

## My Triumph Over Psychosis: A Journey From Schizophrenia and Homelessness to College Graduate

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At age 17, I won a Presidential Scholarship to study biochemistry at my first choice, a distinguished private university in Los Angeles. As an undergraduate, I conducted research, published 3 articles in peer-reviewed journals, and served as first violinist of the community orchestra. Everyone, including myself, thought I would succeed in life. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would develop delusions, start having command hallucinations, lose my scholarship, and become homeless for 4 years, without even telling my parents.

My family was a typical Midwestern middle-class family with a strong work ethic and a commitment to personal integrity. My early years were stress free and happy. In high school, I was competitive and loved to win, but I spent several hours every day practicing instead of socializing with friends. I never went through a period of rebellion. My parents were proud of my accomplishments.

When I entered college, I invested very little time in relationships, but the shallow friendships I did maintain were with other competitive students, who also regularly studied or worked into the early hours of the morning. I blended in, unaware that a shadow had fallen over me.

The tragic events of 9/11 occurred during the fall semester of my junior year. As I watched the news, I began to feel that I would have a personal role to play in international politics.

Two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, during my 2001 winter break, I embarked on my first international trip to China with a small group of American women. The goal of this short trip was to visit remote farming communities in order to better understand our world. The low standard of living I saw was shocking. But through international travel, I found myself on a quest for “something more” in life. The following summer, I spent 2 months volunteering in a slum area of Nairobi, Kenya, Africa.

My return from Africa marked the beginning of my senior year of college, and also the emergence of my thought disorder. When I took my first September genetics exam, I was surprised at its simplicity and expected the

usual perfect score although I did not study much. But I failed the exam.

My mind had become like a broken record, as I thought of nothing but international poverty. I could not leave my feelings behind, and these feelings turned into a cloud inside of my mind. This debilitating obsession with international poverty left me unable to study, and I lacked the necessary focus to work the simplest job. I could no longer move on in my life as I had so easily done before.

As I was failing my college classes, I was convinced I would radically change the world, like Mother Teresa. Over the next few weeks, I came to believe that failing my classes would actually work in a positive way to help me succeed in life (remembering that Albert Einstein failed math classes). Rationalizing my inability to study, I determined that neglecting my classes was in fact the wiser decision.

This was the beginning of my grandiose delusions. Shortly afterwards, I became convinced that I would someday be able to send millions of dollars to Africa, like Bill Gates.

While failing college, I planned another trip to Thailand, which my parents opposed. My parents communicated they would withdraw their financial support if I pursued the Thailand trip (I had recently traveled overseas twice). Because I did not have the insight to ask for counseling, or for psychiatric help, and could not study anymore, I chose Thailand, and decided not to speak with my parents again. My inability to study, failure to recognize my need for help, and refusal to speak with my parents marked the emergence of my psychotic illness.

Following my return from Thailand, I resumed living in the university dormitory. I was failing my classes, again, but my delusional belief that I would soon radically change the world drowned out all reason.

Two months later, in March 2003, I believed that God revealed to me that I should fly to Boston to meet a wealthy man who would know I was coming to Boston through divine revelation. I expected he would enable me to continue traveling around the world, raising money for

the poor. As I turned in the key to my dormitory bedroom and flew across the country, my mind raced with excitement. I spent 15 hours waiting and sleeping in the Boston airport before flying back to Los Angeles.

I returned to a city where I no longer had a home. Thinking of it as my last resort, I began sleeping in the carrels at in the university libraries, trying to blend in with the students. At night, I did independent research online, studying conspiracy theories, such a theory that Princess Diana's death was actually a disguised murder. I carefully studied the international role of Yasser Arafat and other international politicians, believing this knowledge would prepare me for my future.

Because I spent all of my remaining money flying to Boston, I had nothing left to purchase food. By rummaging through the campus garbage cans and eating whatever discarded food items I found, I managed to survive. It was the only thing I could do to deal with my hunger.

My family did everything in their power to get in touch with me, contacting my friends and professors, and even visiting Los Angeles to search for me. At one point, in November 2003, I saw my dad from a distance, and when I recognized him, I ran the other way, afraid he would somehow prevent me from becoming a prophet. But apart from this single brief encounter, I would have no communication with my parents for a period of 4.5 years.

From March 2003 until January 2006, I maintained a deceptive life living in libraries and abandoned buildings, claiming to still be a student.

Then, the voices began.

On January 28, 2006, I was sitting on a park bench alone when I heard a choir of children's voices in my mind. The voices called me a "homeless hoodlum" repeatedly and insulted me, which was like a painful stimulus. But they also alluded to my bright future as one of the most powerful individuals on earth, as they confirmed my delusions were true. This was thrilling to me.

A few days later, while showering, I heard 3 obnoxious men making fun of me. Because of the nature of their comments, I knew the men could see me in the bathroom. But when I looked, there was no window or sunroof. The men were not there.

