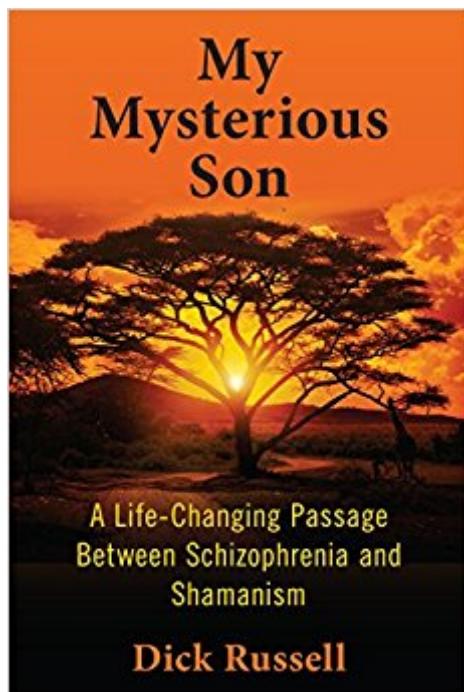


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My Mysterious Son: A Life-Changing Passage Between Schizophrenia And Shamanism



Synopsis

What a father will do to fight the mental illness that has destroyed his son. What does a father do when hope is gone that his only son can ever lead anything close to a normal life? That's the question that haunted Dick Russell in the fall of 2011, when his son, Franklin, was thirty-two. At the age of seventeen, Franklin had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. For years he spent time in and out of various hospitals, and even went through periods of adamantly denying that Dick was actually his father. A mixed-race child, Franklin was handsome, intelligent, and sensitive until his mental illness suddenly took control. After spending the ensuing years trying to build some semblance of a normal father-son relationship, Dick was invited with his son, out of the blue, to witness the annual wildlife migration on Africa's Serengeti Plain. Seizing this potential opportunity to repair the damage that both had struggled with, after going through two perilous nights together in Tanzania, ultimately the two-week trip changed both of their lives. Desperately seeking an alternative to the medical model's medication regimen, the author introduces Franklin to a West African shaman in Jamaica. Dick discovers Franklin's psychic capabilities behind the seemingly delusional thought patterns, as well as his artistic talents. Theirs becomes an ancestral quest, the journey finally taking them to the sacred lands of New Mexico and an indigenous healer. For those who understand the pain of mental illness as well the bond between a parent and a child, *My Mysterious Son* shares the intimate and beautiful story of a father who will do everything in his power to repair his relationship with a young man damaged by mental illness.

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Customer Reviews

Dick Russell has written for such varied publications as Time, Sports Illustrated, and the Village Voice. His books include The Man Who Knew Too Much, Black Genius, and On the Trail of the JFK Assassins, as well as the New York Times bestsellers American Conspiracies, 63 Documents the Government Doesn't Want You to Read, and They Killed Our President (all three with Jesse Ventura).

This is a great book - schizophrenia's long awaited answer to The Horse Boy (autism). The author/father fully "gets" how to understand and work with the life passage that the Western world calls "schizophrenia." As a mother of a gifted young man of 30 who has been given the schizophrenia label, I, like the author, came to adopt a more shamanic understanding of his purpose in life and went to great lengths to find modern day shamans, or guides, if you will, who could help my son. To understand schizophrenia and find the right kinds of help, a good place to begin is by suspending disbelief. You'll need plenty of that if you go the shaman route. Shamans can work wonders, especially in tandem with parents who have the right attitude. I admire the author for being willing to stretch his belief system, something that many parents aren't prepared to do. The received wisdom of the past several decades tells us that schizophrenia is an unsolvable problem and the problem is within the brain, not with the weight of ancestry or in finding a spiritual path.

"Schizophrenia" is mysterious and multi-faceted. By definition, treating it must be done with imagination. Humor, too. The path is long, so why not enjoy it? Both father and son consult the famed African shaman Malidoma, who reminds the father of the upside of schizophrenia. "I mean . . . Being with a person like Frank, there can't be a dull moment." So true, if you enter into the spirit of it, as the author has done. The quantum physics view is intrinsically the shamanic view. It's all about shifting energy and outcomes based on the viewpoint of the observer. In this case, the parent, Dick Russell, is the observer who decides to shift his viewpoint about what is normal after having several discussions with the noted psychologist, James Hillman. Accepting a new normal that validates spiritual and extra-sensory experience is the crucial ingredient to gradually pushing your relative toward interesting normalcy, and should be the cornerstone of treatment. This means radically overturning the current medical approach that insists that the delusions are meaningless and not to engage with them. In one incident, the author noticed that Franklin's delusional talk grew worse after the family pediatrician was impatient with his ramblings and tried to correct his faulty thinking. Haven't we parents all done that? It doesn't work and is demeaning all around. Had the author not met James Hillman, it may have taken him a number of years to stumble onto a very basic treatment modality -- namely, people in extreme states respond well when others treat them kindly.

