

TARANTELLA



Many years ago and shortly after being assigned by the *New York Times* to report from Russia, a young journalist Serge Schmemmann developed a twitching eye that made it difficult to work. Recently he recalled that curious symptom in a *Times* oped (“The ‘Havana Syndrome’ Mystery”, Nov. 4, 2021) explaining that as soon as he arrived in Moscow, he became aware that he was being constantly followed, presumably by KGB agents. When he flew to Paris to have the eye checked out, nothing was found and the twitch disappeared, but back in Moscow, the U.S. Embassy doctor reassured him, “Everybody gets the ‘Moscow Eye’ soon after they arrive and it soon goes away.”

Despite efforts to explain similar “anomalous health incidents” that have afflicted some 200 Americans posted to foreign countries, so far no one has come up with anything conclusive. Strange buzzing noises reported by some diplomats in Cuba turned out to be the mating call of a particularly loud cricket, but Schmemmann ended his editorial: “The indisputable neurological symptoms of the Americans who have suffered from [the Havana Syndrome] for several years now, demand dispassionate and objective investigation, not speculative bombast.” That sounds about right.

Two letters published recently in the *New Yorker* (Nov. 1, 2021) were highly critical of an article about Long Covid that appeared in a previous issue. One writer declared, “The publication’s engagement in ‘what-about-ism’ regarding Long Covid is harmful, and an insult to those who are suffering from this sinister disease, many of whom are being gaslit by the medical community every day. They deserve better.” Both letter writers are officers of Survivor Corps, an organization that claims to be “the world’s largest grassroots group of citizen-scientists... who bridge the gap between activists and scientists.” They were outraged by those who dispute “the lived experience” of so many sufferers and deny the physiologic basis of prolonged post-viral symptoms.

Without taking sides in this increasingly hostile controversy, it may be helpful to recall that for centuries a range of enigmatic, sometimes bizarre symptoms have baffled scientists and laymen alike. For example, consider “dancing mania.” The term was coined by the 16th century scientist-theologian Paracelsus who felt that the condition was a curse sent by an angry saint, perhaps St. John the Baptist or St. Vitus. The earliest-known outbreak occurred during the 7th century and reappeared many times throughout Europe. At a large outbreak in Strasbourg in 1518, a woman began dancing in the street and between 50 and 400 people joined her, dancing madly all day and all night until they collapsed in ecstasy. There were dozens of similar examples.

Starting as early as the 13th century, a similar phenomenon in Italy was called “tarantism.” Victims claimed they’d been poisoned by the bite of a tarantula spider or a scorpion, but thought they could be cured by joining a frenzied folk dance known as the tarantella because of proximity to the town of Taranto. It occurred only during summer months and fast-paced, non-stop dancing was thought to separate spider venom from the blood; perhaps helping the victim sweat out the poison.

As with dancing mania, people would suddenly begin to behave strangely after a perceived bite or sting and were joined by others who believed that venom from their own old bites was reactivated by the heat or the music. Some participants admitted that they hadn’t been bitten, but believed they were infected by someone else who had been, or that they had simply touched a spider. The afflicted often complained of headaches, trembling and twitching, but dancing the tarantella could “cure” the victims, at least temporarily. The result was mass panic, some people saw visions, others acted out wildly — there was no social distancing but lots of coupling.

Another popular theory was that the dancers suffered from ergot poisoning, known as St. Anthony's fire in the Middle Ages. Although ergotism could cause hallucinations and convulsions, it couldn't account for some of the strange behaviors and physicians suggested that the symptoms were similar to those encountered with such conditions as encephalitis, epilepsy and typhus. Tarantism was confined to Italy and southern Europe and was common until the 17th century when it ended suddenly, with only very small outbreaks until as late as 1959.

Closer to our own era, dancing mania and related conditions have variously been described as collective hysterical disorder, psychogenic epidemic, conversion reaction or functional neurologic disorder, but it remains unclear whether it was a “real” illness or a social phenomenon. During the Middle Ages medical misinformation and disinformation were prevalent — unlike today? — and some modern scholars have suggested that both tarantism and dancing mania simply may have been the result of stress caused by poverty or natural disasters, such as plagues and floods. Perhaps the “dancing cure” might have been therapeutic after all, by allowing people to act out and behave in ways that, normally, were prohibited at the time — rather like “primal scream therapy.”

