

# My MYSTERIOUS SON

Dick Russell

Today, at least 26 million people worldwide experience schizophrenia and it remains as mysterious today as it has been throughout human history



About eighty miles northwest of where I live, in West Hollywood, California, inside a white stucco house in the valley town of Ojai, I sit facing Malidoma Patrice Somé, a renowned shaman from West Africa.

A white cloth, containing a circle at the centre, occupies a small table between us. Around the perimeter of the circle, and also used to divide it into quadrants, are five coloured stripes of black, blue, green, red and white. Within the circle rest a number of objects - many cowrie shells, stones both precious and plain, coins from various countries, a ring, and a key.

I have come to Malidoma for a divination, not for myself but on behalf of my 35-year-old son, who was diagnosed in his late teens with a severe mental illness: 'probable schizophrenia.'

Malidoma asks that I use my primary hand to spread the shells and other objects, clockwise within the circle, and he'll tell me when to stop. After about ten seconds, he does so, and peers intently at the pattern that has formed.

Then Malidoma says: "The way this pattern is laid out, it is like a mirror of other-worldly scenarios. Almost like two magnets, each pulling the other, and your son is in the middle of that."

"Your job with him is to hold the space... basically the humanisation of the clinical labelling of him as psychotic, schizophrenic, which is a reflection of a profound misunderstanding. Because the structure of the world afforded by people like him has not been studied sufficiently, it's not a fair approach to look at him as sick. That frequencies of this nature are not allowed - this is really a major discrimination."

Schizophrenia remains as mysterious today as it has been throughout human history.

Some evidence points to the disorder existing even prior to our group exodus from Africa, around 50,000 years ago. In recorded history, a C5th BCE King of Sparta was apparently schizophrenic, and similar individuals are cited in 2,000 year-old Chinese and Indian texts.

In ancient Greece, Socrates apparently experienced auditory hallucinations, and his pupil Plato believed that 'divine madness' lay behind poetic inspiration. The philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras's unusual beliefs included him being convinced he had inhabited the bodies of important people from past generations, and of giving mystical properties to various numbers. Aristotle is recorded as having said:

"No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness."

Today, according to the World Health Organisation, at least 26 million people worldwide experience schizophrenia, and the medical treatment model, in alliance with the large pharmaceutical companies, continues to dominate.

The figures are staggering: since 1985, an over thirty-fold increase in annual sales of psychiatric drugs, from \$263 million to more than \$8.6 billion.

Patients diagnosed with schizophrenia - who've been on prescribed medication for years, and who then stop taking it, generally relapse into a worse condition than they were before they stopped. Yet studies by the World Health Organisation comparing schizophrenia outcomes in developed countries, such as Europe or North America, in contrast to countries like Nigeria - where drugs are not generally available - show a much higher rate of recovery without them, within two years.

Since suffering a breakdown out-of-the-blue, which required his hospitalisation at seventeen, my son Franklin had been prescribed antipsychotics, mood stabilisers,

and antidepressants, with varying rates of success.

But over the years, I'd moved away from accepting at face value what therapists and drug companies push - either spend a lifetime on medication or face becoming permanently institutionalised. And I'd come to realise that alternatives, or certainly adjuncts to medication, can lead to a better life.

I'd also come to understand that Franklin's sometimes 'delusional thinking' cannot simply be dismissed as meaningless, as it also contains poetic gems and gives evidence to a different kind of truth - one that's simply beyond the normal ways in which our everyday reality is understood.

In 2012, Dr. Joseph Polimeni, a Canadian professor and internationally recognised evolutionary psychiatrist, published a book titled 'Shamans Among Us.' He writes in the first chapter: *'In its simplest form, the shamanistic theory of schizophrenia says that people with schizophrenia are the modern manifestation of prehistoric tribal shamans.'*

*In other words, the inborn cognitive factors or personality style that would have predisposed*

*certain people to become shamans is the same psychological mindset that underlies schizophrenia.'*

Polimeni's thesis focuses around similarities between shamans and schizophrenics, such as genetic predisposition, onset during young adulthood, intensified symptoms during periods of stress, and preponderance among males. The resemblance, he writes, surpasses coincidence.

Shamans, of course, are still held in great esteem by many societies, and I believe my son has elements of that same capacity.

Shortly before his sixteenth birthday, with some trepidation Franklin had handed me a typewritten sheet of paper.

