

A tangled reality

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Photo by Wade Spees



When Lloyd Hale was a kid growing up in Georgetown and New York City, drugs were a normal part of life at home, on the streets, wherever Hale and his friends hung out. Dealing was a way for his father to pay the rent and get by in the projects.

Editor's note:

This is the first in a two-part series that follows Lloyd Hale's journey through schizophrenia and recovery.

But Hale's dad wound up spending most of his son's young life in prison for drug trafficking. And at 13, Hale began smoking marijuana and drinking heavily himself. He preferred it to school — and much else.



Lloyd Hale (left) was 15 when he and his older brother, Marvin Jr. (right), visited their father, Marvin, in a Maryland prison. The photograph was taken about six months before Lloyd shot a man. After Lloyd went to jail, he hung the photograph in every cell, hospital and apartment he lived in.



Lloyd Hale's symptoms of schizophrenia set in around age 13. This photo was taken before that journey began. He cut class and got into fights. Charged with armed robbery, he was sent to a state Department of Juvenile Justice facility for a month. When he returned home, a friend asked, "So how much community service did you get?"

"80 hours."

80-80-80-80-80-80-80-80

The number repeated, an uninterrupted string echoing through his mind.

Looking back, it was the first sign.

Soon after, Hale realized he could continue conversations he'd just had with people in his mind. He could talk to his older brother or razz a buddy — then walk away and keep talking with them through his new mental communication.

Yet, it also meant that a fight could rage on long after the person was gone.

It was a secret ability, a hidden world that not all people were able to join. Everyone he spoke with swore they would deny their mental talks if he ever mentioned them out loud.

And they did.

“Do you remember when you said ... ?” he would ask.

“Hale, I never said that.”

One day, God and the devil both came to him, settling into his physical body. Hale was sitting beside his brother in his bedroom, the attic fan whirring loudly, breeze flowing through the window, billowing over him.

Hale felt God speaking in his head, the devil in his midsection.

God spoke in a strange, rhythmic tone that kept time with the fan. His message traveled to Hale's stomach, where the devil heard it and spoke back. Hale couldn't understand what they were saying, but he could hear the sound and feel the reverberations travel through his body.

He opened his mouth to speak the sounds. But nothing came out.

Did anyone ever notice?

“He's high,” they would say. Or, “he's been drinking.”

Which was true.

Hale's world became a haze of smoking and drinking. He rarely spoke out loud. Why bother? Almost all of his conversations took place in his head where people could talk freely.

But increasingly their mental talks turned into arguments. It left his thoughts stormy and paranoid, his stomach coiled into knots.

Music, however, brought relief through its poetry and rhythms. Hale often listened to the rapper Nas, whose songs mentioned the Third World.

The Third World? That must be the world where Hale could talk to people beyond a physical conversation. Was there a Third World that Hale might one day see, too?

It existed, he was certain. He just couldn't access it yet.

He figured his mother and older brother already could, and he needed their help getting there. Hale began leaving his shoes by his brother's bed or his shirt on top of it.

Maybe his brother could sprinkle something onto them to give Hale sight into that world, too.

"I thought everybody was in this place," he said.

But his brother never sprinkled anything into Hale's shoes. Never touched his shirt. If he noticed anything odd, he never said so.

One night, Hale lay in bed talking to the devil, whose aggressive taunts infuriated him.

Hale was no pushover.

"If you're so tough, show me who you are. Show me your face!" he demanded.

The devil showed nothing.

Hale went to the living room couch. His mom was in the kitchen cleaning up. When she leaned over for a second, her head briefly visible through the doorway, the devil said: "Here I am."

His mom was reading in bed later when Hale joined her.

"Mom, I've got a question."

She set the book down.

"Are you the devil?"

Hale's mom was no pushover either.

At the time, her husband was imprisoned, she was living and raising her boys in a high-crime area in New York, dealing with the drugs and violence that came with its streets.

When her sons walked to a nearby store one day, a group of guys across the street started shooting at them.

Hale and his brother raced to the store for safety. Their mom arrived shortly after.

She had her own gun. It was always under her mattress should she need it.

After his father's second conviction, Hale's family moved to Georgetown, where at 15, Hale got a job washing dishes. At work, his mental conversations with customers and the staff turned hostile. When a guy threatened to fight him, Hale quit.

