



FEAR AND OMNIPOTENCE

A Personal Story

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Periods of severe mental illness are not straightforward in their definition of a beginning or an end. They creep up day by day, week by week, month by month. My last episode went beyond the confines of hospital treatment and involved the local police force, magistrates' court and the prison service. It may help to show what can happen when all these agencies come together to try to deal with the mentally ill.

The obvious question is how to recognise mental illness when it presents itself and what to do when, as in my case, the symptoms are interwoven with extreme frustration and justifiable rage and anger.

The context

I had been attending the out-patients clinic of my local psychiatric hospital. I was extremely dissatisfied with my state of mind and had been arguing to come off my medication. I was unhappy about my treatment and I was trying to complain about my previous treatments. There was no acceptance or recognition of these problems by anybody I contacted at the hospital. I stopped taking my medication.

The situation at my home was aggravated by two neighbours whose behaviour was becoming increasingly disturbing. I live alone and this combination of frustrations at the hospital and frightening neighbours was leading me gradually to a complete breakdown. I was arrested at eight o'clock in the morning by a large contingent of policemen. Most of them were wearing protective clothing and carrying shields. I thought that their banging on my door was one of my neighbours who had, in the past, threatened to kill me. I was

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thought they had come to rescue me. I felt relieved to be taken away.

This feeling of relief stayed with me through most of the following weeks. It was also mixed with real fear. By the time I was taken to the local police station I did not know what to think although I felt strangely safe and did not ask for a lawyer. I was charged and transported to another cell for the first of my visits to court. I was beginning to lose some of my sense of safety as I realised I was going into the unknown. My freedom was gradually being taken away from me as I sat for hours in the cell. By this time strong feelings of omnipotence were taking hold of me. The more I was conscious of a loss of freedom, the more powerful these feelings became so that by the time I appeared in court I was elated. I was unmanageable and taken back to the cells and, eventually, transported to prison.



Into the unknown

On entering the prison system for the first time I was not at all sure of what to expect or how to behave. All this was mixed with ever stronger feelings of elation and omnipotence as I went deeper into the unknown. The men in uniforms appeared jovial as we passed through the initial procedures. The place seemed a strange mixture of bus shelter and building site. I was interviewed by a nurse and then I realised I was not in a hospital. I was awakened to the reality of the situation when I refused to take off my clothing. Before I knew it I was surrounded by prison officers and bent over and 'rushed' to the basement. It felt

that at any moment any one of my limbs could be broken. I had to strip down to my underwear and squat over a towel before I was allowed to dress again. I was taken to another cell and left.

This rapid escalation of confinement and powerlessness was matched only by my delusions of omnipotence. Muttering to myself became talking and talking became shouting. Eventually the officers returned with a governor and I was transferred to the hospital wing.

It was dark and I had nothing to eat all day. I had been injected on my arrival at the hospital wing but I could not sleep and spent the whole night raving to myself about the trap I was in.

I spent over ten days here and my last night was in a 'strip-cell' before I was transported to another court. I was fed a good meal while I again waited to plead in court.

After my second appearance I was becoming more desperate and my grasp of the seriousness of the situation became apparent. I was on the move again and transported to another gaol. The differences between my two appearances in court and the two prisons became distinct although I was still in a terrible state of fear and excitement.

The second prison offered a more relaxed atmosphere and I was given a comfortable cell. I appeared once more in court and altered my plea to 'guilty'. I was returned to prison and placed on the open hospital ward where I remained for twenty-eight days. I was then taken to a secure mental hospital.

In retrospect

Looking back to those events almost a year after they happened the effect of prison life remains the dominant memory. It was terrifying. My appearances in court were brief and the decisions that were made were eventually the best ones to be made. I had rejected at an early stage the limited help available at the hospital. Tormented by my neighbours I had lapsed into psychosis. The extreme mental state I was in is exactly the state in which crime might be committed. According to one prison doctor, who I respected, I had given a very good impression of being a violent criminal. In my deluded and frightened state I do not doubt this.