Rethinking Madness: Towards a Paradigm Shift in Our Understanding and Treatment of Psychosis.
Paris Williams. San Rafael, CA: Sky’s Edge Publishing, 2012, 396 pp., $24.95 (softcover)

The very descriptive subtitle of Rethinking Madness by Paris Williams is “Toward a Paradigm Shift in Our Understanding and Treatment of Psychosis.” The mental health care field is in desperate need of such a paradigm shift, but to suggest that a medium length book can adequately capture such a shift (especially considering the enormous complexity of this topic) is likely to appear overambitious. But Williams manages to pull it off, and he does so with a book that is a pleasure to read, offering intriguing insights to the seasoned professional while being easily accessible to the layperson.

There are several factors that I believe have allowed Williams to be so successful with this book. First, he took full advantage of his doctoral program at Saybrook University, conducting three separate qualitative research studies (two pilot studies and his doctoral dissertation research). These involved deep exploration of the experiences of people who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders and who subsequently went on to make full and lasting recoveries. Second, he made a tremendous effort to grapple with the vast web of existing research on psychosis and recovery, trying to reconcile the great disparity between the mainstream understanding of schizophrenia and the actual results of the recovery research (including his own). Third, Williams has himself struggled with psychotic experiences and has since gone on to make a full and lasting recovery, offering the rare insight of someone who has experienced these vexing experiences from both sides. And finally, he successfully brought together all of the major components of the research within the field, the most relevant theories that have been put forward in both the East and the West, and the experiences of his own participants, and then presented them in this book in an engagingly clear and coherent manner.

The book format consists of an introduction followed by four separate sections, with each section doing an excellent job of setting the stage for the subsequent section. In the Introduction, we follow the story of one of Williams’ participants, Sam, as he descends into a deep psychotic condition and then eventually goes on to make a full and lasting recovery. Williams points out the significant disparity between Sam’s story and the mainstream understanding of psychosis, and also the clear evidence that mainstream psychiatric treatment was more of a hindrance than a benefit in Sam’s recovery. He shows that Sam not only went on to make a full medication-free recovery but that Sam had also experienced a profound and primarily positive transformation as a result of having gone through his psychotic process.

Sam’s story and the many implications and questions that arise from it set the stage for Part One: Deconstructing the Myths of Madness. In this section, Williams methodically deconstructs the most prevalent mainstream assumptions about psychosis: that schizophrenia/psychosis is a disease of the brain; that schizophrenia is a valid construct; that full recovery
is not possible; and that mainstream psychiatric treatment increases beneficial outcomes. This section alone is an extremely valuable resource for both mental health professionals and those who have been diagnosed with psychotic disorders as well as their friends and family members. Williams looks closely at the major research ordinarily cited to prop up these various myths, deftly separating out the actual empirical evidence from the heavily biased conclusions and misinformation with which the general population is ordinarily inundated, and he presents all of this in the most concise and coherent format I have come across.

After witnessing such a radical deconstruction of the mainstream myths of schizophrenia and psychosis, the reader is naturally left with the question, “If the mainstream understanding and treatment of psychosis is so seriously misguided, how else do we make sense of the ‘crazy’ experiences that we see in psychosis?” Again, Williams doesn’t miss a beat. He takes us into Part Two: Alternative Understandings of Psychosis, where he introduces several models that are much more humanistic than the medical model, which draw from transpersonal, existential, Jungian, and cognitive orientations and which are based on the premise that psychosis can be seen as a coping/healing/growth-oriented process initiated directly by a desperate psyche. Williams weaves in the stories of two more of his participants in this section, grounding the theory of these various models with the actual experiences of these participants. After taking us through these models, Williams points out that although each model has significant differences from the others, they are not mutually exclusive because they each emphasize different aspects of the psychotic process and draw from different theoretical perspectives.

Attempting to view an individual’s anomalous experiences through so many different lenses, however, can clearly bring significant complexity and confusion to anyone trying to make sense of these experiences. Again, remaining consistent in his ability to bring relative simplicity and coherence to this complex topic, Williams brings us to Part Three: Arriving at an Integrative and Comprehensive Model of Psychosis. Just as the name of this section suggests, Williams introduces his own model of psychosis—the duality/unity integrative model (or DUI model for short)—an ingenious model that integrates the key components of these Western psychological models with Eastern understandings of mind and consciousness, drawing in particular from the Eastern concept of nonduality (which essentially refers to the concept of fundamental interconnectedness and impermanence).

