

Spirit Voices or Schizophrenia?

Crazy Horse. Can you think of a better name for a schizophrenic Indian? On the verge of manhood he spent three days on a hilltop without food or sleep, hoping for supernatural guidance. He wedged pebbles between his toes and put rocks under his back so that he could stay awake while meditating. At last, weak and dizzy, he saw his horse approach, carrying on its back a warrior who flourished no scalp, whose unbound hair hung below his waist and who wore a smooth brown pebble behind one ear. The warrior's body had been decorated with hail spots and a streak of lightning descended from his forehead to his chin. Bullets and arrows attacked him but fell away without touching him. A violent storm approached. Angry clouds roared in rage, great fangs of lightening arced down to the ground. People clutched at the warrior, trying to restrain him, but he rode through them with a red-backed hawk soaring above his head. Then came the blaze of light. The voice. The knowing.

"You have noticed me the way I act. But do not worry; there are caves and holes for me to live in, and out here the spirits may help me. *I am making plans for the good of my people.*"¹ Those were the words of Crazy Horse according to Black Elk, who concluded, "He was always a queer man...." He was also one of the most formidable leaders of the Sioux. Known primarily as a military leader, he was also spiritual leader. Captain Bourke of the U.S. Army noted (1877) that Crazy Horse "made hundreds of friends by his charity towards the poor, as it was a point of honor with him never to keep anything for himself, excepting weapons of war. I never heard an Indian mention his name save in terms of respect."²

There are no authenticated photographs of Crazy Horse. Consequently, we don't know what he looked like. That's true of many spiritual leaders: Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Zoroaster But that's a minor similarity.

The most obvious similarity was apparent schizophrenia. Of course, these spiritual leaders were not considered schizophrenic at the time because the disease wasn't diagnosed until 1890.³ Nevertheless, schizophrenia remains one of the most tragic and mysterious of mental illnesses. Sufferers hear voices and often see visions, causing one of the worst afflictions a person can experience: the inability to tell what is real from what is imaginary.

Like other spiritual leaders who saw visions and heard voices, Crazy Horse took his manifestations seriously. But unlike the better known spiritual leaders of Eastern and Western civilization, Crazy Horse's cultural influence, such as establishing moral codes

¹ Connell, E. 1984. *Son of the Morning Star*. North Point Press. San Francisco. pp: 70-71.

² Ibid, p.71.

³ Schizophrenia was first described by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin.

and tribal laws, remains suspect. Had the Plains Indians had their own Bible, Koran, or Avesta, the doubt would be... undoubtedly less.

What we cannot doubt is that spiritual leaders have helped civilize the world. Civilization - both historic and current - stems from the seeds planted by *spirit people*⁴. People who have exhibited schizophrenic tendencies. Actually, they didn't plant the seeds, they merely germinated them. The seeds came from God. Moreover, they came in the form of visions and voices: burning bushes, illuminated doves, angles, and other apparitions that challenge the rational mind.

Today we tend to accept spiritual stories as metaphors, though fundamentalists take them as literally true. Regardless, the fact remains: these spirit persons reported not just seeing and hearing sacred manifestation, but more importantly, feeling strongly that they knew something they didn't know before. Something *sacred*. Much like schizophrenics today report their voices and visions... to psychologists.

Schizophrenia has always been with us, but the popular film "A Beautiful Mind" has brought the subject to public attention. The film shows us, more than tells us, about schizophrenia, which might explain why NEWSWEEK recently featured the subject ("The Schizophrenic Mind", April 8-15, 2002). In layman's terms it outlines the characteristics of schizophrenia, which is marked by the persistent presence of at least two of these symptoms: delusions, hallucinations, frequently derailed or incoherent speech, hugely disorganized or catatonic behavior, or the absence of feeling or volition.

One only has to read half the article to realize that NEWSWEEK describes the founders of our popular faiths (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism) and virtually every religious leader since Adam and Eve, from the more popular prophets, like Elijah, to the less popular mystics, like Black Elk. What's more shocking: these schizophrenics have influenced – no, make that established! – the foundation of civilization (both Eastern and Western). Like it or not, the origin of what we consider as *right* behavior (in the sense of morals, ethics, and laws) comes from those who exhibited *schizophrenic* behavior, rather than logical contemplation.

When did "we" stop listening to schizophrenics for guidance? Burning bushes, blinding lights, voices from above... just aren't the accented crystallizations they used to be. You'd think the Age of Reason would have changed our way of thinking, but it hasn't. Since then, several "new" religious sects have blossomed. All from spirit persons who experienced a vivid sense of seeing into another layer of reality (visionary experiences): George Fox (Quakers), Sister Ann (Shakers), Joseph Smith (Mormons), and Mary Baker Eddy (Christian Science). If a psychologist were to hear their stories of voices and visions, these spirit persons would probably be labeled *schizophrenics*.

