
WELCOME SILENCE:
MY TRIUMPH OVER
SCHIZOPHRENIA

Carol S. North

Psychological Concept
schizophrenia

When Carol S. North was in medical school and studying the physiology of heart sounds, she put the stethoscope to her own heart and heard the barking of dogs, a barking that had come to her at odd moments since the time she had attended dog surgery labs. When she took an exam, voices told her which answers to give (she failed the test). On another occasion, when she was studying at home and let her bird out of its cage, the bird landed on her head and North felt messages coming to her brain from the bird. Other times, she believed that plants in her home were engulfing her or that the spirit world was controlling her body. Faculty and friends suggested that she seek help, and in the segment that follows, North tells of her first visit to Dr. Hemingway, a psychiatrist. North desperately wanted to stay in medical school, and she didn't want him to learn that she had previously been hospitalized for psychiatric problems. Here we see North's description of her behavior, thoughts, and feelings during her interview, and some of Dr. Hemingway's perceptions.

The psychiatrist was sitting behind his desk waiting for me to arrive. It was eight-thirty to the exact second. I thought that would make a good impression; my punctuality would demonstrate that I was sane and had things well under control.

He didn't seem to notice that I was on time.

"Carol?" he asked. "Are you Carol North?"

I nodded.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Hemingway."

"Hemingway, ocean spray. Love is blind, wined, and dined."

The voices were apparently still with me. I couldn't locate the speakers they were blaring from.

I took a closer look at Dr. Hemingway and wilted. This guy looked like a true Freud. He appeared to be in his fifties, and his beard and hair were pure white. He wore little round wire-rim spectacles which somehow seemed to complete the professorial effect of his tidy three-piece plaid wool suit. This guy did not look as if he

would understand anything. I doubted he had ever had any metaphysical experiences like mine.

“What brought you here today?” he asked.

At first I thought he meant my car, but then he politely rephrased his query to ask what kind of problems I was having. I told him I had been treated for psychiatric problems in the past, but I didn't say that I had been in this hospital, or that I had been having psychiatric symptoms continuously ever since. I didn't want him to think I was a crazy, hopeless case.

He sat quietly while I described the disruptions in my concentration caused by the barking dogs in the lectures and in the stethoscopes. I told him I was having problems understanding exam questions and that they got me all mixed up, although I wasn't sure exactly how. Feeling guilty, I added that I'd been skipping too many classes. But, I explained, this was only because I couldn't make much sense out of the lectures and my time would be better spent at home studying or sleeping.

After a moment's pause to reflect over what I'd said and to think if there was anything I might have left out, I added, “I can't concentrate when I'm hearing the voices.” (That was enough; I didn't want to have to tell him all about the Other Worlds' phenomena because it would have taken all day.)

Suddenly the voices turned on their Echo Machine, to get me to shut up about them, I supposed. My words didn't sound at all normal. They echoed. Next I heard Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention singing “Who Are the Brain Police?” behind the wall, with more echoes. It all sounded increasingly sinister. So many things had seemed sinister lately. Yes, there was something going on today.

“Where do these voices come from?” The doctor's voice was echoing just as everything else was.

“I don't know, exactly. I think they're from somewhere else.”

He looked puzzled. Twitching his eyebrows, he repeated, “From somewhere else?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Sometimes they come through speakers that are disguised in the walls. I can't ever find them.”

“What do the voices say?”

His echo was starting to bother me.

“I can't always understand them,” I tried to explain. “Sometimes they repeat snatches of conversation or make rhymes to it. How they sometimes sound is like they're having a cocktail party in the next room and I can make out only some of the words or phrases. It doesn't make a lot of sense.”

I wished that frigging Echo Machine would quit. It made it hard to concentrate on the discussion.

I had to work hard to stay on the same subject. It took me a while to reconnect my thoughts. Finally, I resumed speaking, hoping I hadn't drifted too far. “Sometimes the voices talk about what I'm doing, like they're sports commentators, saying things like ‘She is walking out of the Medical Sciences Building’ or ‘She doesn't know it but she's about to flunk this exam’—only they say things very calmly. Or they might tell me to do something ridiculous like walk across town and back in the middle of the night. A few times they've wakened me in the night by yelling in my ear, and I've been too scared to get back to sleep.”

