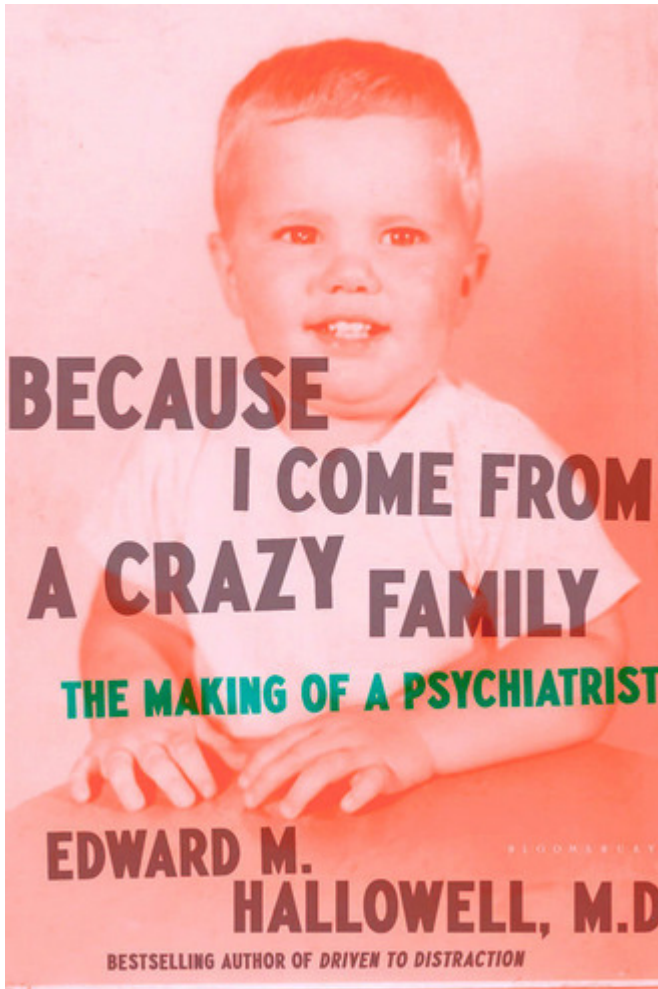


‘EXTRAORDINARY’

Author overcomes challenges, excels in profession

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“Because I Come from a Crazy Family: The Making of a Psychiatrist” by Edward M. Hallowell. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, 416 pages, \$28.00.



“When I was 11 years old, a voice out of nowhere told me I should become, of all things, a shrink,” Edward M. Hallowell explains near the beginning of “Because I Come from a Crazy Family: The Making of a Psychiatrist,” his new autobiographical treatise on how he became a world-renowned authority on Attention Deficit Disorder. “That was definitely not in the game plan I’d inherited. My people would deem it fine to be a doctor, say a brain surgeon or a cardiologist, but a psychiatrist? Please.”

“Yet there I was, standing by myself on a hot summer day,” he continues, “when an alien voice popped into my head and stated as clearly as a church bell, ‘You should become a psychiatrist.’ Not knowing what on earth to make of it, I did what I did with most things I didn’t understand. I put it aside and moved on. But 18 years later, here I was, about to do what that voice from God-knows-where had told me to do.”

So begins the author’s intensely introspective and (at times) shockingly transparent expedition through his early life and career. And make no mistake, Hallowell definitely chose the appropriate title for this highly personal collection of anecdotes and stories. We all have family

members who are, shall we say, a little odd. Hallowell’s upbringing, on the other hand, was saturated with a cast of characters who seem more suited to an off-the-wall Hollywood B-movie than “an old New England WASP family” (his words).

Along these same lines, one of the more endearing qualities about Hallowell’s narrative is the way it flows from one episode to the next in a seamless although not necessarily linear fashion. He is one of those rare individuals who has the ability to write for both an academic as well as a general audience. If you are well-versed in the psychiatric concepts and applications he references liberally throughout the manuscript, you will obviously connect to what he is saying on a fairly deep level. At the same time, if you have only a passing acquaintance with the subject matter he knows so intimately, you will still be able to follow the story with minimal difficulty.

For my part, I found the interactions Hallowell had with those closest to him to be the most revealing – and even relatable to a somewhat surprising extent. Witness the following excerpt from chapter 37:

“The only time I ever saw my father actively psychotic was when I was a sophomore at Harvard. One of my friends, Dave Halvorsen, and I decided to go on a canoeing trip on the Rangeley Lakes in Maine. En route, we stopped to spend a night at my dad’s and stepmother’s house in Derry, N.H. At the time, Dad was teaching public school, the job he held until he died in 1978. Dave and I spent a pleasant evening with Dad and Hope, the ghostly, strange woman he’d married after meeting her in a mental hospital. The next morning, when we got up, Dad had left for work, as had Hope. But Dad left me a message written in spit on the mirror in the living room. It read, ‘take this money and have fun.’ On the table below the mirror was three hundred dollars in cash.”

“Two facts tipped me off that something was wrong. First of all, Dad was one of the world’s tightest cheapskates. He never would have given me thirty dollars, let alone three hundred, were he in his right mind. Second was the writing on the mirror in spit. I remembered my mother telling me she could always tell when Dad was about to go crazy because he would start leaving her messages written in spit on the bathroom mirror. Not knowing what to do, I did nothing. I took the money, and Dave and I went off on our canoeing trip. When I returned to college, Jamie told me that Dad was in the Bedford VA hospital.”

In the last years of his life, my own father exhibited some very bizarre behavior, mostly precipitated by the loss of my mother, his wife of 51 years. I had not thought of this unusually sad and confusing time in all of our lives until I read the author’s description of his interactions with his Dad – such is the power of Hallowell’s prose to elicit an unexpected yet emotionally visceral reaction. By the way, this was far from the only passage affecting me this way – and I am sure many readers would have similar experiences.

Hallowell is founder of the Hallowell Centers in Boston, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and is a graduate of Harvard University; his medical training was completed at Tulane University Medical School. A frequent contributor to US News and World Report, Newsweek, the Harvard Business Review, The Washington Post and The New York Times, he has also been featured on “20/20,” “60 Minutes,” “The Today Show,” “Dateline” and “Good Morning America.” Hallowell is also a prolific author and in-demand speaker, his previous books include “Driven to Distraction (with John Ratey),” “CrazyBusy,” “Superparenting for ADD (with Peter Jensen),” “Married to Distraction (with Sue Hallowell)” and “Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best from Your People.”

Hallowell cites his strong faith, together with a supportive network of loving friends and family as the key factors in his achieving a happy, successful life. He believes human connectedness is a precursor for wellness and essential to helping those suffering from mental and emotional disorders that can seem insurmountable at times. Perhaps Ken Duckworth, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, captures the spirit of Hallowell’s book most succinctly: “Poignant, unexpectedly funny and a brilliant read, this book is thoroughly relatable for anyone who has loved a complex person, worked to learn life lessons, and tried to make the world a better place.”

After making my way through Hallowell’s extraordinary account of overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges to arrive at the top of his profession, I could not agree more. I think many readers would find this one hard to put down. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.