

## In the Belly of the Whale

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In the biblical story of Jonah and the whale, Jonah falls overboard during a storm and is swallowed by a whale. He then spends 3 days and 3 nights in the stomach of the whale, searching his soul and reflecting on his life. I have chosen to use this story to illustrate what living with schizophrenia is like. I have not spent 3 days in “the belly of the whale”; I have spent my whole life there. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia when I was young and went through an identity crisis. When I got the diagnosis, I did not believe it. The doctor could not be talking about me—it had to be someone else. The psychiatrist told me that I was abnormal; a condition that could be changed by filling my body with antipsychotics. It was apparently a question of chemistry and biology. I had spent my whole life thinking of myself as normal, until the psychiatrist told me that I was not. It brought on a sea of thoughts and questions. Does this mean that everything I believed about myself was wrong? If I am “a schizophrenic,” am I then someone other than myself? Who am I, as a person, if I am not myself? Am I a freak? Does this mean that I have to deconstruct my identity and divide it up into what is normal and what is abnormal? And how do I know which is which, when all that I am, is such an integrated part of my identity and have been since I was a small child? I do not have a scale where I can weigh the terms “normal” and “abnormal,” and divide everything that is going on inside my mind into 2 well-sorted piles. Dealing with objects in the physical, external world is one thing, but dealing with the subjective internal conditions is something else entirely. Consciousness is a peculiar phenomenon. It is fluid, fluctuating, and elusive. You cannot hold on to it, because how do you hold on to a sensory experience and give it form, function, and meaning? When I look at my body, eg, I can sometimes feel like the right side of my face and body is distorted; that it is out of proportions. I see black animals crawling on my body. The experience is real. I see it with my vision and my inner eye. How do I ignore that? The answer is; I cannot. Rationally, I know that it is a result of the

schizophrenia, but I cannot deconstruct the experience and make it normal. What I can do, is observe the experience, as some kind of anthropologist, classify the phenomenon, and find space for it somewhere in my mind. Place it in a fictional room in my head and that way create some meaning in the chaos. I have gotten lost in my psyche numerous times when I was young, but over the years, I have learned to navigate in the subjective experience that the condition places me in. Over time, I have learned to draw an internal fictional topographical map of the states I experience. A map, where I place the different sensory experiences, voices, hallucinations, sounds, and delusions in categories. Each state with different characteristics. Doing so, has given me some handles to hold on to when everything becomes too overwhelming. I have gone through a metamorphoses from childhood to now. Not only in growing up and the ordinary human development, but also metaphysically. By this I mean not only the things that can be observed, but also the more hidden and hyper sensory forces. The schizophrenic cosmology has caused me to move outside of time and space. A space where I have seen a world that other people do not have experience with. A multiverse of possibilities. I have experienced divine epiphanies, megalomania, terrifying sensory experiences, olfactory- and auditory hallucinations, and experiences of complete chaos. All of which have formed my identity and me as a person, and it is an ongoing process. I have not reached the other side of the schizophrenia. “The other side” is nonexistent if you ask me. I have not, like Jonah, been spit out by the whale after 3 days. I am still in the belly of the whale, trying to navigate in my own psyche, consciousness, and soul.

This does not mean that I am trapped in the subjective world. I have a social life, with friends and family. I have worked as a dancer and choreographer for many years. It has always been possible for me, perhaps because it is more accepted to be colorful in artistic circles. I have expressed myself through dance. Dance is nonverbal. The kinesthetic sense is everything to a dancer. Through

dance, I have been able to canalize my feelings, thoughts, stories, and states of mind. Schizophrenia is still a part of my life today. Today, I coexist with schizophrenia, and it is a big part of who I am. I have spent most of my life in the belly of the whale examining my life and soul because the condition has forced me to do so. I am neither cured, sick, nor something in between. Most of the time, I simply consider myself a person, trying to navigate through life and the extra condition I received when I was born. I do not see schizophrenia as an illness, but rather a condition or state of being. The schizophrenia only presents itself as an illness when it absorbs my entire being. The rest of the time, I do not consider it an illness, but a condition consisting of a bunch of subelements that I have to deal with. The doctor recently asked me: “what if you had a button on your head, that, if you pushed it, would make the schizophrenia disappear, would you do it?” The answer is no. I would keep the schizophrenia. It is an important part of my identity and if I removed it, I would no longer be me. The same way that you cannot

remove the nervous system from the body and still be you. The condition gives me access to a world that few get to experience; an extra consciousness. I still experience divine epiphanies, megalomania, particular sensory experiences, olfactory- and auditory hallucinations and experiences of complete chaos. But, I know that I can use those experiences to guide me through life. They have as much relevance to me in making decisions, as “normal” arguments do. I believe that we all have madness incorporated in our nature, some more than others, but I also believe that the madness can help us make brave decisions in our lives. For me, the madness has allowed me to become a dancer, one of the most important decisions I have made in my life. Another decision I made “in madness,” was studying in Australia, which became one of the best years of my life.

As an artist, I know that chaos and madness go hand in hand and that they are necessary components in the creative process. Without madness, there is no courage or art. Without madness there is no me. No life.