"You appear to be having some trouble concentrating on what you're saying today," said Dr. Hemingway. "Is there any particular problem?"

"Well, yes. They have sound-effect machines. Like now they are using an Echo Machine that makes both of our voices reverberate, and that bothers me so I can't think very well. There are other machines like the Barking Dogs Machine and the Helicopter Machine that they can use to produce sounds out of nowhere. Sometimes I can't tell whether noises are my neighbors or the sound-effects machines."

I felt creepy talking about the voices. It was like talking about them behind their backs, except even worse because I knew they knew what I was saying about them. I hoped I hadn't gotten them irritated. The consequences could be severe. They could transform my next exam score from passing to failing at a whim.

"Do you ever hear your thoughts as if they had been spoken aloud?" Dr. Hemingway asked.

Wow, how does he know about that? Has he been reading my mind? I glared at him.

Finally I responded to his question: "Yes, I hear my thoughts out loud. In lecture. It bothers me." I wanted to cooperate yet not reveal too much now. I needed his help for my exams.

"Do you think other people can read your mind?" he probed.

Amazing how he knew about that too! Maybe he'd been listening to the same voices. "Yes," I said. "That's been a big problem for me."

He did seem to have good empathy. He was listening intently to everything I said. Nodding slowly, he muttered, "Mm-hmm," as if he was thinking hard. He didn't look totally convinced. "How do you know people are reading your thoughts?"

"My head's transparent. I can't protect my thoughts. Some one sucks all the thoughts out of my head and then I can't say anything because I don't have any thoughts left to say."

"Can you give me an example? When was the last time that happened?"

I felt my skin turning gray and starting to slide off my forearms right there in the psychiatrist's office. The sensation was so alarming that I couldn't possibly think to answer his question. It took all my concentration just to hold on to my skin. I was too embarrassed to tell him about my skin problem because I was sure it was a result of mental weakness.

"Is there some reason why you aren't saying anything?" he asked, firing off multiple twitches from his eyebrows. "Has someone stolen your thoughts? Do you think I have stolen your thoughts?"

His twitches had to be an anxiety gauge or a puzzlement gauge. I didn't know which. I thought it would probably be better for me to tell him about my skin problem than for him to hear it from the voices or pick it up from my own thought waves. I explained to him that I had been quiet for a minute because I had been using all my concentration to keep my forearm skin from sliding off.

He offered up another "Mm-hmm."

"The shrink is pink," said Hal.

I started to smile, but stopped myself. Hal was right. That was funny.

Dr. Hemingway asked me various other questions about my life, including my

medical and family history, educational background, and current living arrangements. Then he announced, "I'd like to prescribe you some medicine. If things get bad enough for you, you might have to quit school or go into the hospital."

Just as I'd suspected. If this guy was going to talk about my quitting school and hospitalization or other ruinous alternatives, he wasn't going to be any help at all. What I needed was someone to help me stay *in* school, not help me *out*. What I needed was a way to be strong against the Forces of Chaos. Couldn't he see my problem was essentially spiritual, even cosmic—and not really psychiatric at all? I refused even to think of hospitalization or quitting school.

To appease Dr. Hemingway I agreed to take small amounts of Navane, a major antipsychotic tranquilizer that he prescribed for me. That would make me seem cooperative and might help buy time until he could understand my problem in its broader sense and give me some real help. But I warned him that if the medicine made me groggy or sluggish or otherwise interfered with my schoolwork, I would have to discontinue it immediately. I needed my energy and my resources for medical school.

Dr. Hemingway wanted to see me again on Monday.