Although there’s no room to go into the details of this model here, it essentially suggests that there are two core existential dilemmas with which we all struggle: the need to find a tenable balance between autonomy and connection (which draws primarily from the Western models) and the need to maintain a sense of self in a world in which the most fundamental qualities of impermanence and interconnectedness make this so precarious (which draws primarily from the Eastern traditions). Williams suggests that the only difference between those we deem “psychotic” and those we deem “normal” is that the psychotic individual is struggling much more intensely with these core existential dilemmas. In other words, he suggests that the existential dilemmas and associated anomalous experiences that are ordinarily so subtle as to be primarily unconscious for most of us are painfully apparent and often completely overwhelming in those struggling with psychosis. Even though the main premise of the book is an attempt to arrive to a deeper understanding of psychotic experiences, this section focuses primarily on universal human experience. A particularly intriguing implication of the ideas that Williams puts forward in this section is that by inquiring more deeply into what takes place within psychosis, we are
likely to gain significant insights into what takes place at the existential level within the experiences of all of us.

Having presented his innovative model, Williams takes us into the fourth and final section of the book, Part Four: Making Sense of Madness, From Onset to Full Recovery. Williams was so successful in crafting a clear vision of human experience at the existential level in the previous section that we now find ourselves in the position of being able to make sense of the entire psychotic process. This section begins with the stories of the remaining three participants of Williams’ research study and then proceeds to break down each stage of the psychotic process as all six of the participants in this study experienced it. We first look at the steps leading to the onset of psychosis for each of the participants, looking at the factors they all apparently shared as well as those that were idiosyncratic. We then look at the process of escalation as they each progressed from experiencing relatively benign anomalous experiences to a condition we more ordinarily associate with full-blown psychosis. We then look at the process of recovery and the factors that supported recovery as well as those that were a hindrance. It’s interesting to note that every participant reported feeling that the single largest factor hindering their recovery was the “treatment” they received within the psychiatric system, including especially the heavy and haphazard use of psychiatric drugs and the heavy handed inculcation of the brain disease model. Williams then explores the lasting personal paradigm shifts, the lasting benefits, and the lasting harms that the participants experienced as a result of having gone through their psychotic process. A fascinating implication that emerged with this analysis is that every participant appears to have experienced a very profound and primarily positive transformation as a result of having gone through this process, a finding that definitely flies in the face of the brain disease theory and offers real hope for others who are struggling with these kinds of experiences.

The book ends with a very insightful “Conclusions” section in which Williams discusses the most important implications of this exploration. He coins the term, the metamorphosis of madness, drawing an analogy between madness and the process of metamorphosis. In the same way that a minimally resourced larva must first undergo profound disintegration before reintegrating into the much more resourced butterfly, Williams suggests that the successful resolution of the psychotic process appears to often entail the transformation of an individual from a way of being in the world that is poorly resourced and ultimately unsustainable to one that is much better resourced and far more sustainable. He also discusses in detail the implications for treatment, explaining why mainstream psychiatric treatment is generally so harmful and explaining why other methods of support that maximize freedom, empathy, and support of the process (such as the open dialogue approach and Soteria-style residential facilities) have been shown to be much more beneficial.

The final sections of the book add the icing on an already very rich cake. There is an appendix documenting in detail the factors that emerged in Williams’ research related to the various stages of the psychotic process; a second appendix drawing parallels between recent discoveries in modern physics and the common experiences that occur within psychosis; a thorough glossary and index; and a very comprehensive resource section outlining books, Websites, blogs, and other media offering alternative understandings of psychosis and alternative support for those experiencing these kinds of experiences.

With Rethinking Madness, Williams has made an invaluable contribution to the field. Contained within the pages of a single book, we find a treasure trove of resources for the professional and the layperson alike. These include an extremely well-researched section
delivering a concise and fatal blow to the medical model understanding of psychosis; a collection of alternative models that are much more hopeful than the medical model and much more in alignment with the recovery research; an innovative model of human experience and psychosis that integrates both Western and Eastern understandings of our experience at the existential level; and a detailed description and explanation of the psychotic process, from onset to full recovery. Not only has Williams managed to bring significant lucidity to one of the greatest mysteries of human experience but also does so in a manner that is a real pleasure to read, breathing life into the theory with the actual experiences of his participants and using language that even those without any formal education in psychology will almost certainly find refreshing.

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