Madness, Violence, and Human Dignity: Transforming Madness for Dignified Existence

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Abstract

This article deals with how madness and violence impacts human dignity. The major thesis is that it is possible to retain a measure of madness in dignified living (i.e., madness-in-dignity) and of dignity even in a state of madness (i.e., dignity-in-madness). My arguments in support of this thesis rest on, firstly, establishing that mental abnormality does not necessarily lead people to become prone to violence; and, secondly, making a distinction between benign madness and malignant madness based on ethical, rather than psychiatric, grounds. Benign madness is devoid of evil and may be harnessed to enhance dignified existence. The preconditions for harnessing are metacognitive capability for self-reflection and self-monitoring, an intact sense of self, adequate impulse control, and a preponderance of love over hate.

Key words: benign versus malignant madness, violence, dignity, religiosity, spirituality

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Many people yearn for and actively seek extraordinary experiences, good and bad. William James (1920/2008) once wrote to his family:

> I'm glad to get into something less blameless, but more admiration-worthy. The flash of a pistol, a dagger, or a devilish eye, anything to break the unlovely level of 10,000 good people—a crime, murder, rape, elopement, anything would do. (p. 43)

"A devilish eye, elopement, and rape" conjure up romantic-sexual fantasies, in an ascending order of salaciousness. Fantasies of a violent nature are also abundant; "anything would do" is really scary.

To associate madness and violence seems natural enough. Have we not seen enough of mass shootings by mentally disturbed individuals in America, for instance? But what does madness have to do with human dignity? My answer is, "Everything." The present article is an attempt to defend this answer. The world has long wanted to expunge madness from dignified existence. But is it possible? And even if the answer is yes, which I doubt, is it desirable?

I have had my share of extraordinary experiences, which I did not actively seek. They simply occurred spontaneously and unpredictably during 17 episodes of mood disorder I have had—all of exuberance, none of depression. Even now, I cannot switch them on or off at will. But I continue to value them as life-enriching experiences. After the occurrence of so many episodes of "madness," it is hardly surprising that the question should arise: "Am I mad or enlightened?" Johnson and Friedman (2008) have discussed the challenges psychological diagnosticians face when dealing with religious, spiritual, or transpersonal experiences that may range from healthy to psychopathological. The present rejoinder adduces evidence from my own self-study (Ho, 2014a, 2014b) to spell out the conditions under which madness may be rendered benign, even transformed in the service of human dignity.

Are Madness and Violence Necessarily Connected?

First, we must question if there is a pervasive or necessary connection between madness and violence: That is, does mental disturbance or abnormality necessarily lead people to become prone to violence? Let me draw on my experience in a huge state mental hospital where I lived and worked as a clinical psychologist for some five years. Contrary to common perception, the hospital was a quiet, peaceful place. I saw little physical violence among patients, but mostly passivity, resignation, and despair that resulted from being institutionalized to the hospital milieu. This process of institutionalization is common to *total institutions* (e.g., armies, prisons, ecclesiastical institutions) in which workers or inmates perform most of their daily functions within the same geographical location under an authoritarian social structure. The patients are mostly not perpetrators of violence; rather, they are victims of humiliation and institutional "violence," an affront to human dignity.

Elsewhere, American society is full of physical violence (e.g., bullying and gang fights), in contrast to the hospital grounds I have described. The violence seems everywhere, in virtual reality as in real life—among normal people. Mass shootings by the mentally disturbed do occur, with alarming regularity. But to attribute the loss of lives to madness is to turn a blind eye to a more fundamental question: Does the loss of lives result purely from the mad people who have guns, or more from the normal people who oppose gun control? This line of questioning leads to

an uncomfortable thought: Human tragedies result more from failures of the normal to prevent their recurrence than from actions of the abnormal.

Madness-in-Dignity and Dignity-in-Madness

My firsthand experiences during episodes of madness lend further credence for negating the putative connection between madness and violence (Ho, 2014a). Rather, they point to a dialectical relation between madness and spirituality: Each may transform, and be transformed by, the other. The transformation of spirituality entails harnessing the creative forces of madness; and the transformation of madness entails receiving the healing effects from spirituality. The idea of harnessing goes beyond coexisting with madness. Coexistence is like living at the foot of an active volcano, not knowing when it will explode. Harnessing madness is more radical: The creative forces of madness are made subservient to spirituality to drive its further development. The healing forces of spirituality temper the volatility of madness and keep it from causing harm or destruction. Self-reflection and self-monitoring, both indicative of metacognitive functioning, play a crucial role in this dialectical process. Even in the depth of madness, I would frequently ask myself, "Am I mad or enlightened?" This has helped me greatly to deflate my supreme self-confidence, keep in touch with reality, and avoid causing more harm to myself or others.

