

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / 'My Friend's Descent into Madness and Bloodshed': An American Tragedy

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you. As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country. That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed. Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry. They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader. I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited. This is going to be an amazing night. It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show. You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates). Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates). I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person. And now here's the show. I'm Barry Weiss and this is Honestly. We don't usually associate brilliance with schizophrenia, schizophrenia with Yale lawyer, Yale lawyer with murderer. But all of those things are intertwined in the story of today's episode. The tragic story of Michael Lauder. Lauder went from being the most promising schizophrenic in America, profiled by the New York Times, to a psycho killer, as the New York Post put it, after he murdered his pregnant fiance, Caroline Costello. Michael Lauder was, by all accounts, a genius, maybe even a prodigy. Academically, he excelled beyond belief. Things that are hard for most young students, like reading and comprehending large volumes of material, came easy to him. He was also charismatic and seemed to immediately absorb the attention of any room he entered. Everyone, it seemed, was drawn to Michael. Including Jonathan Rosen, Michael's childhood best friend. Jonathan has spent the last few years subsumed in Michael's story, writing a book called *The Best Minds*, a story of friendship, madness, and the tragedy of good intentions. I know I recommend a lot of books on this show, but this is maybe the best book I've read in the past few years. It is a breathtaking account of friendship, about the harrowing and insidious nature of mental illness as it takes over someone's life.

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And most of all, it investigates with incredible precision the invisible forces, cultural forces, political forces, ideological forces, that shaped Michael's life, and America's ongoing failure to get people like Michael the help that they so desperately need. Hi, honestly listeners, I'm here to tell you about an alternative investing platform called Masterworks. I know investing in finance can be overwhelming, especially given our economic climate, but there's one thing that will never go in the red, and that is a painting from Picasso's Blue Period. Masterworks is an exclusive community that invests in blue chip art. They buy a piece of art, and then they file that work with the SEC. It's almost like filing for an IPO. You buy a share representing an investment in the art. Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years, and then when they sell it, you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees. Masterworks has sold 45 million dollars worth of art to date from artists like Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Monet. Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market. So go to [masterworks.com](https://masterworks.com) slash honestly for priority access. That's [masterworks.com](https://masterworks.com) slash honestly. You can also find important regulation aid disclosures at [masterworks.com](https://masterworks.com) slash cd. Jonathan Rosen, welcome to honestly. Nice to be here. Jonathan, I want to start where your remarkable book starts off, which is with your childhood best friend named Michael Lauder. Now your mother's best friend, the writer Cynthia Ozick, talks about how the reason that your parents wanted you to live in New Rochelle and specifically chose the street and the house that they chose was because they wanted you to find what she called a suitable playmate. Here's how she put it. When you were a small boy, the aim of the suitable playmate could not have been more perfectly fulfilled. Across the street was Michael Lauder, the ideal friend, a brilliant peer. So Jonathan, tell me about the Michael Lauder you met in New Rochelle in 1973. Michael and I were 10 years old when we met and our street was very short. There were maybe seven or eight houses on it and I met him right away because he walked over to say hello to me and he told me that the aquarium I was looking at, which the people who had lived in the house before they moved and I wanted to salvage, was probably cracked even though I hadn't asked him what he thought. And if I look back on it, we just started talking that day and kept on talking for years afterwards. It's hard to describe exactly because when part of the pleasure of being 10 is that you're actually not really thinking all that much. I was happy there was somebody on my street who came over to say hello, somebody I could call for every morning, which I did, on the way to school, someone who played basketball with me, someone who got my jokes, I got his. He was very, very different from me, but we also had a lot of things in common. His father was a professor of economics. My father was a professor of German literature, but his father wore a bomber jacket and was born in America, grew up in Brooklyn and had a kind of booming assertive, let me tell you way of talking. My father had fled Vienna when he was a child or when he was 14 and he had a soft Viennese accent. So in my house, there was almost a kind of old world hesitation. It was shadowed in some way, at least in my father's world, which was very present by all these missing people who'd been killed. My sister and I were named for people who were killed. In Michael's family, there was this kind of wild energy that I really envied and admired. He was one of three brothers. So there was a kind of crazy scrimmage whenever you went over there for dinner, for example. It was eat or be eaten. And if you didn't eat fast, there would be no food. And if you

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didn't defend your argument, you'd be attacked. And there was an elbows out way of being. And Michael just grew up inside that world in a way that was a kind of compliment to my own. What's striking about your descriptions of him in the book, especially knowing what's become of him, is that it seems like you feel as if you're constantly living in his shadow. You have stage fright and really crippling anxiety and can't perform at your own bar mitzvah. Michael shines and reads Torah without a hitch. You describe getting beaten up very badly by a group of kids in high school. Michael manages to escape. You work so hard. You sweat it out to get into this prestigious summer program. And Michael seems to sail into that same thing without any effort at all. He hangs out with a cooler crowd. You're not included. He tries drugs. You're too afraid. What was it about him, do you think, that always made him maybe one step ahead of you or maybe always made you feel a little bit even envious toward him?

That's a good question. It's not a simple thing to answer because there was a way in which we were complementary figures. So I was often the kid who murmured the joke that was then announced aloud by him. And so I was in his shadow, but I didn't see myself trotting after him, I think.

But our first week of high school, we were kind of attacked by this gang of kids and I was very badly beaten and Michael got away. He ran off far enough to get clear and then watched as I got pummeled and leapt up and I'm sure it went very fast. But it was fraught forever after with a colossal amount of unspoken awkwardness for both of us. I was embarrassed that I had been so clueless

about the world that I couldn't even shake free. And I know you're not supposed to blame the victim or yourself, but I was also aware of the fact that my body was not involved in my awareness. And Michael, in that rougher way, I think, sturdied himself like he played a much rougher kind of basketball than I did. And I envied that and I was ashamed of myself. He also couldn't have helped me fight because I wasn't fighting. He didn't have time to run to get help anywhere. And so he visited me almost every day. I stayed home for weeks because I needed surgery and because

I went to school for one day with a big cast on my face, which turns out not to be a way to win friends and influence people in high school. So I just decided I was going to stay home till graduation. And he came by and visited me, but we never talked exactly about what happened. I didn't like my role. I don't think he liked his role.

You sort of start to drift apart, and yet you both get into Yale. And you say kind of amazingly that the summer before college, Michael told you that he didn't think he'd see much of you at school. And why? And this is what he tells you. He says, because you're too slow, which I thought was kind of amazingly cruel. But you write this, we carried the world of each other's childhood in our pockets like a kryptonite pebble, a fragment of the home planet. I think many people when they get to college change in a way that feels sort of incompatible with their childhood. But there's something especially sad to me about you and Michael sort of side by side at Yale, like sort of ships passing in the night. At one point you say it was like you were living parallel lives on divergent tracks. How do you understand this period in college between the two of you? And how your friendship shifted?

It's a terrific question. And I'm not sure I know the answer, because I went back after many years to think about it and to wonder even whether perhaps he wasn't already becoming ill, showing

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signs of the illness that he later developed. And that some of the very things I most admired about him, even if it was this kind of obnoxious way of declaring himself his own abilities, which I thought was admirable simply because I was so shy and diffident and insecure, if that wasn't an exaggerated quality in him already then. The thing is, I was much slower than he was. I was like the last kid I knew to drive. His brother taught him how to drive before he was even 16. I was afraid to try drugs, because I really wondered if my mind wasn't already just perched on the brink of something and that that would just shove me over the edge. And so I probably felt secretly exposed as well as resentful when he said I was too slow, because I thought I'd finally caught up. What did you mean by it?