After I left he dictated a note which included the following statements about me:

The patient looks rather quiet, answers questions with some degree of thought disorder, and has trouble such as reaching her goal. She appears somewhat confused about her thought processes and what is going on and about the meaning which she sees in many things. There is no push of speech, no flight of ideas. She seems to be on the concerned and sober side. Occasionally, answers are somewhat retarded. She appears to have some insight into her illness, but this is definitely impaired. Judgment also seems to be impaired. Impression: probable schizophreniform illness. The history of an acute episode a number of years ago with rather relatively good health in between would seem to support this, although the possibility of a manic-depressive illness cannot be ruled out.

The following Monday I returned to Dr. Hemingway's office for the follow-up appointment he had scheduled. I didn't know that in the interim he had found my old hospital record.

The first thing Dr. Hemingway wanted to know was whether I was having any problem with the Navane. As he studied my face, his bushy white eyebrows arched upward and then subtly furrowed into his wire-rim glasses. Simultaneously his nose twitched.

That is undoubtedly a signal. This is some kind of a test. He has somehow observed me all weekend and is now fully equipped to detect the inconsistency or lie that he is expecting me to blurt out.

The voices might have filled him in on the details. He couldn't be trusted.

I couldn't decide what to say. I wanted to accuse him outright. But I didn't know exactly what to accuse him of. I would have to pretend I didn't know anything until I had more evidence. The conflicting thoughts about what to say collided with each other in my brain and vaporized, leaving a vacuum where the thoughts were just a second before.

I felt pressured. He was sitting there twitching his eyebrows and nose and mustache, waiting for me to answer his question. I didn't have any thoughts, so how could I answer his question? I had to think of something to say quickly, something consistent. He was still twitching and waiting.

I was falling through space and time again, only he couldn't tell that. I was the only one who could tell.

He broke my fall by speaking. Instantly I had thoughts again.

"Did you take the Navane?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered him in the most normal voice I could summon. It didn't sound like my voice. The voices must have put in a substitute.

The doctor was grinning. He was frowning, too. His face was one huge grin-frown.

"Did you have any problem with the medicine?" he asked again.

With my substitute voice I projected the words "I'm a bit dizzy when I first wake up in the morning." I wondered what they'd done with my usual voice.

"That dizziness is just a side effect which should wear off in a few days," he told me. "Until then, don't stand up too fast first thing in the morning."

His facial expression began to alternate between grinning and frowning at a speed of about four times a second. That made it nearly impossible for me to be able to read his true facial expression. He didn't appear to be so intent on catching me in an inconsistency or a lie now. He looked more trustworthy. Maybe I had misjudged him.

"What did you do this weekend?" he asked.

That sounded like a reasonably innocent question. I relaxed a little.

"Well, you remember on Friday I told you I had to move to a different apartment last month?"

"Oh yes, after the spring rains when your roof leaked so bad?" His eyebrows and nose twitched noticeably as he spoke.

"Right. Yesterday just before dawn I sneaked back to see the old apartment," I continued, still trying to sound as normal as I could. "I got in because I kept a duplicate key." I was doing fine, I thought.

"Well, what did you see?" His twitches were becoming almost rhythmic.

Maybe his twitches meant he knew the answer to his question. I didn't even need to tell him, since he knew. I studied his grin-frown for a minute. The sentence "What did you see?" echoed around in my head several times until I didn't know whether I'd said it or he'd said it or maybe even the voices had said it. He looked as if he expected me to say something. I didn't know what we were talking about anymore.

It was up to me to fill the silence.

Dr. Hemingway's office was dusty. I was inhaling dust particles into my lungs. No telling where all those dust particles had come from. Some of the molecules in the air might have diffused from someone passing gas earlier and now I was breathing them in. Maybe one of the dust particles I was breathing had come from breaking off of King Tut's body and floating aimlessly on the wind for centuries, to finally wander into this room. This was a conceptual equivalent of the Interference

Patterns. Maybe some plants had once incorporated a few atoms originally from Joan of Arc's body into their structure and then a cow had eaten the plants and defecated on the ground and some oats growing out of that soil had taken nourishment from the cow manure and had eventually been harvested and processed, and I had consumed the famous atoms in my Cheerios that morning! The idea became fixed in my head. This had happened, without a doubt.

