

Finding Reality: The Journey through Fundamentalist Christianity, Schizophrenia, and Self-Actualization

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I remember vaguely that she was lying on the bed reading a book with many pages. She seemed to be concentrating. I asked her, "Aunty what is this book you are reading"? She replied "the Bible". "What is the Bible"? I asked. It is "God's word" she responded. I must have been 8 or 9 years old at the time. That was my first conscious encounter with religion. All previous encounters had been passive, unconscious, and insignificant.

I took personal interest in this Bible and began to read it. I was deeply fascinated as I found a new transcendent consciousness which I never really experienced before. However, I was soon to abandon this new found interest being a child.

I picked it up again at the age of 12 when my foster parents began to couple their attendance at an orthodox church (Catholic) with a Pentecostal church. A new wave of Pentecostalism was sweeping Nigeria, gaining a critical mass since the late 1970s through the early 1980s. In the year 1989, I became a born again Christian, a brand of Christianity that grew in power and numbers like wild fire in the dry season in Nigeria. Having a simple and sincere disposition I followed the teachings of this religion. When I attained puberty I struggled with sexual desire, feelings of guilt, and self-repression. My impression was that the human was vile and corruptible, as was reinforced by repeated sermons. I pursued morality without a basic awareness of what *is*, but to please God in order to get a reward, which was immediate blessings and ultimately heaven, and to avoid punishments or curses, with the worst being eternal damnation in hell.

As I began to grow older, approaching adolescence, I sought for my own personal experience of the stories I read about in the Bible. Miracles of the age to come, the supernatural, and eschatology became obsessions. I knew that I had no experiential knowledge of these things. I wanted evidence to validate my dogmatic reality--a reality that was capricious and based on only what I had read and heard from humans like myself.

I had to. I had no alternative. It was the only worldview I had and it was becoming unstable and troubled with doubt. But how could I doubt it? How dare I reject my worldview? Instead, I looked for evidence to support and reinforce it more. I read books on near death experiences, miracles, and the supernatural. I had to sustain my faith belief somehow. Sadly,

other areas of my life suffered terribly. My mind was so undeveloped that I lacked self-confidence outside religious matters. In my university days, I joined forces with more born again Christians and continued to try to find reality.

“Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person’s ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming me.” Carl Rogers

Deep inside I was afraid and knew that I was unable to face the world as an adult. I needed God to help me. Was it not written that we are dust, and to dust we must return? That we are nothing? In ourselves we fail woefully? Shrouded beyond reach, the self, became repressed in obscurity. Inevitably, I was paving the way for a mega-crisis, going against the grain of human mental well-being. I began to fast, repeated dry fasts that would last 3 days. And I read books by hard bent born again Christians, but wanting my own experiences of life. Then schizophrenia struck.

“It is now clear to me that most mental illnesses can be regarded as tools of personal growth, magnifying our most deep rooted beliefs and fears similar to how the “common” ego reflects our insecurities. In both cases, we are being shown our self-sabotaging perceptions as an opportunity to re-empower ourselves to transcend them.” Elina St-Onge

From the age of 22 to 33 I had about 4 active episodes of schizophrenia, the final episode lasting for 2 years. I saw hell in the real sense of the word. My sufferings and horrors in their magnitude make me stand in awe of the human mind and its power. In the interims of sanity I became a free thinker, or possibly an atheist, with no faith-belief any more. At first it was extremely scary. How could I live this life by myself if there was no God to help me? I was completely inadequate and my mind was poorly developed.

“Many people assume that the mind develops naturally as we grow older, but it does not; unless specifically educated, it remains an uncoordinated infant, even while the physical body matures.” Leichtman & Japikse

I didn’t know reality, so how could I master circumstance? The question of facing adulthood came to me during my National Youth Service when I was away from home and had to fend for myself. I saw myself *as I really was* and knew I had nothing to offer society after spending 5 years in the university. An experience that I would call in retrospect self-consciousness or self-awareness. Once the socio-religious forces had been broken, the self

which had hitherto been in obscurity could be seen in its shrivelled state. In this awareness I chose to find a way.

“People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day. These decisions require courage.” Rollo May

And yes, I did find my first self-help literature – The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership authored by John C. Maxwell. I learnt my first lessons of the laws of life in that book. As I began to test these principles, I saw results! I was beginning to gain control. I could lead; I could make things happen! The quest for self-improvement and self-determination imbued my soul. I devoured self-help literature voraciously as I began to grow in confidence and self-mastery. I felt indescribable joy in my new reality.