I didn't ask him. I'm not entirely sure why I was too slow, but I do know that I probably thought of myself as the tortoise to his hare. And long after, by the way, once he was ill, the race was still on. I actually probably relished the competitiveness without my knowing it, because it's wonderful to have somebody you measure yourself against. And I kept hoping I'd catch up long after I realized years later he had run off in a different direction entirely.

I think for every single one of us, the friends we have in high school and college, the things we read, the music we listen to, that all of these things that we experience in that period of our lives have an inordinate impact on who we become as adults. Like on what we think is cool and what shapes our worldview. And I want to talk a little bit about the context that was shaping Michael and you in your young adulthood. You write in the book about the madness, as you call it, of the 60s and 70s. And I want to just get your sense of what you mean by that. Is it madness politically? Is it madness culturally? Is it madness ideologically? I guess it's all of the above. But the way I may have meant it when I think what I say is that madness was in the air, the strangest thing about it was that you really didn't know what it meant. You didn't know if it was a negative thing or a positive thing. Like being a rebel was a positive thing. And if the world was straight laced and hyper-rational, then madness was kind of a quality you wanted or you admired, it set you apart. But also just the idea that you were unpredictable. And one flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, won the Academy Award like 1976, the year of my bar mitzvah, I think. And I heard about it from Michael who saw more R movies than I did. But the hero of that movie is trapped in a mental hospital. Now interestingly, he's not mad. He is, in fact, there almost in like a Kafka nightmare. He's woken up and he's in this repressive world.

But the spirit of that movie was expressed by R.D. Lang who famously said that Schizophrenia is the only sane reaction to a mad world. And R.D. Lang was a Scottish psychiatrist, wonderful writer in the 60s. And so the idea was really society was crazy. So the only way to be sane was to actually be mad, to lose your mind, to come to your senses, as they said at Esalen. And the problem with all of that is that you really didn't understand if it was a literal state, a cultural state. We were kept safe by something called mad, mutually assured destruction. We went out in the hall and took off

our glasses and put our heads against the wall so we wouldn't get fried by a nuclear attack. So it's a hard... I didn't understand at the time how fully and freely actual madness was being borrowed, not just by artists, but by people who were making the rules and that that was deeply destructive, actually. One of the things that you capture so powerfully in the book is the blurring of lines, the kind of collapsing of categories that happens during the 60s and 70s. Whereas your Berkeley therapist put it, there's no difference between real and imaginary, no difference

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between past or future. There's one paragraph in the book that I thought so beautifully captured it. And I'm wondering if you'd read it for me. So if you have the book with you, Jonathan, it's on page 121, starting with part of the playful pleasure. Yeah. Part of the playful pleasure of postmodern theory was pretending that a flaw in a poem was evidence of a crack in society and that verbal constructs held true for three-dimensional life, like a pin stuck in a voodoo doll that made a real person scream. What would happen if such fanciful borrowings from the realm of magic and mental illness began seeping into law, public policy, or political culture, turning everything into a text that meant only what the interpreter believed it meant?

The reason I so loved that passage is because you write sort of in the book about dream worlds, or here in this passage, you talk about it as fanciful borrowings from the realm of magic, you know, a world where sort of the unreal is being mistaken for the real. How did that culture factor in to Michael's development and Michael's story? I think it had a huge impact. It helped shape the world that was there when he became ill, and that was so ill-equipped to care for someone like him. If you believe that all mental illness is a social construct only, even severe mental illness, and that the only reason why asylums were built in the 18th century as Foucault says is as a place to put your enemies, who you've othered by calling mad, simply because they swim against the rational stream, then there really isn't any illness. There's only power, and the people who have power can call the people they hate ill. Now, there's plenty of abuse of power, but if illness is real, then that formula deprives people of any form of care, and the only response to a hospital, a mental hospital, a psychiatric hospital, is to treat it like the best deal and tear it down. And in fact, one of the most devastating passages in madness and civilization, which I read in graduate school and which for some reason was required reading for the study of literature, one of the most devastating passages is about Philippe Pinnell, who was the 18th century reformist psychiatrist. He was really the father of humane psychiatry, and he's often depicted in paintings striking the chains from his patients, because they were chained even inside the hospitals. And for Foucault, he is the villain, and takes a minute to realize is that the reason he's the villain is precisely because he improved the lot of people in those hospitals, that the reforming impulse, the liberal impulse, is dangerous because the only response is the absolute destruction of that system and that world. And in a sense, the system of state hospitals that might have been reformed were instead effectively torn down, and they were not replaced by anything

equipped to care for the people who had once been in those hospitals. And things like that, formulations like that, took place all the time. One of the reasons why I mentioned Harold Bloom, who I really loved and took classes with in college is because he had been a kind of deconstructionist briefly in an overlapping way for a while, but he says schizophrenia is bad poetry. His whole theory was that you intentionally misread your predecessors so that you can insert yourself and make yourself primary by ignoring or misunderstanding what it is that makes them great. But that's only possible if you do know that they are great and if you really are in contention with something powerful. Poetry has to mean something in order for you to contend

with it. And what he said was, the reason why he said schizophrenia is bad poetry is because the misreading that it involves is not an intentional or constructive or creative misreading. It's simply misperception. And it was only much later that I learned that he has someone in his



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family who suffered from severe mental illness. And so for him, that was not an abstraction. And these elaborate theories that erased meaning paled in front of his own experience of the world and of true illness. I think a lot of people hear the term deconstruction and their eyes glaze over. And they think, you know, that's something that's only relevant to people at places like Yale and to scholars like Harold Bloom. It's irrelevant to the lives of normal people. But one of the things you show in this book is how the theories that were so prevalent at elite institutions actually sort of leapt beyond the quad and reshaped America as we know it. Right? You write about deconstruction that, you know, if meaning is just a metaphor, there could be no line between truth and falsehood, between madness and sanity, and ultimately between right and wrong. Let's talk a little bit about the institutions that were knocked down, right, that weren't replaced with anything. The last bill that Kennedy signed before his assassination was this bill in 1963 to free thousands of Americans with mental illness from life in institutions. Kennedy had said that the cold mercy of custodial care would be replaced by the open warmth of community. But you argue that that replacement never happened. Why didn't it happen? You know, there were a lot of reasons why it didn't happen. There were lots of people who did not need to be in state hospitals anymore, partly because of the discovery of anti-psychotic medication. But the discovery of anti-psychotic medication didn't make severe mental illness go away. And it didn't obviate the need for asylum as a concept, as a refuge from the world for those who might need it. And it's very hard to legislate communal warmth. And so many things were going on at that moment. One of them is that Kennedy was assassinated. And so this notion, the Community Mental Health Act, was folded into Johnson's Great Society as a kind of tribute to Kennedy. But it was then elaborated in ways that moved it farther even from where it had begun, which was to care for the most severely ill people, formerly cared for in state hospitals, who would now be cared for in the community. The problem is that if you replace psychiatric hospitals with something called Community Mental Health Centers, it kind of gives away the reality, which is that those centers were not in fact caring for the most severely ill people. There was no follow-up care for the people who were released. Very little attention was paid to the reality of those illnesses. And for many who suffer from them, it's a symptom that you don't believe you're ill. The idea that people would take medication that had harsh side effects without any kind of community structure surrounding them is also unrealistic to put it mildly. And while all that was going on, the very notion of mental illness was being redefined, broadening itself to include half of all Americans. One of the group of characters in this book that I was so drawn to, I think maybe deserve their own book, that I think typifies this new world of therapy is this group called the Network, whose focal point is at the home of this charismatic psychologist named Jane Ferber, whose husband, Andy, again, deserving of his own book, sort of abandons his family, goes off to India. Tell us about this group of people, how they were emblematic of the culture of therapy at the time, and how they intersected with Michael. So the network were amazing people, actually. They were psychiatrists. Jane Ferber was a psychiatrist, and so was her husband, Andy. And they were part of a movement of community psychiatry that wanted to close down state hospitals and replace it with community care. And I should say that state hospitals had fallen into dreadful condition, and there was much to hate and be horrified by. And in its early days, the community care centers that they devoted