"I am breathing King Tut and I have swallowed Joan of Arc," I told Dr. Hemingway. This was a very profound thought. It seemed intrinsically relevant to the discussion because of its profundity, although I was not quite sure how it related. The depth of its profundity seemed to far outweigh any qualms I had about saying it. It had been a good statement and would at least get the conversation moving again. The responsibility of making the next contribution to the discussion would be off my shoulders for the moment.

"Mm-hmmmm." Dr. Hemingway was momentarily taken aback by the absurdity of my statement.

I was still marveling at the brilliance of my observation when Dr. Hemingway said, "But what do swallowing Joan of Arc and breathing King Tut have to do with how your apartment looked?"

I felt my cheeks burning hot from the inside out. He must have been simultaneously seeing my cheeks turn cherry-red from the outside in. I was embarrassed that I had gotten mixed up and forgotten that we were talking about my old apartment, and then said something completely off the wall. Was Dr. Hemingway trying to trick me?

Dr. Hemingway pretended I hadn't said anything crazy. "Tell me about your old apartment," he said.

I was relieved he chose not to embarrass me further by making a big deal out of my confusion. "Well," I said, "when I got up to Megan's¹ old room I saw the ceiling bulging downward. The bulging was a Sign that the Other Worlds are impinging on this world, right? Pretty soon it will all come crashing in. Isn't that what it means?"

Dr. Hemingway didn't answer my question. He was twitching a lot. I couldn't tell for sure, but I thought he looked worried.

"I know it's true," I said soberly, "because I felt a touch of the SuperReal when I saw it." The SuperReal was such a profoundly significant concept that I couldn't convey its meaning to him in ordinary words. Instead I translated the concept into wordless thought waves which I transmitted to him through the air medium linking our minds. He didn't look at all receptive. I was finding communication with him difficult.

"Something else I saw over there upset me," I heard my substitute voice say. That elicited a double-twitch response of his eyebrows.

"There were little green plants growing out of the carpet in Megan's old room. I didn't know what to make of them."

"Mm-hmm," he said along with his next facial twitch. It sounded like an mm-hmm of disbelief to me.

¹ North's former neighbor

"But I *saw* them," I insisted. "They were really there. There were about five or six of them. They were about six inches tall, all single stalks. A couple of them even had little buds on their tips."

"Mm-hmm," he responded again. This doctor sure wasn't too quick with original responses. "Has Megan seen the little green plants?"

This was hopeless. Dr. Hemingway would never believe me, much less be able to offer an acceptable interpretation of these Signs. "No, I haven't shown them to her yet," I said, making a mental note to do just that.

He twitched again to signal a change of subject. He hadn't seemed satisfied with the last one. I hoped the next would be easier to discuss.

"Were you able to study over the weekend?" he asked.

I wished he'd quit twitching. It made me nervous. I still suspected it was some kind of signal. I answered his question: "I studied the whole weekend, but it was hard to concentrate because of the interference."

I anticipated another twitch from him at this point, but he just sat back in his chair grinfrowning.

I must have judged him right in the first place. I interpreted his ambiguous grinfrown to mean that he already knew about the interference, most likely from the voices. He was carefully poised in readiness for a swift pounce on me with a shocking verbal assault as soon as I said the wrong thing. He had all the evidence he needed to incriminate me. I shouldn't have let him in on such a personal concept as the interference.

"Can you tell me a little bit about the interference?" he asked, looking sincerely interested now. He was starting to back off.

Now I felt a little safer. I answered, "The interference is like static on the radio. It—well, it interferes."

"Interferes?" he asked. "How?" His face appeared immensely friendlier than it had a minute before. I had never been able to judge faces.

"It impinges," I explained further. "Like the voices. Like the barking dogs."

"Can you be more specific—to help me understand a little better?" He looked as if he sincerely wanted to understand. Nobody had ever responded to me like this before. In the past, people had just dismissed me as some kind of nut, instead of showing interest in my ideas like the OtherWorldly phenomena. I knew the Other Worlds weren't a delusion I had cooked up out of a state of mental derangement. They couldn't be. Delusions were simpler than that, like when people thought the FBI was after them. The Other Worlds were far too sophisticated and intricate to be a delusion. And they stood up under too many kinds of logic. They had too much consistency and reliability over time to be false. I wanted Dr. Hemingway to understand that.

