

It is important to distinguish among patients who believe that God has spoken to them those who are potential George Foxes or John Bunyans.

Inspiration in the Light of Psychopathology

AMONG the problems which confront the student of religion in a mental hospital there is none more challenging than that of the would-be prophet and the phenomena of inspiration which he presents. The beginnings of all vital religions are to be found in experiences interpreted as communications from a superhuman source, either in the person of the believer himself or of some significant person whose authority he accepts. Such experiences arise spontaneously under the stress of crisis situations when men are brought face to face with the ultimate issues of life and are forced to do fresh and creative thinking. For this reason new prophets are constantly appearing, some true, some false, some giving expression to beliefs which are forward-looking and superior, others to beliefs and practices which are inferior and regressive; some worthy of devotion and admiration, others who are rightly consigned to institutions for the insane.

In every mental hospital, therefore, we find patients who believe that God has spoken to them, that he has given them some important mission to perform and that they have some important role to act out. Among these there

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may be some potential George Fox or John Bunyan or some Saul of Tarsus who has it in him to change the course of history. It is therefore a matter of first importance to be able to recognize and give a helping hand to the moulting genius and to have our eyes opened to the significance of such experiences.

A Twentieth Century Jonah

IN the belief that the mental hospital has something to tell us about the phenomena of inspiration, I am offering a brief study of one of our borderline prophets, a quaint Negro who went by the name of "Mickle," who thought of himself as the prophet Jonah, and who believed that he had been called to preach to the wicked city of Nineveh, entirely unaware, as he later found out, that Nineveh "done been destroyed twenty-four hundred years ago."

This patient had been picked up for vagrancy more than a thousand miles from his native Savannah and had giv-

en utterance to such strange religious ideas that the police took him to the hospital.

In appearance he was a dark-skinned Negro of about thirty-eight years, somewhat below average in height and weighing about 135 pounds. What hair he had was kept closely clipped. He had snapping, bright eyes and a pleasant, happy expression. In walking, he took long strides with a peculiar swing of arms and hips, getting over the ground with remarkable speed.

The hospital staff classified him as "dementia praecox, paranoid type; based on delusions of grandeur in an individual who is following explicitly the hallucinated voice of God, and whose entire life is under the direction of that voice."

In the psychometric examination he was eagerly co-operative and was naively delighted with each success, but his score was only at the eight year level. Some of his answers were of interest.

In the *Ball and Field* test, which resulted in a failure, he made a simple straight line to the center of the circle, remarking, "Something tell me to come in and stop in front of that mark (a water-mark in the paper). I works by the Spirit, you know."

Induction test, also a failure. Here he got one right. He was greatly delighted at this and said, "There's a man inside telling me."

Fables: His response to the fable of the *Fox and the Crow* was, "A fox is a kind of dog that loves to play around a chicken anyhow. He think he can come through with his sweet talk."

Vocabulary: 21 out of 50 words defined correctly. Here are some of the definitions:

Ramble: It's just like as if you goes

into the woods to hunt a coon or a rabbit or a possum and you has to travel around this way and that to find that beast.

Hysterics: It's when a person's mind comes and goes and he talks by spells.

Nerve: Now that's another nationality. It's what makes you do things you don't want to do.

Curse: The devil, he deal with all such jobs as that.

Lecture: It's just like you seeing down here asking me all sorts of questions to see if I'se crazy.

Patient's Own Story

It's not difficult to get Mickle to tell his story. He has evidently told it many times in the past and he delights in telling it. Here is the way he gave it to me in the first interview:

I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, lived twenty years in Savannah. I used to be a wicked man. I was called first in 1912 to go and preach to the heathen race. I had been very wild and rough, very fond of frolic. I went home one Sunday morning from the frolic and lay down on my bed. I see a white man, a big man all dressed in white clothes. It was God's spirit talking to this man, yes, me. He took me by the hands. He say, 'Mickle, you are arrested. There is a wicked city over in that direction. It was on sale 60 or 70 years ago to be destroyed. But before I destroy it, I will send a man to notify the people. This people never has repented of their sin, and there's four and a half million head of people in that city. I tell him I can't read or write and I'se a wicked man. He say, 'I just want you to go down there and stand up and I will talk through you to the people myself. And after you get through talking, I will sweep that whole place out. That nationality is very onruly.'

