

The Center Cannot Hold



Synopsis

Elyn R. Saks is an esteemed professor, lawyer, and psychiatrist and is the Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Law School, yet she has suffered from schizophrenia for most of her life, and still has ongoing major episodes of the illness. *THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD* is the eloquent, moving story of Elyn's life, from the first time that she heard voices speaking to her as a young teenager, to attempted suicides in college, through learning to live on her own as an adult in an often terrifying world. Saks discusses frankly the paranoia, the inability to tell imaginary fears from real ones, the voices in her head telling her to kill herself (and to harm others); as well the incredibly difficult obstacles she overcame to become a highly respected professional. This beautifully written memoir is destined to become a classic in its genre. The title is a line from "The Second Coming," a poem by William Butler Yeats, which is alluded to in the book.

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Customer Reviews

The buzzword in mental health the last few decades has been "recovery". Unfortunately we seem to read about it much more often than we see it. And recovery has also been a somewhat slippery concept. If we think in terms almost everyone can understand: if you lose your spouse of 20 years, or lose a child, do you ever "recover" from it? Well, life goes on, and most people eventually manage to largely put the loss behind them and rebuild, but life is never quite the same. This autobiography by Elyn Saks is a really powerful example of someone who had one of the (typically) most devastating psychiatric disorders known, who made a remarkable recovery and went on to have a quite successful academic career. Her description of her illness will convince any reader that she was profoundly ill for years. There are a couple of other points she really wants to emphasize in her story. One: she had the experience of personally comparing, as a patient, the English system of treatment and the American. The most remarkable difference she found was much less use of physical restraint and seclusion in England. She points out: the patients are basically the same--why is the approach so different? Having been put in restraints herself, she found it a very dehumanizing experience, and she argues for reducing its use. Of course, when you cut staffing as much as possible in order to maximize shareholder profit and CEO bonuses, one ends up using seclusion or restraint when there is inadequate staff time and training to handle behavioral problems by other means...The other argument she makes is about not neglecting the value of "talk therapy", even with patients who have a psychotic illness. For years she struggled to get by without any psychiatric medication. It didn't really work, but she was in psychotherapy for much of that period, and in the absence of medication she found the psychotherapy invaluable in anchoring her, to a degree, in reality. Eventually she came to accept the need to be on some medication as well, but she points out this is not an either/or argument, and both are important components of achieving "recovery". Whether you are a mental health professional, a family member of someone with a severe psychiatric disorder, or a patient in treatment yourself, her story is inspiring in portraying how even the worst of these conditions do not have to mean giving up on a career, on intimate relationships, and the other trappings of what we consider "a normal life."

I began reading this book first because I have many family members who have suffered from mental illness, but a close grandmother who struggled with schizophrenia until she passed. Secondly, I just love memoirs, and third because I am going into mental health social work (at USC too) so this seemed like a good fit. I began reading it on my school break and got about 1/4 way through, and then one of my classes a week later had this on the book list for a paper -- right away I knew I had to take the opportunity to finish it! I have read many other mental health memoirs before, but I must

say this book was MOVING. Seriously. I wish I had read this years ago when I was first interested in the field - even if you aren't this is a MUST READ. It renewed the sense that I chose the right field -- of course I would be a mental health concentration! This resonated with me in so many different ways, and I have never had a moment of psychosis. It changed my lens I saw my grandmother in so many years ago (even though I was just a child- it helped me to understand behaviors that I could never have made sense of). It exposed me to new modalities I knew nothing about, and has made a big impact on the type of clinician I will become. Elyn is one of the most resilient individuals I have ever heard about. There were parts of the book I literally sat to myself and said -- no way that happened and been in awe of her true story. Elyn, if you are reading this (which you are probably not), but you are an inspiration and truly admirable for the struggles you have overcome - and I know you say you are an exception to the rule, but your book alone has expanded my world and lens I can see people from. It makes me proud that you ended up at USC because that is where I am studying for an MSW -- FIGHT ON! That slogan seems to be so fitting for your life philosophy. I am glad you put yourself out there and used your name - you are a major force in changing mental health stigma. For that, I thank you. I work with children and their families who have mental health issues and will surely be recommending this book to many parents who lack empathy for their children with psychotic symptoms.

This book, for the most part, was enjoyable (at least as enjoyable as it could be with the subject matter at hand). I did feel it could've been a lot shorter and still keep the same impact. I admire her perseverance, it truly is an inspirational story for doctors and patients alike to see someone be able to withstand the devastating effects of ongoing progressive psychotic illness and be able to succeed in the manner in which she did. It creates an interesting contrast to compare her story to that of someone without the same generous resources as Ms. Saks had at her disposal (financial conditions to allow psychoanalysis, for instance). Within the premise of the book it was the patient's exposure to Kleinian analysis that I found the most fascinating; I think that for someone with less familiarity with what this entails it may have seemed like many random weird statements made by the therapist, and the author may have benefited from elaborating a little further on what the logic is behind the Kleinian interventions (deep primitive interpretations done at an early stage to evoke the transference neurosis), which without context can literally seem like "verbal rape." This was ultimately a very nice read, and I can only hope that advances in neurobiology and psychopharmacology will allow for the schizophrenic population at large to be able to progress to a place where a functional niche is not just a fantasy.

That this accomplished, professional superstar had the courage to lay bare her most agonizingly vulnerable moments was astounding. The hope and faith in this story could sustain me vicariously for a lifetime.

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