First Person Account: Confessions of the Daughter of a Schizophrenic

by Roxanne Lanquetot

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Accounts series. We hope that mental health professionals—the Bulletin's primary audience—will take this opportunity to learn about the issues and difficulties confronted by consumers of mental health care. In addition, we hope that these accounts will give patients and families a better sense of not being alone in confronting the problems that can be anticipated by persons with serious emotional difficulties. We welcome other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be important for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to First Person Accounts, Center for Studies of Schizophrenia, NIMH, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rm. 10C-16, Rockville, MD 20857.—The Editors.

My mother is a paranoid schizophrenic. In the past I was afraid to admit it, but now that I’ve put it down on paper, I’ll be able to say it again and again: Mother, schizophrenic. Mother, paranoid, shame, guilt, Mother, crazy, different, Mother, schizophrenia.

I have been teaching inpatient children on the children's ward of Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital in New York City for 13 years, and yet I’m still wary of revealing the nature of my mother’s illness. When I tell my friends about my mother, even psychiatrist friends, I regret my openness and worry that they will find me peculiar.

My profession is appropriate for the daughter of a schizophrenic; at least psychiatrists will think so. Since I often marveled that I escaped being a disturbed child, I decided to devote my life to helping difficult children. I have been successful in my work, which includes forming relationships with the mothers of my students, especially the schizophrenic ones, whom I visit on the wards during their periods of hospitalization.

I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1933. When I was 5 years old, we moved to the Country Club section of the city, an area as spotlessly bourgeois as any residential area in the United States. The inhabitants of this region composed a homogeneous population of upper middle class citizens, all very similar in their life styles. Not even one unusual person could be found loitering on the streets of this hamlet, let alone a paranoid schizophrenic. If, according to the laws of probability, there were schizophrenics and other “crazies” scattered about in the population, they were well hidden.

On the outside our house resembled those of our neighbors, but on the inside it was so different that there was no basis of comparison. Our house was a disaster. Everything was a mess. Nothing matched, furniture was broken, dishes were cracked, and there were coffee rings and cigarette burns clear across our grand piano. I was ashamed of our house. It was impossible to bring friends home. I never knew what my mother might be doing or how she would look. She was totally unpredictable. At best she was working on a sculpture or practicing the piano, chain smoking and sipping stale coffee, with a dress...
too ragged to give to charity hanging from her emaciated body. At worst she was screaming at my father, still wearing her nightgown at 6 o’clock in the evening, a wild look on her face. I was never popular as a youngster, and I blamed my lack of popularity on my mother.

My friends had elegant, decorator homes like the ones in House Beautiful. Their parents were caring, organized, but traditional. They provided for their children. Nothing was lacking. They were well-dressed, and their daughters had the kind of clothes I longed for, the kind that are sold at Saks Fifth Avenue. I attached a great importance to clothes, because I had to manipulate Mother to get them. It was not that we were poor. It was just that my mother didn't care about clothing. She was entirely oblivious to the fact that people wore clothes.

My mother didn't know how to cook. She was never at home to order groceries or plan meals, but she showed concern about proper nutrition for her children and hounded us to eat, or overeat. We dined out at least four times a week at the Fred Harvey restaurant in the Union Station where my grandfather had conveniently opened a charge account, and the rest of the week we ate broiled sirloin. The people who worked in the restaurant were used to us and paid no attention to Mother’s idiosyncrasies. We children were allowed to purchase books at the station gift shop, and we read them at the table since no conversation with Mother was possible. Nancy Drew made an excellent dinner companion.

Mother was quite interested in music and ballet, and she took me to every ballet and concert in Kansas City. She always looked terrible when she went out, and more than once she arrived at the theatre in her bedroom slippers. I was embarrassed to be seen with her, and before we left home, I would try to convince her to dress properly. She never listened and sometimes became angry, but chic or not, I accompanied her. I loved music and dance as much as she did. I even gave up Saturday afternoons to stay home with her and listen to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, and I loved her most and felt closest to her sitting in front of a gas fire, feeling her bony arm around my shoulders as we listened to the music together.

Throughout my childhood I was torn between my bizarre, but loving artist-mother and the conventional mothers of my friends.

