

My Madness

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On all sides, madness fascinates man. The fantastic images it generates are not fleeting appearances that quickly disappear from the surface of things. By a strange paradox, what is born from the strangest delirium was already hidden, like a secret, like an inaccessible truth, in the bowels of the earth.

—Michel Foucault

I sat in the bed facing the two smiling demons—leaders of the great Satan/Wal-Mart Organization that ran the hospital. They were trying to convince me that I should let them adopt a clone of my five-year-old daughter Emily. She had been created by new genetic techniques developed by their powerful company and they insisted, “Her place will be great in the new world order.” Over the last few days, however, they had lied to me so often I knew it was a sham. Despair seemed to overwhelm me at the thought of the strange global changes that had recently taken place under this evil organization’s machinations. But I was resolute. I would never let them have the copy of my daughter.

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For a week, I went crazy—completely and utterly insane. I still wrestle with which word to use to describe my condition: Crazy? Insane? Mad? They all seem too general and indistinct. However, schizophrenia, dementia, and psychotic disorder, while more specific, all seem too clinical and lack existential force. Because I hope to give you the view from inside my mind, I have decided to go with the first group. They describe better what I felt happened. I went crazy. I was insane. Madness.

A few minutes ago, I was looking at MRI brain scans taken during

my illness. As I scrolled rapidly through thin sections of my brain, a shiver ran down my spine as I realized I was looking at the small organ that in some ways defined who I was. Everything that I think of as defining “me”—my memories, what I’ve learned, my personality—is sequestered in the physical brain captured in these images. Somewhere in that fleshy blob was a memory of walking under the stars with my father along orchard canals when I was twelve years old; over there might be my goal to run a marathon; to the left might be my knowledge of functional analysis from a graduate math class; the processes that defined my love for my wife and children were written somewhere within the mass represented on the screen. Even though we believe in a spirit, its dependence on our brain for making our way in this physical reality, is absolute. Just think of the destruction of identity that comes with Alzheimer’s.

Prior to my experience, I imagined that going insane merely involved seeing and hearing things that were not there, so I was surprised to find that not only my sensual experience had been rearranged and recreated, but also that my entire belief structure about the world was rewritten. In addition to seeing people who were not really there, they were also placed in a coherent system of thought and belief that, while similar to my normal tool kit for dealing with the world, was decidedly different. Not only did I see and hear things that did not jibe with the rest of the world I had known, but the way the world worked changed. I was handed a completely new calculus for looking at the world that rejustified, reinterpreted, and made new sense of the things my mind presented to me. I became paranoid. I believed in magic. I embraced a new set of natural laws for the universe. And most strangely, God disappeared. These laws and rules were strikingly different from the usual text with which I had previously structured the world, but to me they were just as coherent as the laws of physics with which I am normally so comfortable.

Colin McGinn in *Mindscales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004) points out that this is the kind of rewriting of our belief systems that occurs when we are dreaming. In a dream, we don’t question our ability to fly; we just do it (albeit perhaps with a bit of surprise). However, unlike when I am in a dream state, in this madness I did not believe everything presented to my mind completely uncritically. Moreover, some things occurred that required complex thought, analysis, interpretation, decisions, contemplation—aspects of rational thought that are very unlike our consciousness in dreams. My madness seemed a weird mixture of hal-

lucination and interacting with the real world. But it was a consistent world that seemed oddly coherent from the first-person perspective. At those times when something occurred that did not conform to my understanding of the way the world worked, my mind created explanations to cover the anomalies. Unlike a dream, in which the laws of the universe, our relation to past beliefs, desires, and our understanding of the world can simply be set aside, my mind was constantly providing explanations and reinterpretations of my experience to ensure that it coherently fit together in some way. Because of the strange sensual inputs, there were bizarre twists of logic and interpretation; but unlike in dreaming, my brain was trying to put things back together in a sensible fashion. A consistent reality seemed an important value to my brain.

