

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture – 22

Schizophrenia: A Personal Account and Interview with Reshma Valliappan

Hemachandran Karah: Hello, welcome all. Welcome again. Today, our topic is Schizophrenia. Well, schizophrenia has lots of public misperceptions, stereotypes. Anything is considered schizophrenic may maybe one would say stock exchange is behaving schizophrenically today and so on.

So, it is treated as a synonym for misbehavior, cranky stuff, crazy and so on, but science well, the medical science about schizophrenia is not an exact one. There is a hope to find detectable marker in the brain or blood test or gene and science that would categorically say well, this is the type of schizophrenia somebody has and so on, but we are not yet there.

So, in the course before I have made a statement in disability activism nothing about us without us that statement cannot animate better than what it is happening now. With me is Reshma Valliappan, her book *Fallen Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist* is an outstanding book. It is fortunate that we have her with us on Skype. So, let me begin by asking Reshma herself what is schizophrenia?

Reshma Valliappan: Hi, Hemachandran. What is schizophrenia according to me, I think we see it in our daily life. It is all across. It is all over world this entire universe. It is what you call as chaos at its highest level or madness at its highest level that to me is what schizophrenia is. A disorder within a lot of orders in itself and vice versa in short.

HK: Wow that reminds me of a book that I read long ago Davo of Physics, but the author is talking about organized dance of the cosmos, but now you are talking about disorder within the order.

RV: Yes, then it would be the disorganized dance of the cosmos.

HK: Well, that said let me remind the listeners that detection treatment and clinical understanding of schizophrenia has never been the same. For example, until 18th century

some kind of misbehavior or mental derangement was called idiocy, basically people who are children who refuse to grow up. Dementia kind of misbehavior that comes with old age, mania the kind of violent behavior, melancholia well kind of profound sadness in withdrawal.

And, a person as a scientist like Kraepelin and Bleuler who figured out in our previous interview about autism. They hoped to find the scientific solution like what exists for Alzheimer's, I mean not a solution an obvious marker that may show via MRI since that is not happening what is the connection between human mind and schizophrenia? We talked about cosmos, but what is it in the mind and beyond.

RV: According to my own experience from the research I have done the years of trying to just understand you know the connection with madness as we all know actually schizophrenia has been called the father of all disorders. You know following up with the stigma and discrimination that exists with such an overwhelming label in itself. When I try and make a connection to the cosmos I would just say that schizophrenia is a different type of language that we are trying to communicate with the world.

Once a person reaches a breakdown within himself or herself through because you have faced a certain trauma or maybe many layers of trauma you really cannot make sense of this trauma right. Because we are thinking beings as human beings we are social intellectual beings.

What we tend to forget is we have suppressed the emotional part of ourselves. As we grow up we start you know put our emotions down because or we sort of repress them very naturally because we are told to behave and express ourselves in what is appropriate language and appropriate thoughts.

So, any thoughts that we feel might be perceived as being wrong or as being mad to somebody else we will suppress that. And let us say you were to be afflicted by any sort of trauma. And what I mean by trauma is trauma can mean different things for you, it can mean different things for me. It does not necessarily have to be a really huge deal of a trauma, I like if somebody were to be sexually violated kind of a trauma.

You know it could be a simple thing, like the guy down the road called me this you know used a certain type of language against me. That could be trauma, walking across the

road could be trauma for one individual and it stays playing in my head repeatedly, but because I do not have the strength or the ability or the proper language to express what is happening inside of my head. I tend to further suppress it because someone would say why are you making a big deal out of it? It is just that guy who is calling in your names. I mean come on, do not dramatize that.

Right; we grow up in such a society. People tell us to come on, get over it. It is a small deal not realizing before we are thinking beings right emotional beings. We came out of you know our mother's womb crying, that is the first sign of life. So, as in my experience my every first sign of need living is me crying which might come across to somebody else as you are going through depression, you need help.

But, this very act of me crying is my response to wanting to live, but when I lose all my tools to keep dealing with repeated traumas and I cannot work around helping myself anymore there is only so much I or a person can take. And, when we cannot deal with it anymore your mind eventually breaks out.