In this way, spirituality and madness coexist in a dialectical relation. Spirituality without a measure of madness is devoid of energy; madness without spirituality loses its redeeming value. Spirituality derives creative energy from madness to reach new heights; madness receives the healing, calming effects of spirituality to become benign. Thus, it is possible to retain a measure of madness in dignified living (i.e., madness-in-dignity) and of dignity even in a state of madness (i.e., dignity-in-madness).

This dynamic conception means that madness may continue to be intertwined with spirituality, not something to be expunged from the mind. A dialectical relation entails tension and conflict. Many psychologists, Rogerians in particular, tend to regard inner conflicts as negative and self-consistency as positive for mental health. Self-consistency is manifest in congruence between the real self and the ideal self. By this count, ironically, psychopaths are the most congruent and thus mentally healthy!

The notion of self-consistency may lead to a sterile conception of human functioning in which conflicts have no place. Conflicts are, however, a source for change, adaptation, and creativity in the process of their resolution. I am humbled by how arduous the process can be; failures persist even after having had plenty of opportunities for learning from 17 episodes of madness. When spiritual forces prevail, unpleasant memories do lose their destructiveness and madness becomes more benign. Thus, I have had limited success: experiencing moments of serenity, most ironically, during episodic madness, and when spiritual forces augmented during madness carry into normal times. These extraordinary experiences have informed me on spirituality in clinical practice (Ho, 2014b).

Madness in Cultural Context

In Western psychology, the healthy self is conceived as stable over time; it is a coherent, integrated, and unitary whole; in Eastern thought, Daoism and Buddhism in particular, the notion of selflessness is central to the conception of selfhood (Ho, 1995). During episodes of madness, there were moments when I experienced transcendent states of emptiness in which the self appeared to have vanished. I would argue that to experience the selfless self or the empty mind is to go beyond, not supplant, the normal and healthy. In a similar vein, the achievement of impulse control is prerequisite to experiencing the extraordinary, which implies overcoming repression and gaining access to the unconscious. If what comes out are unchecked rampant impulses and

raw destructiveness, the result would be horror. Digging deeply into my own self, I see a preponderance of positives (e.g., love of humanity) over the negatives (e.g., hateful violence), and I foresee no horror when impulses are expressed in magnified intensities. Early in one of my episodes of madness, I wrote in my diary, "Eros without thanatos, safe." But a reversal of this preponderance raises the specter of madness wedded to evil. Witness the horrid destructiveness to the world that mad psychopaths, exemplified by Adolf Hitler, have wrought.

It is important to distinguish between thoughts, words, and deeds in terms of impulse control. This is especially important when repression vanishes, as in my case, and access to the unconscious is unhindered. Impulses are harmless as long as they remain in the domain of thought. This is a fundamental viewpoint in psychoanalytic theory, in sharp contrast with Confucian ethics. According to Ho (1989):

> A contrast between the Confucianism and psychoanalysis is most explicit with regard to thought control. Psychoanalysis is predicated on the total eradication of all restrictions on thought: Nothing is unthinkable…. Now, to dare to think the unthinkable is the fountainhead of creativity. Thought control suffocates it. (p. 7)

And when nothing is unthinkable, there is no boundary to creativity. As long as we exercise adequate control over the expression of our impulses in words or in deeds, madness may be rendered benign. And the attainment of an ideal, madness-in-dignity as well as dignity-in-madness, may be in sight.

Duality of Good and Evil

In recent decades, the association of madness and violence has been strengthened by human bombers in the Middle East who blow innocent people and themselves up in the name of God or Allah. This compels us to reexamine the long history of violence committed in the name of religion and, more fundamentally, the duality of good and evil in religious or ideological fanaticism.

