



The Ring in the Well: Psychosis as a crisis of identity

Christoffer Haugaard¹, Ava & David Epston.

In late August 2020, Ava, a young woman in her late twenties, visited the psychiatric emergency room at Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital in Denmark. The emergency room psychiatric files state that she experienced hearing voices and had begun speaking to objects in her apartment. Voices seem to have directed her to go into the laundry room in the basement of the building and remove a grate to climb into the well beneath it. The purpose of doing so was that the voices required Ava to retrieve a ring. Ava also decided to get rid of some of her clothes and cut her long hair short. She did this to rid herself of something from the past and in accordance with an agreement with her own body. Ava was described as seeming to be paranoid, fearing she was being watched or stalked, afraid of going crazy and losing track of the conversation with the professionals. She was considered to be in a psychotic state and according to professional evaluation, the likely cause was stress in relation to the demands of her university studies. Her mental state was described as shifting between seeming to be normal and being in a state of confusion and showing strange behavior, especially in the evening and during the night. The files described some uncertainty as to whether this was a psychiatric problem or a neurological problem, but neurological examinations ruled out the latter. She received an ICD-10 diagnosis of acute polymorphic psychotic disorder without symptoms of schizophrenia.

Ava was discharged from hospital in early October 2020 and referred to outpatient treatment at the facility where I (CH) am employed. I first met Ava in early November as she participated in a group therapy format that I ran that ended in early February 2021. In early March 2021, Ava returned to the psychiatric emergency room and was hospitalized for a second time. The reason was a sudden resurgence of voice-hearing, after their silence since she was last hospitalized. The voices were now behaving differently, commenting on her actions and appearance. Such comments came from a number of voices, the contents of which were both positive and negative. However, no other symptoms were described. According to the psychiatric files, she presented no delusions and

¹ Christoffer Haugaard is a psychologist at Aalborg Psychiatric Hospital, Aalborg University Hospital, Denmark. Correspondence: christoffer.haugaard@rn.dk or haugaardch@aol.com



did not suffer the dizziness and confusion of the first hospitalization. She was discharged after one month in hospital, and as she had expressed an interest in conversations with a psychologist, we met and began our collaboration. We met biweekly at first, and later with several weeks between meetings until early February 2022, having had 13 meetings in all. By then Ava had not heard from the voices for a long time, felt that matters from her past had been sufficiently addressed and was in the process of reducing her antipsychotic medication in collaboration with her psychiatrist and psychiatric nurse. During her contact with the hospital, Ava has been treated only with relatively low doses of antipsychotic medication, specifically Quetiapine 50 mg and more recently Aripiprazole 15 mg. Apart from our collaboration, Ava also worked with a psychiatric nurse and a peer-worker.²

Ava's account of her experiences between August and October 2020

The following is based on Ava's recollection of events in May 2022:

Ava was required to climb into a well several times under strict instruction from voices she could hear in her head. The well in question was situated in the college dorm laundry room in the cellar and had a removable grate and was just barely wide enough to fit a person of Ava's size and deep enough to reach up to just below her armpits when standing in it. It was for draining water away, and next to it was a tap with a hose. On the last of these descents, Ava had undressed. She really needed to urinate, but the voices strictly forbade that, leading to Ava wetting her clothes. The voices then instructed her to remove the wet clothes and proceed into the well. It was on this occasion that Ava was discovered. A young man from the dorm came into the laundry room to find Ava without clothes on, stating that "I have to get into this well and find a ring. I am married." The young man perceived that something needed to be done, and assisted Ava to return to her apartment. Shortly after, Ava realized that these events were unusual, and she quickly went to his apartment and apologized that he had seen her in that situation. He was very kind, however, and encouraged her to think nothing of it. After this, Ava sought out a female friend also living in the college dorm. Ava excitedly told her that she had just been in a well, saying, "Isn't that cool? How amazing is it that I just did that?!" The friend did not quite see the coolness of it, however, thinking that this is not something you would do in a normal state of

² A peer-worker is a hospital employee who is or was formerly a psychiatric patient. They represent an insider perspective and work from a Recovery-oriented model.





mind.

Christoffer: Would you say that you were in an altered state of mind during these events?

Ava: I would definitely say that I was, yes.