and respectfully and try to engage with, not "correct" their delusions, which are not really so delusional if you pay attention to the content of what is being said and enter into the spirit of engagement. Criticism makes the delusions worse. Why is this simple concept of acceptance and engagement not taught to family members, who are on the front lines of support? My experience tells me that there is a mental illness industry composed of doctors, psychologists, social workers, etc. who do not want to dilute the value of their time and expertise by having families do the work they are paid to do. More people would recover sooner if this information were shared. My son's doctors were adamant that the delusions were to be ignored. The National Alliance on Mental Illness, which began as an understandable reaction to the parent blaming of earlier decades, is also responsible for hiding this recovery tool. Better to blame the brain than blame the family by insinuating that how they interact with their relative can be improved upon. My son spent eighteen months in a day program, was hospitalized for three months on three separate occasions, and yet I had to find out this information by doing my own research. Getting a solid footing on the recovery path may not just be limited to accepting and engaging in the new normal, especially when it comes to a diagnosis of "schizophrenia." Being non-judgmental in thought, word, and deed may only take you so far. If you believe, as the author does (and I do) that there are genuine paranormal experiences at work in schizophrenia, then feed the beast! Your son or daughter is already dancing in the realm of the spirits so why not go the distance by bringing in guides who speak their language? Warning: Many shamanic practices involve engaging with the spirit of the ancestors. Are you willing to suspend your disbelief and brave enough to go there yourself? There is a wonderful scene in the book when the author's ex-wife (Frank's mother) invokes the spirit of her ancestors, not in a clearing in the middle of the African jungle nor in a far flung corner of Siberia but in an ordinary suburban house in Maryland. Magic can happen anywhere, even in suburbia, it seems. My Mysterious Son will have a powerful impact on what is considered acceptable "schizophrenia" treatment in the years to come. Read it. Enjoy it. Learn from it. Rossa Forbes is a contributing author to *Goddess Shift: Women Leading for a Change*

This memoir is an honest, detailed, and moving account of a father's journey to seek help and answers for his son Franklin, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his late teens. More importantly, it becomes a father's journey to know his son as he truly is, rather than imposing his own hopes, fears, disappointments, and expectations. Russell initially hopes that medications will be able restore his son to "normal" functioning, but after more than a decade of hospitalizations and relapses, he realizes that the medical model falls short in both its explanations and its remedies.

Antipsychotic drugs can mask symptoms, but often come at a high cost to overall health. Franklin's diabetes, weight gain, lack of motivation, and extreme fatigue all seem to be caused or worsened by the medications intended to calm his flights into paranoia. Although Franklin seems to function the best on a moderate dose of clozapine, Russell is concerned about the long-term effects of this medication, and seeks alternative treatments. Franklin does well at a residential respite community called Earth House. Unfortunately, this kind of high-quality humanistic care, despite appearing to be the most natural, intuitive, and simple way to help re-integrate people with severe mental illness, is incredibly expensive, not covered by insurance, and not feasible as a long-term solution for most middle-class families. With Franklin moving between group homes, apartments, and occasionally even homeless shelters in Boston, Russell seeks other ways of helping his son find a place in the world. Father and son take several trips together--one to Africa, the origin of some of Franklin's maternal ancestors, and another to see a shaman, Malidoma Patrice Some, who was initiated into the Dagara shamanistic tradition of West Africa. Along the way, numerous spiritual guides point out that Franklin's thinking, which is full of vivid archetypal symbols and often seems to tune in almost psychically to those around him, is typical of the ways that shamans from many ethnic traditions experience the world. Russell's understanding of his son is also shaped by the archetypal psychology of James Hillman, whose biography he is writing. There are no easy answers on this quest, and no miraculous "cures" for Franklin. Each trip produces both breakthroughs and setbacks. The book is interspersed with excerpts from Franklin's journals, which vividly and poetically explore Franklin's feelings of otherness, both in terms of his racial identity and his different perceptions, as well as often profound and eloquent universal statements about life, love, loneliness, and the search for meaning. While Franklin's way of communicating can sound bizarre on the surface, his flight of ideas is reminiscent of dreams: take apparently random elements and combine them into a meaningful message that the conscious mind cannot fully process. Although it may not be possible for another person to truly crack the "code" of schizophrenic speech, Franklin's mind does not come across as broken so much as tuned in to a different frequency. It's not fully known why about 1% of people across all times and places have experienced schizophrenia-like symptoms. In most indigenous societies, however, their differences are accommodated and respected. At the higher-functioning level they become shamans, and in more extreme disorganized states they are protected and sheltered, but not expected or forced to change their fundamental natures. There is no doubt that people like Franklin suffer from loneliness and frustration because they feel so different. They often have very real problems in making a living, forming relationships, and accomplishing the usual developmental tasks of adulthood. However, Russell's book illustrates how much we can

learn from meeting this "otherness" on its own terms, and how familiar it might seem on closer examination. Franklin's rich, non-linear imagery reveals fascinating soul-level insight into the symbols, fears, desires, and mysteries that suffuse every culture and language, and that make us fundamentally human.

In this memoir, highly acclaimed author and journalist Dick Russell relates his and his son's harrowing journeys as they contend with the challenges of living with the son's mental illness, diagnosed as "probable schizophrenia" by a western psychiatrist. The personal nature of the material is somewhat of a departure for the author, who is first and foremost an excellent journalist. That comes through in his thorough analysis of the illness and its treatments, as well as his investigative approach to the particular case of his son. Despite this, the intensely personal nature of the main story line made me feel like I was reading Russell's personal journal. I was particularly impressed with his treatment of the spiritual and shaman-related material. I imagine it was difficult, as a fact-driven journalist, to embrace the traditional healing of shamanism and, more so to share those experiences publicly, but he renders it beautifully. He clearly has great respect for Malidoma Some, the West African shaman, who gives father and son a new perspective on Franklin's "illness," suggesting that much of what he experiences can be attributed to his having a direct connection to the spirit world. Inclusion of a selection of Franklin's journal entries, poetry, and artwork lends the story a high degree of intimacy and clarity. I read this memoir with great enthusiasm for the subject, having worked with indigenous shamans myself, and was amazed at how often the imagery and experiences resonated with my own. I highly recommend this book to those working in the any of the mental health fields, anyone interested in shamanism, and most especially those in the throws of dealing with physical or mental illness that western medicine has failed to heal.

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