He was describing a vision he'd had the previous night before falling asleep. Lying in bed, his eyes closed, he'd passed through a square, and then a spiral with protruding rays, then another much larger circle that turned into a sun.

As he moved closer to this he wrote that, *'it became a tunnel. This tunnel was as if in space and nothing else existed... I moved slowly along and through it. All around it was glowing, a green yellowish colour... Then there was*

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*an opening that I've never seen before, and that is so beautiful I couldn't even imagine.'*

There was a column with a pyramid in front, and more columns on both sides, which Frank moved through.

At this point he wrote of feeling he was about ten feet above the ground, where an open eye was, which he described as being like the one on the American dollar bill.

Frank continued to ascend higher and higher. He said, to his right there was water glistening with the light of the sun, and further ahead he came to another tunnel, which he described as being like a cave, with dips in the earth. He described it as being shiny and full of colours. The last thing he remembered was going through that tunnel, slowly.



Malidoma's divination cloth set up for Frank and his father

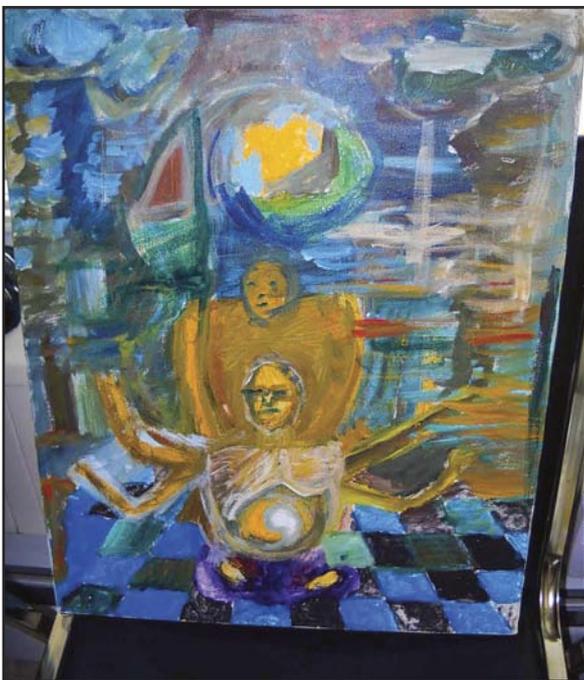


**Above: Franklin drawing during his stay on Jamaica in 2013**

At the time, I didn't know what to make of my son's experience. Only years later would I read about such imagery being prevalent among some descriptions of shamanic journeys, where the individual is transported through a tunnel to an exit opening out upon other worlds.

**Below: a 2014 painting depicting the soul**

Less than two years later, Frank told me on the way home from school: "Dad, I can't find my old self again."



Having suicidal thoughts and hearing voices, he had to be hospitalised. At that time I remember him asking me whether I believed in psychic fields. Before long, he seemed uncannily able to 'read' what I was thinking.

The ensuing decade after Frank's initial breakdown saw him going on and off medication and in and out of hospitals. His situation often seemed hopeless.

The way one doctor put it: "His denial is so dense, he's so invested in not cooperating. He has no idea he has a psychiatric illness, it's simply not part of him."

At the time I saw no choice but to accept the medical model at face value.

At one point, prescribed with an antipsychotic medication called Zyprexa, Frank put on tremendous weight and was diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes. The manufacturer of the drug was well aware of these side effects, but never saw fit to do a warning label.

Only spending a year-and-a-half at a remarkable facility for young adults saved my son's life. Through regular exercise, a healthy organic diet and orthomolecular nutritional supplements, as well as taking a lower dosage of a different antipsychotic medication, most of his weight disappeared, and so did the diabetes.

At the same time, sound advice from a psychologist friend enabled me to stop correcting what I had viewed as Frank's delusional fantasies. Once I accepted his sometimes bizarre thought process, as well as his unusual (and, to me, indecipherable) hieroglyphic-like art forms - which he filled many pages of journals with - we came to enjoy each other's company, and I came to realise that his journaling could not only be poetic, but profound.

His observations on life included such paragraphs as: *'If you are deep as a person, it is sort of like living with your feet in mud for four hours each day. The other part of the day is spent in cleaning the feet off.'*

*'Your empty core was not the problem. Everyone suffers such human ailments. Your fruitless trail of actual events is what you'll need to repent.'*

*'Worthiness comes from practice, practice from patience.'*

*Passiveness is potential for destruction. Direction of mind, body and soul is achieved through actions based on love from the heart.'*

Frank showed me computer print-outs about the human body and chemical elements, which he told me he wanted to use to build a 'transporter.' He also told me that, while living alone for a time, a tiny alien from Jupiter had inhabited his body when he called upon a genie to grant him three wishes. Once, walking the grounds of a hospital, his allusions to the Star Wars movies stunned me: he remembered all the characters in the films, while juxtaposing them to himself.