Christoffer: What you said about recovering a ring sounds as if your actions were purposeful. Were you aware of some meaning of what you were doing? Were voices telling you what to do? Did you perhaps just comply with what they wanted of you?

Ava: Yes. I believed I would be punished if I did not do these things. It was a kind of survival, I think. I recall they said, "You must go down there again. You must do it!" I was also required to do something I really did not like, which was that I had to pour water from the tap into my mouth so that I could hardly breathe, and then spit out the water. Then I climbed into the well. The first time I did it, I was fully clothed. It was on the third occasion that I was undressed and discovered.

These voices demanding that Ava rinse her mouth and get into the well to find a ring only arrived at what proved to be the completion of Ava's unusual experiences. She had not heard them before they turned up to tell her to get into the well. This culmination was preceded by other experiences.

Ava: The first unusual thing that I recall happening was when my heart suddenly started beating very hard and it woke me up from sleep. It was like "bam" and now something psychotic was going on.

Various objects in Ava's apartment started making noises that Ava perceived to be communications directed at her. This included the kettle, the stove and other material objects. She perceived these objects to somehow be communications from friends and acquaintances. They did not speak with human voices, but rather made sounds that Ava decoded for meaning.

Ava: For example, if I wasn't feeling very well, they would make sounds and I would reply to them that I wasn't feeling well, and further sounds implied that I had to explain to them why I wasn't feeling too well. Or if the toilet made a particular sound, it meant that I should use the bathroom. I would also communicate with them while I was cooking. A particular friend was



communicating through the toilet, and another specific friend through the sink. These connections had to do with some specific associations based on colors or word associations.

Christoffer: Were your social relations quite simply present for you in your apartment in this way?

Ava: Definitely. They definitely were.

Christoffer: Was it like having conversations with these objects or was it more a matter of getting instructions?

Ava: It was very much about getting instructions. They were trying to assist me in writing my thesis for university. To motivate me, make sure I ate and got sleep, use the bathroom and shower. A door was a particular person who sort of encouraged me to work on my thesis.

Christoffer: When objects began to communicate and your friends were present in this way, did that strike you as strange or did it not seem unusual to you? Like when you are dreaming, you might experience some very strange or surreal things, but while dreaming, you just accept it? What was this like? Was it frightening or did it seem mundane and quite acceptable to you?

Ava: What I especially recall is that it was confusing. I think I was so committed to it that I just went along with it. It was real to me. I recall working on my thesis and then there would be a sound and I would hurry to get to that person. I had a plastic holster on a shelf, and for some reason, this shelf sometimes vibrated, and the holster would vibrate with it. I took that to be a friend of mine laughing at me, and I'd respond with, "Are you making fun of me?" It would vibrate again, and that meant, "Yes." It was quite real.

Around the same time, Ava experienced a very intense bout of cleaning out her apartment of old things connected to an ex-boyfriend, as well as getting rid of everything in a red color. This was because the color red seemed connected to her ex-boyfriend's mother.

Ava: You can say I was trying to get my ex-boyfriend out of my life. Something new had to happen. Something new was on the way. While I was throwing all these things out, his voice was there, and he was saying "I can see you. I can see what you are doing." I struggled to let go of my formerly potential



mother-in-law, throwing things out that were connected to her through the color red. With every step I took towards the garbage bin with an object, the harder it got. A neighbor helped me to throw things out. While I could hear all these noises in the apartment, I believed that they were communicating with each other, and were getting acquainted. I also perceived them all to have love relations with me. Then at one point, I said to them, "Oh you are really getting cozy, aren't you?" Around this time, I had some considerations about my former boyfriend and his mother being psychopaths. I was also just about to reach the conclusion that maybe he had never really loved me, but just before I quite reached it, there was something from outside that shouted, "STOOOOOP!" I interpreted that to mean that now I just had to get out of this. I was crawling around on the floor and I had to turn off all the lights because I was afraid of electricity and afraid that my former boyfriend's mother would come and kill me. I removed all electrical appliances, so it was quite dark in my apartment.

During this time, Ava also decided to cut off all her long hair, as close to bald as a pair of scissors would allow:

Ava: While reading through my thesis, I heard someone from outside the window shouting, "You are beautiful! I am sorry! You are beautiful!" I picked up a pair of scissors and cut off all my hair saying, "Looks aren't everything. Why must men be so condescending! Violence doesn't solve anything."