Psychopathology of Religious Luminaries

The duality of good and evil looms large in religiosity. In this article, I attempt to differentiate between the good from the evil directions in which religiosity, coexisting with madness, may take: in other words, between benign and malignant madness. Religiosity and spirituality are distinct, though overlapping, concepts. A major difference concerns the propensity toward violence. Religiosity may carry with it potential perils of dogmatism, cultism, extremism or, worse, fanaticism. Because religious experiences pertain to the ultimate questions of life, the danger of their occurrence in violent forms rings a grave alarm. The likes of evil cults ending in mass suicide and religious militants who murder in the name of God are magnified consequences of violent tendencies wedded to religious fervor. In contrast, spirituality has inherent immunity to guard itself against these perils, because of its propensity toward humility, contemplativeness, and self-reflection. Exemplars of spirituality (e.g., prophets, mystics, arhats) may be tormented by self-doubt or guilt; they may be given to self-denial—but not to suicide bombing or other forms of wanton outbound aggression.

Like religiosity and spirituality, religiosity and madness are overlapping concepts. Logically, this implies that neither is a necessary or sufficient condition for the other. It is possible to be religious without being mad or be mad without being religious, be neither, or be both. The last category, being both religious and mad, may comprise only a minority, but an important minority. Religion may enter into madness in the form of hallucinations or delusions with religious content. In some cases, these psychiatric symptoms are merely by-products of madness; they disappear with its termination. In other cases, symptoms with religious content

form the core of madness—that is to say, religion is now wedded to madness, a highly incendiary condition. In still other cases, and these are the most interesting of all, religiosity takes on a life of its own, coexisting with madness, and transforms the person's life in two possible directions, one toward the good and the other toward evil. When that happens we may witness the arrival of a new prophet or another monster. That is why a study of the psychopathology of religious luminaries throughout the ages may be so illuminating.

An account of great leaders of religious movements, Gautama, Jesus, Muhammad, St. Francis of Assisi, George Fox, and many others, reveals some recurrent patterns. Their career paths are tortured paths, characterized by most, if not all, of these elements: an triggering event leading to intensive religiosity; intense, fierce inner struggle; isolation and solitude; being a voice in the wilderness, figurative and literal; self-denial, to an extreme; temptations of great force, typically of lust for sex or power, that are eventually overcome; experience of enlightenment; preaching to increasingly larger multitudes; rejection by orthodoxy or, worse, being branded as a heretic and persecuted; surviving persecution; and, finally, recognition as a religious leader.

My experiences pale in significance compared with those of religious luminaries. Willful hallucinations, such as those of mine, are under the control of the hallucinator and should not be construed as pathological. The psychopathology of my madness is circumscribed and relatively tame; in particular, paranoid ideation is absent. I have no ambition to be a religious leader. I just yearn to lead a good life. Not so with the great religious leaders of the world: Together, they manifest a museum of psychiatric symptoms (e.g., hallucinations, delusions of grandeur). Whereas genius tends to be associated with manic-depression, religiosity-spirituality tends to be associated with paranoia. Medical authors have long adduced biblical evidence to allege that no less a leader than Jesus suffered from paranoia. Albert Schweitzer (1913/2011), the renowned medical missionary to Africa, wrote his doctoral thesis, entitled *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, to refute this allegation.

George Fox and Quakerism: A Tortuous Road toward Dignity

No one to my knowledge, however, has come out for a psychiatric defense of George Fox, who founded Quakerism (later called the Religious Society of Friends) in seventeenth-century England. For this reason, I have chose Fox as a case study of how religious fervor wedded to madness need not lead to more, but rather to less, violence in the world. Fox was a troubled and searching youth drawn to religious concerns. He was shocked by what he saw as the failure of the "professors," that is, the professing Christians, to live their beliefs. At age nineteen, Fox left home on a spiritual quest, during which he challenged religious leaders everywhere to answer his questions. Nowhere did he find satisfaction. In 1647, having "forsaken all the priests" and in despair, he heard a voice, saying "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition." To Fox, this was a direct, immediate, and transforming experience of God. It was to become the heart of his message and ministry, marking the beginning of the Quaker movement. Predictably, Fox was persecuted. He was imprisoned eight times. He suffered cruel beatings and deprivation. But he was an indomitable figure. Nothing would drive him to detract from his dogged persistence to spread his message. His *Journal* and other writings continue to be the basic works of Quakerism.