HK: So, in some sense it is multiple voices coping up with that emerge and to make sense of the world from within and with outside. Is that a way to understand it?

RV: Yes, that is true. If I may add R. D. Laing one of the quite a well known psycho analyst actually wrote in his book *The Divided Self*. That is we have the real self and since we are constantly having to suppress this real self we start trying to make this false self. To deal with things and as time goes on we keep doing that repeatedly and this false self becomes even larger and larger and larger overpowering your real self. You finally forget which was your first trauma. You forget which was your first voice or your first you know the first brick that hit you.

HK: Yes.

RV: Because you are constantly trying to make sense of everything else that came into being.

HK: That makes me go directly to your autobiography. It is not in that conventional cells conventional way autobiography. It is a you know a collection of snippets, emails, scribbles, letters, gossips, detailed narrative, disjunct statements, proverbs, rants

sometimes in literary circle stream of conscious narratives so many out there. I am just thinking at the top of my head I mean. So, kindly say something about your book Reshma.

RV: So, my book was actually a very interesting a journey for me. In fact, I did not even have a manuscripts when the publisher reached out to me. I had no clue on how to even write a book or go about doing it. How the book came into being is the publisher sent me a couple of questions as a guide to help me write my story. And the first question that was sent was what do you think is the cause to your schizophrenia. And, there were six other questions after that. But, just focusing on one question I wrote an entire book.

HK: Ok.

RV: Because from where I was looking at schizophrenia it was a completely different perspective than what everybody had to even offer me. And in trying to make sense of then what is schizophrenia. In order for me to live with my schizophrenia and to function like everybody else and that is how the book started because I tried to make sense about every single experience in my life.

If we were to say that yes, schizophrenia is a chemical imbalance or has some sort of a medical cause towards it is. That is just one viewpoint, but does that make me into the person I am? No. Has it guaranteed a life of hope? Unfortunately no, because there is so many different layers to schizophrenia; it is not just something we can call a medical condition where you take your pills and you think you are going to wake up the next day and feel better about yourself.

Because it is not like any other medical condition out there you know people easily understand and accept cancer today. They do not stigmatize you for it. They do not treat you like you are going to kill them. They do not treat you as if you are a criminal. They do not treat you as if you are the next or even.

HK: In the least they do not negate the agency of the person.

RV: Yes, exactly that. And then when I went through my entire even the process of actually writing the book.

Honestly it took me back into a past that even my psychotherapist found very difficult to work with me on. It is not easy when we are dealing with you know the multiple issues that exist in one's past. If you are just looking at age diagnosis of schizophrenia then comes the prognosis where your parents is sitting over there and asking the doctor. So, when will my child be alright and the quiet their answer is I do not know. Because there is no other story of hope or they are extremely so limited stories of hope and you do not even hear about them because they do not come out.

HK: Statistical improbability.

RV: Exactly that and so, caregivers are left in a radiac zone. You do not have any hope as to will my child be able to live a regular life like anybody else? The question my parent asked is will Resh ever go back to the way she is. Or the way she was and the answer is always going to be I do not know. Whether you ask ten psychiatrist they are going to tell you I do not know. I cannot tell you. We got a just take the medication, she has to take them.

You just got to see it might be possible, it might not be possible, it is the lifelong condition. You have to take it, there will be instances of relapses, there will be instances of hospitalization, that person completely need your support and will be dependent. That is a very dark future by the very thought of that I mean someone like me deserved.

HK: Correct.

RV: We simply just should say that I mean what is the point of living then, there is actually no hope. That been said when I then pursued counseling and even tried going into psychotherapy. Now, that opens up out the door because now you are dealing with shit in your head or from your past that will get uncovered.

And, that is the job of the psychotherapist to uncover what is really troubling you from understanding your hallucinations, understanding these voices or the visions that you have or your imaginary friends and trying to understand why do you have a certain type of a delusion maybe, that you know think people are out to get you or you think you know you are going to be the best you know you are probably Christ incarnate or Kali incarnate or whatever; and.

HK: The culturally embedded yes.

RV: Yeah. You know when you sit across you know the couch from your psychotherapist and you spend now another few years or few sessions trying to even figure that out I am like wow, I do not have the money to you know make another living. Where am I going to have the money to sits more than three sessions here.

