

First Person Account: The Messiah Quest

by David Zelt¹

The article that begins below is the fifth in a series of personal accounts to be published in the *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. In describing his account, the author commented: "The viewpoint is solely my consciousness. The substance of every statement and the specific words in many statements actually occurred to me. The third person narrative was chosen to convey a sense of my psychological distance from the experience. This distance was essential for accomplishing growth. I have described my emotions and thoughts as exactly as possible, and in sufficient detail for the reader to follow the sequence of change in thought form and content. In spite of certain passages in the text, I had never previously felt fervently about any religion, religious figure, or telepathy, and I had never felt harassed by the Central Intelligence Agency. The experience described followed many extreme stresses—death of a parent, end of a longtime romantic relationship, and a career change. Before these events, my emotional and social adjustment had been good. . . ."

Brief comments by two clinicians who saw the author during different phases of the experience described are appended to his account.

The *Bulletin* welcomes other contributions from patients, ex-patients, or family members. Our major editorial requirement is that such contributions be clearly written and organized and that a novel or unique aspect of schizophrenia be described, with special emphasis on points that will be impor-

tant for professionals. Clinicians who see articulate patients, with experiences they believe should be shared, might encourage these patients to submit their articles to the *Bulletin's* new section, *First Person Accounts*.—The Editors

A drama that profoundly transformed David Zelt began at a conference on human psychology. David respected the speakers as scholars and wanted their approval of a paper he had written about telepathy. A week before the conference, David had sent his paper "On the Origins of Telepathy" to one speaker, and the other speakers had all read it. He proposed the novel scientific idea that telepathy could only be optimally studied during the process of birth. He believed that the mother and infant have a telepathic bond that begins during delivery and should be studied before stimuli in the outer world significantly influence it. The paper described his observation, in an obstetrics clinic, of the mother and infant's facial expressions. They smiled or cried in parallel during delivery and for several minutes afterward. Facial expressions of happiness or pain appeared to occur at the same time and to be of similar intensity. He hoped this correlate, consistently present at seven births, would be verified for all humans. David knew that the paper, in reflecting engagement with an esoteric subject, was a signpost of his growing retreat from mundane reality.

David's paper was viewed as a monumental contribution to the conference and potentially to psychology in general. If scientifically verified, his concept of telepathy, universally present at birth and measurable, might have as much

¹David Zelt is a pseudonym.

influence as the basic ideas of Darwin or Freud.

Each speaker focused on David. By using allusions and nonverbal communication that included pointing and glancing, each illuminated different aspects of David's contribution. Although his name was never mentioned, the speakers enticed David into feeling that he had accomplished something supernatural in writing the paper.

A spiritually evolved person with great capabilities was the center of attention. Extraordinary powers of perception, a gift for telepathy, and the intellectual prowess of an Einstein were mentioned. David was certain that all of these allusions were to him when one speaker, while discussing the telepathy hypothesis, said, "Our shepherd." He was compared to a lion—courageous, regal, and wholesome; or a bird that could soar high like an eagle—extremely intuitive. He felt glorified.

David was described as having a halo around his head, and the Second Coming was announced as forthcoming. Messianic feelings took hold of him. His mission would be to aid the poor and needy, especially in underdeveloped countries. He also wanted to help everyone appreciate the joys and bear the sorrows of life; he hoped that, partly from his efforts, people would become more sensitive, caring, understanding, and loving of others.

David's sensitivity to nonverbal communication was extreme; he was adept at reading people's minds. His perceptual powers were so developed that he could not discriminate between telepathic reception and spoken language

by others. He was distracted by others in a way that he had never been before. It was as if the nonverbal behavior of people interacting with him was a kind of a code. Facial expressions, gestures, and postures of others often determined what he felt and thought.

Several hundred people at the conference were talking about David. He was the subject of enormous mystery, profound in his silence. Criticism, though, was often expressed by skeptics of the anticipated Second Coming. David felt the intense communication about him as torturous. He wished the talking, nonverbal behavior, and pervasive train of thoughts about him would stop.

