

The Nature of Madness and Creativity

Myths and Realities

What is the fascination we have for disturbed geniuses? Even decades after their death, there are more biographies written (and read) about the likes of Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland than anyone else, including political figures. We seem utterly spellbound by the stories of people who, against improbable odds and unimaginable challenges, manage not only to survive but to thrive. Unfortunately, this success may be severely limited to only one narrow area of career productivity.

What Is the Connection Between Madness and Creativity?

In examining the correlation between the artistic temperament and manic-depressive illness (as an example), one finds that there is a virtual catalogue of prominent artists and writers who suffered debilitating, suicidal depression or bipolar disorder. Going back into history, the list is a “who’s who” of celebrity poets (William Blake, Robert Burns, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Hart Crane, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, John Keats, Walt Whitman, Dylan Thomas, Anne Sexton); writers (Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound,

Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, Leo Tolstoy, Tennessee Williams, William Styron, Hunter Thompson); composers (Tchaikovsky, Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Mahler); musicians (Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Irving Berlin); artists (Michelangelo, van Gogh, Gauguin, Gorky, Rothko, Pollock, Munch, O'Keefe). Look further at the number of actors (Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Rod Steiger, Patty Duke) and contemporary musicians (Michael Jackson, Brian Wilson, Kurt Cobain), who all suffered (or still suffer) forms of emotional disturbance, and the link between artistic temperament and madness seems quite obvious. When you see the complete list, you might very well get the impression that mental illness is a *requirement* for creative success.

In fact, the relationship between creativity and madness is often exaggerated. There are many more well-adjusted, emotionally healthy, high-functioning creative artists than there are those who end up in mental hospitals. As you can imagine, it is hard to get a lot of work done when you are so depressed that you can hardly crawl out of bed, much less find creative inspiration.

Nevertheless there is a basis for the association we make between creative personalities and a certain eccentricity, if not burgeoning insanity. Among the general public, only about 1 percent of the population is diagnosed with manic-depressive illness, whereas that percentage can be as high as 38 percent among artists and writers.

In another extensive survey of creative individuals, the lives of over a thousand prominent contributors in the arts and letters were studied, as well as those in business, politics, and sports, as a basis for comparison. Sure enough, it was found that only about 5 percent of the politicians, scientists, athletes, and corporate moguls suffered the onset of mental illness during their childhood or adolescence, yet the percentage skyrocketed to over 30 percent among the creative artists and musicians. Once they entered adulthood, the differences were even more profound: well over 60 percent of the creative geniuses experienced full-fledged mental illnesses, most often in the form of mood disorders.

The various disorders common to creative individuals all involve tremendous suffering. Such individuals learn not only to tolerate pain but to live with it in such a way that they can continue to be fruitful. In many cases, what gives their life its greatest meaning is converting their anguish into useful contributions. This is what existential psychiatrist Victor Frankl observed when he tried to sort out why some of his

brethren died at Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp, while others survived. It wasn't just that people were randomly murdered, but Frankl also noted that some of the inmates just gave up and died of despair. They seemed to be unable to find any meaning to their suffering.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

This same attitude is what distinguishes those who somehow manage to overcome their emotional disabilities in order to devote their lives to creative efforts: they find some meaning in their pain. Among the subjects of this book, you will immediately notice the difference between those who surrendered to their illnesses, taking their own lives, and those who managed to endure. Compare, for instance, the difference between rock icon Jim Morrison of The Doors, who slipped into a melancholic stupor supported by drugs, and Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, who eventually rediscovered his creative energy after decades of depressive darkness. As you will see, Wilson was able to negotiate some peace, largely as a result of not only creating music but also finding personal meaning in his pain.

What Privileges Are Afforded the Creatively Mad?

Keep in mind that many creative innovations and new discoveries appear downright crazy at the time. Many scientists, artists, and writers have been branded as heretics. Galileo, Copernicus, Columbus, Freud, Darwin, Picasso, and Einstein did not exactly enjoy a receptive audience to their radical ideas. It takes a certain amount of single-minded devotion (read compulsivity) and thick skin (immune to others' disapproval) to overturn the status quo.

It can be seen from these examples that madness can afford the individual certain resources and abilities that are not available to others. The fantasy life, free flight of ideas, distortions of reality, and heightened senses that are associated with mood disorders offer a unique perspective on the world. If we rename the mania that accompanies bipolar disorder as a kind of *intense creative experience*,

then we have a description of a state that does indeed lend itself to inspiration and productivity.

In interviews with prominent artists and writers, it was found that almost all of them reported periods of intense productive output in which they could go without sleep and work almost to the point of exhaustion. Rather than calling them manic states, they described them in terms of creative ecstasy, characterized by euphoria, enthusiasm, boundless self-confidence, fluency and speed of ideas, physical and emotional sensitivity, and emotional intensity. Sounds pretty good if you want to get a lot of work done, doesn't it? And haven't many of us experienced this kind of productive experience at some time in our lives?

When questioned further, however, these creative artists also mentioned some rather annoying symptoms as well, including fear and anxiety, suspiciousness, excessive drug and alcohol use, impulsivity, uncontrolled sexuality, restlessness, irritability, grandiose ideas, argumentativeness, reckless spending of money, and breakneck speech. What now emerges is not just a picture of artistic license but something approaching a more psychotic mania.

As described earlier, that may very well be one reason why people with this capacity gravitate toward artistic professions, not only among the eminent but also in those industries such as advertising, entertainment, and journalism that permit flexibility in work styles and tolerate eccentricities.

Is Madness Truly Divine?