The next day, his mother dropped him off near a string of restaurants before driving to work herself. She ordered Hale to get another job.

Hale continued to speak with her in his mind. She sounded so defeated, so desperately in need of help. Hale loved his mom. If he could help her, he would.

She confessed what was on her mind. It was about her boyfriend.

"He wants to die but doesn't want to kill himself," she said in his mind.

Hale did not look for a job that day.

He hitchhiked back home while everyone was at work and broke in through a window, knocking his mom's curtains down before retrieving her gun.

He caught up with a friend and headed out, smoking pot and taking the back roads. Hale felt the calmest he had in a long time, the closest to the Third World he had ever gotten. Sales tags popped off the fabric of his shirt: "bullet-proof shirt for sale!"

Then Hale remembered the task his mother had asked of him. It was night, and his mother's boyfriend would be home from work.

"I got to go take care of something," he told his friend.

When he got home, he walked up the stairs with the gun in his back pocket. His mom was standing at the head of their bed, her boyfriend at the foot. Hale didn't hear anything, not even the gun when he fired it twice at his mother's boyfriend, once in the head.

It wasn't until he got downstairs that he heard the screaming. He heard his mother call 911.

"My son did it!"

He didn't understand. Why was she telling on him?

She'd asked him to do it.

At the police station, his mother arrived, covered in blood, held up by relatives.

"Lloyd, why?" she asked.

Hale smiled back. He had just turned 16. And already he had done something noble for her.

Hale was charged with murder. At the state juvenile detention center in Columbia, Hale spent the first 11 months of nearly three years awaiting trial locked into a world of gangs and violence. His roommate faced charges of shooting a police officer.

Hale was no stranger to violence and fighting. He held his own just fine.

He wasn't Lloyd Hale anymore. The other guys just called him Quick.

After he was evaluated, a doctor put him on Haldol, a powerful anti-psychotic used to treat schizophrenia and acute psychotic states. Hale hated it. His tongue muscles stiffened so that it stuck out. His arm jerked uncontrollably. The side effects terrified him.

Fellow inmates encouraged him not to take the meds.

So he didn't.

On his 17th birthday, Hale was transferred to the Georgetown jail. He had been charged as an adult, and to the courts, he now was an adult. Hale would live at the jail for nearly two more years awaiting trial.

His first night, Hale slept on the floor with his shirt wadded up into a pillow. He spoke to his brother using the mental communication he relied on.

“Everything is going according to plan,” his brother assured. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Sure enough, in the morning, a face peeked through the cell bars checking out the new guy. It was his brother’s good friend from back home. Turned out, he also was an inmate.

Hale breathed a little easier. It was a sign that the mental conversations were real. His brother wasn’t there, but his good friend was.

The jail was a more settled place than the DJJ facility. Most of the guys were serving time for lesser crimes or awaiting court dates. The only fights Hale got into were the ones he started.

And eventually one of those got him put into lockdown, alone in a cell for 23 hours a day, shackled and handcuffed for the hour he was allowed out. He paced his 9-by-3-foot cell, plotting revenge.

When he returned to the general population a week later, he did the things he planned.

After, Hale spoke to a guard he trusted.

“I don’t feel right,” he said. “I need to be by myself.”

Back to lockdown he went for three months.

That’s when Hale discovered his body could separate from his soul. When his body was awake, his soul slept on the cell’s bed. Then they switched.

Hale paced all night keeping watch over his soul. He exercised vigorously. When he did sleep, he leaned against a corner to remain upright and facing the door.

Hale also discovered that if he peered into the cell’s tiny mirror, he could talk to his brother. But his brother just spewed his fury back at Hale.

And even though Hale did not face the death penalty, he was certain he would get it. So the prison staff poisoned his food. They wanted to give him a lethal infection, like a form of lethal injection.

If the food was hot, the infection in it lived and would infect him. Once the food turned cold, it was safe to eat.

The juice was always infected. He drank only tap water from his cell's sink.

Several doctors who examined Hale for trial said he was mentally ill. A couple said no. The jail staff offered him psychiatric medication.

He took it every now and then. Mostly, he did not.

Hale loved to write: poems, rap songs, essays, anything. He wrote long letters back and forth with his father, who, even from prison, encouraged him and tried to get him to think about his mental troubles.