⁴ Marcus Borg suggests the term "spirit person" rather than "holy man" because the term avoids the connotation of righteous, pious, saintly or sanctimonious, and it reflects the fact that such figures come in both genders, (*Meeting Jesus for the First Time*. Harper. San Francisco. 1995.)

The rudimentary question is: are spirit persons schizophrenic? They appear so, according to the NEWSWEEK article. There are different types of schizophrenia, but generally speaking, the abnormal condition is characterized by hearing voices (“auditions”) and seeing apparitions (“photisms”) that others do not. Schizophrenia is normal, however, in the sense that every culture has people afflicted by it (about 1% of the population). Although it strikes on the cusp of adulthood, neither doctors nor scientists can accurately predict who will become schizophrenic. It’s affliction, like cancer, is indiscriminate - men and women, rich and poor, intelligent and dimwitted... it even transcends the absence or presence of loving families.

Being schizophrenic is not like being pregnant, an either or situation. It’s like being spiritually minded. Elastic. There’s a continuum between the *natural* voice from a guilty conscience to a *supernatural* voice from the spirits. But the continuum has poles: the former is an inner voice and is as common as rain; the latter is an outer voice and generally an epic event. The (seeming) authenticity of supernatural voices means that both schizophrenics and spirit persons can be barraged by commands that, they are convinced, come from God or Satan. Provided one is not an atheist, that inference is not illogical: who else can speak to you, unseen, from inside your head?

So, what is the difference between a schizophrenic and a spirit person? The boundary is porous, but it can be distinguished by how the visions and voices are translated from an inner world (which many call imaginary) to the outer world that we call *reality*.

To begin with, auditions and photisms, in themselves, are neither good nor bad. To illustrate the point, consider the visions and voices we all experience while sleeping. A dream comforts, soothes and brings rest, which is basically good. A nightmare does just the opposite, which is essentially bad. Similarly, a spirit person produces good results, such as promoting decent human behavior, which is essentially good; while a schizophrenic produces... well, mixed results.

Some schizophrenics produce nothing, they merely destroy other travelers on the road of life (mostly family and friends). This was recently evidenced when Texas mother Andrea Yates confessed that she heard Satan’s voice tell her to drown her five children, one by one. Others bump harmlessly along private rocky roads or down public mental wards (often on medication). Some, the catatonics, merely sit on the road - often in bizarre postures - and grimace. Some, the paranoid schizophrenics, travel in crippling fear. Others travel with Olympian leaps of creativity, like ballerina Vaslav Nijinsky, pianist David Helfgott, and painter Vincent van Gogh. Still others set up milestones of Nobel-winning insight, like the mathematician John Nash. Regardless of who travels the twisted schizophrenic road, it’s a long rough road to haul.

Compared with spirit persons, the influence of schizophrenics on civilization is minor. Their creative breakthroughs and social impacts are few. In most cases, untreated schizophrenia is so crippling that patients can barely buy groceries or pay bills, let alone pen a novel or compose a concerto. Many spirit persons ignite major social change and

fuel the fire of civilization; most schizophrenics have less influence than a chipmunk in a forest fire.

As a result, there are general distinctions: spirit persons are respected if not revered; schizophrenics might also be respected, but they're usually given a wide berth if not scorned. Spirit persons are noted for revealing Truth and therefore are wise; schizophrenics (in their muddled states of mind) tell lies and are considered fools (in the broadest sense of the word). Spirit persons are generally brave, courageous and often heroic, which implies making a personal sacrifice for something greater than oneself, such as a people or a cause. But schizophrenics tend to be fearful or paranoid; though we wouldn't label them cowardly. Moreover, the schizophrenic is self-absorbed and selfish; the spirit person is outwardly focused and selfless. The schizophrenic exhibits childish traits, whereas the spirit person is often childlike: forgiving, compassionate, and accepting others for what they are rather than what they appear to be. Consequently, everyone admires the qualities of spirit persons, and many want to be like them. Contrariwise, nobody in his right mind wants to be a schizophrenic.

Despite the apparent differences, there remain fuzzy similarities. Both see and hear things that others do not. Many have had diverse personalities and identities, which leads to confusion as to whom they really are. ("Who do you say I am?") At times this leads to families and close friends scratching their heads. Although spirit persons are characterized as being compassionate to all, like schizophrenics they often abandon their own families (e.g. Jesus and Buddha) or worse. Remember Abraham holding a knife at his son's throat because God told him to?

Both schizophrenics and spirit persons do what they're told, but they don't take their orders from society. That's perhaps their most obvious similarity: they obey commands issued by voices that sound as authentic as TV anchormen. We assume that spirit persons follow directives that are morally sound, but, as in the case of Abraham, the commands do not always seem "right". Some commands are explicit, others are cryptic. But most are simply bizarre, which makes moral judgment difficult if not impossible.