HK: Correct.

RV: So, you can remove psychotherapy even out of the picture. But that is what my book offered me. My book itself became my own psychotherapist. It allowed me to go back into a past I completely forgot because you are talking about how medications and the process of psychosis can also make you forget who you were. It can make you forget the past that you came at or the person that you were because I was not, I did not shoot out of my mom's womb with schizophrenia.

I grew up. I led a life that existed before this, there was much more to me as a human being. There was much more to me as an Indian girl with you know complicated roots or contradictory roots that also influenced the way schizophrenia affected my life and how I then made sense of it.

HK: Great; see in many ways you are saying writing the process of writing, one helped you to cope with the current challenges that you may have faced with the condition and also writing also help you unearth your inner being, a very vast inner being in which a huge archive of voices is stored or doing the rounds from the past, from the childhood, from adolescence. Because that is what is becoming evident when, I read your book I remember an anecdote for example, you saw this girl dark one, sitting and cutting her hand and you wanted to stop her doing it because you cared for her.

But, she went on cutting and you were unable to move actually, then you then it seems you almost grabbed her and said are you hard of hearing? Why do not you stop? And then when you said that it seems it was your left hand that was being that was getting cut and not the that anecdote quite moved me actually. Because in some sense it is about the writing is about translating the voices that existed inside you. That is how I understood it when I read that anecdote.

RV: Yes, that is true. That is another part of me trying to reach out to another part of me that is first and it is trying to stop that and therefore, the constant spitting of the mind not the personality. And the mind is sorry please go ahead.

HK: Carry on carry on.

RV: So, when we look at schizophrenia as a term it says it was very often mistaken to be a split personality, but it is actually a split mind because your mind is stuck between wanting to do the right thing for yourself and wanting to do the right thing for other people in the world. And, this is the chaos that exists. Am I doing the right thing for somebody else, but oh no, wait I am hurt. I mean how do I protect myself? No, I cannot protect myself it is not my job to protect myself somebody else needs to protect myself.

But, then you are constantly in this struggle within your own voice and one voice is telling you, no it is your job. You cannot afford to do this you need to take care of the rest of the world you are supposed to follow the rest of the world.

And, then there is this inside part of you that constantly fighting and trying to let me know that look you are hurt. You need to deal with this, you need to tell the person to stop. It could be as simple as that and because you are emotional beings we find it difficult to hurt somebody else. A lot of individuals I also know who self-harm, when I ask them about why do you self-harm? The answer is the same that if I do not cut myself I will end up cutting the other person and I do not want to do that because the other person is somebody I love a lot.

So, I had just to take it out on myself because we feel so helpless as to trying to figure out why the other person would say such a thing to us or behave in such way. The world is a difficult place to live in. Some of us are built with certain types of coping mechanisms that might be normal per se. Some are built with the DNA to be diplomatic.

HK: Yes.

RV: How they also deal.

HK: Yes.

RV: With the situation.

RV: Yes.

And some of us are just not like everybody else. We just see the world in a different way and we have our sense of what is right or what is wrong and we cannot stand that, we cannot I mean I know I am not just talking about myself from a lot of other narratives and individuals I know personally. We struggle with this with this ideological or moral ground of what is right and what is wrong you know of some sense of there should be justice and if justice is not delivered even to us or given to us we are highly affected by it. It would be defer for me to say that we are also in a way a lot more sensitive than other people.

The word I would probably use of the term is perhaps hypersensitive. Many human beings experienced the world at maybe 60 decibels. Some human beings are hearing impaired and then you have the likes of people like me who probably experienced the world at 120 decibels.

HK: What did you mean by that Reshma 120 double the decibels that others here?

RV: Yeah. So, what I mean is everything is very intensified.

HK: Ok.

RV: From the sensory experience. So, if somebody would see things in the regular world as that being their reality, I just have to tell them that alright, you see 100 things over there I see maybe a 1000 that you cannot see the other 900.

HK: Because it is filtered out.

RV: Because it is completely filtered out, yes.

Like the best analogy is when you are making tea or coffee there is a filter. Right?