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themselves

to were extraordinary places. There was one in Newer Shell that they operated. But in addition to spending a lot of time with the mentally ill homeless, they were also very prosperous and almost glamorous people. And they lived in a beautiful house that Michael called the Gatsby House. And it was a place in high school, because he was friends with their kids, where he would hang out. There would be these amazing parties, which I didn't go to but heard about. And later, when he quit his job after college and was already becoming ill, he lived in the attic and could look out over the Long Island Sound. The house was actually built by D. W. Griffith in the days when Westchester was a center of the movie business. And the Gish sisters also lived in Newer Shell nearby. And so it had a glamour to it. And Michael literally felt he could look out and see a green light on the water, like Gatsby. In fact, I later asked the daughter of the house, Elizabeth Ferber. I said, you know, I thought it must have been a delusion. I said, you know, Michael even said he could see a green light on the water like Gatsby. She said, oh, no, you could see a green light that were buoys in the water. Nevertheless, it was emblematic in every way. And in fact, you know, I divide the book into four sections. And one of them is called the House of Psychiatry, because as it turned out, the kind of psychiatry that the people at the Ferbers were devoted to was a dominant mode of psychiatry in the 60s and 70s. It was, in a sense, what Kennedy was calling for when he called for the warmth of communal care instead of cold custodial care. And they were very suspicious of what they considered the system, partly because the system really did grind people up. And so when they came to provide care for Michael, keeping him out of the system was really the goal. More, I think, than saving him from his illness, not because they didn't want what was best for him, but because that was their orientation to keep him out of the system. And the network was the name they used for each other. Some of them were psychiatric social workers, some of them were therapists. And they referred patients to each other and they shared their commitment. And they watched over Michael in a way because he was a sort of adopted son of the house.

Jonathan, in the way that the subway murder of Michelle Go in 2022, young woman pushed in front of an oncoming subway train by a homeless man and is killed, sort of emblematic of our current moment, the story you tell in the late 70s of David Berkowitz seems emblematic of that moment. Berkowitz killed eight people, mostly women in New York City, and basically terrorized the city as he evaded arrest for over a year. After he was caught, he confessed to the crimes and initially claimed to have been obeying the orders of a demon dog. In the book you write about this whole experience, the culture had prepared us for David Berkowitz. How so? Well, what's interesting about David Berkowitz, the son of Sam, as we all refer to him, which is what he referred to himself, by the way, because he was also telling his own story in notes to the newspapers. That's part of the strangeness of that moment. The tabloids were almost reborn with son of Sam, and he was almost covering his own killings and his later his own illness. But I think that one of the things when I say that culture prepared us for him is that the obsession of the papers was with the demonic dimension. He wanted an exorcist to come and write his memoirs. He felt there was this demon who gave him orders, and one of the police officers, when he was finally arrested on a parking violation, I think, asked him why, why, and he simply said it was a command. And I remember reading the quote,

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the police officer seemed almost disappointed that he was going to be deprived of an actual explanation. But one of the things that really strikes me is that the original asylums built in the 19th century, partly because amazing people like Dorothea Dix went to every governor in the country and said, we will not be a civilization worthy of the name if we do not provide shelter for people who are living on the streets or who are chained in basements because they're considered possessed by devils when in fact they're ill. One of the things that struck me is that it was almost as if in the aftermath of de-institutionalization we had returned to the time of satanic identification. I mean, here there were no real mechanisms for caring for people who needed medication or who had lost touch with reality, and how did we all respond to him? He was taking orders from the devil. He was demonic, and the judge who interviewed him before he was sentenced had to make sure he understood his sentence and said, so you don't believe in the demons anymore, and you can tell from his answer that he certainly does still believe in those demons, but he was representing himself, and they were eager to send him to prison. In fact, the judge who had voted to abolish the death penalty in New York said, I wish I hadn't because you are so evil, and so it's almost as if we were waiting for untreated illness to become its most extravagant form so that we could then respond to it in equally immoderate ways. There's another story that you tell. It happens probably about five years later, and this is the story of Rebecca Smith, a woman suffering from schizophrenia, who froze to death sleeping in a cardboard box in downtown Manhattan, and following her death, came out that the court order to hospitalize her, which arrived only hours before she died, had taken 10 days to obtain because, as New York's director of protective services for adults had put it, Rebecca, quote, liked sleeping in a cardboard box. He also said he was concerned about people's civil rights, and you describe this as a watershed moment against the institutionalization. It's a horrible story that of course foreshadows Michaels, but I wonder if you can sort of take us back there and to the mindset of people who allow others to die on the street sort of in the name of freedom. Well, what's interesting, I think I was a freshman in college when it happened, and there was a huge outpouring of coverage precisely because somebody had frozen to death on the sidewalk of a great city, and she was not identified for a long time. She was just referred to by the papers as the lady in the box, and then her daughter, who had been looking for her, came forward and told her story. She had suffered from schizophrenia. She had a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. She had spent 10 years in a psychiatric hospital. She had fled her family. She covered her face with veils. She was sure there were visible scars from her electroshock treatment, and she had once been found by her daughter with the help of the police, but then her daughter had been unable to find her, and so it was clear that her choice to say that she liked it was a strange attribution of volition to somebody who was clearly in flight from illness and the torments of her illness. And what was really amazing is that along came Thomas Szasz, who in the 60s wrote an enormously influential book called The Myth of Mental Illness that simply identified mental illness essentially as what we would call a social construct. He felt it didn't exist, and so it was a mere pretense to say that people suffered from



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an actual illness and therefore should be hospitalized and treated, and then that was cruel. But as he put it, it was pathetic that she died on the street and was so ill-adapted to life. He said she had problems with living. That was the term he used, but all kinds of people have problems with living, and it would have been really tragic if society had thought it could help her. And what's amazing about that is that that was long after the discovery of anti-psychotic medication had disproved entirely his argument. And the other thing that's amazing to my mind is that laws were really changed because of the arguments of people like Zaz by people who knew nothing about severe mental illness. And he was considered a civil libertarian, and I guess the reason he was is because he felt that everything she did needed to be seen as her choice. What I always thought was amazing about that was that even if you're a radical defender of free speech, you first of all agree that it's okay to yell fire in a crowded theater if there is a fire. But what if the fire is only in someone's mind? Would you then defend their right to yell fire? It was the refusal to make a distinction even among a tiny subset of a small fraction of society with an actual disorder. It was as if in order for him to have his civil rights, she needed to be treated just like him no matter how much of an exception she was. And there was a way almost in which she was being sacrificed for him to guarantee his own freedom, and that seemed grotesque. So did the story of the woman in the cardboard box who I'd believe had been the valedictorian of her high school or her college, right? Yes. Did it have any effect, that story? Well, it horrified Mayor Koch, who was the mayor at the time, and it for years plagued him, and he actually tried to create response teams who would care for people living in the street. And at a certain point, he tried to broaden the application of commitment laws so that it would be possible to bring people to the hospital, not only if they were an imminent danger to themselves or others, but he sort of stretched the window of time in which they were at risk. In other words, if you're sleeping on the street in winter in a thin night gown, you might not freeze to death that night, but you might freeze to death two nights and away, and if you didn't know you were ill, and it wasn't merely a choice, then it would be okay to bring such a person to the hospital. So he created a kind of pilot program, and the 80s were bookended by the lady in the box, and the pilot program he later created, because one of the people he brought to the, who was brought to Bellevue under his broadened commitment interpretation was a woman who immediately sued the city and was represented by the New York Civil Liberties Union, and she lived on the street. She called herself Billy Boggs, although her name was Joyce Brown. She covered herself in her own excrement. She exposed herself. She swore, yelled racial epithets at black men and people she thought were black men. She herself was black, and she tore up money if she was given dollar bills, set them on fire, and then peed on them. And one of the psychiatrists testifying on her behalf said, well, you know, I lost a lot of money in the stock market. I hope she doesn't think I got a burn there. And another referred to running into traffic, something she did as jaywalking. And the judge referred to her as a proud independent woman living on the street. And her sisters, who were not allowed to testify, working class black women who were religious and worked very hard to try to care for her before she simply, it was impossible for them, and she disappeared from their lives until they heard about her on the radio. Their response to the judge's ruling was that the judge must be a racist because anyone who thinks a black woman exposing herself and swearing and screaming on the sidewalk is living a proud