However, my battle with schizophrenia persisted because I didn't stick to my medication, as it hadn't dawned on me yet that I really had a condition. In the interludes of sanity, I was extremely successful in my career, growing fast and achieving things I could never have imagined and then I would break down again. Yet even at this, in those brief interludes of sanity I had successfully been able to map reality, understand the laws of life, and achieve mastery.

So in the last traumatic experience that lasted 2 years, where I lost everything I had managed to build over the years, and ended up in poverty and depression, I started all over from the scratch. With the blue print already available in my consciousness, I simply changed my circumstances in 2 years. With a faulty and fairly used lap top and a monthly salary of a little over \$200, I made it to the world's leading university – the University of Cambridge.

But how did I do it? On being discharged from the *Aro Neuropsychiatric Hospital* in Abeokuta, Nigeria, in 2010, I was taken back home to Sagamu where I was living at the time. Heavily sedated by psychotic drugs, I was deeply depressed and battled with despair. With no one to support me financially it was critical I took up a job for myself to survive. Yet there was little I could do, having lost all zest for living that was characteristic of my life before the illness. The easiest job for me to get in the small town, given my current state, was a teaching position. I went in search of one. I got a job as an entry level biology teacher but was certainly over qualified with a Master's degree and over 9 years' experience as a professional conservation biologist. I never made it past 3 months in the school however, as I was fired without warning or explanations. In truth, I wasn't teaching but just making

recitations before the students. In my depression all light had gone out of me. I couldn't find access to inner strength any more but dreamt of suicide.

Thankfully, a year later, in May 2011 the depression lifted as the dosage of my medication was reduced. As soon as the depression disappeared the real 'I' was reborn! At this time I secured a teaching position in another school. Fully aware of the laws of life as I mastered them in prior years of my sanity, I took *control of my destiny* under the dire conditions of poverty and limitation I was living in.

“Specifically, leading requires ‘ownership’ of the meanings of personal responsibility and accountability. It means fully internalizing the human truth that in your world, nothing happens unless you personally make it happen. You must understand that the consequences of your action and inaction are like your children – you create them, they are extensions of you, you are responsible for them, for you are they, but they live their own lives nevertheless. It is therefore a ‘fact’ of the structure of human nature that you are responsible for your world. Dependency and paternalism are cruel illusions. The real world is made for the autonomous and self-reliant individual”. Peter Koestenbaum

Even though the teaching job was mediocre, compared to my career aspirations and ambitions, I put my heart into it and worked with dignity and a heart of contribution.

“No matter how humble the calling of the individual, how uninteresting and dull the round of his duties, he should do his best. He should dignify what he is doing by the mind he puts into it, he should vitalize what little he has of power or energy or ability or opportunity, in order to prepare himself to be equal to higher privileges when they come. This will never lead man to that weak content that is satisfied with whatever falls to his lot. It will rather fill his mind with that divine discontent that cheerfully accepts the best – merely as a temporary substitute for something better”. William George Jordan

I taught my students until 4pm in the evening and then picked up my virtual volunteer work with an international conservation organization (Society for Conservation Biology) I had been volunteering with for years, where I learnt professional skills, discipline, and found voice. I had strict adherence to this routine: 8am-4pm --- teaching job; 5pm-7pm ---- virtual volunteering.

“To achieve something – to create something; to realize a dream – one must commit oneself to a schedule for working on it; one must not waiver from it. There are always excuses. Life is a bottomless pit of rationalizations and the reasons for not doing something, so one must simply not allow for any. Regularity is critical to discipline and success; he who aspires to

some achievement must get a rhythm and work schedule going in his life and keep banging on the drum. Accomplishments are built upon a steady, incessant accumulation of individual actions". Tom Lombardo

There was an inner transformation and a colossal growth of my inner being, so that I knew in profundity that soon my inner reality would match my outer reality given my circumstances. And so in late 2011, 2 years after my discharge from the hospital I applied for a scholarship to study in Europe but didn't make it. I persisted. I continued with my routine and worked hard. In 2012, I tried again, this time applying to the University of Cambridge and another school as encouraged by one of my mentors - Phoebe Barnard. Then my reality changed in 2013 when I received news of the award of three international scholarships, two of which I declined to accept the most favorable.

I accepted a Miriam Rothschild Scholarship to study Conservation Leadership in the University of Cambridge! Why Conservation Leadership? Nature and environmental protection to me has been a conduit of expressing a spiritual longing to contribute to humanity and the planetary process. A cause larger than myself, working to conserve nature in the environmental crisis stretches my potentiality and gives my life a basis of significance and highest means of self-culture.

Today spirituality has a new meaning to me –

"Spirituality tends to be characterised by its more personal, introspective and existential search for meaning, purpose, truth, identity and interconnectedness that may or may not include a focus on a divine/transcendent/God". Peter Pruzan