Acting out in eccentric ways typified thousand of inmates of a vast French asylum for women that was known as *La Salpetriere*. It was built on the site of a former munitions arsenal and, in effect, was a city within a city as nearly 8,000 inhabitants were packed into more than 100 buildings; some described it as a living museum of pathology or “the Versailles of Suffering.” During the late 19th century, the womens' care was supervised by Professor Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893), known to his students as *Le Maitre*, who was convinced that there must be a common organic explanation for a broad spectrum of behavioral disorders that he lumped together as “Hysteria.”

Every Tuesday morning, Charcot would lead medical conferences that were open to the public at which he exhibited the most flamboyant of his patients — show and tell. Like a master puppeteer, *Le Maitre* enjoyed putting his divas through their paces at these *Lecons du Mardi*. The six hundred seat auditorium was packed with journalists, theater people and socialites — something exciting was happening in this house of horrors; something theatrical and circus-like, there even was a hint of scandal. The marionettes knew what their master wanted and delivered on cue — they shrieked and barked, postured and contorted to the amazement and amusement of the audience. The leading hysterics became celebrities. Sarah Bernhardt, herself, attended Tuesday morning conferences to study the virtuoso divas' performances.

Although Charcot suspected that the cause had something to do with the brain, at autopsy examination his crude microscope was unable to identify any visible abnormalities. The 1880s were described as “The Golden Age of Hysteria” and, if so, Paris was the epicenter, but the Golden Age was short-lived. Twenty years before Charcot arrived at *La Salpêtrière* only 1% of the hospital’s inmates carried this diagnosis; during his heyday 17% did and twenty years after he died in 1893, there were none.

Philadelphia’s Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) definitely would have disapproved of dance therapy. He was a physician, scientist, novelist and poet, considered by some to be “the father of medical neurology” (Others have suggested that the patronymic should go to Charcot.) Rather than exercise, Weir Mitchell prescribed extreme rest. He pioneered the so-called “rest cure” — a strictly enforced regimen of six to eight weeks of bed rest and isolation at home, without any intellectual activity or stimulation other than massage and electrotherapy. He suggested that a diet rich in milk and meat would “fatten and redden” his patients, and the approach would ameliorate a catalogue of unusual symptoms, especially in women. Weir Mitchell showed his misogynistic colors when he objected to any girl under the age of seventeen using her brain even moderately. To do so, he warned, would endanger her health and her future would be limited to “the shawl and the sofa.”

Some advocates described the rest cure as “the greatest advance of which practical medicine can boast in the last quarter of the century.” Charlotte Perkins Gilman strongly disagreed. Suffering from postpartum depression, Weir Mitchell prescribed a strict rest cure for her, but the treatment proved worse than the disease. After three months and almost desperate, Gilman started to work again. Aware of how close she had come to a complete mental breakdown, sought a second opinion from Mary Putnam Jacobi, one of the first female doctors. Dr. Jacobi prescribed a regimen of physical and mental activity that proved much more successful and Gilman described her experience in the short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” with additions and exaggerations to illustrate her criticism of the medical field.

Am I being unfair to equate instances of manic behavior during early times to today’s post-Covid brain fog, altered taste and smell or strange neurologic symptoms? Obviously there are substantial differences, but my purpose here is to emphasize that sometimes we give modern medicine more credit than may be its due. Even the most sophisticated scanners and laboratory tests are not infallible, experienced clinicians

learn to tolerate uncertainty and a familiar caveat by investigators is that “more work needs to be done.”

Lest my skepticism incur the wrath of the Long Covid Survivor Corps, I don't mean to denigrate the growing numbers who complain of unusual symptoms long after acute viral infections have waned, or those who experience strange feelings when they are assigned to work in hostile environments. Their complaints seems genuine enough and does it really matter whether the cause is pathogenic or psychogenic? They need help. Personally I suspect the former, but even if eventually a medical explanation is discovered, we live in a time when many seemingly intelligent people reject science altogether — no doubt some of them have their own demons. So what fundamentally has changed during the last millennium? Much of human behavior remains a mystery. Some people join cults, others political parties and frequently the most gullible parrot what their leaders tell them to believe.

During the Middle Ages, conspiracy theorists blamed angry spirits or stinging spiders while nowadays some dizzy diplomats in Havana envision KGB agents and sonic rays. Five hundred years ago “cure” sometimes involved exuberant dancing in the squares; just today marathon runners are plodding through New York City's streets urged on by screaming crowds — and several days ago I watched a group of TikTokers manically performing in Central Park. To be sure, by now we've killed off most of the stinging insects, but I suspect that the music was livelier in medieval Italy, so perhaps we should bring back the Tarantella. Who's crazy now?

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

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