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and independent life has to be a racist because he would certainly never let his own sister live that way. And that was the kind of inverted world when you ask, like, what was the madness that I felt growing up? This was the fulfillment of it. It wasn't enough to be neutral and to say, all right, stepping over someone in a busy world is brutal, but part of perhaps what the price we have to pay for an urban life, which would be a terrible thing to say. But to make it a positive good is to really invert the natural order of things. And educated people were saying not merely, we don't have the right, but this is a proud independent choice. And that's a kind of collective madness all its own. After the break, Michael Louder's illness and the killing of Kerry Costello. Stay with us.

So it's into this age of madness, into this age where the line between sanity and insanity had been purposefully blurred or even collapsed, into which the deconstruction and postmodernism and the word games that you encountered in classrooms at Yale had sort of leapt into the mainstream. It's in this context where Michael Louder, your childhood best friend, winds up in a psychiatric hospital. Tell us about that moment. Tell us about finding out that he was there and what landed him there. Michael graduated from Yale after just three years, and he graduated Summa Cum Laude because he really was a great student. And he was recruited to work for Bain, which was a management consulting firm. It was just at the dawn of management consulting firms, whereas he put it, the very smart could become the very rich. Although he wanted me to know that he was keeping faith with our ultimate plan. We both wanted to be writers and had talked about it for years. And he was going to have his 10 year plan is going to make a ton of money in 10 years retire and write. But in the course of his year at Bain, he began to hallucinate, to have delusions, to feel that they were out to get him, but would never let him go, that they were bugging his phone, that the secretaries would suddenly exhibit claws and fangs and blood dripping from her teeth.

And in short, he was in a very long prodromal period, as it's called, that lasted for several years. He quit Bain, finally, after a single year, lived in the attic of what I call the House of Psychiatry, and he called the Gatsby House and wrote stories. But then he began going to bed with a baseball bat to keep himself safe. One of the things that is just part of the mysterious intertwining of our lives is that I had always admired the American rootedness, the American born rootedness of his family. His father was a child of immigrants, but had this kind of confident American air, whereas my father was a child of murdered European Jews. But Michael started to see Nazis on the streets of New Rochelle. And he felt they were trying to run him off the road. And at night, when he was in bed or patrolling the attic with the baseball bat, he imagined that the survivors in the neighborhood, including my father, were hovering out the window ringing bells and reciting the 130th Psalm. And that was also very strange in a way, because how interesting and odd that this historical calamity, which always seemed so private to me, would inflect his delusions. Of course, later I came to realize that the Holocaust, far from, of course, being anybody's private dilemma, refashioned post-war psychiatry, refashioned post-war science, and had an enormous impact on law as well in those years that also changed the world in which he became sick. And my parents called to tell me that Michael was in a hospital. My father had seen him. He would still wear the kind of flapping tatters of his fancy clothes. And my father was very shaken to see him when he saw him on the street. And a few days later learned he was in a locked ward up at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, as it was then called.

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And I'd never heard of the phrase locked ward before. And I didn't know what it even meant, that he'd had what was called a break. But I only knew what my mother told me with absolute terror, that he thought his parents had been replaced by Nazi imposters who had killed his real parents. And so he'd armed himself with a knife and was patrolling the house. And so he'd gone to the hospital the way many people do, tragically, which is in a kind of police event, simply because things suddenly come to a violent head and no one knows what to do.

And so I went to see him in the hospital. You described before you go visit him in the hospital for the first time, worried and wondering if he might catch schizophrenia, like it's a contagious disease, even though you knew that, of course, wasn't possible. If you can drop us back into that time and to your own mental state, what was it like seeing someone who you had so admired, maybe even envied in that kind of condition? Well, it was shocking and I didn't want to go.

I was terrified of going. And it's partly because I think his mind was always a kind of touchstone of high functioning, whether or not we were close as friends at that point.

I measured myself against him. And so what did it mean that something had gone wrong with his mind?

I was the one who forgot everything I had crammed into my head on my bar mitzvah. I was the one who already had, as I called it, senior moments and who had panic attacks and even stranger preparing to visit him. He gave me all these instructions and he still sounded surprisingly rational, but I had to conceal a tape recorder at the bottom of my backpack and I had to buy a copy of *The Literary Guide to the Bible* by Frank Kermode and Robert Alter and wrap it up and make sure the guards didn't see it. And I was dutifully getting ready to do all of these things until my then girlfriend, now wife, said to me, touchingly because she was clearly amused and felt bad for me at the same time, I don't think you actually do have to smuggle that dry work of scholarship into the hospital. I think they'll let you just carry it in. And I realized partly because it was my habit of deferring to his authority and was partly because there is something enormously rational about his mind, even though it was based on an irrational premise, that's what was so disconcerting about it, that led me to sort of immediately participate and there was that sense of almost contagion. And I didn't want it to happen to me. And I had no idea what it meant to be mentally ill or mentally well for that matter. So Michael spends eight months in that hospital, but then he seems to turn things around in his life in a way that's almost cinematic.

Tell us about Michael going from being paranoid that his parents were stolen and replaced by fake parent Nazis to his fears that he was about to get lobotomized without anesthesia to then somehow turning around and getting into Yale Law School. How does that happen?

Michael had applied to Yale and all like the top seven law schools before he had his psychotic break. When I went to visit him, he told me he'd been accepted by all of them

and that he had turned them all down except for Yale, which he had told his brother to defer.