HK: Yes.

RV: And, you get and other human beings they get the good stuff. But in my head whether it is the brain or the mind their absolutely there is no filter.

HK: Yeah.

RV: So, I take in information and I take in all of it. From the sound, to the taste to what is being said, the noise levels, the touch and the feelings. So, I would take in all of it and I do not and I do not have the ability to block them out like other people. It is through learning, practice and habituating myself and constantly being aware that I have just learned to do it and so we withdraw. Withdrawal is the best defense mechanism for us and maybe it is ok.

HK: I think so, because on the one hand the voice is saying this is right, on the other hand the voices from outside regularized voices saying this is not all right and then you are caught between and that is also lots of suffering Reshma. If I could say that way, is it right?

RV: Yes, it is. It is quite an effort every day actually.

HK: Well, lots of writers say in order to write you need to withdraw. You need to be on an exile. Edward Sade testifies this. Lots of students in Humanities and Social Sciences will naturally know this, but here we are talking about a different kind of exile Reshma. On the one hand he mediation between voices, regularized and non-regularised on the other hand withdraw to make sense of what is happening and third practical everyday aspects of it and then get into writing as though it were a therapeutic activity in its own right. Am I summarizing it? Did I did I understand it well?

RV: Yes, true late. It is a I would agree that writing requires a certain type of solitaires what do you call it solitude like many creative acts; painting for example, if you are a traditional painter which are also am, I need to be in a lone space unlike my friends who paint murals. They go out there and the paint with the rest of the world. Unlike performing onstage as a musician or like my alter ego who is am I.

HK: Correct.

RV: So on one hand yes, I need to be alone in order to the right at the same time I need to make sure I am not all the time alone. I need to have some sort of a constructive distraction that will be, that will help me break.

HK: The kind of slip in, slip out approach.

RV: Yes, that will actually help me break that process because unlike a regular writer I am not a regular person. If I would to go deep into myself I will never come out.

It is actually I guess the irony and the very irony of the condition is that. I have tremendous needs that requires me to be alone in order for me to be the best of myself the best version of myself. But, it is the same part of me that if I were to get sucked into this quicksand it is very difficult for me to come out.

HK: Come out.

RV: That is another definition of schizophrenia to me. It kind of sucks you in and when you are sucked into the quick sand as another storm that is happening over there internally and it is really difficult for another human being to pull me out because it is that invisible.

HK: Is it?

RV: And the only other person or the only other being who can do that for me have actually been my cats.

HK: Wow.

RV: Then they just know it I mean. In fact, just yesterday I had a couple of breakdowns because of certain work related issues and I live alone. So, I can put on a mask anytime I want. Quite like the joker from the batman you know. If I mean whatever does not kill you makes you stranger.

HK: I heard it so many times; yeah.

RV: And that is exactly what I feel it might have made me stronger, but it actually it makes me it makes me stranger. I cannot open the door and I mean I have seen a lot of my friends do that you know. If they were crying and you and they open the door for you and you ask them how are you doing, they are like oh I am you know I am just not good. In my case, I could have, I could be in the dark or really ugly space dealing with some crazy life issues.

But, if you were to call me I would be able to crack a joke and nobody would even know, it is an immediate switch that happens with my mind, maybe it is pretense, it is fake, it is

the overriding of the false self that I have learned to do ever since I have been a child I guess that also has schizophrenia. When you are trapped and it is very difficult to get out of that trap, it is very difficult for the people who are even the closest to me to understand I am going through something and therefore, writing has it is another irony because, I think the only way people can understand what schizophrenia is, is for people like me we have to literally bare our soul to you.

On one hand it feels very unfair that I have to bare my soul to the world for them to understand everything that is contained within it, because honestly they are really blind. You know I do not like using that word in this context, but I use it, I still use it nevertheless because that is the language the world understands.

HK: Well, it is a potent metaphor you know.

RV: It is.

HK: Yeah.

RV: I mean my friend who is actually blind, she could tell I was having overstimulating issues on stage whereas, the person beside me who is a moderator, who could see the world could not tell.

HK: There we go.

RV: You know it is that.