Christoffer: What were you feeling while you were cutting off your hair? Was it liberating?

Ava: I was angry. But it was also nice to get rid of the hair. After breaking up with my boyfriend, I wanted something new to happen, so I bleached it to get blond hair and got a perm. By cutting it off I also got back to my own roots in a way.

Christoffer: Yes. Literally!

Ava: Yes! It was also meant to show that I can do things. "Leave me alone. I want to do things for myself. It is my hair and my life, and I don't have to be beautiful all the time."

Christoffer: People around you must have noticed!



Ava: I recall going for a walk with my friend after I cut the hair but before we went to the hospital, and she touched it and said, "Ava, you are so beautiful. Just look at you" because you could see my face more. At one point I also believed that I was pregnant. This was before the well and during the time with hearing voices. I looked at my reflection in a window and noticed my belly and thought, "Hasn't my belly gotten a bit bigger? What is happening?" One of the things I was throwing out at the time was a pair of shoes. I perceived those shoes to be connected to a girl I had seen in dance class. Somehow, I got the feeling that it was her that I was to give birth to. I had to get her out of me. I also sensed that a certain male person with a relationship to my family was also to be borne by me. I would spit a lot during that time. This was to get something out. My feet and ankles were swollen at the time, and I also saw that as an indication of pregnancy.

Christoffer: Was this giving birth a matter of getting something out, like the spitting?

Ava: Yes. There was just something that had to get out.

At a certain point, voices speaking human language appeared and in a very demanding and direct way instructed her to go into the well in the laundry room in the cellar.

Ava: It was a robotic or machine-sounding voice that instructed me, "Now you must do this. Now you must go down there." While pouring water into my mouth just prior to getting into the well, the voices directed me to say that my mother was a prostitute. I did believe she actually was. I also had to say that my mother and my father didn't love me. I had to pour water into my mouth and throat and spit it out and then say these things out loud.

The third time she did so, she was discovered and then visited her friend. Despite Ava's excitement about having been in the well and the unusualness of stating something like that, Ava's friend was remarkably calm. She invited her in, and they cooked a meal and ate together and then spent some time playing a game. She then suggested that they cycle to the psychiatric hospital. It all went very calmly, certainly a credit to Ava's friend.

Ava: She was amazingly cool about it. She was quite fast on the bike, though. I remember this ride to the hospital being quite significant to me. All these



memories came up for me about things from earlier in my life. About what a specific person had said to me and done to me. I kept spitting. I don't know why. Like I had to get clean or having to get rid of something. Every time I had said something, I had to spit it out as well and I was really joyful that I was relieved of that. I could move in a different way, like I felt lighter. It was very liberating. When we had arrived at the hospital, I had these shifts between moments of being exhausted and feeling liberated and a lightness in the body.

Christoffer: She sounds like a good friend. One who isn't easily shaken.

Ava: Both she and the guy who discovered me in the laundry room were just the sweetest people.

Christoffer: Was it significant to you that these people who were involved when you were going through this were so calm?

Ava: I believe so. If they had been all, "Wow what is this, we have to get you to hospital" then it would have been a different reaction, but she was just so calm and calmed me down by just having something to eat together, playing that game and talking about the future. That guy who got me out the well said, "It can happen to anyone," even though that really isn't something you normally hear about. It's not like a broken toe or something. I really went through a lot over a rather short time. I believe it all happened during the course of about two weeks.

During the time that Ava was consequently in hospital, most of these experiences ceased. She does recall many memories of past events showing up for her to deal with, and she had conversations about these memories with a clothes hanger in much the same way as she had communicated with various material objects in her apartment. She also recalls a sense of communication with a close friend, but this did not have the intensity of the time at home. She completed a jigsaw puzzle while in hospital, and this somehow acquired a strong significance for her.

Ava only recalls one other unusual experience while in hospital. She visited the nearby zoo and saw a woman calling out a man's name loudly while standing in front of an elephant. This name was significant to Ava because it was the name of the person she had sensed that she was supposed to marry during the intense events prior to hospitalization. It also evoked an association with an elephant



tapestry that she had at home. At seeing this scene, Ava turned and ran away to prevent being pulled into any further experiences. The person she had sensed that she had to marry was a brief acquaintance that she had become very close to very quickly. This acquaintance was significant for her in a mixed way, involving both the experience of how intimate you can become with another person, but also how people may let you down and hurt you.

