

Playing Crazy?

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When I first saw him, with his Klingonesque receded hairline and stiff, straight, blown-back black hair, he seemed off to me. A lot of the psychotic people I've known have also seemed glaringly off in some way. His touched visage made me suspect that he really was psychotic, although I've also met a guy who seemed perfectly normal only to suddenly break his conversation with me and start an anxious one with God (... until his brain was baptized in Haldol).

But I've seen so many inmates playing crazy, especially in this joint (W.S.P.F.). And this guy, whom I'll call Worf, exhibited moments of quite sensible behavior (e.g. giving me the finger upon our first eye contact). Also, some of his symptoms seemed straight out of The Idiotic Inmate's Guide to Playing Crazy, such as him saying that the last name on his door wasn't his, pooping in his shoe, exposing himself to passersby, masturbating in front of staff, tearing up his books and paperwork then throwing them in the hallway — weird behavior geared toward gaining attention. Then I heard a guard say Worf was playing crazy to beat a pending case, so I doubted the legitimacy of his insanity.

Then, one evening, when staff pulled him out of cell Alpha 411, the pungent scent of fermented urine wafted into my cell, and I heard a guard say that there were puddles of piss ^{on the floor} in Worf's cell along with his bedding. I had to reconsider my doubt of his derangement. Staff had another prisoner mop the cell then put Worf back in it. Worf appeared dazed and indifferent, even to the fact that staff replaced his prison uniform with a suicide-resist nt smock.

"Bad! Bad [Worf]! You're a people and people don't piss on the floor and sleep in it!" I said, angry yet as jocose as ever. He'd already smeared poo in cells A-415 and A-412. I hoped to shame him into being more sanitary, for the sake of us other captives.

But he was beyond shame. He looked gone as he shuffled back into his box.

The next morning, I happened to look out the window on my cell's

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door and saw Worf doodling with what appeared to be clay on his cell's hallway window, with his bare hands.

When lunch came, because Worf had feces on his window, staff trucked right on past him, telling him to clean his window if he wanted to eat. They passed him at supper too, at which time, at the urging of staff, Worf used his bare hands and fingernails to try and scrape the then dried feces from his window — disgusting and futile! That was enough for me!

"If he's playing crazy," I said to a guard, "he deserves an Oscar!"

As nauseated as I was by Worf's behavior, it enthralled me.

What was the psychological basis for it? I wondered.

Along with writing, philosophy, and art, psychology is one of the majors in my self-study program. Worf's shameless, self-degrading behavior presented an intriguing puzzle.

"He's a Nigger. What do you expect," two other White guys on the range said when I expressed my wonder. I had never witnessed a White prisoner smear his feces, only Blacks and one Latino. I have, however, heard credible stories of Whites, whom I knew to be nuts, smearing their feces. So, I doubted that there was a racial (but not necessarily ^acultural) factor to blame.

A person would have to dissociate from their normal identity/persona, the one that enables them (or most of us) to be part of a society. Such dissociation would be necessary for Worf to do what he was doing.

Normally, our mask/persona would be shaped by peer pressure and would feel shame, which Worf was free from. Such a mask could easily fall off if one's society never accepted them or suddenly rejected them by labelling them a criminal and imprisoning them. So I figure.

The C.O.s went right past Worf's cell for three more meals, even though he scraped most of the feces from the window. Apparently he used urine as a solvent, because some had managed to trickle through the supposedly waterproof caulking around the pane of high-security glass and leaked into the hallway. A day later, I could still see the dried yellow streak. This prompted the C.O.s to place a barrier around the bottom of his cage's door.

After being skipped for the sixth meal in a row, after failing to

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drain the urine from the meal tray that he had and which staff wanted back (sans urine), Worf kicked his door in protest. Then he pressed his intercom to ask for food. Apparently starvation has psychotherapeutic benefits.

Despite Worf's bizarre behavior, P.S.U.¹ staff took no special interest in him. Strangely, he regularly received mail, while sending none out. Despite my castigations, he never showered, never cleaned his cell, and, apparently, never used the toilet in his cell for its intended purpose. Despite the filth and the complaint that I filed about it (i.e. # WSPF-2012-1821²), staff never again had Worf's cell cleaned and left him in it, contrary to their own policy of cleaning up body fluids.

I can't blame staff, although they had to work around Worf's filth.

I can and do blame the current, ineffective "tough-on-crime" orientation of the system. It, ^{maybe} as much as a welfare-state orientation fails to motivate people like Worf to put forth the effort needed to act sane. I suspect that the high and constant pressure of this punitive system is too much for people like Worf; and they react to this passive-aggressively (knowing that open aggression is futile), engaging in all sorts of despicable behavior, which the rest of us must deal with. Think of it as playing psychological possum; and think of how some animals secrete foul-tasting slime to discourage predators.

Maybe Worf was playing crazy, at one time, but it would still have been a defense mechanism, as many versions of insanity are thought to be. Even if Worf is malingering (a word that commonly is thought to mean consciously and maliciously playing crazy, which is not true) or has Ganser syndrome (look these terms up in a good neuropsychology text!), it still constitutes a severe psychological disorder — he's being played by crazy. Particularly since the system is inciting this, the system should humanely treat it.

f.n. 1. P.S.U. — Psychological Services Unit.

f.n. 2. As usual, the complaint was dismissed, because staff falsely asserted what I claimed was not true. The next day, I was moved into my current cell, A-223.