Although Mother was rarely at home during the day, she could be found at the ballet studio. I think that I was probably born at the studio, because I can’t imagine that Mother could have gotten to the hospital in time to deliver. Although she continued to take classes until her psychotic break, as soon as I was born she unconsciously decided that I should become the danseuse étoile that had been her goal in life. I didn’t have the talent to be promoted to such heights, but failing to understand this, she continued to nag me to take more classes and work harder.

Feelings of shame and fear overwhelmed me in those early years, shame that my friends would find out that my mother was “different” and fear that I would be “different” too. The fear of being like Mother must have prevented me from studying ballet and piano seriously. My mother played the piano and danced, and she was schizophrenic. If I played the piano and danced, I would be schizophrenic also. I was terrified that if I showed any signs of letting myself go and really working, my mother would close the doors of the studio and fasten them with a heavy, iron bar.

Mother and daughter were competitors in ballet and music. Mother, who had given birth to me when she was just 19 years old, looked young, mother and daughter looked alike, and we were taken for sisters. I didn’t think that I could win a music or dance competition with Mother, and I wasn’t interested anyway. I wanted to go to college, where I was assured success. Mother had always had trouble in school.

There were other problems in living with a schizophrenic mother. One was the lack of tranquility at home, the commotion, and chaos. My parents were constantly arguing, mainly about money. My mother had no idea of budgeting. She didn’t need to learn, because her father was available to supply her with money as needed. My father didn’t approve of limitless concert-going, dance classes, or book buying. He abhorred eating in restaurants everyday and expected Mother to stay home to take care of the house and prepare supper. I would be awakened at night by screaming and lie in bed pretending to be asleep, morbidly fascinated by my parents’ quarrels.

Trying to make up for my mother’s shortcomings was one of the major preoccupations of my early years. I was always cleaning and straightening up the house, vainly hoping to restore order, even as early as age 4, according to one of my aunts. I took care of my brothers, but I bitterly resented the fact that no one took care of me. I felt cheated by having to arrange my own birthday parties, ordering the cake, inviting friends, and choosing the present although I willingly organized parties for my younger brothers. After school I became the little mother who was furious about being deprived of her childhood.
One day, when I was 10, my mother vanished, and as if by magic, my father moved back to the house to take care of us. I resented his return. He had abandoned us, and I must have felt that he was responsible for Mother's problems. We were told that Mother was ill in a hospital in Burbank, California, where my grandfather's sister was a staff physician. I felt very lonely without her and began hanging around the ballet studio. Once the teacher put her arm around me and said, "Poor child, you miss your mother, don't you?"

Years later I learned that Mother had run away to New York without telling anyone she was leaving. She was making frenzied visits to the ballet schools there when a friend of the family phoned my grandparents to inform them of their daughter's strange behavior. My grandparents immediately set out for New York to rescue Mother. They brought her to Menninger's Clinic, which had not been in existence very long. At the time the hospital was located in old-fashioned red brick buildings that were already on the premises when the Menningers moved in. Equating building height and glass walls with hospital excellence, my grandparents took one look at the hospital and headed for California, where Mother was hospitalized for a year. She regained her physical health, but her mental health was totally ignored. When she was discharged, we joined her in California, where we lived for the next 2 years. Mother was subdued and withdrawn from any human contacts outside of the family. Her withdrawal was less of a bane to our social life than her neurotic existence in Kansas City, but she lost something of the artist, her most interesting self.

When the family returned to the Midwest, we moved into a house in the country next to my grandparents, which made it easier for my grandfather to look after his beloved daughter. Mother was withdrawing more, spending the entire day lying on the bed, sleeping or doing exercises. She rarely left the house except to go next door to rant and rave at my grandmother while my grandfather stood nearby, patting her on the back and saying, "Bonnie, my dear little Bonnie, everything will be all right." Since neither of my grandparents would admit that their dear little Bonnie desperately needed help, we children could say nothing.

At the end of my junior year in high school I was in a serious automobile accident. I tend to think that my mother's consequent decomposition might have been precipitated by my being in a coma for 6 days, but I'm not certain. After I came home from the hospital, she became very strict with me, although she had never interfered in my social life previously. When I protested against her arbitrary, nonsensical restrictions on my dating, we began to have terrible fights. I could not make her accept the fact that a monastic existence was not for me.

