Preface

I consider myself an Accidental Psychiatrist. Those who have read the preface to my first book, *Attachment Disability Volume 1: The Hidden Cause of Adolescent Dysfunction and Lifelong Underperformance*, will know what I mean. Here, I will provide a brief summary of the treacherous ground I was treading before I crossed over into psychiatry.

Let me take you back to the spring of 1955 when I was a sophomore at Saint Mary's College in Winona, Minnesota. I was uncertain about my career. I had dropped out of pre-engineering the year before because I found it boring. So now I was biding my time by taking lower-division prerequisites, one of which was called Abnormal Psychology. My professor, Brother Julius, had promised it would be much more interesting than the preceding General Psychology—and it was.

The textbook and lectures flowed like an adventure novel as I was introduced to Freud, Jung, Adler, and other bold explorers of the modern psyche. Reading the work of these pioneers inspired the romantic in me. I was transfixed. Curiosity beckoned: *Wouldn't it be exciting to see if I could create a meta-theory of abnormal behavior? Discover the secret sauce enriching human functioning? What a challenge!*

Even now, all these decades later, I'm still puzzled by the illogic of the practical me then objecting: *But to do that, you would have to be a psychiatrist, and that means medical school, and you know how you* detest *science*. The practical me didn't suggest, *Come on, John, simmer down. Think about other options, like becoming a historian or psychologist or sociologist*, nor did it even say, *You need to discuss this with Brother Julius*. Nope. I just stumbled along, preoccupied, with urgent Curious John debating irritated Resistive John.

In fact, the only person who had ever recommended I become a doctor was my high school basketball coach, William "Wee" Walsh, the year before at our annual Christmas varsity/alumni game. The varsity wiped us, of course. Afterward in the locker room, he came by and asked how I was doing. When I mentioned my vanished interest in engineering, he just snorted: "Oh for God's sake, kid, be a doctor!" and walked off. *What did he see?* I now wonder.

Eventually I began attending a monthly seminar intended to promote interest in vocations. I suppose the idea was to direct attendees' attention to things spiritual and intellectual for a change, perhaps even to a career with the Christian Brothers or the priesthood. I was certain I had no attraction to either. But in that setting, suddenly I distinctly heard a voice, unquestionably in my head, emphatically in my mind: *Do it! Be a doctor!* I didn't cry out or fall writhing to the floor. Rather, there was a mental nod: *Oh, sure, of course, why not? What's the problem?* A lock clicked, a door opened, I stepped through, the door closed. I crossed a boundary.

Princeton University psychologist Julian Jaynes conjectures that "preceding consciousness there was a different mentality based on verbal hallucinations." In other words, "command hallucinations" enabled pre-conscious humans to carry out executive action when confronted by a novel situation. Nowadays, Dr. Jaynes notes, hallucinatory experiences, sometimes soothing, sometimes authoritative, still commonly occur, especially in times of stress (see Jaynes in the bibliography). When casting about for a career, perhaps I was not in a state of stress, but I certainly was in a novel situation.

Then let us here also consider the notion of *clairaudience*: that is, experiencing sounds other than via the auditory canal. Psychics describe this as another means of communicating with the beyond, in addition to *clairvoyance.* Well, whether it was hallucination or a message from the Other Side, or one of the "things in heaven and earth" of which Hamlet advises Horatio, or a photon-precipitated neuronal cascade, or destiny, our mind is not the measure of the universe. Not every experience is understandable. But this experience was certainly indelible. And unquestionably decisive. I could not go back. My quest began. This book is among its consequences, the gist of which is that in investigating the abnormal, we must avoid *pathologizing* it. Rather, our goal must be to *normalize* the abnormal.

Let me clarify. It is rather unlikely that any of us will go through life without at some point experiencing the discomforts of chronic pain or persistent emotional distress. It is important that we resist labeling miseries of this sort as "abnormal," that we instead accept them as "normal" components of the human condition—that we "normalize" such sufferings, come to view them "as part of me." We must resist the lure of "not part of me" thinking, of viewing such discomforts as abnormal. Otherwise we risk becoming trapped by the lure of blaming. We become preoccupied with assigning fault: Ours? Theirs? Whose? And here's the danger: All discomfort, no matter how trivial or intense, whether fleeting or chronic, is associated with disability. Should the disability become contaminated by blaming, the disability is magnified and doubled—becoming what I call a Double Disability (DD). I will present examples of Double Disability throughout the book, which will illustrate how it can become far more crippling than the initial discomfort might signal.

The good news for prescribers is that if we learn to recognize and abort the DD spiral in our patients, we can prevent overprescribing and reduce the toll of addiction and overdose. Better yet, developing a self-awareness of this sort—avoiding fault—will protect us from slipping into the ruminative pit that all those pledged to healing inevitably circle when we confront the enormity of our task. Indeed the same applies to all professionals who confront and hope to manage the disabilities of their clients, and especially to parents whose commitment to and sense of responsibility for their children is lifelong.

Returning to my quest, at first it was predictable. The next semester I switched to a premed track. My pre-engineering classes in math and physics fit right in, but I was behind in chemistry and zilch in biology. Moreover, I had to stuff in enough course work to satisfy minor and major graduation requirements. A philosophy major was the answer: flexible scheduling, interesting classes, only thirty hours requirement. So I ended up with a major in philosophy and minors in chemistry and theology.

