

Awakening from Schizophrenia

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Under doorsteps, hallways, and sick hospital corridors, I step barefoot over the floor to better sense my way forward. Time flees abruptly into dusk. I can't reach it – time, it's too fast and yet too slow—cold white walls—the sound of rattling keys.

When I was twenty-three, I was hospitalized at a psychiatric hospital because of a suicide attempt; upon arrival, my leg was like jelly, and my mind clouded like candy floss. My best friend held my shoulders; I had trouble keeping myself upright. I did not recall talking to a doctor. Still, I remember the sound of a key rattling in a lock, a heavy door slamming and sitting on a bed in a sterile white room: muffled voices and a sense of unreality. The walls seemed to stem with despair, and the sterile space enhanced the feeling. I wondered how I ended up here. I was then blissfully unaware that my journey with schizophrenia had just begun.

My encounter with the psychiatric system has been traumatic. I have met a cold and dehumanizing system. The staff that was supposed to care for me did not care. There was no empathy or human contact. At the wards, I was left alone and felt isolated and miserable, which left me feeling non-human and invisible. If I tried to approach staff, they would keep their distance and talk to me as if I was a dangerous animal. What I learned was that I should not confide in or trust anyone. As a result, I kept schizophrenia a secret when I returned to society. I dealt with the condition in silence, within the confined walls of my mind. After my release from the hospital, I returned to my occupation as a dancer and choreographer. I was not well, but I could express myself through dance and control my condition. I continued dancing for twenty years, keeping my secret well hidden.

Parasites and puffins fight for space on my scalp. They place their claws and sharp teeth deep down, and I can feel the pain in my toes.

In 2012, my career as a dancer ended due to a severe injury. As a result, I felt lost because dance was my entire identity; I knew that if I was not to spiral down into deep depression, I had to apply my mind. That year I was accepted at university. For the next six years, I spent most of my time in bed because of chronic pain; somehow, I managed to study but was utterly miserable and in constant pain, but intuitively knew that university was the right choice. I desperately needed to believe in the future. During this period, my partner left me, and I had to move to another city; the only good thing was that my schizophrenia had retreated. It had met its match. Pain swallowed everything. I had read somewhere that pain starts in the brain. I contemplated that if the pain started in the brain, I could train it to disrupt the pain signals, and I firmly believed despite the pain that, I could apply my mind to conquer it. I used six years working on this process. Slowly the pain lessened, and all my mental work paid off. I slowly started to live again, and for a year, all was good, but schizophrenia resurfaced with a vengeance.

My experience with schizophrenia has been a lifelong and complicated journey. Still, I reached a point three years ago where I experienced something profound. In 2019, an article helped me break my silence and isolation. One late night I was reading an academic paper, and I stumbled upon a researcher on schizophrenia. The article was different from what I had read before, and the attitude toward schizophrenia was unique. This paper initiated a process where things started to fall into place. I began conversations with the professor of the article, and he slowly but steadily pushed me to talk about my experiences with schizophrenia. In the following years, several things gradually initiated a change in me. I met a psychologist who specialized in schizophrenia and started conversations with her. I began writing about schizophrenia and got the opportunity to talk to psychology students and doctors at conferences about schizophrenia.

Most importantly, I confided in my friends. In this process, I felt a lightness emerging within me; the secret was out, my stories were heard and acknowledged, and the trauma I had experienced in the psychiatric wards was deconstructed and demystified with the help of the psychologist. I could finally take agency for what I had been through.

One day I felt a strange and peculiar sensation but could not figure out what was different until I realized that my mind was silent for the first time in my life; it was strange. I had to understand this silence; what was it? That day I thought I had had a stroke since there were no sounds. Still, the silence also gave a sense of deep release, like my mind had been encapsulated and then let loose, so I contemplated that it could not be a stroke. The silence stayed. The first couple of months, I missed the voices; they had been part of me for so long; what was I to do without them? The voices had been an integral part of me, at times destructive, but they had also helped me navigate a confusing world, and now they were gone. My mind felt so different; it was like I needed to reconnect with it again, it was so calm, and I experienced something I have always longed for; to be in the world, not observing it from a distance or disappearing into a fantasy but noticing all the details. It was like I had been living with tunnel vision and then suddenly given widescreen vision. It was overwhelming; impressions bombarded my senses, I anticipated fear and anxiety, but instead, I felt a sense of fulfillment.

Then small things started to change. I noticed that my restlessness evaporated, and I could suddenly sit on my terrace and observe birds for hours. Another profound thing that changed was the concept of my body. I have always felt disembodiment; for instance, I had trouble

seeing myself. The image in the mirror was distorted. I observed a reflection frozen in time; It was a young girl. One morning I glanced in the mirror and saw a much older me. I had to get closer to the mirror and touch my face and body because who was this woman? She was not young. It was me. It was a powerful experience.

What happened to me was an awakening. I'd heard the term before, but I always associated it with Buddhist monks in monasteries. I assumed it was only available to spiritual people. I never thought it could happen to me. Throughout my life, I have faced different mental states, such as psychosis and revelation, which can be euphoric and mind-blowing. Still, awakening cannot be compared to revelations or psychosis. Awakening is different; it is a subtle, calm, and profound spiritual experience. The term "awakening" implies waking up from something, maybe a dream. In my case, it was an awakening from my mind and a deep sense that I was finally becoming myself. I felt like a door had been opened, and the world had invited me in. To awaken from schizophrenia was to awaken from the condition. It was an awakening to myself.

Schizophrenia is still a part of me but subdued. It had lost its power; something else had taken its place: a sense of belonging to something larger than reached beyond body and mind. Things that before were complicated have become more manageable. My body has a lightness that was not there before, and I feel a release from disturbing emotions. Fear, anxiety, and disembodiment have vanished. I have gained insight into something profound that I can still not express, and as a result, my perception of the world is changing. I do not know where it will lead me, but I am hopeful that I will arrive or contain this feeling of being me.