



***The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*, by Elyn R. Saks. New York, Hyperion, 2007, 340 pp., \$24.95.**

This is the autobiography of a gifted woman with schizophrenia whose story is nothing short of legendary. At the age of 7 or 8, in response to a rebuke from her father, Elyn Saks has a terrifying experience that is a harbinger of the illness which will shape her life: “My mind feels—like a sand castle with all the sand sliding away in the receding surf... The ‘me’ becomes a haze, and the solid center from which one experiences reality breaks up like a bad radio signal...the center cannot hold” (p. 12).

Through her early years Saks suffers from night terrors, compulsive rituals, anorexia, and the experience that houses are putting ideas into her head. In college she has outbursts of bizarre behavior and regressive periods of withdrawal with lapses in personal hygiene. In her early twenties she has two psychotic episodes, each requiring months of hospitalization. She is gravely ill with a poor prognosis. Subsequently, even when she is better, she suffers frequent intrusions of delusional thinking and fragmentation. In short, she manifests four of the five cardinal symptoms of schizophrenia—delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and disorganized behavior. Any two symptoms can establish the diagnosis.

However, although one center doesn't hold, others do. Saks's remarkable intellect is never permanently compromised, nor does she ever relinquish her ferocious determination to defeat her demons. She battles through a schizophrenic fog to win academic honors at every educational institution she attends: Vanderbilt (where she is class valedictorian), Oxford (where she obtains a graduate degree in philosophy), and Yale Law School (where she obtains a juris doctorate). Given the severity and chronicity of her illness, it is nothing short of astounding that she is presently a married professor at the University of Southern California Gould School of Law (in an endowed chair), adjunct professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, and a research clinical associate at the New Center for Psychoanalysis. She has published four books and two dozen papers, and survived two major life-threatening illnesses without falling apart.

Reading *The Center Cannot Hold* is, for us in psychiatry, more than a busman's holiday, though that it is. The fact that the patient with schizophrenia who wrote this autobiography

is also a scholar of philosophy, law, and psychoanalysis draws us into the phantasmagoric world of schizophrenia quite differently from our ordinary exposure. It is a sophisticated insider's view of her illness, which hones the edges of identifying both the disorganizing and curative forces of grave mental illness. The latter include, unexpectedly and prominently, psychoanalysis.

Saks's stubbornness as a child morphs in her adulthood into a gritty determination to get well, but that determination cuts in two directions. Early on she adopts the view that drugs compromise one's strength and integrity, and so she doggedly opposes antipsychotic medication. Consequently she falls into an all too common cycle—when she seriously regresses she is too ill to oppose taking medications, and when the medications enable her to regain her sanity, she resists taking them. She has bitter, extended battles with her therapists over the drugs, and after one particularly fierce struggle she decides, on her own, to slowly taper off thiothixene. Halfway to her goal, she falters. “The sheer physical effort of containing my body and my thoughts felt like trying to hold back a team of wild horses” (p. 272). However, she goes on to reduce the dose further and quickly becomes floridly psychotic, spouting delusions in a word salad. Under threat of rehospitalization she abandons her project. “For days afterward, I felt like the survivor of an accident” (p. 277). At first she feels like a failure, but on reflection she comes to acknowledge the absolute truth of her need for the drugs. As she does, “almost immediately, I felt quite good” (p. 282).

Although shy, Saks always has one or two very close friends; they and new ones remain close throughout her lifetime. She also forms intense attachments to the analysts with whom she works—usually five times a week—over a period of many years. Each termination, occasioned by moving away, is gut-wrenchingly difficult. It follows that the most predictable disorganizing influence is change. Her first psychotic breakdown happens soon after she leaves Vanderbilt for Oxford, her second after moving to Yale. Relocation creates complex pincers of stress, breaking attachments and confronting the unfamiliar. Diminished self-esteem is collateral damage of her illness. Despite her raft of accomplishments, every success is marked by surprise—now, maybe I AM worth something! Conversely, any hint of failure kindles self-recriminating voices, inviting regression and psychosis.