One speaker, whose name was a household word, referred to this intense communication about David as Nazism. This denouncement had a dramatic effect: People then sat passively and without talking or thinking. They no longer communicated to David through movements, speech, or telepathy. Revering this speaker and in an extremely suggestible state, David felt that verbal and nonverbal harassment of anyone very spiritually evolved was like Nazism. He hated Nazism, the worst of all evils in his view. For the first time, David anticipated that his role in life would be to see that the psychological brutality of Nazism could never happen to anyone else. He would ensure that humanity would be cleansed of the potential for Nazism. This transformation of humanity would take place with the arrival of the Second Coming.

During the next few weeks, David came to believe that he was the reborn figure of Jesus Christ and that their spirits were identi-

cal. Like Christ, he was constantly in touch with the infinite and the eternal, and lived with a halo around his head that represented unity with God. David believed that he was the only person who could prevent the impending war that would end the world. He would prevent it by loving all humans and never qualifying or compromising his love.

From his apartment, David had a panoramic view in which many people expressed the basic needs and goals of humanity to him. They hoped that as the Messiah he could promote world change for the better. Activity on the left side represented the transcendental, intuitive, and holistic realm of human life; activity on the right side represented the material, rational, and analytical realm. As an example of expressed needs and goals, exhaust from airplanes in the sky formed patterns: the balanced scales of Libra on the left symbolized emotional harmony, and a scorpion on the right symbolized the analytical approach to life.

David could hear phrases superimposed on the airplane sounds, words that always caused great tension in him. Usually, the phrases were obscure and chaotic, unclear in meaning. Later, such phrases would be easily understood by him. Often, the airplanes produced loud noises, piercing David's ears with pain. However painful, all activity in the view reflected attention that was directed at David, and he knew that intense, widespread attention would be essential for his mission.

Pauses in external sounds, such as airplane noises, and in his own movements and thoughts held deep meaning for David. All work-

ings of his mind were manifestations of his spiritual relationship with God. Pauses reflected specific, divine meanings that were hidden from him by the limitations of his consciousness. David felt that by breaking the barriers of his consciousness, he would fathom the meaning of pauses—an understanding he desperately wanted.

David began to suspect and then perceive that a federal agency was observing him. From a moment of insight explaining many peculiar, recent events in his life, he knew that he had been accused of treason for slandering Americans during his psychotherapy. Specifically, he had told his psychiatrist that Americans were debasing him "like Nazis." Wondering whether the Federal Bureau of Investigation was observing him, David decided to employ his telepathic powers to find out. An agent at a local agency told him there was no investigation. David read the agent's mind, however, and determined that the Central Intelligence Agency was conducting an investigation.

By electronic means, the CIA let people around the world know what David said in therapy. Gradually, everyone took sides either for or against the CIA and their opponent, David. The speakers from the conference all promoted David in their own countries as the Messiah. To harass him, verbally or nonverbally, was the psychological equivalent of Nazi torture. Many countries were bitter toward the United States government for letting the CIA investigate a spiritually evolved person. David viewed the CIA, in its harassment, as violating an amendment of the Constitution—freedom of religion.

It dawned upon David that the

CIA was listening to most of his thoughts wherever he went, even sometimes during sleep. David could not think privately in words. His thoughts in words gave rise to subvocal movements that produced specific patterns of sounds during breathing; the patterns were immediately picked up and deciphered by hidden CIA electronic equipment. David had no consistent privacy of mind, except for concrete visual imagery; such imagery was usually very pleasurable and could not be monitored because no sounds were generated. Thoughts in words often seemed to come from external sources that were localized in space, as if someone were talking to David; he could hear these thoughts, simultaneously while thinking them or momentarily later, broadcast by the CIA using electronic means. Wanting a confession of treason, the CIA tormented David by playing his thoughts aloud and also by making comments and criticisms about his thoughts. The CIA always claimed only to want the truth of whether David was a "traitor" in his own mind; nonetheless they tormented him. The CIA treatment of him made the flow of his thinking sometimes seem chaotic or random. Also, playing his thoughts aloud led to a vicious cycle that was extremely painful for David. Hearing a particular thought broadcast tended to promote repetition of that thought.