As he later put it, while yelling, the monkeys are eating my brains. But he had before becoming ill kind of cast out a little lifeline for himself simply because his life was

unraveling and he'd been trying to write and he felt he was falling apart in lots of ways and

there was pressure from his family to go to law school and so he did something he was very good at, which was take the LSATs and do amazingly well and then apply and get in. But he was lucky to have stayed at the hospital so long. It's a private hospital and the way things worked, he wouldn't have been kept for nearly as long had he merely been sent and committed,

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but his father was able to persuade him to sign himself in by suggesting that if he left, which he could actually do any time he wanted, he might not then pass a review and might wind up being committed. And in that complex, cajoling way that can be necessary if someone doesn't really think he's sick but who still defers in some way, especially because he was taking medication at that point, he was able to stay and he needed that all that time. And then he was in a halfway house, which was very hard to get into in white planes. Suburbs hate halfway houses and they zoned against them and he hated it. And he described himself as the McMurphy character, which is to say McMurphy, the one person who doesn't have mental illness in one flew over the cuckoo's nest. He saw himself trapped in a way in a world that should not have been his. And at a certain point, even before his time there was up and you only get a limited amount of time, a couple of years. And for some people, that's okay. You can move on if there are services to move on to. There were very few, but not everyone gets better that fast or gets better at all. And so you can't really assume that there'll be a natural progression. When I visited a halfway house, when I was doing research for the book, I said to the psychologist there, this is such a beautiful place and it was a lovely little community. It was a house. I said, what happens if people have to leave and they're not ready to go? She said to me, well, some of them simply have to leave and then they have another break and then they go to the hospital. And if they're lucky and they're still doing okay, they'll come back here. That does not seem like a good system of continuity. But by then all the things that were supposed to have been created had not been created. In any case, at one point, Michael went to a day hospital and the doctors there suggested

that he work at Macy's. Sometimes he's described it also as working as a checkout boy. It wasn't a permanent job, but it was a way to begin to return to the world. He hated all the little things that they taught him at the halfway house because he found them infantilizing even though he needed to recover those skills, had to balance a checkbook, had to plan a meal. And being told he could work at Macy's was kind of the last straw. And he and his father went to Macy's, the one in New York City, the biggest department store in the world, as it says on the side. And the story he told was that they saw how harried this one woman was working the returns desk or, you know, checkout counter. And his father basically said Yale Law School will be less stressful. And so he had deferred, I think twice, but Yale was an extraordinary place. He was not asked to reapply. And he was allowed to come. So it seemed as though he was gathered in by a kind of

asylum, the place we'd also been undergraduates, this beautiful walled in environment.

Was he open with people there about his diagnosis?

He was open with his professors. One of his professors said he felt he was almost promiscuous with the knowledge. He didn't seem to understand that for many people it was an unusual thing to hear and that it might affect how they saw him. But he was very lucky in that he was surrounded by these extraordinary men of a certain generation who were very moved by him, very impressed by him,

very brilliant themselves, who saw him as brilliant even though they understood that he could not do the work. He didn't tell his fellow students at first. And although amazingly, people were, they understood that there was something that had happened to him and they were, he found people or people found him who really helped care for him. And that's an amazing thing,

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too. They read to him, they typed his papers, they got him to meals, they got him meals. But the stories he told about being at Yale Law School were unusual. It was a revelation for me many years later when I talked to those professors and learned that he really wasn't able to do the work. And they were confronting their own decision to accommodate him as they did. Because in Michael's mind, he was there in recognition of his genius. And as one of his professors said to me, I didn't think he was going to be a Yale lawyer, but that was okay with me. I thought he would be a spokesman for people with schizophrenia.

Some of our best students don't become Yale lawyers. He would be someone who had been to Yale Law School. The only problem with that is that Michael said from the very beginning, why would I be a checkout boy or work at Macy's when I can be a Yale lawyer? So for Michael, being a Yale lawyer was the whole point. I'm looking right now, Jonathan, at a clip from The New York Times published in November 1995 under this headline, a voyage to Bedlam and part way back, Yale Law graduate, a schizophrenic is encumbered by an invisible wheelchair.

So in the beginning, it sounds like Michael only revealed his diagnosis to some of his or maybe all of his trusted professors. But eventually here it is in black and white in The New York Times. What made him decide to come out in that way? And what was the response to that article?

So Michael was given a fellowship for two years by Yale Law School. As he said, it was created for him in recognition of his genius is how he told me about it.

And the Times article described it as he so impressed his professors that they created a fellowship for him. He had applied for jobs without telling anyone that he had schizophrenia because he was told by his professors that it was, as he said, a career killer. But he was not able to answer the question about why he hadn't clerked for a judge. He wasn't able to account for why he lacked the things that people applying for law professorial jobs had. And he simply said he didn't find the work intellectually stimulating enough, as The Times reported. So the following year he decided he was going to come out of the closet as he put it. And to clear himself, he had worked in the interim at a disability rights center and he felt it was time.

And so when he was not hired, but in a sense not getting hired led to the article which wrote about somebody who was not getting hired, but who was brilliant and who was referred to himself as a flaming schizophrenic as he put it. What was the reaction to that article?

It changed Michael's life in remarkable ways almost overnight because the story was so powerful. In a sense it conformed to everything we'd always imagined about writing. Life thwarts you. You describe how thwarted you are and the story is so powerful that you are rewarded and acknowledged

as a writer, if not as a person who was thwarted in the path you were attempting.

And Michael's story was enormously compelling. I only really discovered afterwards just how many people saw him as a hero. There were very few people who spoke of themselves publicly as having schizophrenia. He spoke of himself as wanting to be a role model. He said I can be a role model. And I remember a woman, Lori Flynn, who at the time was head of NAMI, the North American

Association of Mental Illness. On mental illness I always get the title wrong, forgive me.

But her daughter had been hospitalized and she had said now when your daughter's in the hospital with severe mental illness nobody makes you a casserole. And her daughter and she both were filled with admiration because there was Michael declaring himself ill.



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What was amazing about the article, if I may just add though, is that so forceful was Michael's personality and his narrative ability that the story might almost have been written by him. And so he would describe, in the article described, the offensive questions he might get about whether he ever became violent when he was applying for a job. Although I knew that when, you know, he'd been patrolling his house with a kitchen knife because he thought his parents were Nazi imposters. And so although he called it a very hateful stereotype, and that was, you know, what the article essentially suggested, the reality was somewhat more complicated and I felt a kind of strange feeling that I wasn't sure if it was envy or if it was a different kind of disquiet. And it made things somewhat disconcerting in that regard. Even the two headlines you read, the headline that he's encumbered by an invisible wheelchair as if the accommodation was what was encumbering him and not his illness. And he often spoke that way as well. He said it took 70% of his mind to paw through the wool wrapping his mind just to keep contact with reality. At the same time though, he said, I'm a reasonable candidate to be a professor of law. And he didn't say, he talked about taking medication, but he didn't say if it was illness or medication or how much of his mind he needed. But it was such a compelling story. And it was noticed by people in Hollywood, right?

I forgot to say, of course, he wasn't just a role model flooded with letters, he got offers from publishers, he got offers from Hollywood. And he called to tell me that there was a bidding war for his story, which was going to be called *The Laws of Madness*, and that Ron Howard, who had just directed *Apollo 13*, wanted to make the movie. And he was going to get more than \$2 million for the movie and the book. And so it really did seem as if by telling his story, he had in fact been able to conquer, as someone says in his article, his illness, and all the obstacles that went with it, including poverty, because one of the things about people who suffer from severe mental illness is it's very hard to find a job. And so you are automatically cast into a world where you are poor. But now suddenly he was back where we had always imagined he would be. So he has this book deal. He has Ron Howard and Brian Grazer at Imagine, wanting to make this movie about his life. And he also found a relationship. Tell us a little bit, if you would, about Carrie Costello. So I never met Carrie. He talked about her a lot. And it was clear that he was in love with her. And it was clear, and it became very clear to me when I was researching the book, that she was totally devoted to him. One of the things I felt when I was working on the book was that it was very important to me not to allow Carrie to disappear.