Christoffer's responses to Ava's account

Initially, Ava did not give me a complete account of all her experiences during this time of crisis. She told me about it a bit at a time. This meant that I responded to elements of her experiences along the way. Ava told me that a change in her perception of reality happened suddenly and initially told me about the cutting of the hair and about climbing into a well. After a while, she also told me that she had to find a ring in the well and that she also had a sense of this ring being related to being supposed to marry her ex-boyfriend (which she had no actual interest in doing). Upon hearing about these two events, I was seized by some particular associations:

Cutting the Hair

This cutting off the hair – what could this mean? It seemed symbolically charged to me, especially in light of Ava's gender and the cultural connection between femininity and long hair. Was Ava rejecting something about the femininity of her appearance? Was she repudiating something about the fact that she is a woman? As I was wondering these questions aloud, Ava added that she was actually saying certain things as she was cutting her hair such as, "Looks aren't everything. Why must men be so condescending! Violence doesn't solve anything." This prompted me to ask her if she thought this might be connected to the male gaze. Was Ava rejecting a male perception of her femininity as expressed in her hair? Ava then added that as she was cutting off her long hair, she heard a male voice that sounded concerned and apologetic, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please don't cut off your hair. You are beautiful." But this comment about her seeming beautiful to a male voice and the desire of the voice for her to preserve the beauty of her long hair just strengthened her resolve and her desire to reject being beautiful in the eyes of a man. Indeed, these details seemed to me a strong confirmation of a connection between long hair and feminine beauty in the eyes of men, and that this was exactly what Ava was targeting by cutting it, thus making herself "ugly"



according to such a gaze.

Another association I had was concerning initiation. Was Ava going through some kind of initiatory experience? From ethnographic literature as well as my interest in the history of religion, I was aware of the significance in many cultures of initiation processes and that these processes tend to follow a certain pattern (Bramley, 1994; Eliade, 1989; Hartley, 2010; Kvilhaug, 2018; Lukoff & Everest, 1985; Turner, 1979; Wedel, 2009; White & Epston, 1990). According to van Gennep, this pattern or rite of passage has three phases: 1) Separation – the initiate is separated from his or her prior social role or identity. Being a child, for example. This is often understood and performed as a symbolic death. The old identity is ‘killed’ in some way. 2) The liminal phase – a state of being outside the normal social world in which normal relationships are dissolved. At the same time, a new status or identity has not been achieved. One is betwixt and between. Mythically, this is often understood as being in the underworld. New knowledge and powers are often obtained from teachers or supernatural beings in this realm. A search for and the receipt of visions is common. 3) Integration – a return to the social world and stepping into a new social role and identity. Adulthood, for example. It is not unusual for such processes to involve some physical changes to the body, such as tattoos or scarification. I wondered if this cutting of the hair might be seen as a symbolic death and thus a kind of separation from a certain status or identity. Was Ava ‘killing’ an old self, or maybe ‘killing’ a certain perceived identity upheld by people around her? Could this state that Ava was in be a liminal state and part of a separation from a particular identity that had to be ‘killed,’ perhaps an identity specifically connected to gender, femininity, beauty standards, and especially as these are related to a particular male gaze? In such a light, the cutting of the hair appeared to me as almost a spontaneous ritual expression of an initiatory process involving the symbolic death of the feminine self as desirable for men, perhaps even an act of liberation from male dominance. This did not seem irrational or bizarre to me at all. Perhaps the meaning is not obvious in a modern Western context but viewed in the light of initiation rituals and the symbolisms of death and rebirth, it made perfect sense to me. The cutting of hair is not an uncommon signifier of a person’s changed status, particularly a change into a more spiritual way of being, such as is the case with monks in both Christian and Buddhist contexts, as well as in Afro-Atlantic religions (Walker, 1990).

The desire and actions to get something out struck me as some kind of cleansing





action or purification. Ava washed her mouth with water and spoke what seems emotionally difficult material. She felt she had to give birth to someone in order to get them out of her and during this time, she would expectorate a lot. She also recounted negative life experiences to herself while cycling to the hospital and would spit after each utterance in order to get it out. Such acts of self-purification also seemed to me to be quite in line with a process of the death of a former self or an undesirable relation with the past, which seemed to be almost literally expectorated by Ava.

