First Person Account:
A Glimpse of Schizophrenia

by Valerie Fox

The article that follows is part of the Schizophrenia Bulletin's ongoing First Person Account 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 Schizophrenia Bulletin, First Person Accounts, EEI Communications, 66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314.—The Editors.

With this factual story of my descent into the world of schizophrenia, I want to show the insidiousness and deadliness of the illness.

I think I was very fortunate because of the onset of physical frailty, I summoned what strength I had left to attempt to leave my world of "voices" and seek care for myself in a setting I knew to be kind—a hospital setting. I believe that people living as I did in this confused world of voices believe as completely in that world as I did. Sadly, some will die believing in their delusions. Others will seek help when they too know they are in real danger of physical illness. Another sadness of the disease of schizophrenia is the lack of insight many people with the disease experience. Some who seek treatment and regain their mental health will, when released into the community, embrace their delusions again as real and again live as they had in the past, believing with all their heart in the truth of the delusions.

I am aware I must be careful with my illness. I must take care of myself and must be monitored (very discreetly and privately), and I don’t allow myself the luxury of resting in the comfort of quiet prayer and faith. My spirituality has become very simple but adequate for me. I recognize I have been given a second chance at life and try never to take it for granted.

I wrote of experiences when I descended into a home-less, schizophrenic state a number of years ago, but as with a lot of my writing, I just recently decided to publish some of it. Following is the account of a most beautiful experience that was so very treacherous and showed my complete lack of insight into my illness of schizophrenia. My illness betrayed me, and my life changed forever.

As a child growing up in a Catholic family, I was sent to Catholic schools, where I was taught to “walk with Jesus.” I embraced these thoughts. I did nothing that I could not do with my perfect friend, Jesus, near me. I embraced my brothers’ burdens and tried to give joy to those I met. My life was that of a Christian.

I remember the day when I found out my children were taken from me while on a visit with their father. He said I was ill. I was sobbing uncontrollably when I felt a presence very near to me; I believed it was Jesus. I could speak with him, and he consoled me. Then I heard the voices of the Father of Heaven and Mary, the Blessed Virgin. Jesus’ voice faded for the most part, and the voices of Mary and our Father remained with me during my odyssey into the depths of schizophrenia. I had crossed the line of faith into the evil world of schizophrenia: A barren world. I was a barren mother who lost her children. Holding close to my heavenly family of Mary and God our Father, I let go of the world’s reality and entered the only world that could console me, that could offer me hope, the perfection of the divine. Deeper and deeper each day I went into the devious world of schizophrenia.

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In this world of homelessness and schizophrenia, when I was abused and violated my heavenly family said it was because I was mistaken for someone else. I faithfully believed this explanation. God and the Blessed Virgin were always with me. It was as if I could feel their presence. Before going to sleep on a dirty, cold floor or beneath the protectiveness of spiraling pine trees or in an abandoned building, I saw in my mind’s eye Mary’s picture as if she were standing guard so nothing evil would happen to me during the night. I did sleep, and I started each new day with Mary and our Father. While treachery abounded all around me, my core was peaceful.

What our Father told me to do during this time I did. I would listen to our Father, and Mary was the tenderness of my life. When I was scared or lonely or hungry, I would see a picture in my mind’s eye of Mary with her arms outstretched, making me believe she was wrapping me in her being. I believed firmly in the reality of these voices, but I was afraid to do anything against the laws of man because there was a part of me that said, “Perhaps I am sick like everyone says.” I summoned enough courage to say to my heavenly family that I would follow exactly what they wanted me to do, but I would do nothing illegal. I told them I was afraid, and if they were truly God and Mary, they would not want me to do anything illegal. This was accepted by my voices, and I continued to believe with all my heart what I was experiencing was real. If the voices did not accept my condition in order to continue to believe, perhaps there would be a different ending to this story. When I would think about my children, I would believe the voices that I had been too close to my children and that this time away from me was for their growth and development. Even though my heart ached, I was assured again and again my children were safe and that God and Mary were watching over them and I would be with them again in time. Days became months and months became years without my children, yet I still believed. I withdrew deeper and deeper into my inner reality and farther and farther away from the world’s reality. I became brave, although I am not a brave person. I became thin, for I had no money to eat. I was abused, for I had no shelter. Through these trials, I had my “perfect family” leading me, comforting me, and speaking quietly with me. At no time during my life did I ever know the serenity and peace I knew during this time. At the same time, I never knew such brutality, such abuse, and such poverty.