Many people I talked to who knew Michael always would say to me, well, I didn't really know Carrie, where she was often, she was very quiet. She would be in the shadows. But when I spoke to her colleagues, she was front and center, a very dynamic person whose devotion to Michael was part of what made her extraordinary. Michael was the person in the shadows. And it was her commitment to him that added to her mystique. People in the network told me at the time it was very unusual in their experience that someone with severe illness would be able to form a relationship. And they felt that that was part of Michael's unusualness, like going to Yale Law School. So you have this sort of confluence of good events. You have this timed piece. It leads to a book deal. It leads to this movie deal, which sounds so exciting. Brad Pitt was signed up to play him. He finds a relationship. But then over the next few years, things start to go south. Michael's father who he was very close to had died of prostate cancer. Michael becomes

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depressed. He couldn't get a job. He's supposed to be writing the book. He can't bring himself to write. And then either his medication stops working or maybe he stops taking them. Tell me about this

period where Michael is sort of seeming to slowly deteriorate and what the people around him tried to do to intervene and help. Well, it's interesting. It's true that a lot of wonderful things happened to him, but it's unclear whether those things were ever good for him. One member of the network who was a sort of Cassandra-like figure said to me that she understood very well that even good things, because she worked with families, groups of people who have schizophrenia and groups of families caring for people with schizophrenia, that even a good event can be an enormous stressor and that you really need to take your time and to understand how much you've lost and how slowly you need to work to recover things. So she was not sure that going to Yale Law School was a good idea

for him. The others all were. And she actually called one of his professors because she knew him and said, you're going to meet someone and you're going to think he's brilliant and you're going to love him. But he is going to be very sick, much sicker than you know, and you really need to create a kind of day hospital for him is what she said.

And she was aware all along of how difficult these things were. And imagine, first of all, that when he was applying for jobs the first time, he needed to hide from the world that he was ill. But the thing that got him all that money and all that potential success

was discussing his illness. His illness was the source of his authority and it was the story he was telling. And so already there too, there was a kind of confusion and the story that was told in the times and that Hollywood then bought and told back to him and that he was expected to tell was a kind of Hollywood story, that he got sick, that he with the love of a strong father and the care of community triumphed over that illness. The Dean of Yale Law School was quoted in the article saying he has conquered his illness. And Michael's the person who had told me about the hero with a thousand faces and the hero's journey, the Joseph Campbell book of mythology. That story of the person who goes forth to have an adventure gets lost in the woods, gets wounded, gets help from supernatural creatures, triumphs and emerges with gifts to give. That was the model at the time. First of all, for every Hollywood story, but it was also a template for a lot of stories. Amazingly, Joseph Campbell in the 70s had given a lecture about schizophrenia called the Schizophrenic Journey. And he saw the Schizophrenic Journey

as a version of the hero's journey and said, let the Voyager go as if you didn't triumph in spite of being ill. It was your illness itself that was a kind of higher power and authority. And it's not as if anyone told that to Michael, but the culture somehow kept suggesting it or had operated according to that reasoning. And so, yes, the movie was roaring ahead.

First, Leonardo DiCaprio was going to play him. Then Brad Pitt was going to play him.

The guy who wrote the screenplay had written the screenplay Mississippi Burning, which was of particular meaning to me and Michael because Mickey Schwerner, one of the three slain civil rights workers, Goodman Schwerner and Cheney, had lived in Pelham, his mother taught at New Rochelle High School. And here the guy who wrote that screenplay was going to write Michael's story. And Michael really saw his struggle as an extension of the civil rights movement, as did many people who fought for deinstitutionalization, by the way, as if just

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tearing down the walls would set people free. In any case, he was not able to write his book. He did stop taking his medication. It wasn't for the first time. He felt it was poisoned, although it's true. Nobody knows exactly how or why, but it was clear that he was delusional. And sometimes he wouldn't let Carrie into the apartment because he didn't believe she was herself, so she would sleep at a friend's. And the network was getting more and more alarmed, but they didn't feel they could do anything. At one point, Jane Ferber's daughter told me about a conversation she had with her mother, hearing how sad her mother was that Michael was getting worse. And she said, well, what are you going to do about it? And her mother said, there's nothing we can do. And maybe she meant there's nothing we can do because no hospital will hold him. And maybe she meant we can't send him to the hospital because he'll get stuck in that horrible system forever. But they genuinely felt there wasn't anything they could do. And meanwhile, many people simply felt they were honoring his autonomy by respecting his process, his illness, whatever place he was in it. And of course, he was far from community. And so the warnings got sharper. I myself had a conversation with him not so long before the calamity, in which he said to me, I have to go now. I'm having thoughts I shouldn't be having. And so I got off the phone feeling terrible, but not pursuing the meaning of that astonishing statement. Let's talk about the calamity. Well, Carrie stayed home from work, even though the next day she and her colleagues were all flying off to Chicago for a conference. She worked at the Edison project, which was an educational project. She was assistant technology director. And it was a huge conference. And it was unusual for her not to appear, but she didn't. Carrie called in a family emergency. And that day was a day of frantic phone calls with Michael's family, with mental health workers, with people trying to arrange some sort of crisis intervention. And at one point, Michael's mother became so alarmed by the things Michael had said that she called back. Michael answered the phone and his mother said, give the phone to Carrie. And Michael said, I can't because I've killed her. And then Ruth, Michael's mother, called the police and they asked them to check on Michael and his fiancée. And Michael lived about 50 feet away from the police station in Hastings on Hudson. And so two officers went over and the door was locked. But they got a key and they opened the door and they found Carrie and she had been stabbed many times. And Michael was gone. And Michael fled in Carrie's car. He actually fled first to Binghamton and then he took a bus to Cornell and was trying to get to Telluride House. This program we had both competed for in high school was called Telluride Summer Program. And when I heard Michael had been arrested on the campus of Cornell, I knew he was trying to get to Telluride House. But before he had gotten there, he had flagged a police car down and he was taken into custody. And it was a very strange sort of arrest. It wasn't an arrest yet because on the one hand, the police officer, amazing woman, Ellen Brewer, first assumed that he was the victim of a crime. Then she thought maybe it had fallen into one of the gorges because he had blood on his clothing. Then he seemed profoundly confused. And only later did she also experience him as someone dangerous, although actually she felt that possibility too. So she experienced all of these elements that didn't make sense to her because she felt them all almost at once. And he kept murmuring that he had killed someone, his fiancée or a wind-up doll or puppet. And that went on for quite a while until finally the sergeant called the Hastings Police Department

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because Michael kept saying, can we check on Carrie? Can we check on her? And the officer prefaced his remarks by saying, this is going to sound off the wall, but... And then he said what Michael had been telling him. And the officer at the other end said, hold him, he's done exactly what he said. And so, you know, that's what happened.

When Michael stabbed Carrie to death, did he know that she was pregnant with his child? He did. But to say, did he know is to say, to suggest that he knew who she was. And that remains the great question of responsibility. He was found ultimately not responsible by reason of insanity because he genuinely thought, as one psychiatrist said, that Carrie was a non-human imposter. So what he thought her child might be is also a question.

But it was a shocking piece of news that Carrie was pregnant. I certainly hadn't known. Most people didn't know. And so you have sort of, in 1995, this New York Times profile, hailing Michael as a genius who overcame his invisible wheelchair or his invisible handicap. And what is the headline on the New York Post front page the day after this murder?

One word. Psycho. So big, you couldn't even have added an exclamation point, or the words would have fallen off the page.

After the break, the tragedy of good intentions. Stay with us.

Jonathan, the theme that runs through this book and the theme that's captured in its subtitle is the idea of the tragedy of good intentions. Of course, there's no single factor that led Michael to the events of June 17th, to the calamity, to the murder of Carrie and their unborn child, to the New York Post cover photo under the word psycho. But there are a lot of things on both the micro and macro level that paved the way for this tragedy, even if those things were well-intentioned. And I want to talk about those in turn.

The most obvious thing I think of is the failure of people around Michael to make the call before it was too late. You know, with the story of the woman who froze to death in the box in New York City, Rebecca Smith, and the boy, you tell the story of a boy who was released from an institution only to burn down his family's house days later, killing his parents and his seven-year-old brother. With those stories hanging in the background, you describe Michael's mom, Ruth, upon being told by the police that her son has killed Carrie, and she's this anguished face that read, as you put it, we didn't move fast enough. Or as the lieutenant described it, a face that exuded woulda coulda shoulda. How much of this story do you think is a story of personal failure?