When Hale heard that his mother was coming for a visit, he decided to write his life story and share it with her. As he wrote, with every line, every thought, he spit into a cup. It solidified each idea, confirmed it. Soon, he had a long story and a cup full of saliva.

As Hale walked to the jail's visiting room to see his mother, a godly presence urged him to tell his story and keep cool.

He sat down with her, his notebook and spit cup on the metal table between them. He told her his story. Part of it described what she had done wrong as a parent. She challenged his version.

Hale did not stay calm.

He stood and banged on the table, tipping his cup of spit, spilling it over his notebook.

If he had only kept calm like the voice told him.

Instead, his mom stormed out.

One female guard took the time to stop at the little window in Hale's cell door and talk to him. When Hale drew on the walls, instead of disciplining him, she asked what the drawings meant.

She brought him Scripture.

As he read, he felt filthy, spiritually and physically. First, he bathed with spit. Then he washed in his sink. To clean the inside of his body, he ate chunks of soap.

Hale wanted to be clean.

He also wanted to get his GED. He tried to study. And he began to think of his baby boy.

A girlfriend had given birth to Hale's son right after he was incarcerated. When Hale studied, he studied with his son, teaching a little boy he'd never met what the books said.

Hale no longer needed a verbal conversation to start a mental one.

He no longer needed the real world much at all.

When other guys banged on their steel doors, he no longer was sure if he was banging on his door, too.

One night, he awoke to a commotion in the second-floor cell directly above his.

It sounded like an enraged father beating his wife and children. Things fell, crashing to the ground, and the man's voice tore through the air vents.

"When I'm done up here, I'm coming for you!" he screamed down to Hale.

Hale punched the narrow window in his cell door as hard as he could, over and over, desperate to get out of his cell, switching hands until exhaustion defeated him.

For the first time, he laid down across his mattress, his back to his door.

The next day, when he got out of his cell for an hour, Hale walked upstairs.

He went to the cell directly above his.

It was empty.

Hale had been diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Finally, he believed it.

PART TWO:

Healing a tangled mind Man shows what's possible in path from mental illness to recovery

A year ago, Lloyd Hale drove past the four-story building once called the S.C. Lunatic Asylum, now a hulking souvenir to a bygone day when thousands of the state's most severely mentally ill were locked up on this campus in Columbia. He passed a string of ghostly vacant buildings and slowed. He stopped at the final building, the one in whose wards he spent 18 months of his young life, the months when the real Lloyd Hale surfaced from delusions that had claimed his reality, his family, his freedom - and another man's life.

Hale parked his state-issued work vehicle at the building.

In the silence and privacy of his car, he cried, sobbing for his younger self, the one so nearly lost to the delusional grip of schizophrenia. And he cried for the real Lloyd Hale, the one who was rescued, the one who now helps others tangled in mental illness.

Hale mostly grew up in Georgetown's public housing, where the delusions rooted into his 13-year-old mind. He found he could continue conversations in his mind long after the actual person left. It was access to a special, secret world. Those he spoke with swore if he mentioned their mental conversations out loud, they would deny it. And they did.

He perfected the ability until he no longer had to speak out loud much at all. Even the devil and God conversed within him. As the conversations intensified, so did his marijuana and alcohol use.

If anyone noticed, they never said anything.

"He's just high," they would say, "or drunk."

And it was true. His father was imprisoned for drug trafficking, but drugs remained easy to get and easy to abuse.

But the mental conversations turned aggressive, the speakers threatening and taunting. His mother spoke in his mind one day. She asked a favor.

Her boyfriend wanted to die, but he simply couldn't do it himself.

Hale had just turned 16 when he got a gun and fulfilled her "request."

Charged with murder, Hale spent nearly three years locked in juvenile detention and then adult jail while descending further into a delusional abyss.

Doctors tried to get Hale to take medication. Mostly, he refused.

At the Georgetown jail, he got into fights and was put into lockdown. There, Hale found he could separate from his soul. He ate soap to cleanse his inner body. He no longer needed a real conversation to start a mental one. His brother insulted him from the cell's mirror.

One night, in the cell above his, a man went on a tirade. Hollering through the vents, he shrieked at Hale: "I'm coming to get you next!"

Hale beat on his cell door until his hands were bloody and swollen.

But the man never came. The next morning, Hale trudged upstairs in shackles to see his tormentor.

The cell was empty.

