Listening to the Wherewho: A Lived Experience of Schizophrenia

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Key words: auditory hallucinations/first-person account/phenomenology

At the age of 37, I had a psychotic break, just 3 years short of a diagnosis of late-onset schizophrenia. Aside from situational depression a decade prior, this was my introduction to mental illness. I spent a year sleeping on my mother’s sofa, fearfully locked in her apartment and wondering what became of me before diagnosis and treatment began. My doctor told me that my prognosis was good because of my age, even with the severity and speed of onset.

I now live with auditory hallucinations, formally classified as “outer space” hallucinations that I hear outside of myself and, for me, stem mostly from sounds in the environment. This is in contrast to “inner space” hallucinations that are perceived to be within the head itself. I am disturbed by sounds, especially by the hypnotic resonance of motors and fans, for they carry with them the most persistent voices. These voices refer to themselves as the Wherewho.

There’s a droning noise in the background at work and I can’t discern its source. Is it a fan or a motor above the ceiling tiles? Is it a server or other hardware in the cubicle next to mine? Am I hallucinating? I tense up over the low, continued hum. It remains in the background, yet at the forefront of my attention, even as I turn on my MP3 player in the hope that music will drown it out. Instead, focusing on the static from my headphones only seems to increase the dull, monotonous sound. My head starts to throb as my anxiety increases. I’ve had enough for now, so I decide to step outside for a cigarette. Along the way, my attention is drawn to the elevator motor, the drinking fountain, and various other sources of sound. On the loading dock, one particularly large vent repeatedly utters, “I hate you,” in continuation of the conversation I had with the Wherewho.

“Eff human. This is the morning after,” she says, “...the warning after. I am two persons. I am two percentage points. You are human. I hate you.” When the fridge clicks off, I feel a sudden release of tension and I breathe a sigh of relief. The loudest voices have quieted, and only the appliances offer this sort of eventual release.

Layer upon layer, these voices migrate and shift throughout my surroundings. Like the hum at work, there are some sounds I can’t tune out; there are some sounds that cannot be relegated to the murmur of background noise. I call these “fortis audibles.” Regardless of the intensity of my attention or the level of my interest in an activity, I am forced to hear them. I can’t help but listen.

Outside my kitchen window, another layer of conversation begins between the Wherewho. A woman’s voice says, “My anger, my hatred...”

“You sold your anger and emotion. We learn something and we learn nothing,” another responds.

“I will find the answer and feel accomplished,” the first voice retorts.

Two or 3 h later, I find myself wondering how so much time can pass without me noticing. The dishes in the sink collect and the laundry piles up because my free time is spent in internal conversation. Disheartened, despite my overall progress, I feel I’ll never return to a state of natural attention. Once optimistic, I’ve developed a foreboding sense of the future. When a bit of hope starts to surface, I hear, “Be careful what you wish for,” they say, “Irreversible.” My distress swells with the feeling that I am never alone and I wonder if I will ever find peace.

On my break at work, I think about what plans I could institute if I were to become unwell again. Serendipitously, the emergency sirens in the neighborhood go off for a test as I walk toward the corner store. My anxiety level rises—is this a warning sign? That phrase alone brings vivid memories of the onset of psychosis. Suddenly I feel immersed in that former reality. License plate numbers and car colors are things to follow or avoid, something to help me gain my bearings. I hear, “I will notice your honesty. You will notice our artistry. Be different than human. Things can happen.”

Oddly enough, nothing appears different, but something has changed. My senses are overwhelmed as I try to track the many details of color, motion, and sound. I am a block...
away from work, I'm returning in the same direction from which I came yet I am muddled and disoriented. In this hypersensory state, I lose my orientation—my attention to my doings—and the busy intersection dissolves. If I latch onto a detail, the basic understanding that the intersection presents a hazard disappears. By now I have completely forgotten the purpose of my current task (to pick up lunch) and I fight to maintain a single-mindedness that will get me back to the office safely. “If you find the answer, we will reward the answer, we will reward you,” they say. The activity from the 6-lane road beside me is backgrounded by the seemingly illuminated detail of the pebbled-surfaced sidewalk as I force my senses to filter and my attention to focus.

I used to be able to lose myself in the daily activities of life and immerse myself in thought while the chores got done. Cleaning was a form of organization, a launching pad for creativity, and a way for me to unwind. This enjoyable back-and-forth of attention no longer exists for me. Accomplishing anything while flooded by “fortis audibles” requires pointed attention on what I am doing because if I relax, I am pulled into the illusory conversation. In the midst of doing the dishes I hear, “Take it easy, but remember, it won’t be easy. Nothing will be easy.” I realize I’m stuck in this place, simultaneously forced to be aware of the minutiae of inner processes while competing with them to maintain cognizant awareness of the outside world.

