concepts. I have been attempting to put into practice much of what I've discovered about myself from the reading I've done this year. In preparation for this talk, I re-read "Of Two Minds" within the last two weeks and realized that my immature self, although healing, still has considerable anxiety. I realized that Big Hank really does need keep in touch with Little Hank on an ongoing basis... we had a nice chat last Saturday morning. Big Hank empathized with Little Hank and told him that he understood that his anxiety over past traumas is still troubling to him. Big Hank told Little Hank that he didn't have all the answers yet, but he assured Little Hank that he loved him, would always be there to nurture him, and would not abandon him. He also assured Little Hank that he would be safe and was confident that over time, Little Hank's wounds would heal. That seemed to make Little Hank feel better and the two of us proceeded to have a nice enjoyable, productive day.