

## **What if Nash had an “indigenous” psychiatrist?**

By William Wilkie

Russell Crowe's powerful portrayal of mentally ill mathematician John Nash invites another look at orthodox psychiatry.

The movie "A Beautiful Mind" tells the story of Princeton mathematician John Nash whose schizophrenic illness did not prevent his winning a Nobel prize.

Nash had three non-existent companions who exerted a powerful influence on his life. There was Charles, who first appeared as an imaginary room-mate at Princeton when Nash was doing his Ph.D. Later, after Nash's work with the U.S. government decoding Russian radio transmissions, another imaginary companion Parcher arrived. Parcher was the organizer and director of an elaborate delusional system in which the safety of America depended on Nash decoding secret messages hidden in popular magazine articles, newspaper headlines and advertisements. Then another imaginary person came into Nash's awareness, a little girl who was the niece of the imaginary Charles.

After Nash broke down and fled in paranoid panic from a mathematics conference, he was forcibly admitted to a mental hospital where he was treated with insulin coma therapy. Later, his sanity was maintained by anti-psychotic medication. However, Nash stopped taking his medication. The thiorazine was too sedative and made him impotent. Nash relapsed back into his delusions, but this time he refused to go to hospital or to resume the medication.

He realised his imaginary companions never got older. Armed with this basic piece of information, he firmly believed that if his mind had conjured up these false beings, then it was possible to analyse the mental process which conceptualised them and find a solution.

With his wife's support, Nash spent his days in the library at Princeton, placing himself in familiar non-threatening surroundings, and trying to live a low-stress lifestyle. Eventually, by choosing to ignore the interference of his hallucinated companions, Nash resumed teaching at Princeton. From the arrogant, defensive young man who scorned lesser mortals, Nash mellowed into a humble, helpful tutor. At this point he was awarded the Nobel prize for his original work, which had been usefully and widely applied.

Nash learned to ignore his imaginary companions, and they gradually faded from disuse.

### **What the film tells us about orthodox psychiatry**

Orthodox psychiatry is based solidly on a premise that is not generally shared with the rest of the world. The premise is that the human mind is nothing more than the functioning of the human brain. Just as with a TV set, when the power goes off, there is nothing. Psychiatry cannot consider the possibility that life can exist of its own, and therefore there can be no living invisible God that never dies. And if a benevolent God cannot exist, neither can negative spirits or demons. Psychiatry believes that God did not create us, instead we created God to ease our pain as we contemplate the certainty of suffering and death.

However, there are psychiatrists throughout the world who respect the spiritual teachings of the great world religions and who live and work within a spiritual reality.

Australian aborigines and native Americans claim that all life exists in three forms. Before any life form comes into physical existence, it actually exists in a potential form known as the "dreaming". Then there is the life-form in its living state, followed after death by half of the life-form returning to the dreaming and half of it going to some place in the sky where it lives a spiritual existence with the spirits of the ancestors.

Orthodox psychiatry regards Nash's imaginary people and his delusional role as saviour of the world, as symptoms caused by brain malfunction. Putting Nash repeatedly into an insulin coma was like hitting your fist on top of the TV, shaking up the circuits and hoping for the best. Nash's anti-psychotic medication worked by denying his murky, quirky unconscious mind access to consciousness. The unconscious mind where both Nash's madness and his creativity originated. Orthodox psychiatry could offer Nash a choice between a dulled but stable sanity, versus a chaotic life stew with occasional brilliant flashes of insight.

Orthodox psychiatric treatment required Nash to acknowledge that his brain was malfunctioning and to learn how to keep quiet about any unusual mental or spiritual phenomena occurring in his life.

### **An alternative approach**

How would a different psychiatrist handle Nash's case? A psychiatrist who sees the world as do, for example, Australian Aborigines or Native Americans.