Mother and I shared a room with twin beds. When Mother was lying down, she would start to moan as if she were talking in her sleep. "I can't stand that girl. She's evil; she's a bitch. She's just like her father." I was terrorized, but I dared not move. I felt I had to pretend to be asleep, because I didn't want her to know I was listening. I tried to deny the reality of Mother's illness by not acknowledging the outbursts. I used to lie in bed, wishing I were dead, believing that I was the worthless girl she was describing.

My oldest brother was the target of the same kinds of insults, and we comforted each other. We were afraid to talk about Mother's behavior to our grandparents. They wouldn't admit that Mother was mentally ill. She was the "chosen one," and my brother and I took second place in the family—the opposite of a child's position in a normal grouping. We were frequently reminded that we would have to replace our grandparents as caretakers when we grew up.

I still remember with horror the night that I came in late from a date and decided to sleep on the couch in the living room in order not to wake Mother. I made an effort to avoid disturbing her, not because I was being considerate, but because I didn't want her to start moaning. As soon as I lay down, she came into the room and stood next to me, calling me a prostitute. When she spat on me, I grabbed her upper arm and bit it as hard as I could. The outline of my teeth etched in black and blue remained visible for over a week, but Mother never mentioned it. Even now when I think of the incident, I feel shame because of my loss of self-control and display of aggression toward my poor, defenseless, crazy mother.

Next Mother began to insult strangers on the street. She would stop in front of a well-dressed bourgeois of Kansas City, fix her eyes on him for a few seconds, and snap angrily. "What's wrong with you? Why are you looking at me like that? I'm going to tell my lawyer." If my brother or I were with her, we'd be so embarrassed that we'd want to disappear into a crack in the sidewalk. No matter what we did, she wouldn't stop. Once she hit someone over the head with her pocketbook and another time notified the police that the neighbors were spying on her although they'd been gone for 3 months. In the sterile atmosphere of Kansas City, her outbursts upset everyone. In New
York she wouldn’t have been noticed.

My choice of colleges was based on their distance from Kansas City and Mother. I had to get away before I became crazy. I applied to the University of Chicago, Barnard, and Stanford and was accepted at all three. My grandfather refused to let me attend Chicago U. He said that Chicago was no place for a young girl, but I knew he refused because of Mother, who had attended the Chicago conservatory for 3 months before she returned home to Daddy. I decided against Barnard, because Mother liked New York. I was afraid that she might follow me there. That left Stanford.

Much to my dismay, Mother arrived in San Francisco during my sophomore year at Stanford. She came for a visit and decided to stay. The fantasy about being haunted by the specter of my schizophrenic mother had come true. She moved into a dumpy apartment two blocks from a dance studio and began taking Flamenco dancing from a Spaniard who taught there. She fell in love with her teacher, but he didn’t care about her. Although he paid her less attention than he did the other students, she was always hanging around, gazing at him in abject adoration. She never realized how pathetic and absurd she appeared.

After I left Stanford, I went to Europe, distancing myself physically and emotionally from Mother. That same year it had been my oldest brother’s turn to escape to college, and Mother was left with only my youngest brother to link her to the real world. This brother had always been her favorite anyway, due to his place in the birth order and the fact that he was born with his hip out of joint and therefore required extra care. He wasn’t allowed the freedom of college, because Mother immediately followed him to Saint Louis and remained with him until he failed his courses and was asked to leave. Even a letter from my godmother in Saint Louis pleading with my grandparents to bring Bonnie back to Kansas City was not effective. They could not bring themselves to remove all of Mother’s children. My youngest brother had to be the sacrificial lamb. When he became tired of his entrapment, he got married. The marriage was a failure, but it was obviously the only way he could free himself from Mother’s stranglehold.

Mother’s descent into chronic schizophrenia would take too long to describe. She was finally admitted to Menninger’s where she improved during the first year and a half of treatment. Then her father died. She had always been her father’s little girl, and her universe was shattered without him. The only person in the world she trusted had departed. After the funeral she refused to return to Menninger’s. She had learned that no one had the right to send her to an out of state hospital against her will.