Climbing into a Well

Similarly, Ava's description of being told to climb into a well and indeed doing so seemed pregnant with meaning to my mind. Could there be a more literal way of performing a descent into the underworldly realm of death than by actually climbing into a well – a shaft going down into the bowels of the earth? The darkness of the deep that is symbolically both the tomb and the womb. When voices were telling her to do this several times, might we see the voices as taking the role of virtual leaders of a ritual of descent and ascent, a series of journeys into the dark below? I also took note of the connection to water. The literal tunnel of descent that Ava used was a kind of well for water and it had a tap above it. Indeed, Ava even poured water into her mouth from the tap. In myth and ritual all over the world, water is heavily symbolically charged. So much can be said about water. Perhaps the nearest example in a Western context is baptism – the initiation ritual of Christianity. The initiate is submerged in water, by which the old, profane self dies and the person rises up, like a birth from the amniotic ocean of a mother's womb, born again as a Christian. A descent into and rising up from a watery underworld. The water is the agent of the death of the old self, a cleansing of sin, and a birth into a new relationship with the divine. In the Brothers Grimm story about Mother Holle, an otherworldly realm is reached by climbing into a well; another such fairytale, *The White Snake*, requires the protagonist to retrieve a princess's ring from the bottom of the ocean in order to marry her and to avoid his own death; countless Celtic goddesses of healing and wisdom are personified rivers and springs; the goddesses of Fate in Nordic myth come from and reside by the well of Fate; to become wise, the god Odin must drink from the well of the mind and give an eye as sacrifice; in Central-West Africa as well as in Afro-diasporic Cuba, the dead, the otherworld and a central divinity is identified with the sea, both literally and symbolically, called Kalunga. (Beck, 2009; Cerqueira do Rosario, 2006; Grimm & Grimm, 1884a; Grimm & Grimm,



1884b; Kuusela, 2022; Kvilhaug, 2018; Ochoa, 2008)

The requirement for Ava to take off her clothes and thus be naked also seems symbolically salient. Like cutting off hair, taking off clothes may be a symbolic 'killing' of the self and a purification of something that has been imposed on her. Nakedness may also be seen as a reduction to one's most basic being, unadorned and exposed as what one is beneath everything. A death of imposition and pretenses, perhaps like the goddess Inanna-Ishtar being directed to take off all her adornments and be naked in order to enter the underworld and bring back her lost lover. As well as the symbolism of death, nudity can also be connected to birth, as we all come into the world naked, emerging from a watery tunnel.

But if these descents into a well, pouring water over herself and being naked by the direction of voices is viewed as a kind of death/rebirth process and cleansing ritual, why do the voices direct her to state her parents' unlove for her? My suggestion is that this might be the identity that has been imposed on Ava and from which she is to be purified. Is it a case of Ava being required to name squarely that identity that must die and that she must rid herself of? The false self that this process is intended to destroy.

Ava also added another detail: she had the sense that she needed to retrieve a ring from the well. My immediate association was 'treasure'. Having to go into the darkness of the underworld in order to find a treasure and bring it back up. But what could this treasure be? A ring seemed interesting to me for two reasons: 1) It is circular. Might the circularity of it be significant? The circle as a symbol of wholeness and completeness? 2) The most common ritual use of rings in our society is the engagement ring and the wedding ring. Could this signify that the process that Ava is going through is supposed to lead to wholeness? And in light of the matrimonial associations with a ring, might this wholeness be related to intimacy, connectedness – love even? An engagement or a wedding is also a pact of sorts. It is an obligation and a promise of loyalty. If Ava is symbolically to be married, to whom? Perhaps to her own true self? To her true purpose in life – a purpose beyond being a pretty object for a man to enjoy? I wondered: could the treasure that Ava tries to recover from the darkness in the deep be her true self? Is she the jewel, hidden in darkness, waiting for her to recover it and unite with it?



Personal history

The situation that Ava describes concerning certain relations being present in objects and being very directive towards Ava, as well as her sense that her former boyfriend did not love her and was a psychopath, and her desire to remove all objects pertaining to him and his mother, gave us cause to consider Ava's history of relations. The hair cutting seemed explicitly connected to the rejection of particular male relations. We did go on to explore this topic, and indeed there were examples of significant and problematic relations to certain men in Ava's history. Her words while cutting off her hair proved to make a lot of sense in light of this history. We focused on these matters and Ava's family relations during a period of our collaboration.