The indigenous view is that there can be no such thing as mental illness. The mind cannot be ill, because the mind of each person is actually the mind of all of us. Each individual person is like a computer terminal hooked up to a gigantic mainframe. Each of us may think we are functioning as autonomous units but we are actually just running programs from the central computer. What is called mental illness by orthodox psychiatry is either some malfunction of the computer terminal electronics or confusion over what programs to use to process various types of data.

For example, if you try to interpret a graphics image using word processor software, you will just see a page of meaningless symbols and digits. Likewise if you try to describe a spiritual process but you do not have enough vocabulary or basic knowledge of the spiritual processes, the result can be what modern psychiatry calls mental illness.

The young Nash used negativity to reduce uncertainty. He didn't know what to say to people, so he insulted them. That solved the problem and ensured he would be left alone. However, belittling others and claiming to have superior intellect, made him vulnerable to negative spirits.

### **Who and what were Parcher, Charles and the little girl?**

When you lose something, it is a good idea to go back to where you last had it and ask yourself what you were doing at the time. When did Nash first lose his sanity?

Immediately after arriving at Princeton. The newness, the competition and the high expectations of him were very stressful, and Nash could not handle stress.

What was Nash doing when the imaginary Charles first appeared? He was searching the natural world for hidden patterns, hoping to find some process which he could describe as a mathematical formula, an algorithm.

Would it be reasonable to suggest that Charles may have been a pre-existing pattern in the dreaming that Nash perceived because he was open to perceiving such patterns? And that the appearance of Charles at that time was not a symptom of a malfunctioning brain at all, but an outcome of a highly efficient brain doing exactly what it was told- find patterns in the dreaming that you can recognise and make sense of.

Most people with theological training recognise the potential danger of consciously and deliberately making oneself available as a means for unborn life-forms to manifest themselves. There is a real danger of being visited by unwanted spiritual entities. Most cases of spiritual possession arise from deliberate invitation.

An indigenous psychiatrist taking Nash's history for the first time and examining his mental state, might assume that Parcher, Charles and the little girl were definite entities that need to be understood. The question that would need to be answered to clear Nash's mental confusion was- who are these imaginary people, and what do they want?

### **Possibilities**

If Parcher, Charles and the little girl came out of the dreaming, given a chance at existence via Nash's mind, they could possibly have been people who once lived, but who are lost and unable to move on because of attachments to worldly existence.

If these entities were in fact human souls, what did they want from Nash? Help to move on. Human souls in purgatory cannot pray for themselves, and they need someone to present a petition for mercy on their behalf.

Why choose Nash to help them? No reason, just that he was making his mind available and they were in need.

A psychiatrist with some theological training might consider the possibility that Parcher, Charles and the little girl were human souls, but would probably soon reject this possibility because human souls are not capable of causing the havoc these imaginary beings caused in Nash's life.

Could Parcher, Charles and the little girl be fragments of Nash's personality that he had excluded from his everyday persona? If so, these people might represent the self discipline, the risk-taking, and the childishness that Nash's adult personality lacked. This possibility is not a likely explanation, however, because these imaginary people never changed, never grew older. Personality fragments change and mature, and would have been altered when Nash fell in love and married.

The most likely explanation would be that Parcher, Charles and the little girl were familiar spirits. Familiar spirits are negative angelic entities masquerading as friendly human souls, but whose aim was to undermine Nash and disable his brilliant mind from being of benefit to the world.

## **How Nash might have been treated**

What difference would it make to Nash's treatment if the psychiatrist treating Nash knew enough about the spiritual reality to make an intelligent differential diagnosis of who and what were Nash's hallucinated companions?

First of all, it is a fact that Nash was crazy, and his panic and confusion required him to be admitted to a hospital where he could calm down in safety. He would require anti-psychotic drugs. These days we have much more efficient anti-psychotic drugs and there is less need for admission to hospital.

The fact that prior to his admission, Nash had been running on his will-power, constantly in a state of crisis, meant that some of his neurotransmitter chemicals were probably depleted, and his self-control mechanisms were in a state of imbalance. The drugs administered might help to correct a chemical imbalance as well as exerting a calming effect.

