

PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF!

Richard Ned Lebow

Dr. Segal did his best to sympathize with all of his patients and help them as far as he could. This generally meant putting them on the right drugs, monitoring their dosages, observing their behavior and listening to their self-reporting. Psychotropic drugs had brought about a revolution in psychiatry, but not without cost. Early in his career he had poo-pooed the objections some patients had to taking drugs, many of them young and suffering from depression, who feared that it would change who they were. He had come to appreciate their concerns as he watched people he medicated become different selves. They were better able to cope with life but became more accepting of the world around them and more reconciled to fitting in. He would not like to become such a person.

This morning Dr. Segal had two sessions scheduled in a relatively new ward that he had helped to pioneer. It was for people who were helpless in the outside world because they could not remember their passwords. He and his colleagues called it password recall syndrome and were hoping that the next edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual would recognize it as a new clinical disorder. There were a growing number of people, most, but not all of the them, elderly, who floundered when they had to recall a string of numbers and letters. With old people this was more understandable because there was much else they could not remember. With the young it was different. They showed no signs of dementia and remembered all kinds of other things. For whatever reason, people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, and education levels were revealing an increasing difficulty in retaining passwords – even those with only four numbers.

With a smile on his lips he punched in the code to admit him to the ward and sauntered down to the consulting room. Today he was meeting with two patients, one of them an older woman who had a meltdown in a mall. The other was a younger woman, a new patient, who was responsible for a serious password mishap.

The ward was cheery in its appearance. There were wide hallways, high ceilings, light wooden railings and doors, and windows that looked out on to a garden. Patient rooms were on the side with the windows and the consulting rooms and office on the other. There were plants everywhere and the ward looked more like a hotel than a hospital because none of the patients were immobile or seriously ill physically. There was no sign of walkers, IV stands, monitors, or any of the other devices always on display in hospital wards and corridors.

The cheeriness was deceptive. Everyone knew it was a hospital and many of the patients were more depressed than those in other hospital wards. They knew they would be here longer than people who recuperating from illnesses or operations and also less capable of facing the world once released. They had accordingly tried to make their rooms and the ward as a whole more like home. There was the occasional picture on the wall and the woman he was to see first had a cat. The animal had caused a major row in the hospital because pets were strictly forbidden. Mrs. Mahoney insisted that it was her support cat and that she would suffer grievously without it. The hospital administration rejected her request but backed down when word got around and other patients rallied to her support. The psychiatrists were furious.

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Mrs. Mahoney knocked politely on the door to the consulting room, was invited in, and directed to a comfortable looking leather chair. She sat down, still cradling her cat, a sedate black-and white creature with luminous green eyes. After exchanging the usual pleasantries Dr. Segal got down to business. Mrs. Mahoney was sensitive about any suggestion that she was psychologically unfit so he had to bring her around to discussing her problem by circuitous

means. She was not the only patient who was in denial about her condition and, as psychiatrists had long understood, the first and most important step toward a cure was for patients to acknowledge their problem.

Mrs. Mahoney needed considerable encouragement to reach this threshold. Previous efforts had run into a stone wall of defense mechanisms. She denied that she had a problem. It was other people who made unreasonable demands on her. She was making another version of this argument this morning and he was beginning to think that maybe she was paranoid.

“As I’ve told you before,” Mrs. Mahoney said, “there’s nothing wrong with me. I’m hardly alone in struggling with passwords. If you hospitalized everyone who couldn’t remember them you’d have to build more psychiatric wards than prisons. And while we’re on that subject most people behind bars don’t belong there either.”

“Is that so?”

“It certainly is. More than half of them are imprisoned because they’re Black. White society discriminates against them in every way and then punishes them for rebelling.”

“Can we return to your problem with passwords?”