Ava's evaluation of our collaboration

The following conversations between Ava, Christoffer and David took place in June 2022.

Ava's evaluation of Christoffer's interpretations and the significance of meaning

Christoffer: When I had the idea that these actions might be meaningful, how was that for you to hear? Did it seem alien or did it make sense?

Ava: It made sense. I haven't read about mythology or rituals or cleansings and things like that, but I was very open to it because I needed a more rational explanation, or an explanation for how it could be so. I didn't think it was crazy.

Christoffer: I recall worrying whether you would think so, but I didn't think it was crazy myself. You say you needed an explanation. Was that missing at that time?

Ava: Yes. Why was I supposed to find this ring and get married to someone I barely knew? Why did I have to cut my hair? I haven't read about what happens in the brain during psychosis, if that is something you can learn from books. Just having had a psychotic episode and that is why I did those things, that was not enough somehow. The things I had to do were so specific and after that I had to enter into a new life. Something like being resurrected and a new life.



Christoffer: Were you aware even before we started talking about it that something was missing in terms of explanation? Were you on the lookout for an explanation?

Ava: No, I don't think that I specifically was. I think some time passed before all the pieces of the psychosis joined together so that I could understand it as a whole. But I think I had the need to understand it. There are still things I don't understand, though. Like why my mother had to be a prostitute and that my parents didn't love me. Well, I can imagine some of it. My sister's dad once told me a story about how his mother was a prostitute. Maybe I pulled something into my psychosis from there.

Christoffer: You may not have consciously sought an explanation when we had our conversations, but I did provide one such after a while. You said it was different from what you had otherwise concerned yourself with. Mythology and such. Did you become aware that you needed an explanation at that time?

Ava: I think I became more aware that there was an explanation. I became more aware that it had a meaning. That I did have to go through a kind of crisis of identity by means of the psychosis.

Christoffer: Is "crisis of identity" a good term for what it was?

Ava: I kind of think that is what it was. Because I had to rid myself of so many old things, and there was so much in the air of my apartment that was just saturated with my past.

Christoffer: You do describe getting rid of a lot of stuff. I have also made a note of how you did a lot of spitting. You poured water in your mouth and spat it out while saying things about not being loved, you spat while feeling pregnant, and cycling to the hospital as thoughts of the past came up and then you would spit and feel better afterwards. To me, it sounds like a cleansing. Like literally spitting something out to get it out of the body.

Ava: It was very much because it was just gross and "eeeew" out with that.

Christoffer: This matter of considering the meaning of your experiences, was that significant for you? The working on how to explain it? Significant to how you looked at it or how you felt?



Ava: That something makes sense – that is a good thing when you are doing something that is so out of the ordinary. It is quite nice to put it into words. Especially with the hair. It was good to have it analyzed.

Christoffer: Did it otherwise seem unintelligible to you?

Ava: A little. I said, “Why do men have to be so condescending” and then cut off some hair. That did not quite make sense to me. But it is something old that is part of me. I know from my mother how important hair is. She has told me that there is much history in the hair. It is not that I am, I don’t know if you would call it superstitious, but it also just felt good to cut the hair. There was a freedom. A new beginning in a way. It has provided me with more meaning to talk about that.

David: Why was it that cutting your hair fitted best with Christoffer’s speculations regarding you “rejecting an imposed identity”?

Ava: I think that cutting of my hair fitted to Christoffer’s speculations regarding me rejecting an imposed identity, because as I cut off my hair I said things such as, “Why must men be so condescending?”, “Beauty is not everything” and “violence does not solve anything.” These things relate to a “former life” that I had, where I was almost living with my sister’s dad. He had a strong influence on me. I had seen him being violent and he has high beauty standards for women. He thinks they must look in a way that matters to him. And I think that I was influenced by his way of viewing things, and I wanted to sort of make statements about this as I cut off my hair and this past life. Also, I had met two guys months before my psychosis, and they saw me as being someone else. Although I might have been wrong, I did feel that they labeled me as only thinking about my looks and being stupid. The explanation as to why I cut off my hair was sufficient to me and resonated in me.