Hale began taking his medication to treat schizophrenia. At first, he just slept and ate more. Then he calmed. The creativity that fueled his passion for writing dulled. His soul no longer left his body. His brother no longer spoke from the mirror. The staff stopped poisoning his food.

Hale realized that people cannot hold mental conversations.

And his mother never asked him to kill anyone.

As he re-awoke, Hale returned to the general jail population. Without mental conversations derailing his thoughts, he played cards with the other guys and made friends. His passion for writing reignited. He especially loved writing to his father, who from his own prison cell became a friend, someone who really believed in him. They exchanged long letters each week.

When Marvin Hale-Bey was released from prison, he challenged his son to be disciplined, to think above self-doubt, to find the real Hale again.

Hale wrote poems and an essay, "The Only Voice in My Head is Me."

The youngest inmate, he shared his writings with the other guys. He challenged them to rap battles.

And he realized something that would fuel his coming journey: Other guys came to him to vent, to laugh, to right their thoughts through his poetry and songs.

Lloyd Hale found he could inspire people.

But as he approached his 19th birthday, he figured he'd do it from a prison cell for the rest of his life.

Why shouldn't he? He had killed a man. It was horribly wrong. But had Hale understood that?

Suffering from a severe mental illness in itself is not a criminal defense. But what if Hale's illness disrupted his ability to distinguish right from wrong?

As he sat in court, experts testified why they did, or did not, believe he grasped right from wrong when he killed Stanley Sabb.

It was a critical distinction, one that in South Carolina can separate a future in prison from one under psychiatric care.

Hale was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

With that rare verdict, he left the criminal justice system and entered the mental health one.

At 19, he was shipped to a locked psychiatric hospital. Until then, Hale knew the mentally ill as "crazies," guys who lived on the streets back home, unwashed and stinking, talking nonsense to nobody, usually drunk. That wasn't him.

Nor did it fit with what he found at the Columbia hospital. He met patients who had been successful before illness robbed them of their right minds. One man had been a judge, one a professional boxer.

"When you see people who are sick, you don't think of who they were before," he recalls. "I met people who'd had a life."

But who was Hale before he got sick? His delusions set in when he was 13, which, combined with drug abuse fuzzed what was real and unreal over much of his life.

Hale also saw people take their medications and stick with therapies. He saw people meet their goals. He saw them get better.

He wondered: Can I get better?

Hale wanted to, he really did. He spoke with his doctors and counselors. He learned about his illness and its symptoms. He learned about himself. He also took Clozaril, which treats psychotic disorders including schizophrenia. Later, he would call it his "wonder drug" for quieting the mental conversations.

"Meds don't get rid of those conversations," he says. "They quiet them down so you have a choice to listen."

Yet the drug made Hale drool heavily, especially at night. He awakened vomiting up drool. His pillow was soaked each morning.

He also gained weight, going from 130 pounds at one point to topping 200. It slowed his pace and made him sleepy.

So he studied his symptoms. His doctor adjusted his dosage. Another drug dried his mouth when he slept.

Meanwhile, Hale joined group sessions and completed more than 50 courses in everything from anger management to independent living skills and medication management.

He was learning how to live again.

After two years, Hale was released. No longer would he live behind locked doors. The state Department of Mental Health moved him to a Summerville group home, where he'd still receive psychiatric care. There, he lived with other men who spent long days sitting around.

He felt trapped in that mind-numbing daily life.

"I'm thinking, 'I am 21 years old. There has got to be more to life than this,' " he recalls.

One day, he asked his counselor to take him to Walmart. The man pointed out a used bike store.

"You don't need someone to do it for you. You can do it yourself," he said.

So Hale did.

Suddenly, he could bike around. He could go to the store and walk around freely.

"I can live!" he thought.

He learned his meds, stuck with the facility's schedule and kept his area clean. He learned to pay bills and ride the bus. He learned to buy groceries. He learned to schedule a doctor's appointment.

In 2002, he also received his GED.

Then, two guys he knew got jobs washing dishes at Ryan's. Hale did, too. He loved it and gradually worked up to six days a week.

He set the ultimate goal: He wanted his own place. It would be the first time he lived completely on his own.

He also faced a critical fork in the recovery road. If he worked too much, he'd lose his Social Security disability payments and Medicaid. So his psychiatrist offered to continue seeing him for free. And Hale found a studio apartment in downtown Charleston. It was barely bigger than a twin bed. Drugs deals and fights occurred beneath his window.