Then an unpredictable delight: embryology. That spring, once the ice

on the creek behind the college had melted, Brother George has us trudge down to its banks and snag tadpoles. In the lab we sacrificed our poor little pollywogs in the name of science, fixed and stained them, sliced each specimen in a microtome, and prepared slides for microscopic, slice-by-slice examination. Interesting, eventually fascinating to observe incremental organ development at successive stages of tadpole maturation. In the lab among Brother George's texts and lectures was an illustrated atlas of developmental tadpole anatomy that I consulted, comparing its illustration to my specimen: amazing, almost unbelievable correlation. My first encounter with science as sublime. Oh, lucky me! Moreover, mesmerized by its artistic beauty, I bought my own copy of the atlas. One day Brother George, mistaking my aesthetic contemplation for scholarly zeal, admonished my classmates, "You premeds need to work harder like Curran back there … he bought his own copy …" No doubt he inspired more resentment than industry, but I wish I still had that atlas.

Then another unpredictability. Questers are usually accompanied by a sidekick or mentor who serves to carry forward the narrative while providing wisdom at critical moments. Mine was Greg Heimarck.

Brother Julius suggested I apply for a Rhodes Scholarship, and provided a recommendation. Waiting for my interview at the University of Minnesota with a dozen or so other applicants, I introduced myself to the fellow in the next seat. Greg Heimarck was a senior at St. Olaf College in Northfield, also interested in medicine, also interested in psychiatry, also interested in philosophy. We chatted for ten minutes, my name was called, we exchanged the usual gestures of worthy competitors, and I advanced to meet my destiny. Well, I emerged bloody and bowed.

I returned to my seat next to Greg. As we talked, he was excited to discover I was taking a course in existential philosophy. Our subsequent "conversation" consisted of Greg talking and me nodding my head. That was the essential Greg: gregarious, curious, forthright, open, enthusiastic, energetic, informed, cultured. I suppose he sounds too good to be true, but that is how I found him then and ever after.

I wasn't called back for a second interview (no surprise there), but Greg was (also no surprise). I waited to see how his second interview worked out.

He didn't make the cut either. I never learned what he felt about the rebuff, but I felt relieved about mine. I had no interest in studying abroad since I had already mapped my future: finish up at Saint Mary's, then medical school and psychiatry at the University of Minnesota.

Greg and I kept in touch. He wrote he had been accepted at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons (P&S). After graduation he and his soulmate, Claire, exchanged vows and then worked for room and board at a country club in Minneapolis, he as a lifeguard, she as a waitress. Many an evening after work, I would visit with them at poolside, now free of members and guests, the three of us chatting and laughing about our dreams and prospects as we were slowly enveloped by the soft summer twilight.

About six weeks into the school year, I received a note from Greg about P&S. He loved it and told me I should apply. I figured I had already applied to Minnesota and Harvard, so why not apply to Columbia as well? So I did … and heard nothing for months. That October I was accepted at Minnesota and later flubbed my Harvard interview. Then one mid-February evening as I was walking into the dining room, the switchboard operator waved me over. "I've got a message here from Western Union for you: 'Pleased to offer you position class of'61. [Signed] AE Severinghaus, Dean, College of Physicians and Surgeons.'"

I was shocked. This had to be a joke. The deadline for acceptance offers was months past. In disbelief I asked to have the so-called "telegram" mailed to me, which did arrive the next day. I wrote back, saying that I wouldn't accept unless I received a scholarship. Another telegram arrived: "Not sure I completely understand your letter, but pleased to offer you a $500 scholarship. [Signed] AE Severinghaus, Dean." I accepted. What a delight it was to write Greg and Claire with the news. I saved the telegram, but years later it disappeared into my files. If I ever find it, I plan to have it framed.

I wrote to the dean at Minnesota about my change in plans. He wrote a warm reply, thanking me for the courtesy, assuring me that I had a "fine future as a doctor." Years later I was told I had a "fine career as a neurologist." And the foreman who supervised me off and on during the six years I was a summer ditchdigger for the Saint Paul Water Department, and who nearly fired me because I was so lippy (it took me a while to learn that you

never talked to the boss unless he talked to you) gave me what I consider the finest compliment of all. The last day of the last summer I worked for him before returning to P&S, he told me I was his best worker because he knew if he gave me a job it would get done. Obviously I had a great future with the SPWD.

On the other hand, no one ever said I had fine future as a psychiatrist. In fact, at the end of my internship my medical resident seemed puzzled when he learned of my plans for psychiatry: "Why psychiatry? You have never impressed me as particularly sensitive." Insensitive dolt as I was at the time, I was just as puzzled by his comment. Judging from my subsequent career as a psychiatric resident, I have no doubt my supervisors were on occasion similarly perplexed. As I say, an Accidental Psychiatrist.

During the first months at P&S, I was pretty homesick. Greg and Claire had an apartment just a few blocks from school, and I got in the habit of dropping by unannounced at lunchtime. Always gracious, they would invite me in and share their meal, Claire the quiet one, Greg coaching me on what to expect in class and loaning me his old textbooks. I think they had a better fix on my loneliness than I.

Greg was a bundle of interests and initiative. He introduced me to a host of ideas and books beyond the traditional psychiatric curriculum: for example, Erik Erikson's notion of "identity crisis" as depicted in his book *Young Man Luther*, and Magda Arnold's *Emotion and Personality*, her attempt to recast emotion as an organizing rather than disorganizing cognitive experience. And to give you an idea of the breadth of his curiosity, he also loaned me his first-edition hardcover copy of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Another example of his leadership was finding me work, first with him at a hospital laboratory, then later at a mental health clinic. Later he would precede me at the New York State Psychiatric Institute (PI).

After his residency training, Greg remained in New York to undergo further training at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, where he later served as adjunct professor. For years he also taught psychiatry and religion, a lifetime interest, at Union Theological Seminary, an affiliate of Columbia. Greg died in 2010. And this book is part of his legacy, for without his enthusiasm and leadership, I would never have

ventured forth from Minnesota to P&S, and then to PI. My crossing over was an accident, but once past the boundary, after I flunked my interview and decided to wait for Greg, destiny took control.