He wrote out some symbols in Chinese that he called 'the language of trees.' Drawing some of these in my notebook, he glanced up and said: "Let me see if I can do it without tampering with your energy."

He spoke of living in a different time zone - 'the sixth dimension,' he called it - where forty years could be packed into a single day, and he told me I needed to consult a leprechaun before making a research trip to Ireland for a book I was writing.

As the months went by, I experienced too many psychic interactions with my son for these to be mere coincidences. Asking if I'd watched any good movies lately, he could give the title before I had a chance to say it.

Once, Frank asked me to name my favorite book. I thought instantly of Henry Miller, but before I could say anything, Frank unhesitatingly said, 'Tropic of Capricorn,' which happened to be my favorite of Miller's works.

I told him I thought he was amazing, and asked if he had a direct path into my brain, to which he replied: "No," but added that he often 'feels' things.

After I told his mother that Frank had said the monks were calling him to come to Tibet, she emailed back: 'Seeking spiritual fulfillment seems to be a big part of who he is. Perhaps his therapy will come from an atypical source.'

After that, I had a powerful dream about consulting with some professors. My task, they told me, was to unlock a secret about

mental illness which Frank carried.

In his journal he wrote: *'What is behind a situation is a mystery. We are left searching for reasons that things are the way they are... Clarity and cloudy times come and leave. Points are made and life proceeds.'*

Our family paediatrician - who had grown up in East Africa in the 1940s, and who made an annual pilgrimage back to witness the wildlife migration on the Serengeti - invited me to bring Frank along on a trip.

Overcoming his initial trepidation, Frank really wanted to go. He was then 32 years old, and I was 64.

Frank is mixed race, and I saw the trip as an opportunity for him to see the continent which his mother's ancestors had come from. I also hoped the trip would be a good opportunity for the two of us to forge a stronger father-son bond. I was not wrong about that, though it came about in hardly the way I had anticipated it.

In January 2012, we went through two harrowing nights during our couple of weeks in Tanzania. On the first of these, Frank disappeared at a bush camp. My worst fears thankfully turned into a good laugh, when it was discovered the he had wandered into the wrong tent and fallen asleep there by mistake.

On another night, later in the journey, he was justifiably angry at me for being too parentally controlling. Alone together in our room as darkness fell, my son launched into a monologue which soared so far into space, and deep into time, that I didn't know whether anything could possibly ground him again. I was terrified, including of the truths he voiced about my own psyche.

We did come through it, but only after a role reversal: I became the one suffering the 'breakdown,' and suddenly he shifted to become the caregiver. The morning after had dawned crystal clear, and Franklin had asked if he could assemble my packed lunch, before we set off to explore the fabled Ngorongoro Crater.

We travelled by Land Rover, and as we left the bush camp and turned onto the main road, we saw a striped hyena laying in our path, dead. We both took a deep breath, and our guide said that this was a



very rare species.

I would later read that, in folklore, striped hyenas are considered to be physical incarnations of *jinns* (spirit or *genie*), who inhabit an unseen world in a dimension beyond human sight, but who can interact physically with us.

In much of Africa, including Tanzania, the striped 'werehyena' is associated with the supernatural.

I consider our experience in Africa the real beginning of a shared quest, beyond my being a parent with a so-called mentally ill son. Franklin gained a measure of self-confidence lacking ever since his first breakdown. He returned to school after we got back, spending four months learning the inner workings of computers - until a teacher failed him for 'lack of class participation,' and Frank dropped out. He also stopped taking his medication and ended up back in a hospital for a month.

His doctor said that he'd witnessed this repeating pattern in schizophrenics many times over the years, someone beginning to make progress after receiving a lot of help, then ending up regressing and deteriorating. I heard him sigh as he concluded with a shrug: "This is another chapter in a long story."

When Frank was released from the hospital, relatively stable again,

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he told me: "We've gotta get into the unconscious, so we know what the hell's going on."