Because his thoughts were broadcast around him, David often felt that his consciousness was controlled from outside himself and that he had merged with the external environment. In his perceptions, broadcast thoughts were often superimposed on the sounds

of running water, air vents, and cars passing by. These continuous noises of water, air, or car motion usually sounded like flies buzzing in the background of the broadcast thought. The boundary between his mind and the world seemed blurred.

Beginning with his first sense of being studied, the magnitude of the CIA conflict seemed to grow continuously. David intuitively knew that every place he went in his daily life had been carefully and thoroughly bugged in the most sophisticated way, though he did not know what a bug looked like. The CIA was frightening, powerful, and relentless in its pursuit of a verbal confession from David that he had committed treason. To David, words uttered to that effect would be equivalent to betraying humanity, abort his mission, and potentially result in the destruction of himself and humanity. David was at war with the CIA.

David communicated with God, and because of this divine relationship, he had access to profound awareness and knowledge. God knew everything David was feeling and thinking and directed David, usually through David's intuition, at all times. God praised David for his positive thoughts and punished him for his negative thoughts. Physical violence anywhere in the world was deplored, and God punished David for having violent feelings. Deviating from the occasional commands of God tended to be emotionally intolerable for David. For example, for months David obeyed commands to sleep only on his right side with hands in prayer position, as God said Jesus Christ had done.

David's thought processes and

communication with others occurred in two basic ways: One was adapted to the rational realities of others, and the other way—the code—was magical, poetical, and fantastical. The code was used in his continuous struggles with the CIA and sometimes in communication with God. As time went on, the code came to dominate the functioning of his psyche. David never told anyone about the code, which first entered his awareness at the conference. In his perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, the code gradually influenced everything except for the use of words *per se*—influenced telepathy, facial expressions, gestures, postures, and intensity, pitch, rate, rhythm, and pauses of speech. His psyche generally seemed in an altered state to others because communication, except that with God, was often difficult to do in a logical way; communication with God, however, was sometimes experienced by David according to the code.

Eventually, all aspects of his life came to be influenced by the code. Ordinarily unimportant information from external reality took on new dimensions for him. For example, colors powerfully influenced him. At any given moment wherever David went, colors were used to express judgments about his spirituality. People used the colors of their clothes or cars to express positive or negative views of him. Green meant that David was like Christ; white stood for his spiritual purity; orange indicated he was attuned to the cosmos; blue stood for his tranquility of mind; red meant he was a Russian traitor; yellow meant he was a Chinese traitor; and black indicated he was evil. David was engulfed by

an intrigue on the largest possible scale. Except for the presence of God and the CIA, though, he was lonely and isolated. No one else knew about the code.

Whenever David had contact with the media, the code was used. For example, the television and radio stations used electrical signals and verbal messages to convey their attitudes about David. The electrical signals, such as a flicker on the television set or a burst of static on the radio, meant that the immediately preceding remarks referred to David. The verbal messages were usually either praiseworthy or condemnatory, and were understood in some way by everyone who was watching television or listening to the radio during these moments. The stations would state terms such as Jesus Christ or schizophrenia and then wait for David's response in thoughts, which would be broadcast by the hidden CIA equipment. On television, NBC had a transcendental outlook and often designated David as Jesus Christ. CBS usually described David as having schizophrenia. ABC expressed mixed feelings; either David was divine or ill. Sometimes, these television stations referred to David with advertisements, each of which portrayed a specific message about him. As examples of messages, Paul Newman thought that David was exceptionally gifted at telepathy and an endangered species like the American eagle; Merv Griffin said, "We love you," because David had brought world attention to the harm that the CIA was doing to the world; and Jean Stapleton, alluding to CIA slandering of David, said, "A thousand words don't tell a picture." Generally,

though, the degree of attention was so painful that David tried to avoid contact with any media.