While interpreting the experience has been a challenge, the cause of my insanity was not in question. It was caused by *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, a malicious bacterial species that causes melioidosis, usually a respiratory disease not uncommon in Southeast Asia. During a recent visit to Vietnam, I picked up the infection. The physicians in Utah, largely unfamiliar with melioidosis in general, were especially unprepared to deal with the rarer form of the disease manifesting as a brain infection.

It started with headaches so severe I thought my skull must be ripping apart. Doctors diagnosed it as viral meningitis, started me on antivirals, and sent me home with instructions to take ibuprofen for the pain. Nevertheless, the pain went on and on, with the doctors, over repeated visits, insisting that viral meningitis takes time and I needed to be patient. The pain was unbearable, and despite priesthood blessings, prayer, and the constant care of my wife, Lori, nothing seemed to relieve it.

On April 7, 2002, almost a month after my first diagnosis, something strange started happening. In addition to the pain, I began to have strange visual perceptions. Any time I closed my eyes or was in the dark, I would see rolling waves of vivid colors, swirling surfaces of reds and greens, weaving spectral nets waving like a flag in the wind, which suddenly became a slow tornado of multicolored patterns flowing wildly through my visual field.

That night, as I lay down to sleep, my headache seemed better than it had been for a long time. Rather than intense pain, things had mellowed to a dull background ache. I noticed that the bed was covered with a beautiful pattern of soft light green that glowed brightly through the dark room.

Unexpectedly, people began to arrive. Strangers. I did not know who they were or why they were there. Several young women and an older man walked around my bedroom, browsing through our odds and ends as they would at a small shop. Although they did not appear dangerous, I was slightly afraid of them and wondered what they were doing in our home. My reaction seems odd. Normally, I would have actively tried to confront intruders, but now I just watched them from my bed, timid and afraid. They looked real—not in the least dream-like. Moreover, although solid, they had the ability to pass through things like outlandish ghosts. They did not appear to be interested in me, however, and seemed to wander aimlessly, chatting casually with each other. Occasionally, through a subtle motion of a hand or head, the wanderers caused a star-burst of white dust to rain down upon me and cover the already glowing bedspread. I could not understand how they did any of this, but it was unsettling.

When the visitors got to the far end of the room, I jumped up and turned on the bedroom light. The people scattered. They did not simply disappear like the dark shadows created by ordinary objects, but I could see them physically flee as they zoomed away like roaches scampering to hide from the sudden light. Lori told me to turn off the lights. She was exhausted from caring for me and just wanted to get some sleep. I tried to explain but she said I was dreaming and to come back to bed.

I turned out the lights; but in only a few minutes, the people returned. They again seemed to wander about the room like nonchalant tourists in a museum. Sometimes, one would look at me and the others would warn him or her not to do that, as if it were a breach of etiquette. It never occurred to me that they were not physically there or not real. My natural skepticism had been suspended. I accepted all this activity as patently real.

The people vanished for a moment so I jumped out of bed to gaze out of our second-story bedroom window into our backyard below, trying to get some sense of what was going on. My grassy backyard had been plowed, leaving a system of crooked brown furrows where my lawn had once stood. Through my yard, people were migrating; I could see small groups of people marching slowly in the same direction as if gathering for a special event. A few seemed to be wearing military uniforms and might have been driving the people somewhere. I was not sure, but it scared me.

The visitors came back so this time I tried talking to them, asking them to please leave my family and me alone. That changed everything.

Rather than being casually strolling sightseers, unconcerned with my presence, they immediately focused their attention on me. *Please go. I just want to get some sleep*, I explained. A few left, but a group of about five girls told me they would go only if they could touch my genitals. I said no. They became insistent and started reaching for me. They angrily accused me of breaking a promise I had implicitly made or somehow otherwise implied by my acknowledging their presence. I had broken some code of acceptable behavior. By talking to them, I was now bound in a contract that allowed them to touch me in any way they wanted. All five of them started trying to reach for me from different angles.

I reached out to block one of the girls and pushed her back. She instantly withered up and died. The other girls looked on in shock. "You killed her!" one said. They backed away angrily. "I didn't mean to!" I said, trying to explain. "I just meant to push her away." They seemed annoyed, rather than being horrified as normal people would react at seeing a murder. Death, I inferred, was a common theme in the lives of these visitors. They backed up and left, but I felt they were not far away, watching me. I felt guilty. I did not mean to kill the girl. Was I guilty of murder?

