



LENS

# Elyn Saks Describes Her Day-to-Day Experiences With Schizophrenia

AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes



Elyn Saks

Elyn Saks describes her experience of teaching a law school class.

*My students filled the room. They were interested and eager, unusually so, given that they were second- and third-year law students for whom the fear and trembling that came with the first year had long since faded. The course was "Advanced Mental Health Law." The day's topic: Billie Boggs. A street person who lived over a hot air vent in midtown Manhattan, she threw food at people who wanted to help her and chased them across the street. Her rantings and ravings seemed crazy to most of the students, and we were discussing whether she should be sent to a psychiatric hospital.*

*I heard myself speak, surprising myself by the steady sound of my voice as I tried to restore my attention to the group before me: "What if Billie Boggs were your sister—would you put her in a psychiatric hospital then?" Up shot the hands.*

*Concentrate. These are your students. You have an obligation to them. Canceling class would be admitting defeat. But there are explosions in my head. They're testing nuclear devices on my brain. They're very little and they can get inside. They are powerful.*

*I pulled myself together, enough to point to a young woman who spoke often in class. "I couldn't let my sister live like that," she said from across the classroom, which held the students in curved rows, like a giant palm before me. "I know my sister. That wouldn't be her. There's one and only one of her—and that's the one before she got sick."*

*Is she trying to kill me? No, she's a student. But what about the others? The voices inside my head, the explosions. What do they want? Are they trying to interdict me, to hit me with the Kramer device? I went to the store and they said "interdiction." Interdiction, introduction, exposition, explosion. Voicemail is the issue.*

*I knew not to say those thoughts out loud. Not because they were crazy thoughts—they were every bit as real as the students sitting right in front of me—but I kept silent because others would think them crazy. People would think me as deranged as Billie Boggs.*

*But I'm not crazy. I simply have greater access to the truth.*

*"Good," I replied. "But why isn't it the case that your sister has two selves, the sick one you see now and the healthy one you've known all your life? Why should you get to pick which is real? Shouldn't your sister make that choice?" Up shot more hands.*

*My brain is on fire! My head is going to explode right here, right in front of my class!*

*"But isn't health always preferred to illness?" a bright-eyed young man countered. "We should prefer the healthy self."*

*Mercifully, the class ended. A law-school dean spotted me as I walked back to my office. He said I looked as if I were in pain. "Just a lot on my mind," I heard myself reply as I continued quickly down the hall. Keys out, door open, door shut. I crumpled into my chair and buried my face in my hands.*

*That was in September of 1991, and it was one of my worst such incidents. Ten years before, in my mid-20s, during my third psychiatric hospitalization, I had been given the diagnosis "chronic paranoid schizophrenia with acute exacerbation." My prognosis? "Grave." I was, in other words, expected to be unable to live independently, let alone work. At best I would be in a board-and-care, holding a minimum-wage job—perhaps flipping burgers—when my symptoms had become less severe.*

*That has not turned out to be my life. I am the Orrin B. Evans professor of law, psychology, and psychiatry and the behavioral sciences at the University of*