

A Letter to Rob

Dear Rob,

All I know about you is from a letter to my mother from your mother. Your mother contacted my mother because she heard that I had been through schizophrenia and wanted to know what we knew about it. I got together what I hoped might be useful literature which you've probably gotten by now. I'm writing you this letter in hopes that it might be helpful to hear from someone who's been through it.

Schizophrenia has got to be just about the most terrifying thing a human being can go through. What it does to your mind and your body, the way you get treated in hospitals, the attitude of the public, all add up to make it the most nightmarish thing I can imagine. I don't think there's any way to exaggerate the horror of it. The important thing to keep in mind is that others have gone through it and come out of it in good shape. Many people, once they've recovered, wouldn't trade the experience for anything. I myself am inclined that way though I certainly wouldn't wish schizophrenia on anyone under any circumstances.

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One of the hardest parts of dealing with schizophrenia is that it's so hard to believe in. It's so much easier when you have something like a broken arm or even cancer, something that's easy for you and those around you to identify as something wrong. There have been some hopeful advances in diagnostic testing, nice objective stuff like blood tests and urine tests that can positively show there is a chemical imbalance in the system, but it will no doubt be quite some time before there's anything with the eloquence and simplicity of an arm in a cast.

I, for one, certainly didn't believe that there was such a thing as schizophrenia. I always figured it was just a convenient label for someone the doctors were baffled by, and that's probably still true in some cases.

I even worked in a mental hospital without being convinced. That's all beside the point. The point, I guess, is that there is a disease called schizophrenia and from what little I know from your mother's letter it is very possibly what you're suffering from. There's no percentage in your wasting a lot of energy worrying about whether or not you're schiz or worrying that you're calling "Wolf". The thing you're suffering from is very real.

Your mother seems to think that the root of the problem is this socioeconomic political mess we call America. There's no doubt that all the shit that's going down doesn't help much, but I don't think the blame can really be placed there much as I tried to place it there when I went under. One thing that crap does is give madness and paranoia a credibility and reasonableness that would otherwise be lacking. The "I might be a little strange but I'm not poisoning the planet and napalming babies" sort of thing. For what it's worth, what statistics show about schizophrenia is that throughout all times and cultures it displays remarkable consistency, about 1 percent of any given population at any given time is how it works out. What this means is that while some people at some times have better reasons for going nuts, about the same number go nuts regardless. Actually other varieties of mental illness show considerable fluctuation through time and place but schiz keeps hanging in there with its 1 percent. What this means is that your health is not dependent on the moral, political health of this country. Thank God for little things like that. For another thing, accepting the political mess in this country as an explanation for your trouble doesn't give you much by way of a hopeful direction in which to move. It doesn't give any clues about how to get better — just a good reason to be sick which doesn't do you any good.

You have doubtless already been confronted with many different theories about what schizophrenia is, what's causing your problems, etc. And you will run into more, lots of them contradictory, some reasonable, some completely ridiculous. Everyone will get into the act. It's your parents, your childhood, some sexual hang-up, your politics, your life-style, your religion, and on and on and on. Mostly it will be benefit of hindsight, mostly it will be bullshit. Everyone has a field day explaining schizophrenia. They get to put forth all their little theories; they get to project all their crap on you which is something schizophrenia makes one really vulnerable to. You

don't need reasons for why you're sick; what you need is ways to get well. The explanations people come up with for the most part are just out and out wrong, and even if they were right such insights unfortunately don't help you get better.

I was told by someone that my whole problem was that I hadn't accepted Jesus as my savior. Others told me that everything would be fine if only I had stuck with Maharishi's meditation. Others said it was because I ate too much meat as a child. It's really cruel for people to go around theorizing like that because for one reason or another I was so desperate I was really willing to accept anything. So I accepted Jesus, I meditated, I talked about my parents, and lots of other stuff, and it didn't help at all. When you follow their advice and then it doesn't work it turns out to be because you're deep down inside evil or something and you're hopeless. They walk out looking for some other lucky crazy person to work on and leave you in a strait jacket.