Anyone who succeeds in leading a religious movement into maturity, surviving untold hardship and persecution, has to be a religious genius. The probability of success, though statistically significantly different from zero, is still near zero. But Fox was also a mad genius. A

reading of his *Journal* makes clear that Fox was a deeply disturbed man. Paranoid ideation leaps out from the pages.

As a clinical psychologist, I detect one extremely disturbing aspect in Fox's case: his obedience to, and acting out, hallucinatory commands attributed to some external authority. An excerpt from his *Journal* (as quoted in James, 1902/2002, emphasis added):

> The word of the Lord came to me, that I must to thither [to the city of Lichfield]…. Then was I commanded by the Lord to pull off my shoes. I stood still, for it was winter: but the word of the Lord was like a fire in me. So I put off my shoes…. Then I walked on about a mile, and as soon as I got within the city, the word of the Lord came to me again, saying: Cry, 'Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield!' So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield! … As I went thus crying through the streets, there *seemed* to me to be a channel of blood running down the streets, and the market-place *appeared* like a pool of blood…. After this a deep consideration came upon me, for what reason I should be sent to cry against that city, and call it the bloody city! … *afterwards* I came to understand, that in the Emperor Diocletian's time, a thousand Christians were martyr'd in Lichfield. So I was to go, without my shoes, through the channel of their blood, and into the pool of their blood in the market-place, that I might raise up the memorial of the blood of those martyrs. (pp. 12-13)

What if the commands had been of a more violent-destructive sort? The use of the words *seemed* and *appeared* suggests an awareness of the distinction between appearance and the real thing. The "deep consideration" is a clear indication of a self-reflective mind (or metacognition) at work. The word *afterwards* is significant, for it informs us that the crucial historical information about Lichfield comes after the actions. The martyrs' blood then gives Fox's actions perfect rationalization and elevation to the status of religiosity.

His *Journal* also reveals total commitment to his religious quest; indifference to his physical and, more significantly, social costs that the quest entails. To Fox, how others perceive and react to his actions are irrelevant. Surely, here is a mark of madness. But is there anything evil in his actions? The answer is no. That is the critical question that may differentiate religiosity from evil. To conclude, Fox is a religious genius, paranoid but not evil. William James (1985) says, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> A genuine first-hand religious experience like this [of George Fox] is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: The spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. (p. 270)

Great religious leaders share some common attributes: They have charisma; they have an unshakable belief in their own righteousness; they have a singularity of purpose, to spread their message or doctrine; their determination is resolute, even ruthless, and no sacrifice is too great a price to pay to reach their goals. Contagiousness comes from the combination of these attributes. Now the same combination is found in the leaders of evil cults, of whom there are few examples more destructive and revolting than James Jones. Moreover, if religiosity is extended to the larger domain of ideology, then we may easily find men of genius who are both mad and evil, of whom Adolf Hitler must lay claim to be the Führer. How can benign madness and malignant madness be differentiated?

"Every Tree is Known by its Fruit"

Judgments of good and evil are made, not on psychiatric or scientific, but on ethical grounds. So the severity of psychiatric disturbance, if any, is irrelevant. Though fully capable of acting in naughty, mischievous, even out-of-bound ways, I confess that I lack the capacity to do evil. This I count as a blessing. Less inclined to inflict pain on others than to hold myself responsible for wrongdoings, I find it easier to forgive others than to forgive myself. This I now count as a liability.

"Every tree is known by its fruit": This provides a hint on how we may proceed. Suppose we look at two trees, Fox and Hitler, and see how they are known by their fruits, Quakerism and Nazism. Suddenly, the contrasts cannot be sharper at every turn. Nazism is too well-known to require introduction. For now, a brief introduction to Quakerism will suffice. Early Quakers were so named because they were said to tremble or quake with religious zeal. The nickname Quaker stuck, now devoid of its original derisiveness. Quakers are also known as Friends, belonging to the Religious Society of Friends. Quakerism was a radical movement against hollow formalism, for a return to the original gospel truth, in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. George Fox, the leader, believed that the Scriptures must be read in the same Spirit that inspired those who wrote them. He and his followers rejected the ecclesiastical authority of their day. Their movement represented a call to return to the original, primitive Christianity. Predictably, Quakers were branded as heretics and persecuted. Quakerism has survived, but has shown resilience in preserving its original intentions, not to become itself an orthodoxy. Today, the friendly Quakers, no longer quaking, may be seen doing their work for peace and the betterment of humankind everywhere.