Stealthily, one of the girls shot through the mattress, through me, and delightedly told all those around I had screwed her. I was horrified. She woke up my wife and told her we had "made it" together. I tried to restrain the girl, but she got away.

It turns out I was actually choking Lori. She was now scared and begged me to go to sleep. I had been out of bed several times during the night, and she had walked me back to bed, becoming increasingly frightened. I was clearly delusional, but now I was becoming dangerous.

I will not try to describe the full events of that first night of madness; the horror, the despair, and the frustration were real and unrelenting. These events were interspersed with a number of weird interactions with the people of that world. As dawn began to break, a person informed me that I had joined their cause and I was now part of a powerful Satan and Wal-Mart conglomerate, the SWO. Somehow, I had automatically joined when the girl performed the bizarre sexual act of flying through me. The person told me that great benefits were mine but that I was bound for life. My wife had even joined a mutilation fad and had cut her eyeball in half horizontally. She was placidly spinning the lower half.

Seeing I was clearly out of my mind, Lori put on an old movie and I settled into watching it while she tried to contact our doctors. The people

still wandering around now took the form of workers provided by SWO to take care of domestic needs. One of them came and sat next to me to watch the movie. I was a little annoyed because he was supposed to be working and he was just sitting there watching TV. He wore a kind of chief's outfit that included buttons and a cap, and had mannerisms, including things like yawns or occasionally readjusting the blanket in which he had wrapped himself. He would occasionally even direct a smile my way. I had to tell my mother to be careful because she almost sat on him.

In addition to appearing real, these apparitions were amazingly consistent. If I went into the kitchen to get a drink, the people on the couch were still there when I got back. When I looked out into my backyard, the ground was plowed and the fences that ringed our suburban backyard were all down as I had seen from the window last night.

My wife realized that I was in deep trouble so she drove me to the hospital. I was in a state of amazement: The hospital was brimming with large, colorful insects! I am a biologist and this did not cause me the fear I suppose most people would feel. Mostly I was delighted! I thought the idea of filling the hospital with insects was an inspired approach to cleanliness because they could eat harmful bacteria. I also thought the insects might be used to help keep up a healthy pool of bacteria that were susceptible to antibiotics and keeping down the level of antibiotic resistance in the hospital. I also surmised that the insects had been genetically engineered by the SWO for this purpose.

Finally, an intern decided I was quite in need of admittance, noting in my record: "At the time of admission, the patient was oriented to person and to place only. Furthermore, the Patient was having vivid hallucinations at the time of admission."

After a long wait, they finally wheeled me into my room. I was so tired. My head was again aching in debilitating pain, and I had not slept in forty-eight hours. Last night's adventures were still fresh in my mind when I retired to my bed. I felt safe in the hospital. Oddly, though, I discovered that, not only was my room full of insects and other various creatures, but my bed was, too. I had my first sense of consternation. Filling the room with insects was one thing, but my bed, too? That was going a little too far. I told one of the nurses that I appreciated what they were trying to do with the insects but that having them in my bed was going too far. She told me that if I turned on the light they would go away. I tried that and it appeared to work, so I got back into bed.



The evil leaders of the Satan/Wal-Mart Organization.

Like the previous night at home, my first night in the hospital was terrible. People were walking in and out of my room, some reminding me I had murdered that girl at home. At one point during the night, the room began to fill with water; at another time, monkeys invaded the room begging for asylum from the SWO. It was another long, busy night with little sleep and grossly disturbing dreams when I did sleep. Despite my wild hallucinations, I could still distinguish between sleep dreaming and my waking states.

The next day, my wife brought me two hand-drawn pictures my five-year old daughter Emily had made to cheer me up. She hung the pictures on a bulletin board facing my bed. In the middle of the night, it slowly began to dawn on me that the two beings depicted by my daughter were the heads of the SWO, not drawings of the leaders of the SWO, mind you, but the actual rulers of the SWO themselves. I started talking to them and they answered back. In so doing, I began a conversation with my daughter's drawings that was to last the rest of the week.