I don't see it as a story of villains. And so in that sense, I suppose I don't see it as a story of personal failure, simply because it's unclear what any single act of intervention would have done. Actually, a crisis intervention team had gone to Michael's apartment a week before, I think, he killed Carrie. And he came to the door, and he took their card. And as a member of the network said, he knew how to act, not crazy. So they left. And in that sense, yes, of course, I wish that there had been an intervention sooner. But the whole system had fallen apart.

You needed to be violent to go to the hospital. Being sick was no longer a reason. And once that happened, it became very, very difficult, both in people's minds and practically, to understand how to help people. And I try, and it's not a simple thing, to connect all of the good intentions that compounded the misrepresentations and the errors. But by the time Michael needed that world, a world that could have offered him care, that really didn't exist anymore. And I should also say that even the Cassandra of that group, who I

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write about, told me that never in her wildest imaginings did she think Michael would kill Carrie. She said what they most feared is that he would fall into the system. And even though people were seldom held, that he would fall into a kind of unending, revolving door of hospitalizations and releases, which indeed is what often did happen. You couldn't be held. You couldn't be medicated if you refused. You would be released. You would do something and you would either wind up in jail or wind up on the street or back in the hospital. And so I grew up in a time it was like not playing with a toy gun, of hiding the spinning wheel rather than teaching people what a spinning wheel was. And in the end, Michael fell into the spinning wheel anyway. He wound up in the system on the far side of it with his life destroyed and Carrie's life gone. That for me is the feeling, although it's true when I began looking at the story, I mean, I knew Michael had killed Carrie, but it started to feel almost like a murder mystery because so many people seemed implicated and involved at so many levels and so many small lies and omissions that turned into laws and those laws shaped the culture that influenced other laws and all of these things ramified over the years. And that I find almost overwhelming because it's very hard to rebuild something broken in so many ways. In other words, when you see what's going on in the streets of Los Angeles or the streets of New York or the streets of San Francisco with people being left to shoot themselves up with drugs to death in the name of autonomy, you see Michael in those faces. Is that what you mean? Well, the way you put it is true enough, but what I see is the consequences of lies. And one way I think about it, I hope this isn't too abstract, but as I said, Michael and I grew up after Vietnam or in the tail end of it, we didn't play with guns, but we grew up in the golden age of revenge movies. And the brilliance of those movies is that they always created a situation in which a good person is so abused that in the end, you're rooting for him to take dreadful action. You hope that the punk does make Dirty Harry's day, because even if he's not the nicest guy, he really doesn't want to shoot anybody. But the guy acts so dreadful. Or Chief Bromden, the character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, after they've tormented McMurphy, after they've given him electric shock treatment, after they've given him a lobotomy, his friend, Chief Bromden smothers him to death and then escapes by smashing the window so that all the people left behind will have a hero to root for. And you realize that a movie that's supposed to be about the mistreatment of people in psychiatric hospitals has people cheering for euthanasia, for smothering a mentally impaired person to death. And there was a way in which what was so morally gratifying about like death wish, here's this law-abiding architect whose wife and daughter are murdered, maybe raped as well, I can't remember. And he's so surrounded by dreadful conditions that eventually, yes, he starts riding the subway and blowing people away. And it's a form of human sacrifice which allows people to keep their feeling of moral superiority intact. It worked great for adolescent boys, but it began to seem almost like it was the deal people were making. Yes, he can't do the work, but to say so would be awkward. Yes, it's true, he did arm himself, but to say that that might be an outcome of losing touch with reality would ruin the nature of the story we're telling. So better just to leave that. It may erupt and explode someday, but we won't be responsible for having said an awkward thing along the way. And that really is what I also see and think about when I watch what's taking place. One of



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Michael's mentors, and two of them had both clerked for a judge who had done more than any other judge. He was a judge at the DC Circuit Court of Appeals to change the laws and that led to deinstitutionalization. One of Michael's mentors who had come up with legislation that helped release people from state hospitals said to this judge, you know, they're just letting people go on this and they're just on the street. And even though the ruling was a good one, that's not why people are being released, the judge had a very different opinion. He said, you know what, I think Americans are good people and when they see all of these people around them suffering, they'll do the right thing. So the formula was let's wait until there's a critical mass of suffering. That seems like a dreadful approach. I think you capture in a very powerful way in this book the sort of failure of the institutions, obviously the failure of mental health institutions in this country, the failure of hospitals, but also the failure of institutions like Yale. Michael described Yale Law School as America's most supportive mental health care facility. And as you write in the book,

his fellow students, his professors, they did so much to get him through law school. They wanted him to succeed. They thought they could save Michael. There was talk at one point of Michael being capable of clerking for Supreme Court justice. The Dean of Yale Law School, as you mentioned, said that Michael was in an invisible wheelchair and that he would be the ramp. But did they inadvertently, even with the best intentions, participate in the delusion? Did they participate in the lie? One of Michael's mentors said to me, you know, if I wasn't so busy thinking what an amazing place Yale Law School was for taking Michael, I might have thought more about how he was feeling. And this was someone who had asked Michael, do you still hallucinate? And Michael

had said, oh yes, I'm looking at angels right now waving fronds of fire. Professor said there was something so wrought about the image that he had to actually stop and ask himself if he was being bullshitted. He decided he wasn't and they moved on. But the point is it was actually the opposite. The stylized nature that made it seem almost literary was misleading. The reality was he was still hallucinating and he couldn't do the work. One of Michael's professors said to me, don't blame Hollywood, he said, because I had talked about how strange it must have been that Michael, who had delusions of grandeur among other delusions, was suddenly going to see a handsome movie star playing him and he loved to go around and ask the law professors who they wanted playing them, you know, should Danny DeVito play Guido Calabresi? But this professor said to

me, don't blame Hollywood. If Hollywood is to blame, we all are. And of course, Hollywood's job is making stories with happy endings. It's not the job of a law school. And as he then said, yeah, law school gave that story to the New York Times. The New York Times gave that story to Hollywood. And that's an interesting set of questions really. And what's interesting is that the House of Psychiatry, that actual place that was also an emblematic place in New Rochelle, which I say was built by D. W. Griffith, was also the House of Dreams, which is the name of the last book, the Hollywood book. But those houses did not keep their contents inside. The House of Law, which was Yale Law School, was also a House of Dreams in its way. And what they felt about Michael

was that he was brilliant. And what was amazing about being brilliant was that it didn't mean doing the work. It meant almost as if he somehow qualified for their good will. And that's a very