“I’m trying to tell you it’s not my problem. Everybody I know has difficulty in recalling passwords. You need them for everything from the front door to opening your car door or buying anything with a debit card. You can’t use the same password without putting yourself at risk, and for the same reason, you need to change them every few months. They used to be four digits now they are longer, require a mix of capital and lower case letters, and punctuation marks. Next they will want me to jiggle my phone to the right or left before I key something in.

“All you need to do is change your passwords periodically. Then there would be no problem.”

“No problem you say? I would have to remember them. How do you expect me to do that? It’s not easy to come up with some jumble with letters, numbers, and symbols that means something to you and will stick in your head. It’s impossible to do this for twenty different accounts or devices – and then to do it again and again every few months. I’m a person, not a damn machine.”

“But other people do it,” Dr. Segal reminded her in a gentle tone of voice.

“Are you sure?” came the quick rejoinder.

“I am. They get on with their lives and somehow have figured out how to cope.”

“Some have, I do not doubt. I don’t know how they do it. But many more are like me. They struggle to remember passwords. And so many of these passwords are totally unnecessary. Last week I had to get one to access the bus schedule. This is public information and there is no reason whatsoever for some silly password.”

“You think we could do without them?”

“Yes. For almost everything but banking. And I bank in person. The tellers are nice people and there is good free coffee. Although they tried to close my branch last year, protests from people like me saved it. They want us all to bank on line or at their machines.”

“Mrs. Mahoney, would you be willing to go on a simple drug regimen? We could reduce your anxiety and make you better able to cope.”

Mrs. Mahoney did not reply. Her cat wiggled free, jumped out of her arms on to the floor, made its way to Dr. Segal and began brushing against his right trouser leg. Dr. Segal pulled his leg back, but the cat moved a few inches forward to rub against it again. He tried gently to push her away. She resisted at first, but then drew back and leaped into his lap. He was taken by surprise and jumped up. The cat, thrown off his lap, landed effortlessly on the floor and looked

up to face Dr. Segal. He looked down in horror at the beast, who stared back at him for a moment and then sauntered over to her owner's chair and curled up at the base of one of its legs.

Mrs. Mahoney was greatly amused by this episode and its implicit reversal of the power balance between doctor and patient.

"Can you control your cat, please!" Dr. Segal said.

Mrs. Mahoney smiled. "I'm sorry, she seems drawn to you."

"I can't imagine why."

"Neither can I."

"Do you understand why you are here, Mrs. Mahoney?"

"Yes and no, Dr. Segal."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"I am here because society insists you have multiple passwords that you change on a regular basis. And I cannot do that."

"There's more to the story, isn't there?"

"Well, yes. I threw a hissy fit in a shopping mall when I was denied access to the garage where I had parked my car."

"May I suggest that from what I heard a hissy fit does not quite describe your behavior?"

"It's a matter of opinion, I suppose."

"I would call it a meltdown."

"If you like."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"I think it would be helpful for you to do so."

"If you insist."

"I'm merely suggesting."

"There's not much to say, and I gave you an overview in an earlier session."

"Give me a more elaborate account if you wouldn't mind."

"Well, I went shopping to buy a birthday present for my grandson. He's going to be twelve and is a big sports fan. He also plays the oboe. Did I tell you that?"

"No, you didn't. But it's you I want to hear about."

"He's a fine musician and a good athlete, and, of course, a good student. He doesn't yet know what he wants to be when he grows up but that's natural at his age."

"Mrs. Mahoney, could we return to your meltdown?"

"I bought Liam a keyboard. He's been longing for an upgrade from the one he has had for several years. He really plays it very well."

"Mrs. Mahoney, please."