As dawn broke on the second day, I imagined I saw my wife approaching through a window that lined a hallway, but I knew that this approaching woman was not really Lori. I rushed out to the nurse's station and told her to call my wife because a copy of my wife was coming and it was not really her. "Please get on the phone and talk to her so that when this imposter arrives you will believe me." The copy of my wife arrived and

I pretended to play along; but thinking better of it, I told her that I knew she was a copy. (I could tell Lori from this fake because the copy of my wife used the F-word repeatedly, something Lori, a good LDS woman, would never do.) My imposter wife seemed very angry and gave me an evil look, mixed with hurt. It occurred to me that this copy of my wife actually loved me; she could not help her evil nature; it was just part of her cloning. Just then, Lori came around the corner. The imposter ran away; I could see her scampering all the way down the hall.

Lori had come to be with me for an MRI. Throughout the hospital were groups of people scampering in and out of hiding. I saw a couple of my children among them and noticed with surprise that they were all in army fatigues. When I asked my wife what our kids were doing here, she insisted they were still at home. I then realized that copies had been made of all my children. Evil copies. Just like the copy of my wife I had just met, these copies had all the memories and feelings of my kids at home but had somehow been made evil. Sadly, they did not even know they were copies. They thought they were my real kids. The crimes of the SWO began to grow and grow. When would this end? Who could control an organization that could wield such powers over life and death? I despaired.

I was loaded into the MRI machine and told to “hang on for the ride” by the technician—and what a ride it was! I thought the large machine was bolted to the floor, but when I climbed inside, much to my delight, I found it was mounted on a set of wheels. We started bouncing down a dirt road in the MRI toward the nearby Provo River, which flowed about a mile from the hospital. We rolled along at a good clip, and through a small periscope that allowed me to peer outside, I could see a whole wagon train of MRI machines. Suddenly, again to my amazement, we started flying. We flew upstream to where the Provo River rushes from the outlet of Deer Creek Reservoir Dam; then, entering the river, we floated down the river in peace and delight. I could see other MRI machines bouncing along with us as we rode the rapids or smoothly bobbed along in the calm places. It really was a great ride. What a hospital!

All these adventures were intermixed with conversations with doctors, my wife, friends, nurses, and others. I remember their presence and interaction with my world. My conversations from their perspective were bizarre at best. For example, at another point I was brought in for an additional MRI. About midway through, they let me out for a short break before they put me in for the second half of the procedure. The technician

was explaining the second part of the procedure and suddenly said, "You deserve to die for killing that girl. I am going to make sure it happens. Get back in the machine." I was frozen in fear. His conversation alternated between a mundane explanation about why we needed to complete the second half of the MRI and swearing at me, telling me that he was going to kill me. The vehemence of his denouncements of my crimes was startling. He told me he would personally make sure I did not come out of the machine alive. Naturally, I refused to get back in the machine. While he was talking to some others about my refusal, I bolted back to my room. I knew they would be looking for me, so I returned very cautiously, peeking around corners, hiding whenever a crowd approached me.

I have snatches of memory about many strange sights and events, but these were not just perceptual hallucinations. In my madness, I not only saw and heard things arising only from my imaginative facilities, but I *believed* things about the world that were informed by cognitive delusions. I believed that the hospital was run by the SWO and that my children had all been copied in a strange new kind of cloning. These were not just new images but new cognitive beliefs about the world.

It was these beliefs that made the experience of my madness so hellish. I agonized over the question about what I was to do with the evil version of my kids. Was I still responsible for them? Was I their father? What was the ethical thing to do? I often ran into my kids in the hospital. They were always dressed in fatigues, always engaged in some sort of military training exercise. Once I saw them in the courtyard of the hospital practicing kung-fu moves that included fantastic leaps off buildings and gargantuan jumps onto the roof of the hospital.