Elyn Saks snatches a life from the jaws of psychotic chaos through a symmetry of curative forces which fuel and sustain her determination. "Medication kept me alive; psychoanalysis...helped me find a life worth living" (p. 298). A host of other factors contribute to her survival. She was born into an intact, caring family with the means to afford whatever treatment and education she needed. She has an incredible intelligence and a voraciously inquiring mind, which enables her academic mastery in stabilizing environments, with tangible rewards. She has the wisdom and capacity to form and keep an ever widening range of friendships that foster trust in others and herself.

There is something of the fable in this autobiography, as it evokes comparison to the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the dwarf who spins gold from straw to save the miller's daughter. Saks spins her own gold. In one acute psychotic state, she has to be placed in restraints and has the delusion that she is a bug impaled on a pin, struggling helplessly while someone contemplates tearing her head off. That terror of loss of autonomy transforms into an ardent advocacy for patients' rights (Saks's third book is *Refusing Care: Forced Treatment and the Rights of the Mentally Ill*). To carry the metaphor further, Saks writes, "psychosis sucks up energy like a black hole in the universe" (p. 272). In her journey through madness she gathers light from many corners of the healing universe: psychoanalysis, psychopharmacology, philosophy, law, friendship, and collected forms of caring, patience, love, and kindness. She, in turn, becomes a sort of brilliant star who walks proudly among us, lighting an optimistic path and making us proud of the profession which shepherds her journey. She is not the first person to sail a ship through this terrible storm, but she has made a major contribution to the cartography of the ordeal. I am grateful for the opportunity to congratulate her success and applaud her book.

JUSTIN SIMON, M.D.
Berkeley, Calif.

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Me, Myself, and Them: A Firsthand Account of One Young Person's Experience With Schizophrenia, by Kurt Snyder, Raquel E. Gur, and Linda Wasmer Andrews. New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, 192 pp., \$30.00.

This aptly named self-help book is one of a series of accessible firsthand accounts of mental illness. The patient/author, Snyder, presents his experiences in first person in sections entitled "My Story," followed by sections jointly written with Gur entitled "The Big Picture," which are written in a voice that varies from the impersonal to the second person "you." Wasmer Andrews, a journalist, adds case examples from patient interviews. A section containing 12 paintings by "people who have or may have had schizophrenia" is included without comment. Mostly outsider, naive primitivist, or expressionist, the paintings do not specifically reflect the syndrome (as, for example, Silvano Arieti did in his older collection [1]).

Mr. Snyder's case history, which I found winning in its detailed revelations, features paranoid ideas of reference and difficulty with focus and has a happy outcome. Although unable to complete college, with treatment Mr. Snyder is able to train and work as a database administrator. Originally, he suspects people are spying on him, because while typing on his computer the cursor moves without his touching the mouse. I am sympathetic, as at the time my laptop also had this key-boarding defect, which was included in a class action suit against a prominent computer purveyor. Mr. Snyder endorses antipsychotic medication as the necessary ingredient in maintaining his recovery and vows to continue treatment, despite experiencing most of the possible side effects. The inter-locuted sections address phenomenology, affects, comorbidity, treatment, and rehabilitation. Osler (2) suggested we should learn from our patients more than our textbooks, and I particularly like Mr. Snyder's term "personalization" for his referentiality. He discusses his premorbid shyness and his shame at having schizophrenia. His experience of time slowing down recalls Ingram's (3) discussion of *chronotons*, or subjective time units, and Sacks's (4) view that the slowing of time is a manic symptom. I find it helpful in explaining schizophrenia to say it is a difficulty attaching affects or valuations to the perceptions and cognitions that are the freight of thought, with the result that establishing a hierarchy of importance becomes difficult. Analogous to a paraproxia, it is a parapathia, or in Peled's (5, 6) computational terms, a connection problem, or a frantic search for external signs, as Arieti described (1). Indeed, Mr. Snyder describes one prolonged "semi-random" drive home, only turning homeward if the last digit of the clock read 1, 3, 5, or 7.

The one howler is the repeated misspelling of "akathisia," or inability to sit still, from the Ancient Greek origin of *a*, meaning "not," and *káthisis*, meaning "sitting" (compare with the unrelated Yiddish term *shpilkes*, meaning "on pins and needles"). Apparently Oxford University Press cannot be trusted with English (let alone Greek). Frequently asked questions, a glossary, a list of resources, and an index complete the useful book.

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DAVID V. FORREST, M.D.
New York, N.Y.

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