But I went out and I went back to the gaming table. I worked as a brakeman on the Seaboard Air-Line four years. After that I went back to Savannah and worked four years toting furniture for the Benton Transfer Company.

In 1922 the Spirit came by where I

was working and said, 'Come and go with me.' I went home to my house. He say, 'You remember, Mickle, what you promised God? You promised God you would go to that wicked city. I want you to go there now. There's a man named Ananias. He will tell you what to do.'

After I am baptized in Savannah, I am a number one speaker. You see I am just a young preacher, a Missionary Baptist preacher, but I'se the biggest missionary in the United States. (Here follows a detailed itinerary of his journey through Georgia into Alabama, then back into Georgia and from there up through the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont to the Canada line and then back to Massachusetts, all the way on foot.) He then concludes:

When I got back to Worcester, I had walked 3400 miles. I was on my fifth pair of shoes and I had been arrested seven times. I was a give-out vessel and I'se very happy when I end my journey walking into Worcester Hospital. I felt a great rejoicing when I landed in the wicked city of Worcester.

Supplementary Details

Because of the distance to Savannah it was not possible to check his story and we were forced to rely upon the patient himself. The information derived from many interviews may be summarized as follows:

Concerning his early years he reports, "I couldn't go to school. I had to work. My father was a bright-skinned man. He go all around. He leave my mamma. My mamma, she marry another man. He fight me. My father was converted afterward and became a preacher. He came back and want to take me, but my mamma, she wouldn't let me go."

He claims to have been a good worker, earning \$30 to \$35 a month and holding his jobs for considerable periods. His regular earnings seem to have been supplemented by what he took in as a "banjo-picker" and danc-

er. In the hospital he did little or no work. This was not due to laziness, but to his idea of what was becoming to a man of his high calling. It was also a reaction to the institution of slavery. To work under orders is slavery, and this he would not do.

He says of himself that in his younger days he was a "bad man after the wimmens." He was "a man crazy after big fat wimmens." He also claims to have been "a very lucky man with female folk." With one woman he lived for four years and ten months. "She weigh 220 pounds. She love me pretty well. But I give her up. The Spirit tol' me, it's a wrong thing for a single man to live with a woman."

During his sojourns in the hospital, especially in the earlier period, he seems to have been little occupied with sexual matters. He would rarely bring up the subject spontaneously and when questioned on the subject he would answer without evasion or embarrassment. He stated that he had no use for female folk and explained, "If you eats a lot of corn and that corn make you sick, you doesn't have anything to do with that corn any more."

Concerning his religious life he reports that before his second call he had been attending meetings in the Reverend Danright's church in Savannah. It seems that Mr. Danright said some things that "'sturbed" him. "He talk about shooting craps and running around after other men's wives and getting drunk. All that hit me pretty. Rev. Danright was a live fellow and a good preacher and he had been converted just like me. But when I went and ask him to baptize me, he wouldn't do it. He say, 'That the way God call you? I don't deal with no such man as you.' I feel pretty bad at that. I go then to Rev. J. H. Wiley. He baptize me. Did Rev. Danright think there was

something wrong with me? Yes, he did. He thought I was a crazy colored man. But he's badly fooled. It's an awful queer thing that a preacher doesn't know a religious man when they see him."

Personality

Mickle's chief delight was in his conversations with the Man Above. This Man Above would appear to him, especially at night, and bring him comfort and counsel and warning. Sometimes he would bring a choir of angels to sing to him. The common term for these communications was "signals." When he got good signals he was happy. When for any reason the signals were not functioning, or when they were disquieting, he would be irritable and cross. I asked him once if these signals sounded like my own voice in talking to him. His answer was, "No, he tell me things to tell you. He speak much like a natural man, but he don't speak like a natural man. When God speak to me, it ain't no idea that comes into my mind. There's a man down in here (pointing to his chest). But the Spirit don't talk like you talk. He don't say no dozens of words. I don't hear him with my ears. I hears him here." (He points to his chest.)