I start to tidy things, but each chore presents an obstacle. If I listen, and sometimes I can’t help but listen, the placement of each object makes a difference. I find there is an otherness that comes from what I hear that is neither derived from the sonorous quality of these voices nor the idiosyncrasies of their personalities, but from the content itself. I haltingly wander back and forth, muttering, arguing internally. I prefer to place the garden fork under the kitchen sink while my doctor would have me believe it is also I who prefers the garden fork face up under my bed to “claw my dreaming body while I sleep” and that, essentially, I am aggravating myself. This implies one has some sort of control with this illness. It is not as simple as deeming the voices irrational or unreal and placing things in their proper spots, because if I do, the voices then become agitated, disagreeing relentlessly for hours on end. “You are seriously off your rocker. You can’t have simple. You murdered voices.” These creepy and sometimes dangerous situations are leveraged against the immediate and longer term misery of suffering these hallucinations.

Pushing through the barrier of psychosis to become present, to reawaken to the state of mind I knew, I had to retrain my concentration. The more I forced myself to perform extremely demanding tasks, such as doing taxes for 30 h a week, the more grounded and solid I began to feel. Imposing directed single-mindedness on myself doesn’t end, however, when I leave work, for at home the voices persist. “Your honesty matters. We learn to sing to you. You will find your answer if you believe us.” With this illness, there is no repose. Between the sedating medications, the toll that the schizophrenia takes on my physical well being, and all of my labored attention to details, I am exhausted. To work 40 h a week used to be easy. Today, the effort is so demanding that I seldom get in a full week.

My coworkers seem disgruntled by my inability to carry out tasks to their level. My inability to focus, process, and concentrate places my performance at the lower rungs. I was blamed by a customer for making a mistake, which no one seemed to doubt. She phoned the office relentlessly until she’d been heard by a wide audience in an attempt to have me dismissed from my position. As the pressure grew to identify the mistake, it was determined that I had not been the source of the error after all: my coworker, a 20-year AA veteran, came to make amends with me, apologizing. I chuckled and dismissed it lightheartedly. Misunderstanding my nonchalance, he wrenched his imposing frame from the chair, stood and yelled, “You bitch!” Our coworker, who was in the room at the time, later admonished me in front of everyone for “frequently laughing inappropriately,” as if shame would set me straight.

Spaced out and terminally disconnected, I am not always able to focus even when trying my hardest. My new manager enjoys holding morning meetings with a group of us crammed into his small office as he attempts to fill my brain with information. My breathing is fast and shallow and my legs bob up and down as my uneasiness and anxiety increase. I know others notice and judge my ability. Not only am I uncomfortable in such a small space with others, penned in, I am also uncomfortable in my body. Weight gain from medications has added 45 pounds to me—my clothes constrain me as much as the pressure to perform.

I feel like a fraction of myself in stark contrast to how I felt at my previous job prior to the schizophrenia, where I was the star of the group: always on target, enthusiastic, and energetic. Here, people quickly catch on that I am not on top of it. If this doesn’t thwart my confidence, my persistent discomfort does.

Sometimes I catch myself passively listening to the “audibles” while talking to my mother outside on her porch. They say, “Can you feel the ang-le? Can you hear the an-gel? The conscious answer is the question. Irreversible.” She suddenly stands up without a word and walks inside. Awkward moments continue to occur, but at least I am able to notice them now. My mother is uncomfortable talking about the changes she sees in me. As a result, I don’t talk about it, and as a consequence, when I bring it up, members of my family say things like, “I didn’t think that was happening anymore.” I traverse between 2 worlds—the world I experience is held in silence and shame while at the same time, I try to act as though I am nothing other than what is normal.

With the dissonance both at work and at home, I seek support by connecting with the local National...
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Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) chapter and the Schizophrenics Anonymous group. I gravitate more toward the schizophrenic and schizoaffective people than toward the variety of people who attend the NAMI support group. I feel comfortable talking with others about our same medications, similar challenges, and common hopes. Our shared struggles help forge my sense of acceptance and camaraderie, without which I would feel very much alone in this new reality.

Though I am working again, I have a pervading sense of loss about my life. This illness has affected all aspects of how I perceive myself and how others perceive me. There's been a radical shift in my social interactions, family relations, and cognitive abilities. Fighting to stay grounded is difficult enough. Bearing the brunt of stigma and confronting the mind-set that I am somehow in control of the situation leaves me feeling hollow and cut off. I remember the days when I was happy.

My computer fan is talking again. "Circumstantial." His voice is so small that I strain to hear it. "This is all circumstantial and you don't want to listen. I want beautiful. I want wonderful. This is circumstantial."

Molly Watson tweets her auditory hallucinations on Twitter under the username @clearlysz in support of schizophrenia awareness and education.