

# How I Learned to Live With Mental Illness

Mark Stone

I fell victim to serious mental illness in my mid-20s, while I was studying psychology and philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1978. I had most of the classic symptoms of the illness, including delusions with persecutory, referential, and grandiose messianic religious themes. I will tell you about them and about how my own creative nature as an artist, playwright, and poet helped me deal with this illness with the help of my orthomolecular psychiatrist. He vastly improved the quality of my life and helped save it. Now let me describe the period just before the onset of my bout with this mental illness.

It was 1977, and I was a determinist. I greatly admired Albert Einstein because he said, "God does not play dice." My theory was that nature itself is deductive, like mathematics. Scientists can understand the laws of nature because those laws are deductive. I love philosophy, particularly philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of religion, axiology, and inductive and deductive logic. I was also a behaviorist, believing that B. F. Skinner's ideas of stimulus-response conditioning were simply the description of cause-and-effect determinism. At that time, the joy of my academic studies was my own personal discovery of "The Logical Paradigm," which is the beautiful pattern to Aristotle's formal deductive logic.

I was trying to find the meaning of life. Socrates said that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and I could not agree more. I discovered in axiology

that "pleasure shared is pleasure doubled." The greatest insight I learned was from Plato's theory of forms. Think for a moment about a square drawn on a piece of paper. Whereas the square on the paper is sensible, or an imperfect object perceived by the senses, the viewer can transcend and perceive the perfect, real square, which is intelligible and perceptible to the intellect of the mind. This method can apply to things like virtue and justice, for example, as well as to forms such as squares.

The ideal world where the form of the perfect square is real is the transcendent realm, where the sun is the highest form. Plato called the sun the Good. This is important to understand because Plato's sun concept became a personal self-concept in my delusional world. I came to believe that I was the faultless sun—a kind of perfect, Platonic sun god.

At that point in my life I didn't believe in God. I was thinking a lot about existentialism, believing that existence precedes essence; that is, we are born into the world without any meaning and only after we are born do we create essence or meaning for ourselves. A Native American aphorism, "a man becomes what he dreams," was the direction my life was taking. This led me away from determinism to the Oglala Lakota holy man and prophet Nicholas Black Elk, who lived from 1863 to 1950. There is much empirical evidence to support many of Black Elk's prophecies. Black Elk had a vision about the sun god. He said, "the Sun, the light of the world, I hear Him coming. I see His face as He comes. He makes the beings on earth happy, and they rejoice." Black Elk has another great vision of an immature golden eagle. "He will appear, may you behold Him, an Eagle for the Eagle Nation shall appear may you behold!" I believed that Black Elk was referring to an immature man who would

revolutionize the world and that the immature man was me—an unmarried man stunted socially by a severe mental illness. I started to believe in God, and I thought I was becoming Black Elk's sun god.

I next discovered the *I Ching*, a book of ancient Chinese divination that would come to govern my life in many ways. It is known as "The Book of Changes." Confucius believed that only a sage could use the *I Ching* because the sage possessed the Mandate of Heaven. Its divination works by transcendental coincidence. A person asks a question, tosses coins, and the combination of heads-and-tails landings leads by transcendental coincidence to a passage in the *I Ching* containing the answer. The coincidence is transcendental because it is an earthly, empirical event that coincides with a heavenly, transcendental event from the invisible world of God.

The more questions I asked the *I Ching*, the more amazed I became. In response to my question Who am I? I learned that I was a prophet who shall be a great boon to the world, and according to the text, this power "is not given to every mortal to bring about a time of outstanding greatness and abundance. Only an enlightened born ruler of men is able to do it, because his will is directed to what is great. . . . He must be like the sun at midday, illuminating and gladdening everything under Heaven."