When finally I sought hospitalization I was so very weak and could not face yet another freezing night without shelter or food. I started to wonder if I was really in the care of God and the Blessed Virgin; and if I was, why was I so abused, why was I living the torturous existence I was? The voice of God answered me that even though He was perfect and watching over me, He had to let people use free will in the world. I was too tired and too weak to think any more with the intensity of the past 2 years.

During one moment of clarity, I sought admission into an institution. I remember for about a month at the hospital I was still living fully in my inner world, not letting go. Since I was given medication, it was harder to concentrate on my voices, but I would still think with such tenderness of the wonderful warmth of Mary, speaking with me and explaining away painful experience after painful experience. I did not want to let go of my inner world. I thought back to mornings when I would awaken from my night’s rest and the Blessed Mother would be with me and stay with me all day. Through my thoughts I would talk of many things with God and Mary and receive answers. I felt complete love while my torturous existence continued.

I could have died and I would have been brave enough to face it with my perfect family ever near. In fact, I think I looked death in the eye a few times during this period to make my “spiritual family” proud of me and worthy of their perfect love. I remember one night walking on railroad tracks in the dark of night. The tracks were on a bridge over water. In my delusional state, believing I would be protected by my “heavenly family,” I walked across this bridge. Today I know if a train had come I would have certainly been killed because if I had jumped off the bridge the fall would have killed me, and if I had stayed on the bridge, I would have been killed by the train. In my state of mind, I dared death again and again. I believed so strongly in my “heavenly family.”

For a couple of months at the institution, when the medication was taking stronger hold and I was starting to focus on my surroundings, I was still questioning whether to embrace what the world thought or to continue to believe in my inner voices. I thought about this for some time and made a conscious choice to let go of my thoughts of God and Mary and to seek the world where my children and my mother were. My healing had begun.

It has been 17 years since my odyssey, and to be candid, today I still remember the wonderful feeling of peace I knew during the world of horror I was living. When my mind wanders back to something from that time, I allow myself to remember for a moment, but I don’t dwell on it. However, I don’t think I ever will forget such a traumatic time.

In the years since, I have done well—eventually living independently in the community. I still choose to live a moral existence, the basis of which is embracing the simplicity of the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I don’t go to church services because I don’t want...
frequent reminders from that wondrous, savage, deadly time. I don’t want God, Jesus, and the Blessed Mother to be in my conscious mind on an ongoing basis. I may start pensive, deep thinking about spirituality versus mental illness; and that I don’t think would be good for me to do. I do believe in God and Mary and Jesus, and that is enough for me. I have a great respect for life and for the deadliness of my illness, yet I embrace life fully and am thankful for each day of health of mind. I live a simple life, but a good life; and I am very grateful for my second chance to enjoy my family and pursue my dreams.

Since I was a small child, I have respected the mind. Looking back, the enormity of the pain I felt over the loss of my children was replaced with the only hope that could console me—the voice of a kind, perfect God, the one person who could assure me over and over that He and Mary were with my children to wipe their tears when I couldn’t and to protect them and that He and Mary would be with me always. Perhaps I had to wander aimlessly until I was strong enough to face the reality of my loss. Perhaps this schizophrenic state was my mind’s way of coping with a very deep trauma, a trauma so deep I could not deal with it any other way.