Frequently in talking with Mickle, a far-away look would come into his eyes and he might explain, "He's talking to me now." This was likely to happen when for any reason he was deeply moved.

Time and again I have found that in my efforts to change some attitude the one effective way was to get the Man Above to give him orders. Such orders he would not "jump." Within the limits imposed by his system of beliefs, the advice thus received was generally sound. The Man Above would reprove him for losing his tem-

per. The Man Above would tell him to go into the packs. The Man Above would tell him to look upon his hospital experience as a school and assure him that all was in accordance with his will and in many other ways he would help him to cope with some really difficult situation.

Mickle was not without some share of mystical identification, but he was somewhat canny regarding it. He rarely went further than to say, "You doesn't know who I is." On one occasion he went on to explain that he couldn't tell because he didn't want people to run from him. On another occasion he announced, "I am behind Norah and Jonas and Paul." Asked whether this meant that he was one with God, he replied, "No, I didn't say that." Usually he identified himself with Jonah. This identification seems to have come from the circumstances surrounding his second call. "I tell God," he explained once, "that I feels like Jonas." It seems that in reply God said to him that he was Jonas and gave him the commission to preach in Nineveh. This commission he took quite literally, believing in his ignorance that Nineveh was a "sure enough city." He did not discover his error until he got clean to New York. However, this discovery did not faze him. Work ... became Nineveh and his great ambition was to preach the message of doom to that wicked city.

His system of beliefs was thoroughly fixed and organized. His whole life was unified around the idea which had carried him on his three thousand mile journey. He said of himself once, "I wants to be different from everybody else. I want to walk different, talk different, act different." But in his peculiarities there was no confusion and no uncertainty. He always knew his own mind. And there was no self-

pity, no seeking of alibis, no tendency to transfer blame.

No picture of Mickle would be complete which did not take account of his courage. "I never moans or cries," he remarked once after a series of reverses which included the loss of a cherished parole, "I jes' keeps right on." I can testify to the accuracy of that statement. He had the true fighting spirit. After a fight with another man in which he got the worst of it, his only comment was, "That sure some man."

For me, Mickle always seemed a work of art or, better perhaps, an artist himself. I have found no little enjoyment in some of his shrewed observations and quaint phrases. Here are some examples:

The Conversion of Paul

You see, I was called just like he call Paul. Paul was a very wicked man. He went through the world 'stroying people. One day God come along while Paul was going out to kill people. God knocked Paul a double somersault off the hosses. Paul rise up and say, "Lord what will you have me to do?" The Lord say, "Go down there, Paul. There's a man named Ananias. He will tell you what to do." Paul became the finest preacher there ever has been in the United States.

Jonah and the Whale

God told the whale, "You take Jonas back to Nineveh and put him in dry-dock." The whale started back. He went three hundred miles an hour.

Advice to Preachers

A preacher, preaching, must branch off on three roads, first, second, third. On the first you makes them open up their eyes. Then you comes back and you throws another switch and you digs in after the way people live. You tells them they's getting worsen and worsen. On the third you knocks them sprawling all over one another.

What Makes a Man Go Crazy

What tears a man's mind worse than most anything else is to have something covered up in your mind. It's just like as if you shuts up milk or meat. They

'gins to stink. That's what keeps a million thousand people here in this 'sylum. They's minds is all muddied up. My mind used to be that way. But God cleaned it out. God just p'litley took a scrub brush and scrub it out. But I ain't never been crazy. That comes from worriation, and I never worries. I just gets mad and that lets the stink out that quick. But God is curing me of that now.

When a man worries, the worriation go into his heart and the heart get sick. The heart telegraph it to the brains, and the brains, they gets addled up, just like addled eggs.

Comments

Many questions may be raised by the story of this quaint prophet. Why was he adjudged insane and kept in the hospital while Father Divine goes free? Why was it that with all his picturesque and attractive qualities he failed to win any followers? On these and other questions much time might be spent. This paper, however, is particularly concerned with the "signals" and with the mystical identification so closely associated therewith as a problem of special interest in any consideration of the interrelationship of religious experience and mental disorder.