In this first stage of the treatment for Nash's mental illness, there would be no difference between the approach of orthodox psychiatry and that of a spiritually sensitive or theologically trained psychiatrist.

However, in the next phase of treatment, there would be a totally different approach between orthodox psychiatry and spiritually-sensitive psychiatry.

### **The orthodox approach**

Orthodox psychiatry regards the hallucinations and delusions as the symptoms of the mental illness. Recovery involves forgetting the delusions and not experiencing the hallucinations. The goal of treatment is reached when the patient no longer says anything deluded or sees or hears anything that others can't see or hear. Only the patient can tell you if he is recovered. And when he is better he can go home.

Regardless of his actual progress, the patient soon learns not to tell the psychiatrist about any unusual thoughts and learns not to reveal any hallucinations. That way he gets to go home.

But more than this. The patient learns to distrust his own imagination and to keep his distance from people who might see through his façade. Going to the psychiatrist is like visiting the thought police. Because the patient is always the last to know he is mentally ill, the psychiatrist will trust his relatives more than the patient's self-report when deciding on any changes to medication.

### **The spiritually sensitive "indigenous" approach**

By contrast the spiritually sensitive indigenous approach would involve working closely with Nash to help him sort out what had gone wrong. Once Nash was settled and had some insight into the fact that he had been acting inappropriately, the goal of treatment was to work out why, and make sure it didn't happen again.

Looking at the possibility that the first hallucinated companion Charles could have been brought into existence by Nash's brain seeking hidden patterns, therapist and patient might focus on understanding what Charles wanted, and what he contributed. Charles encouraging Nash to drink, and throwing his desk out of the

window, could be seen as furthering Charles' agenda of separating Nash from his fellows and increasing Nash's reliance on Charles for conversation and emotional support.

By analysing his response to Parcher and Charles, Nash might be able to see that his life had gotten into a mess because he had been trying to make some meaningful response to spiritual phenomena by inappropriately acting out dramas and false conspiracies as if they were everyday realities. The therapist would aim to help Nash get the three material, mythic and spiritual realities into better perspective. This would involve educating Nash in the spiritual reality that he had neglected in favour of his intellectual pursuits. Nash would be encouraged to think in this area, in contrast to orthodox psychiatry, which would be aiming at suppressing his thinking on spiritual matters.

Thus this stage in treatment would require a close working relationship with the psychiatrist, in which Nash would be able to discuss any weird thoughts or urgings or knowings that he would be unable to tell anyone else for fear of ridicule.

The spiritually-sensitive psychiatrist is the first person a psychotic patient will tell about his latest delusions, while the orthodox psychiatrist is the last person he will tell.

Because Nash was an original thinker, he would be unlikely to accept the explanations of the indigenous psychiatrist, but that would not matter at all. The ability to discuss, differ, agree and argue about spiritual phenomena is healthy and would enhance an ongoing working relationship with the indigenous psychiatrist.

### **Medication**

Medication would be used to help Nash, not to control him. The dose of anti-psychotic medication would be low enough to avoid troublesome side effects, and high enough for Nash to feel comfortable. The patient's comfort is the most important issue. Whether he is hallucinating or slips back into his delusions is not as important as the ongoing relationship with the therapist.

### **Outcome**

In cases like that of John Nash, the imaginary companions begin to show their true colours after the patient has begun to develop a good relationship with the therapist. They become jealous, more and more demanding and shrill, and their basically destructive agenda becomes increasingly obvious to the patient.

The imaginary companions are no longer friends but enemies, as Parcher was becoming later in the film. The patient may then choose to resist their interference. At this point, differentiating clearly between the self and the interfering entities, the patient is not far from being healed. This is the point reached by John Nash by the end of the film.

In Nash's case, the therapeutic goal of separating himself from his hallucinated companions was reached by Nash the long way around. It may be tempting to try the short cut and simply encourage the patient to suppress any signs or symptoms of mental illness, but this rarely works with an intelligent, enquiring mind.