Later, as I read about the brilliant Jeane Dixon's 1952 prophecy about the sun, I thought that I was a sun god who would bring all humankind together in one all-embracing faith; I would be the foundation of a new Christianity, with every creed united through me. I wanted to spread the wisdom of God throughout the world. The more questions I asked the *I Ching*, the more I believed that I was Jeane Dixon's sun

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god, destined to change the world for Christ. Then I received a powerful sign of Christianity.

One day I was drinking a Chinese beer called Tsingtao, and it may have been the second or third one I had that day. After I finished it, I saw bubbles in the empty bottle form into a near perfect crucifix, with six bubbles in a circle with one in the center, and as I looked at it, one of the bubbles disappeared and moved over to the right arm of the cross. Suddenly I had a transcendental thought, which is a thought that God puts in the mind, and that meant the First Coming of Christ. Then another bubble from the circle disappeared and went above the bubble on the right arm of the cross, and this transcendental thought meant to me that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Now because Elijah must precede Christ, I thought I must be Elijah, the “sun of righteousness,” and Black Elk’s sun god, the immature golden eagle, who arises with healing in his wings. I was a glorious shaman crowned with the light rays of the rising sun!

I arrived at this holy, sacred belief, and I truly knew that none may know as I did. A spiritual person endowed with transcendent mental superiority is the greatest genius, and the greatest genius is a mystic, and the greatest mystic is a prophet, and the greatest prophet is a god—a sun god with the mandate of heaven! I was floridly out of touch with reality, until my parents got me help from a great psychiatrist.

Mom and Dad said that day by day they watched me slip away, out of the world that they were in. My illness was so hard on them, but so great was

their love that they never gave up on getting me treatment that would bring me back to reality.

I had more than one stay in the hospital, each lasting two to three months. As I remember it, my psychiatrist gave me a 50% chance of recovery. I had electroconvulsive treatments twice. The first time I was hospitalized, I had seven treatments along with medication, and another time four along with medication. I was told the messages in my brain were transmitting too fast and had to be slowed down. The shock treatments took away the madness and brought peace to my mind, so I could leave a lot of my grandiose ideas and paranoid thoughts behind. I have had to stay on medication to stay well, but I am just fine now, thanks to the brilliant intervention of my psychiatrist.

Since then, I’ve become a playwright, artist, and poet. I wrote a long, complicated play called *The Sun God* that is loosely based on my life when I was ill. Writing it was very therapeutic. I also love Chinese art and poetry because they bring peace to my mind. In China, art and poetry are considered the highest culture, and by transcendental coincidence I was meant to be a poet and an artist. For my art, I work in a 19th century style called stippled drawing. A life-size portrait takes two or three months to create with thousands and thousands of tiny India ink dots. This requires so much concentration that it became a refuge from the paranoid thoughts that disturbed me from time to time. I do not wish to describe my thoughts because I don’t want anyone to know where my goat is tied.

### ***Dedicated to: Scientists, Poets and Madmen***

Since the form I underlie  
Is all I can behold,  
Whereabouts in it am I,  
Whom lifeless atoms mold?

Am I just the order,  
That animates the form?  
Me within this border  
Where thoughtless atoms storm!

Had this occurred to you,  
As urgently to me:  
Then perhaps our atoms flew  
On path-o-logically!

I did two portraits of Mother Teresa and wrote her a poem, and I sent them to her. She thanked me and I replied, and I now have 16 short letters from her. She told me many very beautiful things. I also did a large portrait of Pope John II, and I sent it to him and received a nice thank you note back from the Vatican.

My psychiatrist is a friend of Amos Ben-Gurion, and he asked me if I could do a portrait of Amos’ father, David Ben-Gurion, for him. I was very honored to do it. My psychiatrist told me that Amos Ben-Gurion was very impressed with his father’s portrait, which made me very happy.

I have been doing so well for so many years that I only need to see my psychiatrist twice a year now, thanks to my very loving, supportive parents and the insights I have regarding my illness. I know quickly if I am having any delusional thoughts, and I am able to take action.

As a poet I will close with a poem, which you can find in the box on this page.