**Case 13: Schizophrenia**

"Jim’s parents had both been born and raised in Argentina. They met when his father was 38 and his mother was 19, and decided to marry soon after his mother became pregnant. They then immigrated to the United States where they hoped to make a better life for themselves. Their first few years on American soil were happy ones, but difficult financially. The couple went through several business failures before Jim’s father started a clothing manufacturing company that did well.

After arriving in the United States, Jim’s mother, Consuela, gave birth to three healthy baby boys in close succession. Jim, born in 1973, was the third boy. Her fourth child was stillborn when Jim was 13 months old. Devastated by the tragedy, Consuela soon stopped eating properly, and began drinking heavily. She eventually became so depressed that she could not function and had to be hospitalized briefly. The notion of being hospitalized for a mental disorder particularly concerned Consuela because her own mother was, at that very time, also a patient at a mental hospital back in Argentina—a hospitalization from which she was never to be discharged, as it turned out. During Consuela’s hospitalization, care of the children fell to a series of nannies, as Jim’s father was required to work long hours.

Two years after her hospitalization, Jim’s mother became pregnant again. This lifted her out of her depression, and she was able to stop drinking. By the time the new baby was born, she seemed restored to her former self. She later told family members that the birth of this child had been her “salvation.”

Jim Unfulfilled Promise

Throughout their childhoods, Jim and his younger brother were the better students of the 4 boys and, as such, received most of the attention from their parents. Jim was a prized pupil of his teachers, as well. He was enthusiastic, motivated, and he typically finished at the top of his class. As head of the chess club in high school, he led the school’s chess team to victory in several tournaments. He was also among the top scorers on the state-wide scholastic achievement test. Everyone who knew him had high hopes for his future.

However, things began to change for Jim toward the end of high school when his father, Roberto, suffered a heart attack. Jim could no longer concentrate on his studies, and spent almost all his time praying for his father’s recovery. His father did recover eventually, and Jim became convinced that it was due to his prayers.

Despite poor grades in his final semester, Jim graduated from high school; however, he seemed to have lost his bearings. He registered at a community college in the fall, but after a few weeks became lax about attending classes. Eventually, he stopped going to classes altogether and spent more and more time in front of the television set in his room at home. The extended television time, however, was not due to laziness, or lack of ambition, or lack of interest in people. Rather, Jim was starting to believe that he had special powers. He would closely observe the movements of every character on the screen, trying to determine the extent of his influence. The more he watched, the more his suspicions were confirmed. His effect on the characters was just too obvious to deny.

At first, this belief was just a feeling, but eventually Jim concluded that a specific change had occurred: He had acquired the capacity to control other people’s emotions and behavior. He discovered this by going into restaurants and observing the patrons. He noticed that if he looked at people long enough, he could cause them to rub their eyes, scratch their noses, or make other simple gestures. At first, he thought he had to be within a close range to have this effect. However, as time went on, he concluded that he could project this influence over great distances. He discovered this one day as he watched the news on television. While watching, Jim observed that the reporter glanced down at her notes periodically. Suddenly, Jim realized that he himself was directing these movements. From that moment on, he believed that he could guide characters on television to move in ways that they ordinarily would not. Gradually, he became convinced that not only people but objects, such as traffic signals and automobiles, were responding to his influence. If he stood on a street corner, for example, and observed the flow of traffic, he found he could direct the cars’ movements.

In the beginning, Jim was not sure how he controlled people and things, but one day, while pondering his situation, he had a flash of insight. He concluded that he, like God, must have a “life force” in his breath. In effect, he influenced people and objects through his breathing.

This was a momentous revelation for him. It meant that his power was not just your garden-variety black magic or wizardry. Rather, he had been selected for some sort of holy mission. This suspicion seemed to be confirmed soon afterward when Jim heard God’s angels whispering that he had been chosen to be the Messiah.

With this discovery, Jim also became increasingly convinced that people were talking about him behind his back. One day, for example, he got on a bus and believed that some of the passengers were engaged in conversation about him, while others were glancing at him and pointing. This, he presumed, meant they knew about his power.

After the bus experience, Jim became extremely anxious. He was afraid that other people, particularly those with evil intent, might somehow gain control of his power and use it for destructive purposes. The best solution, as he saw it, was to stay home as much as possible. He also began to use greater and greater amounts of marijuana because, he believed, “it reduces the oxygen in the breath and that reduces its effect.”

As Jim’s discovery of his special powers evolved into the hearing of voices, then into his understanding that he would be the Messiah, and, finally, into his realization that others were talking about him, he became more and more confused. One day, as he emerged from his room after an intense session before the television, his mother asked him how he was feeling and he could only respond by babbling incoherently about “angels” and a “life force” in his breath. His parents, who previously had seen their son as merely withdrawn and somewhat depressed, were alarmed, and arranged the first of what turned out to be several hospitalizations.

At the hospital, Jim was given a diagnosis of schizophrenia, a label that initially meant nothing to his family but one they would eventually know all too well and hear all too often. At this hospital, Jim was treated with thorazine, an antipsychotic medication. Within a week, his speech became coherent again and he stopped hearing voices. He continued to believe in his special powers, but he became less preoccupied with them. After a 4-week hospital stay, he had improved considerably and was discharged.

At home, Jim continued to take the thorazine for a while and, as a result, was less troubled by symptoms. However, he lapsed into his previous lifestyle. Most of the time, he still watched television or slept, emerging periodically for meals. He had no interest in returning to school or doing anything else constructive, in spite of his parents’ urgings.

As the weeks passed, he decided to stop taking the medication because it made him tired and dizzy. Within a couple of weeks, his hallucinations, intense anxiety, and confusion returned. Once more he had to be hospitalized.

This pattern was, unfortunately, to be repeated again and again over the next decade. Jim would be hospitalized periodically with a major flare-up of symptoms; he would be stabilized with antipsychotic medication; and, after a period of relief—sometimes just a few weeks, other times as long a year—he would either stop taking his medication or the medication would stop being effective. Even when his medication helped, only 2 of his symptoms disappeared: his hallucinations and incoherent speech. The delusion that he could control people and objects with his breath was only mildly lessened, and he remained isolated from normal events and activities.

At the age of 27, after 10 years of treatment disappointments, Jim was still spending most of his time in his room at home, not having done any productive work for several years. He had one friend, someone he had known since grade school, who he believed was immune to his breath’s effect. Their interactions consisted largely of smoking marijuana together. Otherwise, Jim socialized only with his immediate family."