

Spiritual Emergency: A radio Play 12-17-2014
By Harriet Cooke, MD, MPH, and Miranda Lovelong

Narrator	Miranda	Dr. Cooke	Harriet	Karin	
Terry	Laura	Peter	Fred	Louise	Henry

Narrator: The scene takes place in the home of Miranda Lovelong, a social entrepreneur and organizer who has opened her home for potluck discussion groups, where individuals going through powerful experiences of non-ordinary consciousness can get together to discuss their experiences as assets rather than liabilities.

While waiting for dinner to warm up, a heated discussion has been warming up as well.

Harriet: So glad you are hosting these groups Miranda. So many of us don't have a friendly environment where we can talk about other perspectives on extreme states and mental illness.

Miranda: ooohhhh... there goes that word again. I cringe and almost get sick to my stomach when I hear the word mental illness. We have to help develop another way to understand extreme states of consciousness. They are the mind's way of healing itself. A process of evolution. I hate the way we pathologize extreme states of consciousness as illness!

Harriet: I agree that many states of non-ordinary consciousness are positive and healing processes, and often are confused with mental illness. You know my story, I went through that difficult period with lots of losses and life challenges, started meditating, and had a beautiful mystical experience of Unitive consciousness and the deepest Love that I had ever experienced. I made the mistake of telling my boss about it and she sent me to a psychiatrist who said I had bipolar disorder and needed to be on medications. My medical license was suspended for almost a year. It was totally absurd and could have been devastating to someone in a different financial situation. Fortunately I had some sick leave time to use up and a husband to support me.

I've worked with people in manic periods and my experience had some similarities and also significant differences. I felt stable and my experience was deeply healing in many ways.

On a positive note, I personally learned how demoralizing it is to suddenly lose one's credibility and have one's insights and judgment invalidated.

I think the worse part was how terrible it felt to have such a sacred experience considered to be a mental pathology.

Miranda: Wow, I was luckier than you when I had my first mystical experiences. I was a director of a spiritual camp/retreat center, and so my experiences were accepted within the context of religion. I was not pathologized for having mystical

experiences. In some ways I was envied by others who wished they had such experiences. I was accepted and supported as a spiritual leader in my community and among my peers and colleagues. Until...

Harriet: Until what?

Miranda: Until my experiences crossed that line from "mystical experience" into "spiritual emergency" and "psychosis". I went far beyond the typical experience of mainstream protestant religion. I got lost in the psychic and spiritual "oneness" realms and couldn't get back on my own.

According to modern psychiatry definitions I was psychotic. I entered into altered states of consciousness, felt one with the universe, I was walking around naked in the neighborhood in the middle of a December freeze, I could see and smell and feel things that no one else could, I could sense negative spirits around me, among other things. To me, it felt like a dream state. I remember it, but was shocked to awaken in the hospital to find out that everyone else knew about my dream!!

Harriet: What was the worst part for you?

Miranda: The nightmare of being forcibly held down, stripped naked, yelled at, and drugged in the ER. I guess I'd put my clothes back on by then. When I awoke to find out that nightmare was real, I felt like I had been forcibly raped.

Then the nightmare got worse. I was told by the psychiatrist that I had a serious mental illness, that I would never recover, and that I had to take serious antipsychotics and mood stabilizers for life to manage my symptoms. And because the doctor diagnosed me with mental illness, everyone around me started treating me like I was mentally ill. That was the worst thing of all. I started to believe it myself. I thought I was crazy and the life I hoped for myself was over.

Harriet: What do you think set you up for the whole ordeal?

Miranda: When the occupy movement started, I got very involved . Seeing and hearing about how so many people are suffering under our economic system and the ecology crisis- my heart just ripped open!

Harriet: I can understand. I've been there too, though I just got deeply depressed, not psychotic.

How'd you get beyond the labels and limitations that the psychiatrists gave you?

Miranda: First it was rethinking psychiatry. Someone told me about your film festival and I attended and started thinking that maybe there was a different way to understand and work with what I was going through.

I was still looking for alternate ways of managing my extreme emotional states, though, as if they were the problem. And I was so sad that I couldn't be the joyful self I had discovered in my extreme state.

Then I came across a website on Spiritual Emergency and I started to think of my experience from a very different place, and definitely not an illness!

Dr. Cooke: Miranda I am so glad you found information on the web about Spiritual Emergency. It sounds like that is what is going on for you.