I mean she who could see me thought that I was having I was nervous to be on stage. And, despite me telling her, excuse me I have been on a lot at TEDx and I have given a lot of talks, I am not nervous. I could not take on the world if I want to. I even told her I have issues of patterns and you know there are too many bright lights around me.

Yet she did not pay attention and it was not until my friend who is actually blind told her that can you please get the camera man out of Reshma's face because the flash will cause a seizure. It is just basic sense of humanity.

And, on the other hand it is the basic sense of being treated like another citizen. At that points it spoke about how the rest of the world sees a schizophrenic. We get a nothing, but individuals who lack the capacity for I do not know what. For a lot of things, I mean

the judgment that people have given is a lot. I always tell them I might be crazy, but I am not stupid.

HK: And, not insensitive either.

RV: Yes, [laughter] not insensitive either. I am probably a lot more sensitive and therefore, I need to you know constantly cover myself up.

HK: I get that. See again going to the form of the writing, you have chosen e-mail as a very important medium many parts of the book e-mails come up. Are emails in some sense protective mechanism for you to stay out of the loose soil that you are talking about because e-mails are real vehicle to the world you know. You cannot write emails to yourself. Well, you can, but those e-mails that I read are not written to yourselves.

RV: Honestly it actually was not a protective mechanism. It was me trying to connect.

HK: Ok.

RV: Yes, the person I was writing to who happened to be my publisher.

HK: Ok.

RV: And, I there were two ways there was given to me. One was to either write an entire manuscript of let us say 300 pages and send it to her at one go. And, the other just happened naturally and my publisher I think realized that I was trying to connect with her and for me that was absolutely important, because having to live with this condition. And, the lack of human connections and interaction in my everyday life I always took the opportunity to connect to the other person on the other side.

And if even sending them an e-mail a day would establish that sort of connection that, hey you are not just a publisher who is interested in my story because it is an interesting story the world would want to read, but you are actually following on this everyday process of even the struggle in my writing and you are reading it and that was importance. And, I think she knew how important that was for someone like me in that, she also acknowledged every e-mail that went to her and she read it.

So, instead of again, instead of sending 300 pages after 6 months on it was either everyday or it was after 3 weeks or after 3 months. And, this helps all of the voices

inside of me understand that this is someone I can trust who is acknowledging every single part of me and was reading it and therefore, even if to by the time the book gets out I know I am understood by someone already.

HK: Definitely, Reshma; actually when I was reading the young adult part of the book where the young protagonist is struggling about so many things, it is about establishment of one's own voice. I mean not establishment assertion of one's own voice hobbies like basketball, being heard, cultivating one's own voice all that actually it reminded me of this classic book catcher in the right.

RV: Yes.

HK: I do not know, I was thinking about the book all the time when I was reading your book. All that whatever you said before 10 minutes ago about recovering voices it is quite apt actually when I read this portions because it is all about making sense of those voices which stay inside all of us all the time. It is just that you would like to animate them and they animate you, I think that is the difference. And, that is the difference being a schizophrenist, meaning you are using the term like ophthalmologist or gynecologist and so on. I mean just making fun of it affectionately.

RV: Yes of course, of course.

HK: Because it gathers your authority to talk about the experiences from childhood onwards as it is schizophrenist.

RV: Yes, I mean on that notes I want to owe it. It does not want me anymore and I think that is what is you know even spirituality is trying to tell you. It is.

HK: I was going to come to that in a minute actually, spirituality. Yes, yeah carry on Reshma, yeah.

RV: It comes down to that is you know for a very long time even as a kid I grew up doing a lot of things. I did struggle in school. I hardly could stay still for 20 minutes. I am I am pretty sure that if a psychiatrist met me at a young age I probably would have gotten an intellectual disability disorder.

HK: Of some kind yeah.

RV: You know. I know I have; I also know I have not been a regular child right. I have been a bully. I have been in the compartment of being a deviant the troublemaker, rebel all of that jazz and what I started realizing as to everything I did even after my schizophrenia and even when I got out into the world and without any supports when I had to make that decision to get off my medications and go and explore the world. Because I was so grateful to my older siblings telling me that Resh, you need to see the world from an objective side of view, not from a schizophrenic point of view because that is your comfort.