The central beliefs of Quakerism are at once simple and deceptively simple. Simple, because they are stated in simple words, accessible to most people. Deceptively simple, because their deeper meanings, rooted in Quaker traditions and the "testimonies" of exemplary Quakers, cannot be understood in words alone. They have to be lived, witnessed in the deeds of daily life. Without getting too deeply into Quaker theology, I find this core belief to be the most illuminating: There is an indwelling Seed, Christ, or Light (which may be interpreted as metaphors) within all persons that, if heeded, will guide them and shape their lives. From this deceptively simple idea springs a wealth of spiritual implications.

The core belief is a statement of ecumenicity: The Light is within *all* persons, that is, everywhere. It erases, therefore, the artificial divide between the secular and the religious, so that all of life may be lived in the Light. Each person I meet is potentially inspired and inspirational. When I shun or reject one, I deprive myself of an inspirational channel to spirituality; when I embrace one, I enrich myself spiritually. What a creative and powerful idea! God is directly accessible to all persons without the need of intermediary priest or ritual. Quakerism rejects, therefore, ecclesiastical authority and "empty forms" of worship (e.g., set prayers, words, and rituals). All persons are to be equally valued. No wonder Quaker organization is ultimate democracy.

Buddhism and Quakerism share much in common. Of the world's major religions, Buddhism stands out in its appeals: nonviolence, compassion, and respect for life in all its forms. Through supreme effort, a person has the potential to reach enlightenment. This idea is truly radical, for implies the possibility of altering the cosmic flow of events, namely, breaking the cycle of births and rebirths, through conscious self-direction. In sum, both Buddhism and Quakerism are champions of human dignity.

With this brief introduction, we are now better prepared to make a judgment. The fruits of Fox may be found in Quakers' humanitarian, mission and service outreach, programs of education social action; the fruits of Hitler are death by the millions, unprecedented destruction, and the Holocaust. Quakers were victims of persecution; Nazis persecuted innocent victims. Quakers are led by love; Nazis are consumed by hate. Quakers do not have a creed, but "testimonies" expressed in individual lives and collective actions; Nazis have *Mein Kampf* as their bible. Quakerism is inclusionary, tolerant of diversity; Nazism is exclusionary, obdurate in its insistence on purity. Quakers believe that each person has the divine potential to be guided by an indwelling Light or Truth, without the need for intermediary priests; Nazis demand absolute obedience to the Führer. Quakers believe in self-direction and self-determination; Nazis excel in mind control. Quakers are pacifists; Nazis are warmongers. Quakers value the individual man, woman, and child equally, without distinction; Nazis believe in Aryan superiority. The Quaker Way of decision making and governance is not the rule of the majority, but a deliberate process of resolving differences, in which the opinion of each single person is respected and heard; Nazi governance is the embodiment of totalitarianism, where the voice of the Führer drowns out all others.

Conclusion

The main conclusions I have reached may be summarized in the following propositions. First, there is no necessary connection between madness and violence. Second, judgments of benign madness versus malignant madness are made on ethical, not psychiatric, grounds. Malignant madness causes suffering to the sufferer and those around him. If wedded to evil, as in the case of Hitler and his gang of psychopaths, it has no redeeming value; it serves only to magnify suffering and threaten human dignity. Benign madness is devoid of evil and may be harnessed to enhance dignified existence.

The creative energy of madness may be harnessed for dignified existence, given that several preconditions are met. The first is the metacognitive capability for self-reflectiveness that enables one to be aware of and to monitor the extraordinary state in which one finds oneself. The second is an intact sense of self, without which, paradoxically, selflessness can hardly be achieved. The third is adequate impulsive control, without which the destructive forces of abnormality may get out of control. Finally, most important of all is the preponderance of love over hate, for its reversal would raise the horrid specter of madness wedded to evil. Even when these preconditions are met, sustained effort is needed to transform madness in the service of life enrichment. And without ever having been mad, there may be a limit on how such transformation can be accomplished.

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