Two years later she had to return to the hospital. She was driving a car without brakes and insulting black people by loudly declaiming her theories about the inferiority of the black race. By her second admission it was too late. Mother had become a chronic schizophrenic. After the first year of hospitalization we were asked to remove her. The Menningers were only interested in patients whom they could cure. The family, for we remained a close family, rallied its forces to find another hospital, and we transferred her to a Mennonite Hospital in a small town in Western Kansas. We were grieved by the loss of Mother as a functional human being, a bereavement that was finalized by attaching “chronic” to her diagnostic category. I was especially horrified by the necessity of burying my mother in the country. My trepidation was intensified when Mother was moved to a halfway house near the hospital, where the only activity available to patients was filling mattresses.

When Mother began to threaten the doctor at the new hospital to find a lawyer to sue him, the family was forced to make the difficult decision to go to court to have her declared “incompetent,” to openly admit that she was psychotic. We had to safeguard her trust fund from a shyster lawyer. My grandmother was devastated. Having avoided the truth for the greater part of her daughter’s life, she couldn’t face the fact that Bonnie was crazy. Since I was in Europe, my brother, my uncle, and the doctor testified that Mother was a danger to herself. Mother was declared “incompetent,” and the judge appointed a guardian for her. According to Missouri law, a judge controlled every move made by an “incompetent.” Mother lost all liberty, all sense of self. Any step she took had to be authorized by the magistrate.

Once drug therapy came into being, Mother was force-fed Haldol against her wishes, and this resulted in a remission of symptoms. Feeling well enough to leave the hospital, she made the decision to go to Menninger’s by herself to take an examination that she supposed would disprove her insanity. Of course, her guardian was forced by law to make her return to the hospital. She had not requested the judge’s permission to make the journey. Later my brother accompanied her to Menninger’s for an evaluation, the results of which showed that she was well enough to leave the halfway house in Kansas and come to New York to be near her children. They specified, however, that she would
need to live in a structured environment.

Eventually the family received the authorization to have Mother’s guardianship transferred to New York, and a “Committee” was appointed by the New York court. When Mother first joined us in the East, she behaved the way she did when she was discharged from the hospital in California—withdrawn, isolated from everyone but the family, yet able to profit from all the big city had to offer. Listening to music or watching ballet, she came back to life. Vital energy that had been absent for so long returned to her body. The results of changing her habitat were much better than we had ever expected.

Not only did Mother rediscover art and music in New York, but she soon became familiar with the liberal New York laws regarding “patients’ rights.” She refused to continue to take Haldol and slowly began the reverse trip to “No Man’s Land,” where she now dwells. The first sign of her decompensation was a refusal to come to my apartment, and then she rejected me completely. Next, the manager of her middle class apartment hotel asked us to remove her. She was annoying the guests with her outbursts. She had become known to all the shopkeepers on the block as “The Crazy Lady of West 72nd Street.” Looking like a zombie, she paraded down West 72nd Street, accusing aunts, uncles, and brother of stealing her father’s fortune, screaming at people who frightened her, discernible from her New York counterparts only by a Midwestern accent and an absence of curse words.

Having been told over and over again in our youth that it was our duty to take care of Mother, my brother and I initially resented our burden. We felt that since Mother had not accepted the responsibility of her children, we should not have to be responsible for her. At that time it was difficult to admit that we actually loved our frail, unbalanced mother and wanted to help her. When we grew up, we began to understand why Mother was different, and our resentment lessened. On Haldol Mother’s behavior improved tremendously, and we even harbored false hopes of her return to normal living. We never suspected that she might cease taking medication and regress.

Whether or not it’s preferable for her to be forcefed Haldol and incarcerated in Kansas or allowed to do as she pleases in liberal New York, as destructive as her life is now, is paradoxical. She was not able to enjoy life and pursue her artistic interests in the former situation, but she is even less able to do so in the latter. Without medication, she can only exist. I believe that basically she is less free in her present life, a prisoner of her delusions and paranoia. My brother, however, disagrees. He thinks that Mother is better off having the choice to live as she wishes, wandering aimlessly in the streets, constructing the world to fit her delusions.

The Author

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