I saw one of my Chinese friends standing at an intersection, waving to me regularly like a machine at Disneyworld (she had returned to China months earlier). I heard a woman with high heels walking back and forth again and again, for minutes, who was not there. I looked into a mirror and saw my face, but with the features of the character Lisa from the TV show "The Simpsons." When I opened books, I saw strange patterns of lines underlining words once, twice, or 3 times. The name on a local library was altered by one letter. By summer 2006, I could no longer check the date on a newspaper without hallucinating.

The voices began to scream at me whenever I asked for favors, especially when asking friends for a place to

shower or sleep. Sleeping on a concrete slab in the backyard of a local church every night became my last resort. (The churchyard happened to be located across the street from a dormitory where I lived as a student in good standing.) For 6 months, as I slept under the sky, the voices intensified. Occasionally, I was completely soaked in the rain. Through it all, the option of contacting my family or old friends never entered my mind.

Though I never used drugs or drank alcohol at any time in my life, I still became entirely isolated, alone in my little delusional world. I never held up a sign or begged, and I never interacted with other homeless people. While homeless, I never accepted help, preferring to sleep outside and find food in garbage cans.

In October 2006, the command hallucinations began. At first, they told me simple things, like walking to the right or left, or hitting myself. Eventually, they commanded me to do more complicated things, like walking for miles in areas where there were rarely any pedestrians.

On October 16, 2006, the voices would not stop screaming at me until I went to the university campus (where I had been a student) and lay down to rest in a fancy lounge. When university staff saw me, a dirty homeless woman, lying down in a fancy graduate student lounge, they did not care if I had once been a good student at the university. They called the police, and I was taken to jail.

Unfortunately, being arrested did not lead to treatment of my psychosis. I was released from jail after a few days, and then I resumed sleeping outside, eating garbage, and spending my days in local parks, staring into space for hours with auditory and visual hallucinations.

Then, one night, I was loudly screaming back at the voices who were taunting me all the time. The neighbors called the police on the morning of March 3, 2007. They picked me up, and when they recognized that I was mentally ill, they took me to a psychiatric facility for evaluation. After 4 years of homelessness and hallucinations, I finally was going to receive psychiatric treatment.

When I was admitted, hospital staff members asked me if I wanted to speak with my mom. I thought about all the times my parents had tried to reach me and I had refused, and how much money they spent on my unfinished college education, so I agreed. When my mom connected with me over the phone, she told me I was her best friend. Not that I had been before, or could be again, but that I was. She said she missed me. After our conversation, my parents flew to Los Angeles from Ohio, arriving within 24 hours.

Because of my parents' urging, I consented to take medication and was prescribed risperidone, which eliminated my command hallucinations and the visual hallucinations, but it did not help with the usual voices, which actually became louder. Regardless, because the command hallucinations disappeared, my behavior noticeably improved, and the psychiatrists deemed me stable and ready for discharge.

After 2 weeks, the side effects of risperidone became intolerable. I slept at least 16 hours a night. I had a voracious appetite, akathisia (sitting for 5 minutes was like sitting for 3 hours used to be) and severe anhedonia. About 10 days after discharge, I discontinued the risperidone, believing I did not need it. Within 2 weeks, I became psychotic and agitated again, and was rehospitalized. During the second hospitalization, my psychiatrist explained that psychotropic medications become less effective following another relapse. Because of him, I have never missed a day of my medication (that was 9 years ago).

I spent the next 12 months trying many different medications with minimal success in suppressing the voices. Then I was started on clozapine. Within a few days, I experienced an improvement unlike any other antipsychotic medication I had received. During the following few weeks, the voices practically disappeared. I began seeing friends again, playing the violin, and reading normally (before clozapine, I could read but not “study”). After 18 months on clozapine, and with the encouragement of my psychiatrist and support of my parents, I enrolled at the University of Cincinnati with hopes of completing my molecular biology degree. I took 1 or 2 courses at a time and, to my delight, got A’s in almost all of them. Two years later, I graduated from college with high honors and was one of the Marshals at the Commencement procession.

Ironically, when I was first admitted to the psychiatric hospital in Los Angeles, my parents were told to “lower their expectations.” Doctors said that as a person with schizophrenia, I will always be disabled and will need to live in a group home the rest of my life. But today, I have a full and normal life. I volunteer, tutor, and perform regularly on violin for events. I published my memoir “Mind Estranged” in June 2014, and my mother, a retired nurse, wrote her own book “Flight from Reason” about her and my father’s ordeal: the family burden of having a psychotic daughter. Today, I work as a motivational speaker, hoping to inspire patients and families and to serve as the voice of struggling, stigmatized patients, and of homeless individuals who struggle with severe mental illness. I am also proof that recovery from severe and chronic psychosis is indeed possible.

Every year in America, 2 million mentally ill men and women are incarcerated. Many are jailed for erratic public behavior stemming from their mental illness, like I was. Many badly need treatment and medication, like me, in order to rebuild their lives. Serving jail time and being criminalized add to the stigma of mental illness and delay recovery. I hope others who develop psychosis like I did will receive prompt medical treatment, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation so they can have a chance to return to their baseline and lead normal lives.

To read Bethany’s memoir and more articles, please visit [BethanyYeiser.com](http://BethanyYeiser.com).