We may begin by recognizing that Mickle's *signals* were identical with the "voices," or auditory hallucinations so frequently encountered in a mental hospital. The medical record, compiled by an able psychiatrist, thus describes Mickle as "an individual who is following explicitly the hallucinated voice of God and whose entire life is under the direction of that voice." Most psychiatrists would probably agree. In the mental hospital vernacular he might be described as one of those who "hallucinate all over the ward." Such phenomena are common in a mental hospital. It is assumed that these voices are the product of repressed and dissociated wishes and that their presence is evidence that the personality is in

process of disintegration. There is therefore seldom a psychiatric interview in which the patient is not questioned directly or indirectly as to whether he has "heard voices," and if his answer is Yes, he is likely to be labeled "schizophrenic" and to be given a gloomy prognosis.

What are these "voices," and what is their significance? This is a question in which I have long been interested and for many years I have made it my business to talk with patients who are said to "hear voices." I have found that most of them, if left to themselves, will describe this experience in different ways. The commonest term is "voice," but most such patients make a sharp distinction between such *voices* and those they hear with their ears. Here are a few examples:¹

Patient 1 heard a voice which seemed to be God's voice and words from the Bible came into his head. He had an idea so big that it just carried him away and he ran out into the street in his underwear. When questioned, he explained that he didn't exactly hear anything. "It's just like when you sit and think. Something comes to you."

Patient 2 began to get directions. Ideas came to him. The greatness and the allness of it drove him goofy.

Patient 3 got such funny thoughts and felt himself under some sort of control.

Patient 4 got inner pushes.

Patient 5 heard voices repeating his thoughts.

Patient 6 heard God speaking to him, saying that judgment was coming upon the human race. He got messages. He discovered things through thought transference.

Patient 7 got such funny thoughts. Things popped into his head.

Patient 8 heard God and the devil talking. The voices said he was to be cut up.

Patient 9 heard voices saying "crucify him."

Patient 10—God put thoughts into his head. God hypnotized him. God did the talking.

Patient 11—"I can't explain it. It was just the way I felt. I got the idea. It came to me as a revelation in a dream."

Patient 12—"I began to have a flood of mental pictures as though an album within were unfolding itself. Communications came to me from out of the ether. I felt as though I were directed by some one higher than myself."

Patient 13—"I had to give up my work and sit around and brood. Then ideas came to me. I didn't have to search for words. It was just like I was commanded to say certain words I had never heard of before."

Patient 14—"I got the inspiration to write poetry. It just seemed to flow without my trying. There weren't any voices. Ideas just came to me. I got up one morning at 5 a.m. and wrote my first poem."

I could give many other instances, but these may be sufficient to indicate that the psychological process involved is found outside the mental hospital and that it is not uncommon. It is that of the "inspiration," or "verbal automatism," that of the idea or thought formation which after a period of incubation darts suddenly into consciousness so vividly, sometimes, that it is ascribed to a superhuman source. It is a mechanism which is common to poets, to inventors, to creative scientists and, according to Professor Coe, it is the primitive root of all mystical experience from spiritism to religious ecstasy at its best.²

Professor Eliot Dole Hutchinson has described this dynamism as among the phenomena of "insight." His words are worth quoting:

The scientist, the artist, the thinker of whatever variety has before him a

¹Cf. Boisen, A. T., "Onset in Acute Schizophrenia," *Psychiatry* (1947) 10:159-166.

²Coe, G. A. *Psychology of Religion*, chpat. 16; also 11 & 12

problem involving some production or decision. For months, or it may be for years, this problem remains unsolved, the creative intention unfulfilled. Attempts at solution have ended only in bafflement. But suddenly, usually in a moment when work has been abandoned temporarily, or attention has been absorbed in irrelevant matters, there comes an unpredicted *insight* into the solution. As if "inspired," or "given," ideas arise which constitute the real integration of previously accumulated experience. An answer, a brilliant hypothesis, a useful "hunch" paves the way to artistic or scientific advance. Exhilaration marks such moments of insight, a glow of elation goes with them, a feeling of finality, adequacy, accomplishment.³

Professor Hutchinson goes on to point out that the distinction between religious and scientific or artistic insight is to be found in the nature of the problem which is at the focus of attention. In the case of the artist, and especially of the scientist, the new insight will pertain to something which can be more or less readily verified by others and fitted into the structure of organized and tested experience. In the case of the mystic the new insight is likely to be intimately personal and have to do with his own role in life. It is therefore not so readily subject to verification and it involves tremendous affective reactions.