Evaluation of outcomes

Christoffer: I think it is very interesting that you were doing things that, at least to my eyes, seem very meaningful, as you may read in what I have committed to writing. It seems to follow a mythic-ritualistic pattern. Almost like you are speaking a ritual language, while you at the same time had no prior knowledge of anything like that. And during it, you had no awareness of



anything like that either. Much of it was by instruction from voices that did not provide any explanation, but just said, “Do this and do that.” That really has me speculating about these voices. How on earth do they know these things? It seems mysterious to me that they instruct you to do things that, at least to me, speak an almost ritual-symbolic language. Crawling into a well – of course! This is a journey to the underworld. Cleansing by water. The hair has to go, because the old must die. Clear enough. But you had no awareness of that. How do you look upon this now?

Ava: I do think I went through a crisis of identity. I had to throw all this old stuff out. I suspect that it makes sense in that case. And also, that I had to get married. That also has to do with something new, as I understand it. It makes sense that I had to go through these things, because I was precisely in a state of crisis, and so much was stuck in me. And the past hurt. The past came up and I had not dealt with it sufficiently.

Christoffer: Was this a reckoning with the past?

Ava: It was definitely a reckoning with men who had looked upon me in a certain way. Like I was stupid. I felt like I was put to one side. There were things that had happened within the last month like this that had a great impact on me. I find it strange that just that month could affect me that much during the psychotic episode, as compared to the time from I was a child till I was a teenager or mid-twenties. All that time took up space, but how much space just the past month also took up. I took note of that. That one month can have such a big influence on you when you just meet two people you hardly know.

Christoffer: If this was a reckoning with the past, was it successful? Was it completed? Was it a reckoning that led you to emerge transformed or with a different relationship to your past?

Ava: I think I was a lot less angry at my dad after this than I had been. Less angry at my mom as well. I did find a greater peace after this. I was happier. When I had to leave the hospital and go back to my apartment, it was hard. I cried then. But it was just like I was uplifted. There had been something heavy on my body of emotions that had gotten out. When we were on our way to the hospital it was like I was so light.



Christoffer: What was the role of psychiatry? You said the altered state was wearing off when you arrived in the emergency room.

Ava: That had to do with getting a foothold. To find my own self again. To put it into words. A diagnosis. There were things I hadn't expected at the hospital, like a sense of community and I learned knitting. I could sit down and relax better. Simply eating I don't know how much food. There were so many good things that came out of that too. Trips to the zoo. It was like getting some peace and securing a foothold.

David: Do you think this crisis of identity was something of a close call between say 'losing yourself' and 'finding yourself'?

Ava: You could say that by having a psychosis I lost myself, and by cutting off my hair, throwing out old clothes and other belongings I wanted a new beginning. My hair has grown out now, and I'm starting to feel as myself again. Just more relaxed, at ease – without anxiety and confusion.

David: Do you see "crisis" and "transformation" as synonymous? Or do you see them as somewhat different?

Ava: I think that through a crisis comes a transformation. I don't see them being synonyms, but if you go through a crisis, you can in the end transform yourself. The crisis can in other words lead to a transformation, because I did something emotionally and physically to go through the crisis, which resulted in me cutting my hair and throwing out belongings related to the past.

Looking back two years later

Christoffer: How do things look in a longer perspective? Two years have passed now. Those two weeks and what you went through – was it a seminal event?

Ava: I think so. Definitely. It helped me put some things in order. And it helped me to let go of things. Much of the past. I had been seeing a therapist before [the psychosis] and we had talked about the relationship I was in and my relationship to my boyfriend's parents. What happened there was a pretty clean cut. Not long after, maybe about half a year, I moved away from that place.

Christoffer: Have there been changes in your life that you connect to this event?



Ava: Definitely. I have gotten a much stronger relationship to both my parents. I talk to my mother every day and my father too. We didn't use to. That relationship has become much stronger. Also to my sister. And to myself, I think. I have found a peace that I have not had before. I was studying back then of course, or maybe I have just gotten older... but so much energy became stored up inside me that just needed to get out, so I jogged a lot, and I don't anymore. I have found a greater calm or peace.

Christoffer: What about men? I got the impression that some of it, especially cutting the hair, was connected to men. Has anything happened with your view of men or gender?