The CIA was always fearful that David might write a letter to a foreign dignitary, openly revealing their tormenting behavior of him. This would start an international war involving explicit wording, as opposed to the code. Mailboxes were watched constantly by the CIA in case David sent a letter. Once, David suspected from telepathic communication that the CIA, helped by the postal service, had examined a letter he sent. He suspected that the CIA had followed the letter and had asked the recipient if they could look at it. Given approval, they were startled to find that erasing had been done; the location of erasing, the context in the letter, implicitly conveyed David's feelings toward the CIA. David later received a letter from the recipient with similar markings, and the implicit meaning of these markings confirmed his telepathic impression. With his letter design, he had outwitted the CIA. He had also exposed the role of the postal service in examining his mail. People of the postal service were ridiculed for this, and David felt sorry for them. But he developed a sense of power that was useful; people tended to listen to a person of power.

Everyday, David studied the patterns in the sky formed from clouds or airplane exhaust. These patterns, always vivid, typically expressed a favorable view of David. Commenting on the war between David and the CIA, people often said, "All the skies are on your side." The wings of an angel, a lion, an eagle, and artist's pastels were commonly presented in the sky. David also sometimes

saw a lion with two heads, a lion with wings, or an eagle with the head separated from the body. Occasionally, an airplane would emit exhaust in the form of a line across the sky; the line signified that David was Jesus Christ. At night, the moon was often surrounded by a halo, a sign that the Second Coming would soon begin. It was David's function as the Messiah to perceive these patterns and to interpret them in ways that had deep meaning for everyone. Merely thinking in words about the patterns provided interpretations for much of the world via the CIA equipment. During such moments of interpretation, David always felt himself to be a prophet providing revelations.

Several months after the conference, David's vision of emotional change among humanity had become clarified. God suggested that eventually humanity, guided by David, would unite in love. In this global state of love, there would be no need for the negative emotions of anger and disgust. To David, anger and disgust represented failures at empathy. He fully believed that lasting, empathic attunement by all humans with one another was the sole way to prevent the end of the world. He hoped that a new unity among mankind would arise from his emotional efforts and from the worldwide division over the CIA conflict.

David knew that whatever was wrong with the world lay within his psyche. As the Messiah, his

psyche mirrored humanity's problems. He struggled against profound powers—Nazism, the CIA, and the self-destructive tendencies of humanity—but he knew that the power of God would ultimately triumph. David's duty was to fulfill God's ultimate goal—to turn the Earth into a heavenly kingdom. He wanted to do everything he could to reach this goal. In heart and mind, David gave himself fully to his Messiah quest.

Comments From David's Therapists

First Therapist. I was David's therapist during his acute episode, and he and I decided to go through it without medication. This was his intention and request, and my preference as well. It is a hard course to take because fear and suffering are all too evident. However, David's outcome provides the final justification for such a therapeutic policy. His account takes the reader directly into the feeling of the intense experience of psychotic inflation and the accompanying fears. My part was mainly to empathize and to remind him often that the phenomena belonged to his inner world. It was impressive to me to find

someone with an exhaustive intellectual knowledge about psychosis still unable to bring his critical faculties to bear upon the onslaught of ideation. This ideation was visionary in nature and scope, although overwhelming. In time, his critical faculties did work effectively, and one must acknowledge that the outcome has been favorable. The fact that he is well-endowed with high intelligence has, I think, played a vital part in his capacity to steer his episode toward growth and development. What strikes me most about his present state is his heartiness, vigor, and warmth; he seems to have abundant energy and high motivation, and to relate with fullness of feeling.

Second Therapist. I felt that being available to David on a daily basis was essential for him and that not doing so would have been cruel. There were few people with whom he could share his feelings and ideas. Our meetings, an open exchange between two people, seemed to ameliorate the loneliness of his struggle and perhaps were helpful in the resolution of his struggle. Despite intense involvement with his inner life, he was able to function in the world on a simplified level. Besides taking care of himself, he went out and did things with people and also read. His writing is a demonstration of the usefulness of the experience and reflects his change for the wiser.