"I went to pay with a credit card and the bank sent me an SMS with a code to validate the purchase. But I temporarily forgot my new phone code and made the mistake of trying three times to get it right. The phone would not unlock, the purchase would not go through, and trying to use another credit card would not help because they too just send another SMS to my phone. I left the store with a great sense of frustration, went to the café in the mall for a cup of tea to calm down. I swiped my credit card but it was rejected because of what happened in the store. Fortunately, the other card worked. I drank my tea and headed for the parking garage, where I needed a password to enter. I had reserved a space on line and they send me a code. I got into my phone without a problem at home, but now I could not. So I couldn't get to my car. I went to the security desk to ask for help and they asked to see the confirmation message on my phone. The

guy was so thick it took five minutes to explain that if I could get into my phone I could access the garage and my car!”

“So he let you in to the garage?”

“No. He told me there was nothing he could do. Surely, I said, he could unlock the garage and I could lead him to my car. I had made a note of where it was parked. He could check my license against the registration in the glove compartment to see that it was my car. He said he couldn’t leave his desk, and there was nobody else to ask for help. They had cut back on security personnel in favor of CCTVs monitored from a central location in town. And then he added that my license would not help. Paper or plastic identification was useless because it wasn’t password secured.”

“What am I supposed to do now?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m only following instructions.”

“That’s when I lost it. You won’t help an old lady get to her car?”

“No can do,” he said.

“Would you run out of her to quell a disturbance in the mall?”

“Of course, that’s what I’m paid for.”

“I left his office and walked to the middle of the mall, where its two axes meet and there is a little pool and atrium. I stripped, folded my clothes and put them neatly in my shopping bag, with my shoes alongside. I climbed into the pool and began to sing. I knew I was certain to attract attention.”

“And this is when the police came?”

“Yes, that shit – forgive me – that security guard did not come himself but called the police when somebody told him there was a naked women singing in the pool – and I’m sure I was off key.”

Dr. Segal suppressed a smile as he pictured the scene in his mind’s eye. A naked 65 year old woman displaying herself in the pool and attracting attention by singing loudly and badly.

“What were you singing?”

“The first thing that came to mind,” she said. “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Dr. Segal smiled. “That might be enough to attract the police.”

“Oh, it did. They demanded that I get out of the pool and get dressed. I told them I would do this on two conditions. Somebody had to bring me a towel. I wasn’t going to get my clothes wet. And the security guard had to let me though the garage door so I could get to my car. A large crowd had gathered by then, some of them were taking pictures or filming the scene with the phones. It must have gone viral because any number of friends told me afterwards that they saw it. Unfortunately, so did my boss – now my former boss.”

“Did they bring you a towel?”

“No, the three cops just stood there whispering to one another. It was a standoff. None of them wanted to get wet by coming into the pool after me. While they deliberated I finished the anthem. I only know the first verse. Suddenly, a woman appeared with a towel. She worked in a bath shop and brought it out thinking I would cover myself with it. You may not believe me but I am a very modest person. This was the first time I exposed myself in public but I was desperate and needed to do something dramatic to convince the guard to let me into the garage. I assumed he would be thrilled to do so to end the nuisance I was causing, something that might cost him his job if I continued to sing and attract attention.

“Is this when they arrested you?”

“Yes. I made the mistake of getting out of the pool and trying to dry myself with the towel. Two of the cops grabbed me, wrapped the towel around me, and carried me off. You can see it all on You Tube. My grandson has said nothing but I’m worried that his friends told him about and that he is embarrassed. It’s not what I had in mind for his birthday.”

“But the police didn’t charge you?”

“I thought you knew? They agreed to let me go – fully dressed, of course – and get access to my car if I agreed to undergo treatment. That’s why I’m here.”

“Have you learned a lesson from this experience?”

“You bet I have! Passwords are an even bigger nuisance than I thought, the police are out to protect the system, not people, and the Internet is as much a curse as a blessing. The posting on You Tube and other sites cost me my job, but I have had several job offers and even more propositions.”

“Propositions, really?”

“You can’t believe anyone would find me attractive?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“Let’s continue with your reactions. Mine are unimportant.”

“The propositions I ignored, but I’m thinking of accepting an offer to appear nude on a calendar with an anti-technology theme.”