However, as a doctor, it IS useful to make some distinctions between potentially healing and transformative experiences and pathological states of mind. Though they can look the same, their causes and optimal treatments can be very different. People can have infections, autoimmune disorders, tumors, hormone imbalances, food sensitivities, toxic levels of pollutants and heavy metals, other metabolic disorders, and degenerative neurologic diseases. These all can create behavioral changes that look like mental health challenges from psychological and spiritual causes, though there is generally more coherence to spiritual experiences.

Miranda: hmmmmmm...

Dr. Cooke: And there is also an overlap for many people, where temporary extreme states of consciousness can go on for so long that they lead to significant suffering and dysfunction in a person's life, even contributing to illness.

Classifying things as an illness can have advantages. It lets us know someone needs help, time off from work, sick pay benefits, healthcare and therapy.

It helps doctors, healers, and researchers look for underlying causes to help alleviate extreme suffering so that people going through challenging mental health periods can live joyful and meaningful lives. It helps planners know how to allocate resources and what resources are needed.

Karin: "I think I prefer my illness having a name because it makes me feel less lonely, I know there are other people experiencing my kind of misery and that live through it and make a meaningful existence with it. But I have to be careful not to adopt the sick role, since I know I would just give up if I did that."

Terry: When someone confronts you with the line, 'you're ill,' it's easy to reject it out of hand and dismiss it totally. This kept me in limbo for six years. But acceptance of aspects of my condition as illness was a turning point for me to becoming well. Denial was a natural reaction though, because our society has such a dim view of mental illness and my own stigma is so negative. Denial was my way of feeling meaningful and like a valid human being who deserves to have my thoughts and feelings honored and respected.

When I accepted the idea that some of my experience was unnecessarily painful and an obstacle to what I wanted to create with my life, I began to actively look for therapies, sometimes medications, that would help me feel stronger and in more control. I've seen many people stuck in the place of thinking nothing is wrong.

Peter: It was opposite for me. For a number of years I accepted the medical model as a valid framework, but I wasn't getting better and started reading on my own. My reading suggested the model might not stand up to scientific scrutiny. The emphasis

on distress as illness not only encouraged me to resort to exclusively physical treatments like drugs and ECT, but pushed to the side any consideration of content and meaning to my crisis episodes. Thinking of myself as having a chronic and incurable illness robbed me of my power and agency and confined me in a negative category.

The medical model worked for me for many years but became unsatisfactory.

Pat: When I was told I had a disease, I began to undergo a radically dehumanizing and devaluing transformation. I went from being Pat Dee to being 'a schizophrenic.'

Fred: Maybe my sensitivity to the illness label is because being given a diagnosis is not like saying there is something wrong with your liver, but that there is something wrong with YOU.

Louise: Once past the relief response on learning a name for the distress- the label doesn't alleviate any pain. It doesn't help the professional understand what is happening or why or what would help the individual. It can stop the individual from owning their experience and finding their way through it to the other side. Labeled people are seen as less competent or inferior. I watch people become dependent and helpless with treatments and labels.

Laura: I hear you all, but there is a point where challenging extreme states become what we call an illness. We don't function in ways that support our life, our healing, or ability to relate to others in mutually respectful and satisfying ways.

Maybe the problem lies in what we attach to the ideas of illness and the false assumptions we have made historically about mental illness states: lack of meaningful content of our experiences, and the idea that these illness states are chronic with no recovery possible outside of symptom control and learning how to cope with our unusual perceptions.

Harriet: Or maybe there is some essential negative energy in the word *illness* itself. I just opened an ancient text called a dictionary to see the official historical meaning of the word ill: worse, worst; unwell, sick; evil, wicked, bad- of ill repute; objectionable, poor, faulty- ill mannered; hostile, unkindly- ill feeling; unfavorable, of inferior worth or ability.

Miranda: No wonder I feel sick when I hear that word! Just the word itself sends my mind down the path of fear, and pathology, and blinds us to what I believe is really happening to ALL people who are experiencing extreme states or other experiences that fall under the huge umbrella of "mental illness." Mental health is a spectrum of experiences, but I believe all of them are the soul's way of saying "it's time to work through this issue or deep pain you have been suppressing that has been blocking you from becoming fully your True Self."

Harriet: How about we use a different word for mental health challenges, how about we just call them mental health challenges and use severity levels to determine assistance needs from the larger society?

Laura: That sounds better to me.

Fred: Me too. (Everyone nodding) Miranda: Great! Because dinner is ready!