Later that night—several hours after this experience with my soaring children—I watched the evening news with my wife. My mind conjured a news story (with both audio and visual hallucinations) on the new military training at the hospital that showed the same things that I had seen in the courtyard earlier. Most surprising is that the file footage shown on TV was filmed from the perspective of the ground rather than from the seventh floor where I had watched it originally, showing the news footage from a different angle than I had seen it earlier that day.

This is something that continues to amaze me about this experience: the consistency of the world in which I lived. Things that happened, no matter how strange or bizarre, continued to be a part of the reality and were often referred to later, like the girl I "killed" in my bed at home. The

narrative in which I found myself was internally consistent and self-referential, interacting smoothly with the reality I was handed (albeit a distorted one). Moreover, there was a narrative structure to my madness. There seemed to be a plotline exerting itself as I interacted with the people and demons of my imagination.

My five-year-old Emily was perhaps my greatest worry. I saw her often around the hospital. She was never involved in the war games my older children were engaged in whenever I saw them around the hospital. On one occasion, I saw Emily with one of the evil leaders. I thought they were going to try to keep her because I was not caring for her. What could I do? My wife did not believe she even existed. I was so sick I was incapacitated most of the time, and these horrible creatures were taking away my daughter—or at least a copy of her. She was so young and innocent that I did not believe she had been corrupted like the older children. I could not let her go with these powerful and evil entities.

I tried praying while I was in this state, and I don't really know how to put it except that God was gone for me. I wanted to pray, but there was a hopelessness about it that seemed very real and impenetrable. Satan/Wal-Mart ruled here completely. This was especially strange because prayer has always been a part of my life. How could that be taken away? In contrast, as these events unfolded, Lori had distinct impressions of help from beyond the veil and felt the direct influence of many people praying for me. To me, however, this aspect of my life vanished.

After I spent about five days in the hospital, a new doctor finally joined us. He believed that my illness had a bacterial origin and began IV antibiotics targeting this bacteria rather than the former diagnosis of viral meningitis, which had been based on the lack of bacterial activity in my spinal fluid.

My delusions and continued wrestling with this demonic world continued for two days after I started antibiotic treatments. On the morning of the third day, every time I ran into one of my alternate children, I asked them to meet me at 8:00 that night. I told Lori that I had set up the meeting and that our cloned children would come to the hospital room at 8:00 that night. She insisted that the kids were home; but I knew that, even though my copied children had been made evil, they still loved us and would be there at my request. My wife bet me that the children would not show up at 8:00. I was sure they would. It occurred to me that, if they did not come, then Lori might be right and these children were not real. I

believe that this possibility was the first intimation that I was returning to reality.

At 8:00, I fully expected my kids to knock on the door. In fact, I was sure I heard them talking outside the door a couple of times. However, they did not come. At 8:15, I was a little concerned. At 8:30, I still thought, "They might just be held up," but a new hope was bubbling up. What if Lori is right? Maybe I did not have to worry about my evil kids bunking with my real kids and trying to raise them all together. Maybe there were not two Emilys, and I did not have to give one up! Maybe I had not killed someone! At 8:45, I felt happier than I had in days—like a dream in which you lose all that is most precious to you, but you awake and find it all restored. I remember looking at the clock and thinking over and over, *Lori is right! Lori is right! There are not two sets of kids.* All the ethical problems that surrounded me were gone. I felt like rejoicing.

From that time on, I no longer saw strange people, doors, animals, insects, landscapes, malevolent copies of all those I loved, or events that no one else could see. Even so, I am struck by the memory of how real they were. The memories laid down from this time do not seem like the memories of a dream. They are as real and as vivid as any memory I have. I can recognize them only by the incongruity with the rest of reality, as I know it. Their richness of color and detail are as clear as those of any other memory I have.

I have been asked how my madness compares with dreaming. There were several similarities. Like a dream, there seemed to be a narrative structure to my madness. There was an ongoing story that I seemed to be imbedded in: I had killed a girl, obligating me to membership in the SWO; my family had been cloned and were being trained by this organization for their diabolical purposes and had been purposely made evil; the leaders of the SWO wanted to adopt the clone of my little girl and were constantly pestering me to allow them to have her; and everywhere I went, people in the hospital were playing a game with complex rules that I could not understand. The narrative structure seems to have informed everything I thought and did at this time and provided a matrix for the images with which I was confronted. Like a dream, I would also suddenly "know" very complex things without the imposition of intervening facts and information.

