

Case Report 'Epiphany or Psychosis?'

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Objective: To describe the case of a man who experienced an epiphany and later presented with features of a manic illness.

Method: A case report.

Results: A 40-year-old man was referred to psychiatric services having suffered significant physical injury after jumping from a high window in the expectation of entering an alternate reality. He then described an epiphanic experience he had had 10 years earlier. He was treated for a presumed manic illness.

Conclusion: Religious experiences may have features in common with psychotic illness, and have also been described in organic brain syndromes. It is difficult to ascertain whether such experiences are 'authentic' or due to mental disorder. Arguably, both explanations may be correct simultaneously.

Key Words: Religious experience, Psychosis, Mania, Organic brain syndrome.

Introduction

An epiphany is an intense, ecstatic experience, which arrives unexpectedly, and is usually of a religious nature. It is usually felt as having profound, life-changing meaning for the person who experiences it. Such epiphanic experiences may have features in common with psychotic experiences, and it can be difficult to differentiate the two.

This case report is particularly illuminating because the person involved described an epiphanic experience ('peak experience') in great detail in an email to a friend shortly before coming to the attention of psychiatric services. An abridged version of this e-mail is included.

Case History

Mr A is a 40-year-old man who was admitted to a trauma ward with multiple fractures having jumped from the window of his third floor flat. He had done this to test his belief that his mind and body were separate entities, and that his mind was indestructible, even if his body was destroyed. He had arrived at this belief whilst studying the teachings of a 'New Age' organisation that he had discovered on the Internet. He had spent most of the previous ten years studying such teachings, after having a 'peak experience' in 1993. He explained that his beliefs were similar to the themes addressed in the film 'The Matrix'.

Prior to his accident he had felt a reduced need for sleep, increased energy levels, and had felt that his mood was particularly good.

Mr A had no past psychiatric history, nor was there a family history of psychiatric illness. He denied heavy alcohol use or illicit drug misuse. He said that he had always had an interest in 'the meaning of life', reincarnation, and other metaphysical issues.

On interview, Mr A presented as particularly friendly, extremely cooperative, and keen to talk about his experiences. His speech was continuous and coherent but difficult to interrupt. He described his mood as being 'very good' despite his injuries, and he continued to sleep for only a couple of hours per day. His thought was not disordered, and there were no overt delusions, nor abnormal perceptions elicited. He felt that with hindsight, he had been 'stupid' to jump from his window without testing his beliefs in a safer manner first. He was certain that his 'peak experience had been genuine. The following is Mr A's account of his 'peak experience'.

'Early in August 1993, I was walking on my way to work (I am a carpenter) when all of a sudden, I was hit and swamped by a massive tidal like force (like jumping into a swimming pool). Shouting in shock and surprise. It felt like I had been hit by an invisible energy tidal wave and left at the bottom of an invisible energy sea. The instant that the wave hit, it felt like a pair of invisible energy hands were cupping my brain from above and below, and gently pressing the two hemispheres of my brain together. The two halves of my brain felt like two hemispheres of water that were jelling and blending together into one sphere.

All of a sudden my brain jelled and exploded into an infinitely bright, infinitely white, infinitely loving, all knowing, divine light! My mind went totally and absolutely crystal clear. Clearer than I could ever have imagined. Every negative thought that I had ever felt had simply ceased to exist. The infinite cleansing divine white light energy then automatically released from my head and flooded down my body, arms and legs. Walking along I felt truly invincible! It felt like my head had been instantly removed and replaced by all universes everywhere! My mind stretched infinitely in all directions. I was one with all of existence. I was all of existence!

It felt like I had a 'Black Hole' in the centre of my back and a 'White Hole' in my stomach, sucking all energy in existence through my body and pouring it out into the universe! I was immortal! I was God! It felt like I had been alive infinitely. I wanted to tell the whole world about my experience. Twelve minutes after my experience began, it began to fade. I said to myself 'Oh no! Please don't go!' But it went! Everything turned back to normal (to abnormal!). I was absolutely devastated that my experience had ended'.

Mr A was tentatively diagnosed as suffering from a manic illness on the grounds that he appeared elated, and continued to sleep for only a couple of hours per day, without complaint of exhaustion. He was commenced on olanzapine 15mg nocte. There has been no noticeable change in his mental state after three months.

Discussion.

Are Mr A's experiences simply unusual, or are they pathological? Is there, as Freud¹ believed, a tinge of psychosis in every religious experience,

or is there a 'pure' form? If the latter is the case, how can one differentiate this from psychosis?

Determining whether an epiphany is 'authentic' (i.e. an interaction with a superhuman power) is beyond the scope of scientific enquiry. Nevertheless, Watson ² regarded some religious experiences as being similar in nature to common symptoms of schizophrenia, but with the important difference that religious experiences are usually regarded by believers as being metaphorical or spiritual, whereas in schizophrenia they are regarded as being concrete or physical.

There is also a well-documented association between religious experience and organic conditions such as epilepsy, or the use of hallucinogenic drugs ^{3,4}. The finding of a neurological explanation for epiphanic experiences is not necessarily proof that they are not 'authentic' and it has been argued that this is evidence that a superhuman creator provided some humans with the apparatus necessary to experience the divine.

References

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