The cat stirred again and walked between and around Dr. Segal’s right leg. His left was folded over it. He removed the leg, stood up, and backed away from the cat. “I think we’re done for the day, Mrs. Mahoney.”

She rose and walked to the door, opened it and left, followed obediently by her cat.

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Dr. Segal hoped his second appointment would be less fraught. Ms. Jordan had only recently been admitted and he had met her once. Their discussion had been perfunctory. He hoped she would be receptive to therapy and the tranquilizers he usually prescribed as part of it. His optimism did not last long.

Ms. Jordan was admitted at the request of her employer, a major airline. She was a supervisor with a good record and twelve years of experience. The airline reported that she had walked off her job and may have had a nervous breakdown. She had failed to enter the right password at a critical moment and flight operations at her airport ground to a halt. She denied any responsibility for what had happened and the airline had given her the choice of therapy or looking elsewhere for employment.

Dr. Segal read out to her the airline’s account of what had transpired.

“This is utter nonsense, you know.”

“Are you telling me there is no truth to what they say? They are a major airline.”

“Surely you didn’t come down in the last storm, Doctor. They will say anything they think makes them look good and passes responsibility for a bad outcome on to someone else. In this case, to me.”

Dr. Segal wondered if he was dealing with another paranoid.

Ms. Jordan took his silence for an invitation to proceed with her account of what had transpired.

“The computer system had gone down at the airport on her duty shift,” she explained. “All flights were delayed and many were ultimately canceled. I had to rebook passengers on later flights and summoned extra staff to handle the demand. To do all the rebooking efficiently I had

to activate a special program on the computer system. I called it up identified myself by user name and password, and was brought to the next prompt that required an additional password, unique to this program.”

“So this is where things went wrong?”

“Yes and no. I had no problem remembering this unusually long password because I resorted to mnemonics. It began with the three capital letters: MLK. I remember them as Martin Luther King, one of my heroes since childhood. Next came a string of numbers. I broke these down into three sets of four and thought of them as years. I associated them with historical events: Columbus’ discovery of America, Pearl Harbor, and the years when Elvis Presley was born and died. You have to wonder about the last two sets. Were they random or was the person who thought them up also a fan of the King? Elvis was followed by an exclamation mark, which is a natural. Then came 34SF11m. I didn’t have to puzzle long over that one either, My partner wears size 34 snug jeans – that show up his bottom very nicely – and 11 medium shoes. And finally, there were a string of zeroes ending with a lower case pt. It’s not hard to remember six zeroes – they represent Monday through Friday -- and physical therapy – PT -- is what I need every Saturday in this stressful, chair-ridden job. End of the code, end of the week.”

Now it was Dr. Segal’s turn to be speechless.

Ms. Jordan continued. “I got lucky with this code They are supposed to change it every three months, but never get around to doing it. They’ve used the same code for over a year now.”

“Shouldn’t you have told them about it?”

“Absolutely not. I would have to figure out a new set of mnemonics and that could be a real challenge. And they don’t really need to change the password. Think about it. There are two or three people who do my job at our four hubs, so a dozen folks all together. If you can’t trust them, who can you trust? If they wanted to shut down the airline they could clear the skies and the management to its knees in a matter of hours. As for an outsider doing this they would have to get into a locked room in which there were always people on duty who would know they were intruders and sound an alarm. Hackers would need to know the program existed, and it can only be used to facilitate rebooking. What incentive would they have to do that? It’s another example of the absurd lengths businesses go to build firewalls around things that don’t need protecting. All they succeed in doing is making life harder for everyone trying to do their job.

“I still don’t understand.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Why everything went haywire if you had the right password.”

