

**BECAUSE
I COME FROM
A CRAZY
FAMILY**

THE MAKING OF A PSYCHIATRIST

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1.

I come from an old New England WASP family, characterized by what I call the WASP triad: alcoholism, mental illness, and politeness. You could be tipsy, even quite sloshed; you could be a bit off, even mad as a hatter; but none of that really mattered as long as you were polite.

The point was never to let life rock you overmuch. Be debonair under duress, be cool under attack, be a good egg. No tears. We specialized in a pitiless pragmatism that deplored sentimentality and revered character. You paddled your own canoe, and if you fell out, well, fare thee well. These things happen. No matter what, we carried on. Rather than ever show sadness, we bucked up. Rather than get angry, we practiced the velvet art of courteous cruelty. You could be as nasty as you wanted to be, as long as you did it with wit and a smile. Above all, your job was to be a good sport. Expressing painful feelings was self-indulgent and embarrassing and created an uncomfortable mess no one wanted to be part of or to clean up. We all knew what a raw deal life could be, but our way of making do was to look it in the eye and, with a tip of the hat, walk on by. If we couldn't beat the devil, we could at least refuse to let him shut us down. Happiness lay in never taking *anything* too seriously. These are my people, and I love them.

But I took a different turn. When I was eleven years old, a voice out of nowhere told me I should become, of all things, a shrink. That was definitely not in the game plan I'd inherited. My people would deem it fine to be a doctor, say a brain surgeon or a cardiologist, but a *psychiatrist*? Please.

Yet there I was, standing by myself on a hot summer day, when an alien voice popped into my head and stated as clearly as a church bell, “*You should become a psychiatrist.*” Not knowing what on earth to make of it, I did what I did with most things I didn’t understand. I put it aside and moved on.

But eighteen years later, here I was, about to do what that voice from God-knows-where had told me to do. It was the final day of my internship in Medicine. Psychiatrists are required to do a year of a medical internship before beginning psychiatric training, both because many medical conditions can cause what appear to be psychiatric problems and also—for me this was far more important—because the year of internship bonds you to the medical profession and makes you feel like a real doctor, the way I am told boot camp bonds recruits to the Corps and makes them feel like real Marines. Only our medical internship was twelve months instead of a measly thirteen weeks.

Minutes short of being done, I’d finished writing the final progress notes on my patients and was staring off into space, drumming my chewed-up Bic pen on the Formica counter in the nurses’ station. It had been years since I’d thought about that inexplicable voice from age eleven, but at that moment in the nurses’ station I flashed back to it and laughed out loud. *Little boy has auditory hallucination telling him he should become a shrink . . . and then becomes one.* Not jolly likely, as my Gammy Hallowell would have said. But there it was.

One of the nurses nearby asked, “Did someone say something funny that I missed?”

“No, Nan, don’t worry, you didn’t miss a thing. God forbid you should miss something!”

“Get outta here, Hallowell. You’re finished today, right?”

“Yup,” I said. “Thanks for the memories. I’ll never forget *you*, that’s for sure.”

“No doubt you say that to all the girls, but thanks. We’ll miss you. You’re a good doctor.”

Nan had no idea how much her words meant to me. All year I had done my best to keep up with all the brainiac interns who were going into internal medicine. I didn’t want to be the weak link headed into psychiatry. Because the nurses were really our best judges, what Nan said capped my year. “Thanks. You guys taught me a lot.”

As to why I laughed, that was too much to tell Nan. But here’s the story about the voice. I was standing in the shade of some scrawny pines along a dirt road on a sweltering day in July waiting for my cousins to come outside so we could get relief from the heat by going for a swim in the lake below. I can still see my hand resting on the top rail of one of the splintery, weathered split rail fences so common on Cape Cod when a unique voice, unlike anything I’d ever heard before or since, popped into my brain and told me, as if delivering a message from beyond, to become a psychiatrist. Back then, “psychiatrist” was a word I’d never even used and only vaguely understood.

Wearing just my tattered bathing suit, with a threadbare terry-cloth towel over my shoulder, I was alone outside my aunt Janet’s house in Chatham, the small town where I lived most of my early years, when that weird voice broke in.

To make the moment even more bizarre, I reacted as if it were *not* bizarre. Instead, not missing a beat, not even doing the logical thing and looking around to see if a real person might be standing nearby, I simply took the message in stride, as if hearing words popping into your brain out of nowhere was a run-of-the-mill occurrence rather than the abnormal event it actually is: a cardinal sign of psychosis.

Even as I took the voice at face value, I didn’t get right on it. I actually forgot about it and went swimming. Nor did I determine

then and there to become a psychiatrist and pursue that goal the way some kids from an early age single-mindedly work at becoming a professional basketball player or a brain surgeon. The advice the voice gave me got buried.

Still, the voice must have planted some kind of powerful Jack-and-the-Beanstalk seed, because, improbably, here I was, at age twenty-nine, having hoisted my way up the slippery stalk, branch by elusive branch, about to start my psychiatric training.

All kinds of life had happened to me in the interim. I had most definitely not walked the typical path that leads to doctoring—of any kind. There'd been so much chaos in my childhood—insanity, drinking, divorces, violence, sudden uprootings and moves—and there'd been so little planning and guidance until very late that it was, well, “not jolly likely” for me to be standing in the nurses' station at a VA hospital having just finished twelve months of medical internship.

But now I had earned the chance to make good on what that voice had told me to do, and to satisfy my long-standing curiosity about the mind, which had been ignited as a kid talking about people at dinner with my gossipy family.

I knew just from what I'd learned in medical school that psychiatry was nowhere remotely close to having it all figured out, but at least now I could join the search as a certified player. I could learn what others had done and see what I could do myself.

Until now, my main instructors on human nature had been my family and my teachers, as well as Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Samuel Johnson, and all the other writers I'd come to love. But now, with medical training, I could also use science as my source, combined with the lives of real people, to take on the complexity of the mind face-to-face.