How a West African shaman helped my schizophrenic son in a way Western medicine couldn’t

Schizophrenics, some believe, are simply a “modern manifestation of prehistoric tribal shamans.”

By Dick Russell  March 24
Dick Russell is the author of 12 books, the latest being his memoir, "My Mysterious Son: A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia and Shamanism."

After a wonderful summer of fishing and learning to surf, my son, then a 17-year-old junior at a Boston high school, suddenly told me one afternoon, “I don’t know what’s happening; I can’t find my old self again.” Soon after, Franklin had to be hospitalized. The evaluation described an “increase in psychotic symptoms, including paranoid thoughts, command hallucinations telling him to hurt himself.” These things were “associated with the onset of schizophrenia.”

That was the autumn of 1996. For many years afterward, my son was on and off medication and in and out of hospitals. The drugs reduced his hallucinations and illogical or paranoid thoughts, but their side effects caused him to gain almost 100 pounds and be diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes. Only as Frank entered his early 30s did our shared desperation take us beyond medical treatment, onto a path we could never have
A profound ignorance still exists as to the molecular mechanisms behind schizophrenia. Despite theories ranging from genetic inheritance to environmental exposure, scientists cannot specify why 2.2 million Americans suffer from the mental illness. Some have suggested that there is more to this puzzle than Western medicine realizes. In 2012, Canadian evolutionary psychiatrist Joseph Polimeni published a book called “Shamans Among Us,” postulating that schizophrenics are a “modern manifestation of prehistoric tribal shamans.” The South African healer Colin Campbell has been quoted as saying: “People hearing voices for instance or feeling certain things are in touch with other realities, especially the whole mythic realm, that Western society does not have a time or place for.”

This spoke to me because, amid what appeared to be delusional ramblings, Frank had an uncanny ability to tune in to what I was thinking. On the advice of a psychologist friend, I’d stopped trying to correct his often bizarre ideas. This had led us to a much less antagonistic and more trusting relationship. Still, I had little hope that Frank would ever lead anything close to a “normal” life.

Then, early in 2012, I took a chance. Our family pediatrician — who had grown up in East Africa in the 1940s — invited Frank and me to come along on his annual return trip to witness the wildlife migration across the Serengeti Plain. Frank is biracial, and this seemed a unique opportunity for him to see the continent his mother’s ancestors came from — and for us to forge a stronger father-son bond.
Our trip was not without its difficulties. One night, Frank temporarily disappeared at a campground deep in the bush. But ultimately the journey proved a breakthrough not only between us, but also for my son’s self-confidence, which had been slowly but surely shattered over the years of struggling with illness.

Part of the trip’s impact was surely that we were spending days and nights amidst the wonder of the East African wildlife and landscape. It also helped that our guide, a Maasai the same age as Frank, related to him without any sense of his being “different.”

Nine months after our return to the U.S., I sought out Malidoma Somé, a renowned West African shaman. In the culture of his Dagara people, schizophrenics are not viewed pathologically, but often as mediums bringing messages to the community from the spirit world. As an Anglo-American male in my mid-60s, I never expected to be conducting spiritual water rituals at the ocean and invoking the assistance of my ancestors on my son’s behalf. But that’s just what I did before taking Frank to see Malidoma in Jamaica, for a divination about his future using cowrie shells, beads, stones and other objects. Frank also made drawings for the shaman during their hour together, which Malidoma described as like “being with a colleague.”

Since our trip to Jamaica, Frank has continued to speak with the shaman over the phone and create symbolic paintings. At Malidoma’s impetus, Frank and I traveled to the Native
American sacred lands of New Mexico. Over the past few years, Frank’s mother and I have kept seeking connection with our ancestors through meditative rituals, which has made a difference in our own lives as well.

These experiences, rather than taking Frank further “out there,” have had a grounding effect. He is not cured — he still takes medication and resides in a group home — but the weight gain and diabetes have disappeared. Only a short time ago, he rarely emerged from his room; today, Frank’s life is filled with activity and enthusiasm. Now 36, he has gone back to a technical school to resume a course in mechanical engineering; has taken classes in gymnastics, boxing, and skating as well as ongoing music and art therapy; has traveled to Maine for two weeks on his own to learn to build wooden boats; and has been working out regularly at a gym. He still writes pages of glyph-like characters with no readily apparent meaning, at least to those of us in this realm. He still speaks of a vast imaginative terrain that he’s covered and continues to traverse. And he is still possessed of a remarkable ability to tune in to the thought patterns of other people, including me.

In a time when more stereotypes and stigma are attached to mental illness than ever — and when the pharmaceutical industry dominates the attitude of Western medicine — more attention should be paid to several studies by the World Health Organization comparing schizophrenia outcomes in the U.S. and Europe with poorer nations like
Nigeria and India, where only 16 percent of patients regularly take antipsychotic medications. In one study, nearly two-thirds of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in developing countries had good outcomes after two years, compared to only 37 percent in wealthier nations where drugs are the standard of care.

It may be too late for Frank ever to leave medication behind him. But I am deeply grateful for the progress that discovering alternatives has brought. I’m happy, too, that Frank knows not only that I’m proud of him, but also that I hold deep respect for all that he’s been through and who he is.

In his journal, Frank writes: “What is behind a situation is a mystery. We are left searching for reasons that things are the way they are. ... Clarity and cloudy times come and leave. Points are made and life proceeds.”

More from PostEverything:

I take care of schizophrenics and sex predators. I’m completely unqualified.

Stop blaming mental health for gun violence. The problem is guns.

Mental illness turned my ex-husband into someone I didn’t recognize. Still, his death left me reeling.