

Maybe That's Why I Became A Psychiatrist

By Jacob Freedman

Only very rarely do I bother telling someone about Harry when they ask me, “Why did you become a psychiatrist?” It’s not because it isn’t important, rather that they aren’t asking to hear about Harry. Sometimes they’re interested because a psychiatrist is something fascinating that they’ve never seen like a coelacanth or a samurai. Other times it’s out of disgust like I’m some sort of self-proclaimed Faith Healer or Shaman who doesn’t practice *real medicine* like a *real doctor* who uses x-rays and blood tests to make diagnoses. There are also folks who are convinced that I’m a prison warden who relishes in trapping innocent people who are exercising their libertarian rights to be grossly psychotic and untreated. Oddly enough this even happens when these innocent people are innocently smearing feces on the walls of a public library somewhere which is why someone called the police and they ended up in the hospital to begin with.

Maybe the real question isn’t “Why did you become a psychiatrist?” Rather it’s “Why didn’t you become a dentist?” My dentist drives a *Cadillac* during the week and a *Porsche* during the weekends and never works on Wednesdays because he’s too busy playing golf with his buddies. He never has to deal with Medicare, Accountable Care Organizations, or Affordable Care Acts and he gets to relax at his beach house every August. Plus he can make terrible jokes to a captive audience when he unsheathes the drill. Every time I make a joke I have to worry about transference reactions.

Maybe it’s kind of like asking the punter, “Why did you become a punter?” The implication being “Why didn’t you become a real football player?” Football players run and catch and throw and tackle and drop-kicking the ball a few times a game doesn’t really make you a *real football player*. A punter is just some guy who suits up with the team and makes the veteran minimum salary according to union regulations. But a punter still has a good life because he gets paid to kick a ball and doesn’t have to take steroids like the other guys. He doesn’t have to outrun four-hundred pound linemen like the running backs and doesn’t have to worry about chronic traumatic encephalopathy from getting squashed too many times like the quarterbacks. Plus he gets to relax the whole offseason while I’m stuck moonlighting on July 4th to pay off my student loans.

Maybe I became a psychiatrist because I found the rest of medicine too limiting. Diagnostic algorithms and treatment mnemonics were too stifling and took all the art out of medicine. I felt like a meter maid writing a ticket because the car was parked too close to the fire hydrant every time I wrote for antibiotics because the patient’s cough was associated with a fever. There was no mystery and no pleasant surprises in my days as an intern. I’d have already discharged patients to rehab facilities and nursing homes before I’d met their families, found

out what they'd done for a career, or asked about their favorite Bob Dylan album. Being a psychiatrist gave me the ability to get to know my patients beyond taking a social history that was limited to noting whether or not there was recent drug and alcohol use.

Or maybe it's because one of my best friends from back in school was grossly psychotic and filleted his poor cousin one day in a horrifying moment that haunts me just about every day. Harry was the coolest guy in the dorm but before you knew it he was smoking too much pot, sleeping on the floor *because it felt like a uterus*, and eating only canned foods *to protect against the germs*. Then came the problems with the *flu shot conspiracy and the satellites* and before you knew it he was whisked away to a hospital and diagnosed with schizophrenia. The lousy treatment he received never touched his paranoid delusions and eventually he killed his poor cousin *because he was a KGB spy*.

So maybe that's why I became a psychiatrist. Every patient that I meet with schizophrenia wears a Harry-mask at some point or another and gives me the chance to save someone else's cousin. Plus I still think that I'm more of a *real doctor* than some of my buddies in the radiology department. I still do a physical exam on all of my patients and order an EKG once in a while. Radiologists don't even touch their patients and most of their offices are in the basement next to the linen closets and the biohazard storage rooms.

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