I explained, "The interference is other things besides voices, helicopters, and barking dogs. It's also patterns. The patterns jump around and flow in and out of each other and change colors. They march over walls, spaces, and people's faces—like radio static, but only in the visual sense. The interference spills into our perceptual grounds from leaks from other systems. *You* can see and hear it, I think. You have the capability within you now, but you have to learn how to perceive—

just as the medical student must learn how to appreciate subtle clinical nuances that seem obvious to the seasoned physician.”

I paused, but Dr. Hemingway was listening intently, expecting me to finish.

I continued, “I think everybody sees the interference—but they haven’t learned to recognize what they’re observing.” That was what I meant to say, but I actually conveyed only about half of it, leaving Dr. Hemingway wondering what exactly I was trying to tell him.

He nodded thoughtfully. If I could get him to see that I had stumbled onto other dimensions, he might be my key to enlightening the world. People would be more likely to listen to a psychiatrist than to a former mental patient labeled schizophrenic.

“Have you ever discovered your phosphenes?” I asked him.

I could see I’d lost him there.

“Phosphenes,” I explained, “are the brilliant colored patterns you see when you close your eyes and press on your eyeballs with your fingers. Try it.”

“I know what those are,” he said. “I’ve seen them.”

“Good. The interference looks something like them.”

I felt I was starting to fall again. It was going to be difficult trying to explain things with this happening.

Dr. Hemingway persisted with his own questions: “Can you tell me about this SuperReal feeling you mentioned?”

“SuperReal, reel-to-reel banana peel,” I heard one of the voices say playfully from a far-off world.

That was funny. I tried to subdue an uncontrollable smile.

Dr. Hemingway responded with the slightest hint of an involuntary grin and asked, “What about this SuperReal feeling? What’s that like?” He was trying not to acknowledge my smile.

I managed to get my mouth straight again and explain, “The SuperReal is a feeling of reality that is stronger and harsher than the usual reality I know—it’s like biting down on something cold when you have a cavity. It impinges, like the interference. It’s a feeling that overwhelms me when we collide with the Parallel Worlds and part of their systems leak into this one.”

Dr. Hemingway looked puzzled. He couldn’t understand why I believed such absurd ideas. (What he didn’t understand was that schizophrenic logic transcended ordinary logic.) I couldn’t explain the SuperReal to him. He was in the wrong logic set. There weren’t earth words to describe it. “SuperReal” was the closest I could come to describing it.

“What are these Other Worlds you keep telling me about?” he asked. “What’s it like over there?”

I thought back to my last visit to the Other Side. Right then I was sitting on the wrong side of the SuperReal Barrier to be able to tell him about it. My mind over here couldn’t grasp it. His probably couldn’t either. I could only suggest vaguely that it was totally different from here. It was something you just had to experience for yourself.

Dr. Hemingway was still wearing his grin-frown. He hadn’t stopped grin-frowning for more than a few seconds while I’d been talking to him. I wanted to

ask him about it, but I thought maybe I was already supposed to know somehow, so I didn't ask. I didn't want to look stupid.

The unmistakable putter of a helicopter vibrated through the windowpane right behind Dr. Hemingway. He pretended not to notice it.

Why? Was he somehow involved in it? Had he informed them of my whereabouts? I tried to block my thoughts out completely in hopes that the helicopters couldn't locate me by homing in on my thought waves.

After an insufferably long minute the helicopter faded into the nondescript drone of the background interference, and I no longer heard it. I was aware that neither Dr. Hemingway nor I had said anything for quite a while. His twitch had quit. He was looking directly into my eyes. I thought he was trying to read my naked thoughts right through my pupils. He had me under some kind of a spell. It felt creepy. He was doing it with the power of his eyes. He was hypnotizing me. He could make me do weird things. He could make me do things I didn't want to do.