You know and they made so much of sense I said yeah I need to understand the world because on one hand the world expects you to behave like them. They expect a schizophrenic to come out and start functioning.

But, if your world is so closed to me how do you expect me to learn all of this. How do you expect me to learn these social skills when it has constantly rejected me and when I started going out there and I you know I shuffled between multiple jobs and people would keep saying that hey, you know you seem to be the jack of all trades. Are you even a master of any? And, I just kept my mouth shut. And, I said well a jack and a master is specific to the male category.

HK: Yes.

RV: Try a different name this time you know.

But, then like I tell people today, that I am an alien from a different planet. So, I can do a lot of things. I am very good in all of them, but because humans cannot understand that one person can be many things they have given it is a disorder. They have decided to label it and give it names.

Whereas, if I probably sat in a different country and or maybe if I wore a robe and I had a beard and you know I had a lot of followers you might tap your hand saying that wow you have mastered the art of mind over matter that you are a brilliant painter, you are a writer, you know you have published many things and you teach kids and you do all of that. That is the only difference I think the world is more schizophrenic than I am.

HK: And, reaching out cannot happen one way. It has to happen two ways right.

RV: It has to happen two ways.

And, yes.

RV: If made the efforts sorry.

HK: Yeah, go ahead.

RV: So, coming back to the label of the word of the schizophrenist I think it, I remember another sorry a neurologists. Yeah, by the name of George Murphy, he read my book. He is the author of Sacred Pathway.

HK: Ok.

RV: And, he also liked the term schizophrenist. He says that it feels that you are describing it like it is schizophrenistry; you know like dentist is dentistry and schizophrenistry is an art or a way of you know kind of decoding the world of voices and visions to the rest of the world and it will never end, I said exactly that. Because the world presents me with constant sensory stimulation every single day of my life and I have to make sense of that.

After I have made sense of that I will now find an appropriate way to communicate it to you and I will use art, I will use words and I will use action which is my mind to replay it for the rest of the world. And that for me is being a schizophrenist. I am not bound because I have found a way to live with what the world calls as madness.

HK: Well, in being a schizophrenist, you are also a deeply spiritual person. Going by the narrative I never talked to you before, but going by the narrative the book that I read it seems the following things may mean a lot to you as a spiritual person. For example, being more than oneself just a rounded body category visible person maybe a sense of mysticism.

Maybe more tolerant of this harmony; or I think these are the ways in which I understood your spirituality through the book. But, I would like to know what is your understanding of spirituality especially with linked to within quotation madness that you have tamed?

RV: So, that is going to be three answers to that.

HK: Ok.

RV: Starting first with schizophrenia.

HK: Ok.

RV: When you get diagnosed with anything; right whether it is schizophrenia, heart disease, diabetes.

HK: Yeah.

RV: The first question you ask yourself is why?

HK: That is.

RV: The first question my mom who is a typical Indian housewife she kept praying in front of god saying that; why our child?

HK: Correct.

RV: Why my child? Right, it is a very common thing.

HK: And a very human question.

RV: And, very human question, correct.

And, eventually when I got better I asked my mom, but why not?

Why not your child?

Would you be if it was somebody else's child?

I mean and that is they are not human because it could be somebody else's child and would you be ok?

Right.

So, would it be if somebody else's child had cancer and yours not? It would be the same question and when that played into my head, I think it also came from the fact that I actually graduated from philosophy. I was somebody who naturally asked lot of

questions as a child. I was never satisfied as a person, as a kid I was always told like Resh you asking too many questions.

You know and I think you even see this with kids we tend to complain about kids asking questions all the time. And eventually we reach a point of saying that this kid is too smart. We cannot go on answering your questions. I said oh how about you look at me from the same perspective then.

Because, it is a curious mind at the end of the day, that also makes me schizophrenic. I am curious as to why I am a certain way I am curious as to why people are built a certain way. So, that why let me to realize that would I also be if I experienced any other disorder and when I made a comparative narrative to the rest of disorders that was being advocated for alright.