That was when I discovered Malidoma Somé, an inheritor of the traditional wisdom techniques practiced by his grandfather in a small village in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Today Malidoma travels the world, conducting workshops that introduced Westerners to the ancient Dagara wisdom he carries, through different kinds of rituals, which emphasise the importance of ancestors and community. Malidoma has also written several books, including the autobiographical 'Of Water and the Spirit.'

At our first meeting, Malidoma said to me: "You find yourself, as Joseph Campbell would say, in a forest of symbols, like some kind of - I don't know - Harry Potter character, who has entered an unknown geography. In this sense, Franklin is the gatekeeper."

He then instructed me to perform several rituals, one of which was to call upon my ancestors to make a place for him at their table. Malidoma said they couldn't fathom him, and they needed to as it was central to Frank's healing.

I was also to bring some specific natural elements to the water's edge - organic milk, apple cider vinegar, alcohol such as vodka or rum, and a cob (ear) of maize (sweet corn). I had to offer these to the water spirits as nourishment for my son's psyche. I did this on several occasions at an isolated beach in Malibu, wading into the surf and giving the offerings into the water during a series of seven waves.

Malidoma had told me that he wanted to meet Franklin and, in January 2013, the opportunity

**Above: a 2002 magazine advert for the antipsychotic drug, Zyprexa. The international drugs industry is vast**

arose, as Malidoma would be teaching a workshop and doing private divinations at a wellness centre in Negril, Jamaica.

On the plane I read a section in Malidoma's book 'The Healing Wisdom of Africa' about the making of large clay pots. I reflected on how much Franklin had enjoyed creating pots in high school, and that he had taken a Saturday pottery class in more recent years.

There was another description in the book which also reminded me of Franklin. It took me back to when he used to gather old motors and other metal parts off the street and put them in his bedroom. Malidoma described a young man in his maternal family who, after his father died, had begun to act unusually; inexplicably collected scraps of metal, until his little room was crowded with random metal objects - from bicycle parts to old tin cans, radio antennae, and dead light bulbs taken from flashlights. From these pieces of scrap the boy had made things, which appeared to be almost functional.

Malidoma's explanation to the boy's behaviour gave a new slant to Frank's obsession. Malidoma wrote that: 'The urge to collect is the natural response of the human psyche to an aesthetic object that speaks directly to it, stirring memories that lie deeply within. Collecting confirms the indigenous belief that the human psyche reads and understands symbols and that the attraction to beauty is a function of psychic awareness. I think museums are born out of the West's confused response to things that speak directly to the psyche.'

As our plane touched down in Jamaica, I asked Frank what he might want to discuss with Malidoma, and he replied: "I'd like to talk with him about pottery and paint."

The wellness centre where we would see Malidoma was about two hours drive from the airport in Kingstown, and Frank instantly fell in love with Jamaica.

Some years earlier, he had written in his journal: *'The larger the soul, the greater the suffering. From*

*suffering comes beauty. Bob Marley preached and taught it when he said 'One Love, One Heart, Let's get together and feel alright!' '*

And feel alright Frank did, as he sat alongside Malidoma doing a series of drawings that reminded the shaman of ancient glyphs. They found one another fascinating.

I left them alone but, as they had requested, tape-recorded their meeting. Malidoma told my son that the pattern he'd made on the divination cloth spoke of being in touch with the ancient Mayan, Egyptian, and Native traditions.

"Here," Malidoma told him, "I can even see Dogon cosmology."

"Oh nice," Frank replied. "This is an ancient game. From Atlantis or...?"

"Yeah. The other planet that is called..."

"Pluto. Neptune," my son quickly interjected before Malidoma could say it.

"That's right. All these energies..."

Frank pointed to certain rocks that he'd moved around to form the pattern on the divination cloth and

**Below:**  
Malidoma and  
Frank in Jamaica



told Malidoma: "I love these, they are special rocks, old, quite old."

"Very old indeed," Malidoma replied to him. "The way you know things is unbelievably calibrated. And so far beyond the normal human consciousness, I mean somebody..."

"Somebody could walk up to you and be angry at you for that, though," Frank again quickly interrupted.

"That's right" replied Malidoma: "Because you're so far advanced. This world is borderline, just skimming the surface."

"Yeah, I know."

Malidoma told my son that the sequentiality of time and space only applies to him if he wanted it to, otherwise he could find himself here, and then go far into time, then come back so fast that nobody notices...

"You process so much data that sometimes you are in multiple places at the same time," he told him, adding: "and yet, you still look like you are here in body and flesh, sitting in front of me, when in fact it's everywhere."