HEREIN we may find a clue to what has happened in the case of our Negro prophet. We do not have all the facts, but we do know that about the thirty-fifth year of his life, there came a sudden and dramatic change in his concept of himself. He had been a "wicked man, very wild and rough, very fond of frolic." For some time apparently he had been deeply discontented with his way of life. In any case,

³Hutchinson, Eliot Dole. "The Nature of Insight" *Psychiatry* (1941) 4:31-43

the solution to his life problem came in his sudden call to preach to Nineveh, and around this new role his life is completely re-built. This change seems to have taken place without any serious disorganization of the personality, but it must have been attended by profound emotion and narrowed attention, and the initial "call" was followed by other "signals," or messages. As he gives up everything in obedience to this call and starts forth on his great adventure, his conversations with the Man Above, the "signals," as he calls them, take on increasing importance. Interpreting them as communications from God, he pays attention to them and cultivates them, and because his personality is truly unified around a great controlling interest which is associated with that which is supreme in his system of loyalties, the signals become more and more insightful. They even approach the level of genius, as in his explanation of what makes a man go crazy.

These considerations may help us to understand why it is that mental hospital workers have come to regard the presence of "voices" as an ominous symptom. They have had abundant opportunity to observe that it is the seriously disturbed and also the more fragmented types who are most likely to hear voices and they lump these all together without recognizing the constructive aspects of the acute schizophrenic disturbance and the significance of the voices which characterize it.

It is important to recognize that the acute disturbance usually begins with a period of preoccupation and sleeplessness during which the patient is intensely concerned about his own role. There is a narrowing of attention which is conducive to creative mental activity but unfavorable to balanced judgment. In any case it will be fertile

in new ideas growing out of what is on the patient's mind. Pathological features are most in evidence when there are serious maladjustments and the patient is overwhelmed with the sense of personal failure and defeat. His eyes may then be opened to his unsuspected importance. New insights in the form of voices come to him regarding the magnitude of the disaster and his own responsibility therein and the entire personality will be stirred to its bottommost depths and its forces marshalled in an attempt at healing which may either make or break. Frequently the forces of destruction get the upper hand. When that happens the voices are likely to persist, giving expression to the fears and to the disowned tendencies. Not infrequently the patient who hears God talking to him makes a good recovery and we seem justified in looking upon such disturbances as problem-solving experiences which are closely related to the dramatic forms of religious experience.

IN THOSE cases in which the outcome is constructive, either of two things may happen. The patient may return to normal, and the strong emotion and with it the voices may disappear, or else he may rebuild his life on the basis of the role envisioned in the mystical experience. In the latter case the voices may continue to function more or less as a creative factor. This is what happened in the case of George Fox, of John Bunyan, of Saul of Tarsus. This is likewise what happened in the case of our Negro prophet. Whether we classify such persons

as paranoiac or recognize them as religious geniuses, depends entirely upon the value of their message and of their achievement. The important question, therefore, is not the presence or absence of voices, but what the voices say and how the patient reacts to them.

There were, of course, many difficulties with Mickle's religion. One of these was his reliance upon force. When he "got a mad on," he would fight like a tiger, hurling flower pots and swinging swabs with reckless abandon. He could not be persuaded that the Man Above would have given him two good fists if he were not to use them in fighting. It was this fighting proclivity which kept him in the hospital and blocked my efforts to set him free. Another great difficulty was his lack of reverence. His was a tiny universe, limited to himself and the Man Above. Nevertheless he had found something which enabled him to bear up and keep going in the face of devastating frustrations and disappointments. The source of his courage we may see in his sense of fellowship with the Man Above, in his conviction that the Man Above had a plan for him and that this Man Above was in full control. As to the signals, the mediaeval mystics had to learn the lesson that some of the ideas which came surging into their minds could hardly come from God. They assumed that they must come from the devil. Perhaps we of today need to learn the converse lesson, that all auditory hallucinations do not necessarily come from the devil but may represent the operations of the creative mind.