Ava: It's funny, because there was no reckoning with women? It was mainly men that I felt stepped on by. Because I have put away my sister's father, I have found my own father. He is not like that at all, which I have not appreciated before, but do now. He says I am beautiful both inside and outside... I get all emotional. I appreciate my parents a lot more. I have also gotten a boyfriend who is not like that either. I think there are many things that have been healthy for me to go through with this psychosis. I just had to say that not all men are like that and to see that not all men are like that. I did have that, "Why do men have to be like this?" and I generalized a lot.

Christoffer: Did the psychosis put things in a sharp light? Almost like a caricature? One that you had to respond to?

Ava: I think the psychosis gave it just 50% more than what it really was – if not more. There was a lot from reality. I didn't see my dad that often before. Like 3 times a year and talked 3 times a week on Facetime. So, I think there has been a lack of him. When he was in my life, I was stronger.

Christoffer: Do you believe you have become stronger?

Ava: Maybe psychologically. But I haven't had many challenges after this. It was a challenge for me to defend my master thesis, but after I did, I was like, "Was that all? That wasn't so bad." It was basically just a conversation where I had just wound myself up, right. It may also be a challenge to have been looking for work for a year and not having gotten a job. There have been these little things where I might think that the psychosis could have popped up due to some stress, but it hasn't.



Christoffer: Is it like life doesn't throw much at you and what there is, you just don't mind too much?

Ava: Yeah, think so. I think I have actually been quite lucky after all this.

Christoffer: That is remarkable. I wonder if one gets luckier after having been cleansed.

Ava: Yeah. I just think I have become more calm, knock on wood.

Christoffer: Anything else you want to add about it or the meaning of it all?

Ava: It is certainly as if a lot of restlessness has been put on the shelf. Sure, I can get a little restless because I don't have much to do because I don't have a job except some training and practical stuff. All in all, I think I am just more at peace.

Christoffer: I think something in your story challenges the common psychiatric perception of things. In a common psychiatric view – it is less commonly psychiatric to compare your experiences to various myths – but in a conventional view you'd say that during those two weeks that is when you were ill, and then in psychiatric treatment afterwards, you will hopefully get well. But that is not what it looks like to me. I almost feel like saying that during those two weeks is when you got well. Is that taking it too far?

Ava: No. It is not that I wasn't well before that, but I just felt so much lighter after this crisis. It may not be entirely wrong to say what you said. I think it happened for a reason, and I don't think it was just because of stress or anxiety or something like that. I think it was also earlier stuff that came up with this stress and anxiety and pushed it. During the psychosis when I was pretending to have these conversations with these objects there was very much a confession or testimony of sorts.

Further reflections

I (Christoffer) remain fascinated with how Ava's experiences seemed to be in accordance with mythical or ritual patterns with no conscious awareness of anything of the sort. Likewise, I cannot shake the impression that Ava's psychotic episode appears to have been a healing process. Perhaps Ava's term 'crisis of identity' is a better match than a word that basically means 'mental illness'. It is as



if the 'illness' is a kind of healing in Ava's case. I wonder how far the implications of this may go. Might psychotic states sometimes be intense transformative processes? If some of these states are indeed transformative, or perhaps even mystical in nature, how might clinical psychology and psychiatry best engage with them? Might psychiatry benefit from taking an interest in the possible meanings of such unusual experiences and mental states? Might clinical professionals gain something from engaging with mythology and ritual practices? I do hope that accounts such as Ava's may inspire others to look for meaning in the experiences of people deemed psychotic and consider the possibility of a healing potential in at least some cases of extreme states. (Clarke, 2010; Cooke & Brett, 2020; Dupuis, 2022; Haugaard & Trish, 2021; Lukoff, 1997; Lukoff & Everest, 1985; Phillips, Lukoff & Stone, 2009; Read, 2019)

Consent

The name 'Ava' is a pseudonym. The person behind the pseudonym has been fully informed about Christoffer's interest in publishing her story and has given her consent for him to write it and expressed her desire for her story to be made available to others to inspire them to find ways to make sense of psychotic states. The paper is based on Christoffer's notes and recollection, psychiatric files as well as two interviews with Ava and written correspondence. Prior to submission and publication, Ava has read this paper and accepted it, and she has given her written consent for it to be submitted to a journal for publication.

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