Both also suffer. A less obvious but profoundly similar characteristic is the state of suffering (always emotional and sometimes physical). The key distinction is that the schizophrenic internalizes suffering and lives in darkness; the spirit person externalizes it and illuminates the world. And explanation is in order.

The spirit person obeys a command - often reluctantly and with pain! - for a cause greater than him/herself. Typically the cause is to reform a suffering society. Suffering is a universal human condition. Every individual and every society suffers at some time, often through a sense of bondage or exile. The spirit person happens to be the right person at the right time to reform the condition. And the message of reform is more than words. Spirit persons reform society by exemplary illumination: "I am the light. Do as I do." They guide the flock, leading as shepherds, not following as sheep herders.

Schizophrenics are black sheep. They neither lead nor follow; they stray - and they stumble. Their abnormal *behavior* and suffering *emotions* can be neatly categorized as separate phenomena, but the lines of cause and effect lack direction. Society in general writes them off as lost causes. Often they write themselves off, because their cause is lost. Ironically, the few who humanly accept schizophrenics for what they are are spirit persons. And they accept them with compassion.

Compassion is the common denominator of spirit persons. (Not so with schizophrenics.) We might not readily see this when we read their biographies, but it is a common thread woven through the tapestry of their lives. This might explain why such people are not just spiritual leaders but the pillars of society, because compassion is also the foundation of civilization.

It's hard to believe compassion is the cement of civilization when we review the history of mankind. But if we look for a unifying factor in sustainable societies, we find compassion holding us together. The heart of compassion is a deep feeling for and understanding of suffering. Societies that lack compassion eventually decay. They survive like competing microorganisms in a compost bin, feeding off each until all the rot is gone. Morals and ethics sustain life. Furthermore, they stem from compassion. We *ought* to feel for others for no other reason than the consequences: individual suffering and social misery. And as experience demonstrates, when we fail to follow our social *oughts*, that which is morally and ethically "right", people suffer. If moral decay continues, civilization begins to crumble, laws are demolished.

Laws build civilization. And the foundation of any law is based upon a rudimentary desire to alleviate misery; though it's not always clear how, or who is the focus of potential misery (e.g. laws that promote slavery). Admittedly, laws (both ecclesiastical and secular) deviate from this focal point, and have created countless long sagas of suffering as a result. However, laws inherently establish what is *believed* to be right: doing what is right, promulgating rights, maintaining righteousness.... A society that creates laws that are believed to be wrong is as ludicrous as an army that encourages cowardice. In the course of history, it's often been a spirit person who recognizes that laws that create misery are, in fact, wrong. Furthermore, the spirit person leads the trail - and trail! - of reform. Spirit persons not only build civilizations, they maintain them.

Civilization needs spirit persons: they keep it civil. (The same can't be said for schizophrenics.) Without civility, societies decay, rot, crumble... just like buildings. And as we know, buildings - typically made of stone for permanence - are a characteristic of civilization. Mere cultures are housed in temporary structures: perishable huts, seasonal tents, nomadic teepees.

Crazy Horse did not reveal his vision to anybody until he was sixteen and ready to become a warrior. From then on he painted white hail spots on his body and a red lightning bolt down one cheek before going into battle. He tied a brown pebble behind

one ear, wore a red-backed hawk on his head and threw a handful of dust - perhaps a symbol of the storm - across himself and his pony.

A biographer of the Teton Sioux, George Hyde, was baffled by the attention devoted to this renowned chief, whom he considered to be morose, sullen and rather limited. Crazy Horse experienced sacred mountaintop manifestations, and after his transformation said to his people, "Follow me." The Crazy Horse cult, says My. Hyde, was amazing:

It was evidently started among the Oglalas at Pine Ridge... aided by some whites admirers of the Oglala fighting chief. They depict Crazy Horse as the kind of being never seen on earth: a genius in war, yet a lover of peace: a statesman, who apparently never thought of the interests of any human being outside his camp: a dreamer, a mystic, and a kind of Sioux Christ, who was betrayed in the end by his own disciples....⁵

Apparently Crazy Horse saw the light and obeyed the spirit voices, but his transformation did not change the human condition of suffering. The seeds of a new morality were not planted; or if they were, they did not germinate. Civilization did blossom on the prairie, but it was not that of the Sioux. The cult of Crazy Horse's died and the Sioux culture withered. As Hyde rhetorically concludes, "One is inclined to ask, what is it all about?"

Was Crazy Horse a spirit person or a schizophrenic? It's like trying to determine the taste of wine from an empty bottle. Perhaps the best answer comes from this truth: "From their fruit you shall know them."

⁵ Hyde, George E. Red Cloud's Folk, A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians. Norman, Oklahoma. 1937.