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complicated thing for me to contemplate, because I'm a product of that world. The people that tried to destigmatize mental illness did so with the best of intentions, you could argue. They did so because they didn't want people to be stigmatized. They didn't want people to be discriminated against. They saw it, as you said earlier in this conversation, as the continuation of the civil rights movement, arguably. But how did that go awry? How did their well-intentioned desire to destigmatize these diseases contribute to real harm for people suffering with mental illness? Well, one thing that was really very basic is that if you are arguing that you're going to give people the care they need, not in a hospital but in the community, at the very moment when you are redefining mental illness, you have to wonder what it is that you will be doing for people who are ill. And one way I describe it is that anti-psychotic medication was essentially introduced into this country. In the 50s, the same year that LSD was sent to psychiatrists and psychiatric institutions gratis by its manufacturer, and psychiatrists had in one hand a pill for inducing hallucinations, and in the other hand a pill for stopping them. And it was just a matter of time before things got mixed up, because when Aldous Huxley wrote *The Doors of Perception*, he was given mescaline by a psychiatrist who used it to teach his medical students what it was like to work with people who were psychotic. It was considered a psychomimetic drug. It wasn't, by the way, but that's what they thought. When Aldous Huxley tried it, he thought it was the most wonderful thing he'd ever experienced. He referred to it as the good parts of schizophrenia. So if in a mad world, someone with schizophrenia isn't merely sane, but has access to higher knowledge. And if people who take what were called mind-expanding drugs are doing something that is like giving themselves the symptoms of this illness, it would be very hard to decide that losing touch with reality is a symptom of a disorder needing help. So that's just one tiny fragment of many of the things that were happening in the culture that made it so hard to simply address the problem. And everything in the DSM is a mental illness from arachnophobia to schizophrenia. And if that's true, if it's all in a single category, then in a sense, if everyone is sick, nobody is. And helping a tiny subset of the small fraction of people most severely ill who lose connection to reality is very different from the grand fungible category of mental illness that has become a kind of staple in how we understand people and ourselves. And that makes it extremely hard to help people in direst need. And I think now in our culture, we've actually kind of moved one step beyond that, right? If you're writing about a period in which the collapsing of the categories between people with suffering from anxiety or panic attacks and depression are now grouped together with people suffering from schizophrenia, now we have a movement in our culture saying that schizophrenia shouldn't be thought of as a disease at all, but more like an identity that needs to be coddled and protected. Critics of this movement, like writer Freddie DeBoer, who we've had on this show, have said things like, I don't need acceptance when I'm psychotic. I need medication. Do you see that phenomenon of looking at not just destigmatizing, but actually elevating these diseases or conditions as if they're some kind of sacred identity? That is an old and romantic idea. In a sense, it's a return to the 60s and to already lying who saw it as a higher form of being. And in a sense, it's a kind of borrowing and metaphorization of illness, but that's been going on for a very long time.

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People have reached into the asylum to borrow mental illness almost like it was a kind of central bank of metaphors. People who wanted to expand the definition of the insanity defense, to extend it to people who committed crimes, but who were poor or who were marginalized in some way. One of Michael's mentors drafted the ruling that changed the insanity defense until it turned out that housebreakers were getting sent to state hospitals for years and years and years, and it backfired terribly. But there has long been that desire to see mental illness as a form of prophecy. And in a way, maybe it's what happens in a secular age. It's interesting. I originally, I'd written about quite a bit because Michael admired Norman Mailer and taught me about him first, as he taught me about a lot of writers, but also because when my mother never mentioned Norman Mailer without saying, of course, he stabbed his wife. And he did stab his wife. One of the things that's shocked me was when I was reading an oral biography of Mailer and Irving Howe of all people gave an answer in which he talked about why he and others like him loved and admired Mailer. He said, we were essentially rationalistic people for better or worse, but he was able to get at certain things we could not. We admired it. I think even envied it. He was our genius. And I think later in that same book, Lionel Trilling, who was revered in my house, my mother had studied with him in the 50s, he referred to Mailer stabbing his wife as a Dostoevsky employ, as if it were a kind of literary thought experiment like Raskolnikov killing the old woman to see, you know, as a kind of existentialist experiment. His wife, who was also a very gifted critic, Diana Trilling, thought, no, Mailer had suffered a psychotic break and needed to go to the hospital. But the reverence for someone who is breaking the bonds of ordinary life was a symptom of people who admired what they called genius. And maybe it's bound up with illness, too. We no longer find our inspiration in other ways. Even Susan Sontag, whose book *Illness as Metaphor* was an exposure, an expose about how dreadful it is to turn tuberculosis or cancer into a metaphor, has no trouble making a metaphor out of illness. And admiring people, like Artaud, who was a great hero to people like Foucault, who was severely ill and even says in her chapter on him, don't try to read his writing too much because it doesn't really make sense. An unusual thing for a critic to say. I'm still processing what all of that might mean. The title of your book is *The Best Minds*. Obviously, a reference to Michael in a certain sense. And I can't help but think about the fact that the day Michael was accepted to arguably the best law school in the world, he also believed that monkeys were eating his brain. Having spent so long with his story and this project, where do you land with the question about how genius and mental illness are fitted together? You know, it's a very good question. And I don't know the answer, partly because there's a kind of cult of genius that was not so different from the cult of madness, as if it was a form of prophecy that rescued you from ordinary existence. I would not say that people who suffer from severe mental illness are next door to genius and vice versa. It's hard to know what genius even means, to be perfectly honest. Michael was amazingly smart. He had a photographic memory. He, you know, he would land on a book the way a bee, you know, rubs itself into a flower and then the pollen was just always there. Whereas I was always like, what pocket is my pollen in? I can't remember anything.

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But I don't know what genius means. And that's what's so interesting. He was always spoken of as being brilliant. But what does it mean if you're seen as brilliant and yet you cannot do the work that's expected of you? And it's almost as if it becomes a category that simply elevates you. And it was like being an artist when Michael and I were young. I didn't want to be a writer, so I could come to terms with life in all of its complexity. I wanted to vault above and beyond it. It was a very unhealthy impulse. And I grew up in a world of writers and I grew up probably believing what I think Mallarmé, the poet says that the world exists to be put into a book. But really, I don't believe that anymore. And when you have a baby and you hold your baby, you don't think the baby is waiting to be put into a book. It doesn't feel incomplete, even if she can't talk yet. And it's life that you realize is so remarkable. And one of the things that took me so long writing this book is that I wasn't just telling stories. I had to untell stories also. The impulse to make stories, the impulse to believe that Freud was right, he'd discovered applied mythology, really is going to heal us. And we're actually made sick by a Greek myth lurking within. This idea that somehow literature heals you or makes you whole and telling your story means you've triumphed. There's a way in which it doesn't honor life, it does the opposite. And everyone thought they were helping Michael by making his story come out a certain way. So they would supply missing pieces of it, like the frog DNA that they use in Jurassic Park. It's very close, but it's different. And so I think somehow this dream of genius is like that. One of the things I said early in the book, when I say Michael and I shared this idea that our brains were our rocket ships, we were just going to outsource ordinary existence. I kept thinking, where did that word come from? There's this amazing line in the poet Shelley's elegy for Keats, who died very young and I was obsessed. Oh, Keats did everything by the time he was 26. It says, he has outsoared the shadow of our night, envy and calumny and hate and pain and that unrest which men miscall delight can touch him not and torture not again. And I remember I memorized it in high school and it was, you know, you sort of drunk on the music of it until you realize what he's saying is he's safe now. Why? He's dead. To outsource the shadow of night and be free of all that struggle and suffering is to be outside of the world. And so many of the theories that were imposed on life and imposed on literature when I was in school and imposed on medicine were not only untrue, they were antithetical to life. And I think that is bound up. I guess I got here by answering your question about genius, that the great goal is not to step outside from the ordinary world, but quite the opposite. My father was right when he would say to me, quoting the Bible, choose life. Michael murdered Carrie 25 years ago. Where is he now? So 25 years ago, Michael killed Carrie. Legally, he didn't murder her because he was found not responsible. Although the condition of pleading not responsible is acknowledging you did it. So it's a paradox from the beginning. He's in a forensic psychiatric hospital in the Hudson Valley where he's been for almost 25 years since then. And so now he's in a place where he gets medication and a kind of care. And now he's in the system that people cared for him were so determined to save him from. Jonathan Rosen, thank you so much for your time. Thank you. Thanks for listening. If you liked this conversation, if it moved you in some way, or if I or Jonathan said something you appreciated or maybe disagreed with, use it to have a conversation of your own.

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