But Hale could afford it. He bid the security of government benefits farewell.

"It was liberating!" he grins.

His neighbors called him Hard Working. As in, "How's it going, Hard Working?"

"He just kept getting stronger and better and recovering like crazy," says Deborah Blalock, executive director of the Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center, where Hale was a client.

Then, Hale heard about a job opening that would change his life, and those of many others with mental illness.

The mental health center needed a certified peer support specialist. Hale applied. "Our staff said, 'He's fabulous!' " Blalock recalls.

But management learned about his history of violence and drug use. They learned about the shooting.

"You're sure about this?" they asked.

"Then we met him," Blalock adds.

In 2004, Hale was hired.

"He has soared from the beginning," Blalock says. "The staff adores him, and he can get clients to adhere to our recommendations when we can't. He's walked in their shoes."

At 32, he often helps young guys in crisis.

Raised in a rough neighborhood, a veteran of juvenile detention and adult jail, and once locked in a psychiatric hospital, Hale can hold his own. He's not afraid to approach someone suffering a psychotic break or a client with a violent past.

He's been there.

"I spend a lot of time listening," he says, "and not judging. I can see a shift while I'm talking to people."

He also chairs the mental health center's patient advisory board and leads group sessions. He travels to speak about mental illness, including at the hospital where he once lived.

"People who have been there, done that have better success of breaking through," Hale says.

In the wide lobby of the Charleston Dorchester Mental Health Center, dozens of clients wait. Most sit quietly on benches and chairs. Many nod off, drowsy from their medications, a common side effect. A few use walkers. Several wear Santa hats to celebrate the holidays.

Hale emerges from a locked door, a buoyant burst into the sleepy room that summons the Recovery for Life members. In dark jeans and a red polo shirt, he greets eight clients with hugs, fist and shoulder bumps and his wide, contagious grin.

They settle into a conference room and talk about the past week. One man confesses he accidentally took the wrong medication.

"Anyone else have that experience?" Hale asks. Hands around the table shoot up. Including his own.

"We all make mistakes, and it's all right," he assures.

He challenges them to write down the qualities most important to them. All do so, though some struggle to sift through their thoughts. One man mumbles to himself.

They list values common to all people: family, honesty, loyalty, financial security.

"I value peace of mind," Hale says. "I've been through so much with my mind that I really value my mind."

That brings them to setting boundaries. Hale won't drink or do drugs. Because his past drug use was so interwoven with his delusions, he must enforce this boundary - no matter someone else's pressure.

They end with setting short-term recovery goals.

"It's not something you write down today and then forget about," Hale warns. "My father always told me, You can't wait for someone else to set your goals."

Although Hale is able to recognize and dismiss them, not every mental conversation is silenced today. And not every relationship is fully mended.

About once a month, he visits his 16-year-old son, who was born while Hale struggled in a violent juvenile justice facility amid his delusions. He missed the teen's critical younger years. Now, he tries to accept whatever his son is willing to give.

Hale and his mother also have worked hard. They visit and function like mother and son again. Yet she doesn't invite him to stay at her home overnight when he visits.

He understands.

"She lost the man she loved, and her baby boy, all at once," Hale says.

The enormity of what he did hit him hard while attending a family member's funeral. He thought of the man he shot.

"I did this to a family. There is a girl out there without a father ..." He stops, staring at the hands clasped in his lap.

Hale cannot erase Stanley Sabb's death. But he can apologize for it.

He recently contacted Sabb's brother on Facebook. "I know I am the last person you want to hear from ..."

Hale explained what he had been through. And where he is today. He asked for forgiveness.

Two days later, a reply came.

"We forgave you a long time ago. We found God, and we hope you do, too."

Hale often goes to New York to see his father for the holidays. This year, he has a new reason to stay home. He and his girlfriend welcomed a baby girl into the world this past summer, giving Hale yet another second chance, this one at fatherhood.

With his new family, he imagines his daughter, Karrington, learning to walk and talk, the things he missed with his son. He is determined not to miss them again - for her sake, for his, for all of those with mental illness. He wants to show them what it is possible, what he wishes more folks with mental illness believed this new year: With treatment, they, too, can lead fuller and more productive lives.

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