Well, stop staring at him, then!

But I couldn't.

"I'm going to increase your Navane from ten to fifteen milligrams a day," he said. "And I'd like you to come back and see me again in a week. Can you do that?" he said with another twitch.

I was under his spell. He could make me do that. I couldn't possibly fail.

He set me up another appointment for the following Monday. As Dr. Hemingway opened the door to his office, Hal announced, "You're leaving Dr. Hemingway's office now. You're about to step off the edge of the earth."

I gazed out the door in the direction of the voice. I looked back at Dr. Hemingway. He hadn't heard the voice. Well, then, I hadn't either.

"See you next Monday," he said as I stepped into the hallway with my book pack over my shoulder. I didn't glance back.

Dr. Hemingway dictated the following note:

It turns out that Miss North has a very large record compiled here at the psychiatric hospital with at least one admission here, numerous outpatient visits. On the occasion of her admission to the hospital . . . she was diagnosed as catatonic schizophrenic. Apparently, when admitted to the hospital, she showed many of the present symptoms which she is complaining of. It is evident that this girl has had a serious and possibly chronic condition going back . . . at least [four years] but has been able to function reasonably effectively in the school situation despite the chronicity of her complaints.

As I changed into my sweat clothes to prepare for my morning jog my breasts felt lumpy and tender. This had to be a side effect of the Navane. I'd also gained several pounds, thanks to the medicine. But the worst side effect was when I started finding wet spots on the front of my blouses, also from the Navane. I phoned Dr. Hemingway to complain that the medicine was making my breasts leak milk. Having previously experienced psychiatrists who were intolerant of "patient non-compliance," I thought Dr. Hemingway might get all huffy and demand that I either cooperate or terminate treatment. But at this point I didn't care; I couldn't tolerate these side effects.

To my surprise, he was sympathetic. He told me I was apparently very sensitive to side effects of drugs, and he elected to switch my medicine to small doses of a different antipsychotic tranquilizer, Haldol. I had had trouble with Haldol when I was being treated by Dr. Falmouth, but the doses had been large. Dr. Hemingway began my dose at a minimal half milligram at bedtime, and over the next week he gradually increased it to four milligrams. After a few days I began to notice that the voices were not bothering me quite as continuously, and that the interference was growing fainter and less disruptive.

I continued regular appointments with Dr. Hemingway. I began thinking it was time to be honest with him. He seemed trustworthy. I decided he knew me well enough by now that his opinions of me were already formed and he might not be so likely to be swayed by my old records if he read them now. . . .

"Keep taking the Haldol," he advised me. "It should help stop those confusing thoughts and the voices too. It will probably make it easier for you to study."

That's exactly what I wanted, to be able to study better. Maybe this guy really was trying to help me. . . .

I wasn't too crazy to be able to sense genuineness. Even through the heavy interference storm, I could detect Dr. Hemingway's caring attitude. He was unlike any other psychiatrist I'd seen. He seemed sincerely interested in my welfare and in the quality of my existence. I sense this was how he could understand my inability to tolerate certain drug side effects, when former psychiatrists had not taken the same complaints seriously. What I really feared was being forced to take drugs that would prevent me from studying effectively. I would do everything possible to prevent another interruption of my education.

Response and Analysis

1. What symptoms of schizophrenia did Carol North exhibit during her meetings with Dr. Hemingway? For instance, do you find examples of clang associations, ideas of reference, or certain types of hallucinations?
2. What differences do you see in the way North perceives herself during the sessions and the way Dr. Hemingway perceives North? What might cause these differences in perception?
3. What does Dr. Hemingway do to earn North's trust? What strengths does North show that may have aided in her recovery?

Research

Suppose you want to conduct a study to investigate the degree to which individuals are correctly diagnosed with schizophrenia. You will videotape an interview with an individual who demonstrates symptoms associated with schizophrenia. Then you will send the videotape and a detailed history of the individual to a random sample of one hundred clinical psychologists. How might you select the psychologists? Why might it be important to give all of the participants the same instructions? What instructions might you give?