Now, talking in terms of cross disability or talking in terms of other medical conditions people would say hey, you have a heart problem, I think you should accept it and change your lifestyle.

HK: Correct.

RV: If you have you know so and so disability, change your lifestyle, change everything else around it. Nobody tells the person to change themselves.

Go grab another pair of legs, you will start walking. No, I mean, yes once upon a time people said that, but it is a very ridiculous thought and so, I have also asked people the same thing, I mean why do not you change the way you look at me. That if I have schizophrenia why did not you ask me a different question? Hey Resh, how about you accept this as something that was meant to be? Because it has altered your entire course of life, just like any other strong condition would.

And maybe it is not for you to go back to the way you were alright. When the rest of the world is telling your doctor hey, will I get my child back? I look at my momma and say why do you want that Resh back? Isn't life about moving forward? Why do you want me to go back to what I was 2 years back? Maybe this is a condition that forces us to completely shift our way of life. I mean that is what spirituality is. We think spirituality

is something that is nice, we think that spirituality is about this social media post that tells you drink green tea. Go hug a tree.

And, you will reach enlightenment and after the age of 60, when you hair becomes white and all of your kids have grown up and are settled. Then you will find them time for enlightenment, I said wow. I mean that to me is distorted. For me life presents you with suffering. And, when that suffering hits you it puts you and the rest of your family into a position where you actually have no choice, no material choice, no superficial choice left, but to stare life and say oh mother of god this is what it is and I have to deal with it.

And, you can I look at it as something that is completely negative like oh shit. Or you can look at it wow life is actually forcing us to take onto this path. Alright and that is how I decided shift my choice in speaking and maybe it is a choice in itself. That is one part of the spirituality that I understood, we can call it Buddhism. That it tells you to accept your sufferings; you realize the cause of your suffering.

And, when you know that you can do something of your suffering and in that suffering you help other people where is your four noble truths. Then you have the eightfold path that is just one part of spirituality. The other part of spirituality which is following for the second answer goes back to the fact that I also come from my family background has roots in practice in Hinduism. My family, my father's side we grew up with I am sorry I will just rephrase that sentence my father's side owned a lot of temples.

HK: Ok.

RV: Yeah back home in Malaysia and my dad himself grew up pretty rebellious, despite being a scientist that he is. But a scientist is somebody who questions. A scientist is somebody who is something does not make sense to the rest of the world is to say oh, but how about I try this. And, it might seem completely preposterous to the other person. So, I share the same genetic code as my dad; right. And my dad would constantly describe how he also kept asking his father for questions.

Why do we pray to god a certain way? Why do we eat? Why we are not allowed to eat beef? Why do we? Why do we? Why do we? Why do and his father actually answered his questions and my father also answered my questions and when he did not know the

answer he said Resh, I think you will figure it out on your own because I do not have the answer for that.

Now, this influenced the same genes that I carry, for me to seek to those answers that out as to, why? Because at the end of the day, no matter what condition you have you carry a certain fate we cannot ignore that fate.

HK: Correct.

RV: You cannot ignore the fact that no matter what science has to tell us. When it comes down to suffering all of us as human beings we fall to a particular type of fate. We cannot step out ourselves from reaching out to this being we call god. Or an atom whatever you know belief we come from and we will ask.

HK: Some material manifestation. That is inherent.

RV: Yeah, correct. Yes, that is inherent in all of us to feel that somebody else can answer us because suffering is connected now to an emotional part no more to your intellectual analysis of who I am as a human being that is the second answer. The third is following the fact that schizophrenia is not the first brain or mind condition to have struck me.

I also and happened to be a survivor of Reye's syndrome from the age of 1 and a half years old and after schizophrenia I also happen to go through craniotomy for a brain tumor that was sitting on the left hemisphere of my brain. That left me with scar epilepsy and sleep disorders and I have found a way to live with all of this without medications.

HK: Wow.

RV: Because I did look at, I did dig deep into research of shamanism into Christianity into all possible scriptures or you know ideologies whatever we want to call them, to really try and make sense of what is happening. On one hand you have mystics, who say that mystics and psychotics swim in the same ocean and when I hear a sentence like that it reminds me about again a line of discrimination that a mystic is segregating himself from the psychotics. And, my counter response to that is the only difference between a mystic and a psychotic is, a mystic has been trained to be a mystic.

