BOOK REVIEW

*The centre cannot hold – A memoir of my schizophrenia* by Elyn R. Saks

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*About the Author:*

Elyn R. Saks is a Professor of Law and Psychiatry at the University of Southern California (USC) Gould School of Law. Before joining the USC Law Faculty in 1989, Prof Saks was an attorney in Connecticut and an instructor at the University of Bridgeport School of Law. She graduated summa cum laude from Vanderbilt University before earning her Master of letters from Oxford University and her J.D. from Yale Law School. She holds a Ph.D. in psychoanalytic science from the New Centre for Psychoanalysis.
Come to the Florida lemon tree! Come to the Florida sunshine bush! Where they make lemons. (p. 1)

These are the words of Elyn Saks, diagnosed with schizophrenia. These words introduce the reader to a psychotic episode that Elyn Saks experienced as a law student in the library of the Yale Law School and is the first of many episodes that are described throughout the book. The centre cannot hold – A memoir of my schizophrenia is a moving and honest description of her journey through schizophrenia.

As a young adult, and student, Elyn Saks began experiencing bizarre and often frightening symptoms which eventually led to several hospitalisations. These episodes were confusing not only to her, but to those around her. In an interview released on YouTube, Elyn describes these episodes as being “like a walking nightmare, things are crazy, bizarre, frightening . . . its sheer terror”. Schizophrenia is a disorder that is characterised by hallucinations, delusions and disorganised thinking and behaviour; while symptoms may begin to appear in adolescence, the ‘break’ or onset of active symptoms usually appears in the early to mid-twenties. The prognosis is generally seen to be rather poor, with individuals having limited insight into their illness. However, The centre cannot hold is a memoir that provides the reader with an insightful account coloured with hope, despite the somewhat ‘hopeless’ diagnosis. Elyn Saks has vivid recollections of each episode and is able to engage with the reader through her openness and willingness to share.

Readers are taken through the hospital admissions, both in the USA and UK. Many of the admissions were characterised by isolation, physical restraints and the administration of medication against her will. Elyn describes how, during one particular admission in the UK, the respect shown to her allowed her to be more open to the treatment recommendations: “when you are really crazy, respect is like a lifeline someone’s thrown at you. Catch this and maybe you won’t drown” (p. 74). While reading these accounts I, as a clinical psychologist, was challenged to reflect on my time working in psychiatric hospitals. From my experience, in South Africa, the use of physical restraints is generally not practised; however, patients are often secluded and sedated when needed. There has been a shift in South Africa to move away from long term institutionalisation and to create services at a community level to assist those who have a mental illness.

Readers are also taken through Elyn Saks’s academic career and personal life, and the challenges the illness placed on these areas of her life. It is clear that Elyn Saks is a driven and intelligent individual who found much pleasure and purpose in her work. It is her keen interest in reading and academia that provided a pathway to buffer the debilitating nature that schizophrenia is known for. She has published several papers including: Refusing care: Forced treatment and The rights of the
mentally ill. We also get a glimpse of the personal relationships that Elyn Saks has formed over the years, and how important a good supportive system is.

Throughout all this, Elyn Saks was committed to engaging in psychoanalysis, a form of psychotherapy that is most commonly not recommended for schizophrenia. However, this therapeutic space, which included several therapists at different times in her illness, became an essential part of her recovery. Here the delusions and disorganized thoughts were given time and space to surface, and therapy thus provided a supportive, yet at times a rather difficult environment. She reflects that the worst thing to do is to expect that an individual with schizophrenia will not amount to anything.

In personal communications with Prof Saks (May 28, 2012), she has shared that several people warned her against writing the book. She nevertheless persisted in writing the book as she felt that she would be telling people, many of whom were close friends and colleagues, the truth about her illness. She feared that ‘coming out’ with the truth would change the way people viewed her, and that perhaps people would perceive her as fragile and disturbing. However, she described the writing of the book as cathartic, and reports to have received an enormous amount of support, with the feedback on the book being overwhelmingly positive. The feedback is generally centred on three themes:

- Messages of thanks. The book has provided hope for individuals who have themselves been diagnosed with schizophrenia, and for family members of those diagnosed.
- Advice. Many turn to Elyn for advice on how they could get loved ones to take medication.
- The odd messages that Elyn is indeed a space alien and that the medication is indeed poisoned by doctors.

Prof Saks reports that she is still in psychoanalysis five times a week, which has been crucial in her recovery. Having being trained in psychoanalysis herself and understanding the processes that come with this therapy, Prof Saks describes herself as a ‘lifer’. Prof Saks is married, and has a successful career as a Professor of Law and Psychiatry at the University of Southern California Gould School of Law.

I found the book to be amazingly insightful and encouraging. Despite the difficult and painful experiences described in the book, it left me with feelings of hope and an even greater need to continue to be able to reflect on my own work in this profession. I found the book to be inspiring and I was often unable to put it down. In conclusion, I will leave you with a quote from Prof Saks:

The more I accept the mental illness, the less it defines me. (YouTube interview)
Title: The centre cannot hold – A memoir of my schizophrenia
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Nicola Themistocleous is registered with the HPCSA as a clinical psychologist. She is currently working as a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. She runs a private practice at Bellavida Centre in Johannesburg.