There were, of course, lots of less outlandish explanations, like some key things in my childhood or sexual hang-ups, or the fact that my parents were splitting up or that the woman I had been virtually married to for the last few years took off with another man. These were certainly factors in my cracking up and good things to try to straighten out, but that didn't help me get better. Those things happen to lots of people and they never deal with them very well and they didn't end up in a nut house, but I did. So what was different about me? The chemical genetic explanation was the only plausible thing to me. The fact that some people can't handle adrenalin in large amounts, and turn it into a nerve poison like LSD and mescaline. The hallucinations, the inability to sleep, the strange way stuff tasted and smelled. Chemistry seemed to be a reasonable way to explain that and, besides, it didn't involve leveling blame at me, at my parents, or anyone else. The fact is there is no blame. You haven't done something horribly wrong and neither did your parents or anyone else.

Everybody's just sort of bumbling along and everybody makes mistakes, but mistakes aren't the reason you're having trouble.

Since the disease itself is so poetic, most people assume that any sort of cure should be equally poetic. I think this is a mistake. The things I've found really to be helpful are for the most part exceedingly pedestrian. I think that probably the most important things are simply eating the right sort of things regularly and getting enough sleep. The chemical changes your body may go through may make this exceedingly difficult. There is definitely a speed-like thing that happens with schizophrenics making it difficult and in some cases impossible to eat or sleep. I went about two weeks without being able to eat or sleep. I wasn't fat to start with and lost 25 pounds. Anyone who doesn't eat or sleep for that length of time is going to be in pretty rough shape. Even if you don't feel like eating or sleeping, make yourself stick to some sort of schedule as much as possible. It will help a great deal. I somehow got it into my head that I had attained some sort of enlightenment that made it possible for me to transcend the need for food or sleep. That was no help.

One problem with most of the more poetic nonmedical therapies (insight, analysis, group, etc.) is that they tend to promote the notion that honesty or some other character trait is compulsory for schizophrenics. Besides being inaccurate this can be out and out destructive. Many come out of such therapies feeling that if they or the people around them are not at all times kind, wise, and honest, they'll crack up again. It's a hell of a thing to have hanging over your head. Kindness, wisdom, and honesty are very desirable attributes in themselves, but expecting them to have therapeutic value in treating schizophrenia is pushing things. When you come out of this you will be able to be a scoundrel or hang around with scoundrels all you like without any unusually dire consequences.

My diet was probably a precipitating cause in my breakdown. I was more or less a vegetarian

macrobiotic for economic-ethnic-political reasons all mixed together, not very well sorted out. That changes in diet can work extensive changes in a person is probably no news to you. In any event, there is considerable evidence suggesting that a macrobiotic diet produces some of the changes associated with schizophrenia. For lots of people this is just what they need, but if you're already pretty close to schiz, that sort of thing can push you over the edge. Apparently blood sugar mechanisms are doing it. Sugar and starches produce a much less even blood sugar level than a high-protein diet. For some like myself and possibly you this can be disastrous. Biochemically we just aren't very well-equipped to deal with it. So as far as dietary suggestions that might be helpful, cut out all sugars as much as possible. White sugar is the worst since it zips into your system immediately. Honey is better but still not good. Soy beans and brown rice and other vegetarian sources of protein aren't such a good idea since you have to put down so much starch to get enough and starch, although not as damaging as sugar, also produces uneven blood sugar. Salads are fine and will give just about all the vitamins you need. Lean meat and poultry and fish will go quite a ways towards stabilizing your blood sugar. If the idea of meat is unacceptable to you for one reason or another, eggs and dairy products are good. I would really advise, however, that you eat lean meat at least once a day for awhile and do something nice for the cows later when you get yourself together.

Coffee, as you might have guessed, is not a good idea for schizophrenics. Any drugs like grass or hash and especially the hallucinogens can be real trouble. Alcohol, interestingly enough, can be helpful in a pinch. It happens to be one of the best antianxiety drugs known to man. Don't depend on it too much, however, as you will find yourself with two problems instead of one. There is nothing permanent about any of these restrictions. As soon as you get yourself back in good shape you can do whatever you

like. I now have coffee occasionally, could probably smoke dope if I felt like it.

Any restrictions you place on yourself don't have to be forever. But for now, you should give yourself every break you can. In a while, if things go well, you can eat or not eat anything you damn well please.

The literature sent by way of your mother explains pretty well about the vitamins. I'm not completely convinced that it was the vitamins that made me well but I find their research to be pretty good. In any event they don't cost much and they don't do any harm. They are water soluble so your body just gets rid of whatever it doesn't need. The flushing and the itching of the B3 is uncomfortable but is not all that terrible. It goes away.