The evidence may be compelling regarding the link between creativity and madness, but there are also critics who question this and believe that it is essentially a myth. The question we should be asking is not whether creative individuals are helped by their mental illness but whether some people can be so resilient that they manage to accomplish remarkable things in spite of their handicaps.

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, an organization particularly concerned with the ways that these awful diseases were being portrayed as helpful in some ways, conducted their own study in which they asked twenty-four artists what happened to their output once their symptoms were brought under control by Lithium. One-quarter said there was no change in the quality or quantity of their work, and one-half reported that their creative efforts actually improved. Other studies have supported this result, suggesting that only

about one-quarter of those who begin treatment notice a drop in their creative productivity.

Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle lauded the benefits of *divine madness*, which they believed was literally a gift from the gods, the source of creative inspiration. But the condition is not nearly as much fun or as entertaining as it is cracked up to be. There is no way to romanticize or gloss over the debilitating severity of symptoms nor the depth of despair that is prevalent among those with serious mental illness—no matter how productive they may have been in one domain.

As you will see in the stories contained in this book, emotional disorders are best described as a living hell, an existence of daily life so excruciatingly painful, so devoid of hope, that death is often seen as the only way out. And the chances of those with mental illness killing themselves are about twenty times greater than the general population.

Contemporary novelist William Styron writes about his own struggles with lifelong depression, which became so merciless that killing himself seemed the best and only solution:

The pain is unrelenting, and what makes the condition intolerable is the foreknowledge that no remedy will come—not in a day, an hour, a month, or a minute. If there is mild relief, one knows that it is only temporary, more pain will follow. It is hopelessness even more than pain that crushes the soul.

Just imagine what it must be like to be so desperate, so *accepting* that your plight in life will never change. All you can do to give yourself even a few hours of satisfaction (but never peace) is to give vent to your creative expression.

In What Ways Are Creativity and Mental Illness Related?

There are many different kinds of mental illness common to the creative professions, each with its own unique set of tortures. Perhaps most prevalent of all among artists and writers is *manic depression* or *bipolar disorder*, a biologically based cycling of moods that takes someone from a state of crippling depression to euphoric agitation. Next most common would be *major depression*, the diagnostic name given to those who experience terrible and lengthy periods of melancholic misery that appear without any precipitating event. Both of these conditions are often

not only biologically based but also passed on from one generation to the next. Someone like Ernest Hemingway, who suffered suicidal depression, had two other siblings who killed themselves, not to mention a father and a son with the same condition. Philosopher William James and his writer brother, Henry James, were both afflicted with major depression, as were their father and two other of their siblings. Vincent van Gogh had three other siblings with psychotic or mood disorders that led to suicide or insane asylums.

Less severe but still incapacitating conditions that are common to the creative include *dysthymia*, a milder but still chronic form of low-grade depression, *schizophrenia* (most famous examples are the Nobel Prize-winning mathematician John Nash and English poet Richard Dodd), *obsessive-compulsive disorders* (think Howard Hughes), *anxiety disorders* (John Steinbeck, Charles Darwin, Barbra Streisand, Woody Allen), *drug or alcohol addictions* (Jackson Pollock, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Edison, Edgar Allan Poe). The latter often begins as a form of self-medication for distressing symptoms and then becomes a hard-to-break habit that becomes a problem in itself.

Although these mental illnesses manifest themselves in unusual, different, and confounding ways, there are several common symptoms:

- Impaired or dysfunctional relationships with family and friends. Not only is the creative person distressed, but likely so are the people around him or her who have to deal with the erratic behavior.
- Apathy and diminished pleasure in most activities. Mental illness is a grim business. It is a major chore just to get through the day, much less to derive any satisfaction from the experience.
- Significant changes in appetite and eating patterns. People often lose or gain weight, further compromising their health and well-being.
- Disrupted sleep in the form of either chronic insomnia or constant waking. It is difficult to concentrate and remain focused, much less feel very good if you can't get enough sleep to function well.
- Chronic fatigue and lack of energy (except during mania). Not only does the sleep disruption take its toll, but even for those who sleep constantly, it is still hard to find the energy to crawl out of bed.

- Feeling totally worthless inside, no matter how much you accomplish or how much recognition you have. Self-esteem and confidence take a huge hit when you realize you are noticeably different (and a burden) than everyone else around you.
- Presence of auditory or visual hallucinations that destroy your ability to experience the world the way that others do or to see what others describe as “reality.” If you can’t trust that what you are seeing and hearing is real, it takes a tremendous effort to negotiate daily activities without getting yourself in big trouble.
- Self-defeating behavior in the form of acting out or self-medicating. When you have little to lose anyway, when you have problems with impulse control, when you believe yourself to be special, it is predictable that you might do some things that are hurtful to yourself or others. Especially common are attempts at self-medication through addictions and eating disorders.
- A sense of abject hopelessness and despair such that the future seems like a prison sentence that must be endured—until you have the courage to end it once and for all.

A picture now begins to emerge, not of someone who is “gifted” but rather is afflicted with a chronic disease. Writing in a letter about his episodes of insanity, Edgar Allan Poe talked about his attempts to medicate himself with alcohol, to the point that he was regularly seen about town as a drunk: “During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God knows how much or how long. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity.”

As you will find in the stories that follow, it is challenging to sort out the cause-effect relationships between madness and creativity. Do some forms of psychopathology help promote greater creativity? Or is it the other way around: Does deep creative work lead to madness?

Regardless of which way the process flows, you will find within the biographical narratives some fascinating themes that will generate as many questions as answers. You may also find some interesting parallels to your own life, perhaps not to the extremes that are represented in these particular individuals, who are chosen for their uniqueness, but nevertheless inspiring in that they remind you what can be accomplished under the most challenging circumstances.