"There is something about that which also makes you - as you sit here - look like you are a sub-space antenna; picking up messages from so far away."

Frank laughed then and said, "Thank you, or should I say, Dashi!"

"Dashi!" Malidoma repeated: "and also picking up the knowledge of language too, universal language, it's just amazing."

Later I looked up the word "Dashi." It's of African origin, and the website also said that people with the name Dashi often fight being restricted by rules and conventions.

Malidoma continued to interpret what he observed in the divination, telling Frank: "The light that shows here is not of this world. How could that be connected to the body that is sitting in front of me? I have no clue."

Frank continued to draw for him, and Malidoma said to him: "Yes, you've been there, through various tunnels, and it has led you to various worlds. And it looks like you've left something of yourself in those worlds."

Malidoma asked if he could keep Frank's drawing of a bird, telling him: "Because this is also a sign that shows how your spirit can fly."

Malidoma told Frank that he

observed nothing in the divination to indicate that he was sick.

"It doesn't show?" my son asked. "In that case," he added, "Give 'em a call for me if you could, you know, in the hospital, tell 'em that. Write a good note for me or something."

Then it was my turn to see Malidoma, he shook his head and said being with Franklin was: "like meeting a colleague, he ended the session, so it felt like he was the one doing it for me. But he did ask gently, can I go now? I said, of course."

After I pushed the various objects clockwise on the cloth and Malidoma began to divine the pattern, a pleasantly surprised look came over his face.

He pointed to two stones, one clear and the other orange.

He explained that he'd asked Franklin, toward the end of his session, to move things around a second time, and after Frank had spent some time rearranging, he had finally taken those two same stones and placed them carefully in almost precisely the same spot I'd had moved them to just a moment before.

Malidoma told me that the orange stone was to do with a kind of healing related to the ancestors; and the clear stone was to do with structure; "Or what you call the 'purpose' that is mandated by ancestors," Malidoma said.

He continued: "Now what were the chances that you were going to move them almost exactly like this? That's why I can only see just how intertwined your two paths are. It simply means that the one of you needs the other as much; there is a kind of reciprocity which makes both of you a team. Where all of that is going will reveal itself in time. The journey is an ongoing one, and there won't be a dull moment!"

And such has been the case. Not long thereafter, Malidoma responded to an email: "I'm glad to hear that Franklin is changing. There was more work done 'sub-space' than in this dimension when we met in Jamaica."

Malidoma added that he had brought out the drawings that Frank had given him there several times. He told me that he liked to meditate upon them, sometimes for as long as twenty minutes. "They are not random," Malidoma wrote,

*Frank is much more grounded in physical reality, and has spent the past year being what he calls a 'jack of all trades.' He has taken several classes at art school, spent two weeks learning how to build boats in Maine, and is now attending a technical school, where he once got halfway through a degree in mechanical engineering*

and of one drawing commented: "That's not even his hand, that's some spirit's hand."

Above all, being in Malidoma's presence added immeasurable validation to what Frank sensed about his inner being, but feared no one else could ever recognise. Both I, and his mother, have continued to seek communication with our ancestors on his behalf. These have been very different, and sometimes difficult journeys which have made a difference in our own lives as well as in Frank's.

At the same time, our son is much more grounded in physical reality, and has spent the past year being what he calls a 'jack of all trades.' He has taken several classes at a Boston art school, spent two weeks learning how to build wooden boats in Maine, and is now (re)attending a technical school, where he once got halfway through a degree in mechanical engineering.

Long ago now, the day after Frank was born in fact, a close friend of mine looked into his eyes and said to his mother and I: "You know? I think Franklin is really your teacher." And so he has been.

So is there a torch at the end of many a dark tunnel?

From Franklin's journal: *'As a man, I felt I had no purpose. I've been lost and I have been found. As a man you create your purpose and your sense of it. It is the growth that I am talking about. It isn't the growth of a nation that creates a man. It isn't material expansion or monetary development. It comes from inside. When there is nothing, there is infinite potential for something. Where there is darkness, light is there to fill it.'*

Dick Russell is the author, or co-author, of twelve books, including several New York Times best-sellers. His latest book, 'My Mysterious Son: A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia and Shamanism,' is published by Skyhorse (New York) (see the review of the book in this issue of Sacred Hoop Magazine) [www.dickrussell.org](http://www.dickrussell.org)