Any sort of violent stimulation can precipitate a crack up: loud freaky music, lots of noise of any sort, lots of visual stimulation you really don't need.

Don't waste time worrying about money, especially short-term money. The best way you can insure not being a financial burden on your parents or anyone else is to get well. Most jobs involve stress and responsibility that won't help you get better. They keep you sick in fact. So any short-term money you might be able to make just isn't worth it to you are anyone else. Perhaps the best way to play it is just accept the fact that for awhile at least, you can't support yourself.

Familiar surroundings might help. I was on the west coast when I cracked, in British Columbia. Not knowing what to expect from seasons, the weather etc., didn't help me. Not being used to the trees and landscapes, all became incredible terrors. I'm back on the Cape now with the weather and trees and people I grew up with. It helps some. I feel less out of place, more like I have an excuse for being here. More at home.

Suicide is a very real danger. It becomes a rational choice in many ways. If I was going to have to spend the rest of my life institutionalized or with my head as fucked up as it was, I would much prefer to be dead. Luckily I was so screwed up I couldn't figure out how to do it. Had my head been just a little clearer I would most certainly be dead. The thing is, it's possible to recover. I didn't know that, that's why I wanted to die. I had heard that schiz was incurable, which is untrue.

By way of general advice, I think the best thing I can tell you is to give yourself every break you can. Your primary objective must be to get well, to overcome the very real and serious disabilities caused by schizophrenia, because if you don't beat it you won't be able to do much else. You won't be much use to yourself or anyone else.

I didn't give myself many breaks which is one of the reasons I cracked as hard as I did and as many times as I did. Everytime my head cleared for as much as 10 minutes I believed myself completely recovered and able to take on the world again, and of course I cracked again and again and again. I found the idea of being recuperative somehow degrading and that I should indulge myself in some sort of vacation abhorrent. A lot of it was due to the deceptive nature of the illness. Like I say, if I had an arm in a cast it would have been a different story. But, eventually I caught on that the only way there was any hope of my beating the vicious cycle was to give myself certain breaks. If I had to borrow some money from my parents for awhile that was ok., or if I couldn't be superman commune leader that was ok., if meat was helping my head I could do it without worrying about the poor cow. Other people were a lot more willing to give me a break than I was. So don't play hero. Your illness is real and you need breaks. Usually people will give you breaks if you just hint ever so slightly that you want one. The slave driver is more often in yourself than in others.

I understand you've got some sort of political trial coming up. You don't need that sort of circus. See your lawyer about getting some sort of medical postponement if you can't get the whole thing dropped. In a few months, if you take good care of yourself, you could go

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in there and find the trial to be only a minor pain in the ass, but now that sort of strain is just what you don't need.

The problem, at least for me, was basically one of being completely unable to take any sort of stress. Arguments, responsibility, the suffering of others, cruelty, etc. All in all, it seems that one of the things schizophrenia is, is a drastic lowering of your shit tolerance. It's just not being able to take any more, not being able to take loud noise, confusion etc. This had been happening to me for years gradually and then faster and faster. It was probably a big factor in my trying to carve a niche for myself and some friends with a chain saw twelve miles by boat from nowhere. But in the end even the wind and birds were too much. It started as not being able to take New York and cops and pollution and confusing this disability with some sort of virtue, but in the end my friends became as monstrous as the cops had been and birds as deafening as the jackhammers.

So, at least for now, avoid shit. As soon as you get yourself together you can deal with it. If someone is bleeding now I'm able to bandage them instead of crying my heart out in sympathy. I'm not urging you to develop callouses which is what will happen in any event if you keep your present course. I'm just suggesting that you don't do as I did and confuse disability with virtue, and that you do some things to get your body chemistry back in line so you can cope and be effective.

Being crazy and being mistaken are not the same. All the things that upset you are upsetting things. It's just that it's possible to not be crippled by them. There are great insights to be gained from being schiz, but unless you recover they won't do you or anyone else much good.

If there's any way I can be of any use to you, or any questions I might be able to help you with, please feel free to call or write me anytime. I'd be more than glad to be able to do anything I could to beat this bitch they call schizophrenia. Call it a grudge.

— **Mark Vonnegut**