HK: Yes.

RV: A mystic has been educated about a certain pathway. A mystic has been given the knowledge of it maybe from a young age, maybe from an adulthood and has had the time span to read and to understand his experiences are going to be like this and he is going to have a mentor that is going to tell him hey what you are experiencing, it is part of this type of a practice. You might want to enroll yourself into that school of thought where they have certain types of beliefs and methods; so, whatever these are. A psychotic has suddenly woken up one day and all of this has just happened.

That is that is a difference.

HK: It is coming from the biology that they have which is a part of them.

RV: Yes. So, you wake up and you are suddenly thrown into this ocean and you are like oh god where am I, you know because a mystic is also somebody who spends a large amount of time alone. It is just that he has more peers to talk to and a mystic is a beautiful term that the world accepts is also an English word. Psychotic it is not a beautiful term at the end of the day and it is also an English term.

HK: So candidly said Reshma, because see on the one hand you acknowledge that the suffering and the laypersons challenges that come with schizophrenia and many other human conditions. On the other hand, you say that well, this is human and once sense of agency personhood and should be preserved in a way society does not corner them and also the condition does not take over the personhood.

RV: Yes.

HK: Lastly I mean we are nearly at the end of our 1 hour conversation, but you mentioned a lot about loneliness. Well, I teach culture and literature. So, there is this essay Georg Simmel wrote “Metropolis and Mental Life” meaning our city lives especially 20th and 21st century, city lives make us notoriously lonely. Is it any different for you, Reshma?

RV: Yes and no.

HK: Can you quickly walk the listeners to through that.

RV: Yes. So, yes because I also live in a city and as city people we are all playing the same rat race, we are all hiding behind our gadgets. And, we do not want to show our vulnerability to the other person, because it will allow them to use it against us in work.

HK: Correct.

RV: In everyday relationships.

HK: Correct.

RV: Because being ethical and professional on this planet is seemingly very difficult because not many people are honest and not many people are trustworthy. So, we are constantly in defense and in God. That being said that no is my schizophrenia has taken away the yes. My schizophrenia has forced me to be vulnerable.

That is the only way people will understand me and in that vulnerability I actually find my power. I feel more empowered that hey, you know what you cannot see you cannot put me down any longer. I mean you simply cannot. I know I am vulnerable. I mean everybody it knows I am vulnerable to the point that it is starting to make no difference to my life.

So, actually it is a power that I have and I think to summarize everything you have asked me right now and I mean when you actually told me that it reminded you of catcher in the rye I always go back to the 15 year old inside of me that ran away and it was why I came to India. And about the population in India that is struggling mainly our young adults we are all running away. We are all running away into a superficial reality and we forget what relationships are.

We easily want to step on our closest of friends for any success that we think is success at the cost of our relationships, but at the end of the day when you need someone it is going to be that person that you probably stepped on who was your friend. And I mean I am coming from a place where I also teach students in school and I tell them do not do that because suffering will really make you alone. And today, my suffering does not make me alone. I have learned to find a way to keep in touch with other people. I feel I do feel lonely, but I remind myself that I have people that I can reach out to and I need to make that effort because they do not know how to reach into me.

HK: Correct.

RV: Since I spend a lot of time in my work and I spend a lot of time indoors. So, a lot of people on the other side who want to help me do not know how to help Resh, but when I make the effort to let them know hey this is how you can help me they know exactly how to reach in them to me and effort is both ways it is 50-50 and to be in letting the people, letting others know that hey, I need your help, please, like talk to me, it is ok and somebody is there. So, in a way I have to remind myself I am actually not lonely, I have a lot of people right now for me there. They might not be physically present, but they are real voices that exist.

HK: I get that. So, vulnerability is a resource too, apart from being right.

RV: Yes.

HK: Great, great Reshma.

RV: Vulnerability.

HK: Yes.

RV: Allows you to form human connections.

HK: That is true. Wonderful Reshma, it was a pleasure talking to you. I certainly learnt a lot. Thank you so much.

RV: Thank you so much too.