“It was a system error. They happen all the time. These are complicated programs with lots of potential to go awry. And one of the things that’s almost certain to go wrong is the error message when there is a glitch. The programmers have no idea of what will happen when their programs operate in real time and interface with other programs. Their pre-programmed error messages are hit and miss and, I suspect, designed to direct attention away from possible faults in the program. Better to blame it on the operators, so up comes a message on the screen that reads ‘error in user name or password.’ This is what happened with me and no matter how much I insisted that I had the right password they refused to believe me, the idiots. They believed the error message instead.”

“And you threw a fit?”

“No, I tried in a calm voice to explain that it was the program, not me, that needed fixing. I got nowhere. One of the higher-ups arrived, furious at being called away from his dinner and

began screaming at me. I realized the situation was hopeless and likely to escalate so I collected my purse and coat and walked out.”

“They said it was you who screamed.”

“They also claim that my alleged password failure was responsible for the grounding of almost third of their fleet. Who are you going to believe?”

“I really don’t know.” Dr. Segal thought her story made a lot of sense but so do those of clever paranoids Their tall tales often appear more logical and credible than the truth.”

“Well then, there’s little hope for society when educated people like you can be fooled by the lies corporations and governments propagate.”

“Surely, they wouldn’t go to the extreme of having you committed. I’m sorry, I mean coercing you, as I understand it, to come here for treatment.”

“Why wouldn’t they? They have no more principles than the people who ran the Soviet Union. They committed dissenters to psychiatric wards to get them out of the way but also to convince themselves and the public that the system was healthy. The dissidents were the healthy ones, and severely punished for it. It was shameful of psychiatrists who swore the Hippocratic oath to play their game.”

Without prompting Dr. Segal thought of doctors in Hitler’s Germany who had done even worse things to accommodate to the Nazis. But this is twenty-first century America, not Nazi Germany. Still, Ms. Jordan had a point, but only if she was telling the truth and not spinning a web of self-serving lies. Maybe, he told himself, he should withhold judgment for a while.

“So, are you going to play the game or stand up to them?” she asked.

“I’m committed to doing my best for my patients.”

“That’s part of the problem,”

“What do you mean?”

“As long as you think of us as patients, you’ve put us in a box and are taking their side.”

“I don’t think that’s fair.”

Ms. Jordan looked him in the eye and said nothing.

After a pause that would have been uncomfortable anywhere else but a psychiatrist’s consulting room, Dr. Segal asked Ms. Jordan if she wanted to go back to work at the airline.

“Frankly, I’m undecided. The pay is excellent, sometimes the work is interesting, and I like some of my colleagues. But I’m furious at how I have been treated. I’m thinking of looking for a job with another airline. Another possibility is something far-removed from the digital world.”

“Wouldn’t that be a mistake, given you skills, and the far-reaching tentacles of the information revolution?”

“Quite possibly. But there are many people who are going off-line, not by choice initially, but now happily so. They are rejecting the digital world. There’s a movement out there, and who knows where it might lead.”

Dr. Segal pondered her comment thinking it sounded Luddite. He looked at his watch, breathed a sigh of relief that the session was coming to an end. Ms. Jordan got the message, rose to her feet, and he escorted her to the door. He returned to his desk to write up notes of the two sessions, which took him some twenty minutes.

Dr. Segal signed off his computer, shut it down, and locked his office door as he left. Feeling a great sense of relief, he walked down the hallway and told himself that in another ten seconds he would be out of the ward. In less than a minute he would leave the hospital, and in two minutes more at most be in his car, drive out of the parking lot and leave this place behind.

At the exit to the ward he reached out with his right hand to punch in the code. He keyed in the numbers without giving it any thought. Nothing happened. He looked over just in time to see a little red light flash off on the keypad.

“That’s odd,” he thought. He reached out again, more carefully this time, and digit by digit slowly punched in the code. He waited for the expected flash of green light and the metallic click that signaled that the door was now unlocked. Instead, the red light appeared again.

“How can this be,” he muttered. I didn’t make a mistake. He realized that he had one more try before the system would shut down for some indeterminate period of time. He had to get it right.