However, in some respects, the madness was decidedly not dream-like. There seemed to be more details in my visual hallucinations than in

dream images. The memories of my interactions seem more real than memories of dreams and are imbedded in a perceptual context that was conditioned on real perceptions. For example, I can remember my colleagues visiting me with my cloned son standing next to them crying. In my memory, there is no difference between the qualitative aspects of my son's presence and those of my colleagues'. Both seemed as real as any percept I would see when my brain is behaving normally.

My madness seemed also more consistent than dreams. For example, I had the hallucination of my cloned children practicing kung-fu moves seven stories below me, and then six hours later watching file footage on TV of their practice seen from the ground.

During this time of madness, I also reasoned much more deeply than I normally do in dreams. My obsession with the ethical dilemma of whether I had a responsibility to raise the cloned children because they believed they were my real children weighed heavily upon me. I deliberated, argued, and reasoned about this question in ways that I never do in dreams.

Unlike in dreams, I also tried to explain why certain features of the world were the way they were. Why was I the only one that could see certain things? Why could my wife not see our cloned children? The "answer" was that I had a genetic defect that allowed me to see what others could not. (I also reasoned that the SWO had glasses that would allow others to see these invisible people, but the SWO passed them out only to their confederates.) Why was the hospital filled with insects? To control bacterial infections. These explanations seemed to make consistent things that otherwise would not fit neatly together.

It fascinates me to consider those things that remained of my normal consciousness during the illness and those things that were lost. I retained a sense of ethics, love, emotional attachments, my scientific understanding of genetics, antibiotic resistance, and other scientific facts. Some of the powers of reason remained. But I was paranoid; I assigned causes to things that did not exist; I believed that conditions held that did not, which I appeared to pull from thin air, like the existence of the SWO.

However, one thing that amazes me more than anything else is how powerfully the brain was able to construct a consistent world—a world filled with images, people, and beliefs that had no bearing on reality. It was able to integrate this constructed world with elements of the real world and produce a coherent presentation to the conscious self. Having

seen the creative elements of the brain display such an impressive array of abilities, I cannot help wondering how much of our current reality is likewise a construct. How pliable are our minds? These nagging questions have taken away a bit of security about why I believe the things I do. If not only the percepts presented to my mind can be manufactured by the imaginative faculties of the brain but also my beliefs and desires can be rewritten, how can I ever be sure that what I believe about the world reflects an objective reality? That is an old, and almost hackneyed question, but one that takes on new meaning now that I have seen the brain in action at its creative best.

I have avoided some questions and even now find difficulty in writing them—mostly, because I have not come to any answers that satisfy me. How did I find myself in a place without God? What does this experience imply about the connection between the spirit and the body? How could the very things I believed be changed? I don't know what to say. I was teaching a priesthood class a few weeks ago, and one of the brothers commented that God never abandons us. I could not let it pass because I *had* been abandoned. So completely, so utterly, that looking back no other words fit. There were no footprints in the sand. I was not being carried. God disappeared for me and only demons remained. This has left me shaken because, as the questioner in my quorum meeting suggested, this was not supposed to be an experience I *could* have. I still do not know how to fit it in.

A few days after I came back from my madness, I ordained my son a priest. Standing there in my hospital robe, supported by my good bishop, brothers, and friends, I felt that same spiritual connection I have always known. I felt the presence of God and the flow of the priesthood. But seeing how completely, how frighteningly, my brain can construct and deconstruct realities, there are questions that I still don't know what to do with.

Epilogue: Ironically, I had formed an interest in consciousness philosophy about a year before the events discussed in this paper happened. Among my published articles on this topic is “The Current Philosophy of Consciousness Landscape: Where Does LDS Thought Fit?” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 36–64. This article was already written in rough when this happened. However, I think I learned more by going mad than I ever did reading the literature on consciousness!