

RELEASE IN PART B6

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January 12, 2013

Hypochondria: An Inside Look

By WOODY ALLEN

WHEN The New York Times called, inquiring if I might pen a few words “from the horse’s mouth” about hypochondria, I confess I was taken aback. What light could I possibly shed on this type of crackpot behavior since, contrary to popular belief, I am not a hypochondriac but a totally different genus of crackpot?

What I am is an alarmist, which is in the same ballpark as the hypochondriac or, should I say, the same emergency room. Still there is a fundamental difference. I don’t experience imaginary maladies — my maladies are real.

What distinguishes my hysteria is that at the appearance of the mildest symptom, let’s say chapped lips, I instantly leap to the conclusion that the chapped lips indicate a brain tumor. Or maybe lung cancer. In one instance I thought it was Mad Cow.

The point is, I am always certain I’ve come down with something life threatening. It matters little that few people are ever found dead of chapped lips. Every minor ache or pain sends me to a doctor’s office in need of reassurance that my latest allergy will not require a heart transplant, or that I have misdiagnosed my hives and it’s not possible for a human being to contract elm blight.

Unfortunately, my wife bears the brunt of these pathological dramas. Like the time I awoke at 3 a.m. with a spot on my neck that to me clearly had the earmarks of a melanoma. That it turned out to be a hickey was confirmed only later at the hospital after much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Sitting at an ungodly hour in the emergency room where my wife tried to talk me down, I was making my way through the five stages of grief and was up to either “denial” or “bargaining” when a young resident fixed me with a rather supercilious eye and said sarcastically, “Your hickey is benign.”

But why should I live in such constant terror? I take great care of myself. I have a personal trainer who has me up to 50 push-ups a month, and combined with my knee bends and situps, I can now press the 100-pound barbell over my head with only minimal tearing of my stomach wall. I never smoke and I watch what I eat,

carefully avoiding any foods that give pleasure. (Basically, I adhere to the Mediterranean diet of olive oil, nuts, figs and goat cheese, and except for the occasional impulse to become a rug salesman, it works.) In addition to yearly physicals I get all available vaccines and inoculations, making me immune to everything from Whipple's disease to the Andromeda strain.

As far as vitamins go, if I take a few with each meal, over time I can usually get in quite a lot before the latest study confirms they're worthless. Regarding medications, I'm flexible but prudent because while it's true antibiotics kill bad bacteria, I'm always afraid they'll kill my good bacteria, not to mention my pheromones, and then I won't give off any sexual vibes in a crowded elevator.

It's also true that when I leave the house to go for a stroll in Central Park or to Starbucks for a latte I might just pick up a quick cardiogram or CT scan prophylactically. My wife calls this nonsense and says that in the end it's all genetic. My parents both lived to ripe old ages but absolutely refused to pass their genes to me as they believed an inheritance often spoils the child.

Even when the results of my yearly checkup show perfect health, how can I relax knowing that the minute I leave the doctor's office something may start growing in me and, by the time a full year rolls around, my chest X-ray will look like a Jackson Pollock? Incidentally, this relentless preoccupation with health has made me quite the amateur medical expert. Not that I don't make an occasional mistake — but what doctor doesn't? For example, I once convinced a woman who experienced a mild ringing in her ears that she had the flesh-eating bacteria, and another time I pronounced a man dead who had simply dozed off in a chair.

But what's this obsession with personal vulnerability? When I panic over symptoms that require no more than an aspirin or a little calamine lotion, what is it I'm really frightened of? My best guess is dying. I have always had an animal fear of death, a fate I rank second only to having to sit through a rock concert. My wife tries to be consoling about mortality and assures me that death is a natural part of life, and that we all die sooner or later. Oddly this news, whispered into my ear at 3 a.m., causes me to leap screaming from the bed, snap on every light in the house and play my recording of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" at top volume till the sun comes up.

I sometimes imagine that death might be more tolerable if I passed away in my sleep, although the reality is, no form of dying is acceptable to me with the possible exception of being kicked to death by a pair of scantily clad cocktail waitresses.

Perhaps if I were a religious person, which I am not, although I sometimes do have the intimation that we all may be part of something larger — like a Ponzi scheme. A great Spanish philosopher wrote that all humans long for "the eternal persistence of consciousness." Not an easy state to maintain, especially when you're dining with people who keep talking about their children.

And yet, there are worse things than death. Many of them playing at a theater near you. For instance, I would not like to survive a stroke and for the rest of my life talk out of the side of my mouth like a racetrack tout. I would also not like to go into a coma, to lie in a hospital bed where I'm not dead but can't even blink my eyes and signal the nurse to switch the channel from Fox News. And incidentally, who's to say the nurse isn't one of those angel of death crazies who hates to see people suffer and fills my intravenous glucose bag with Exxon regular.

Worse than death, too, is to be on life support listening to my loved ones in a heated debate over whether to terminate me and hear my wife say, "I think we can pull the plug, it's been 15 minutes and we'll be late for our dinner reservation."

What worries me most is winding up a vegetable — any vegetable, and that includes corn, which under happier circumstances I rather like. And yet is it really so great to live forever? Sometimes in the news I see features about certain tall people who reside in snow-capped regions where a whole village population lives to 140 or so. Of course all they ever eat is yogurt, and when they finally do die they are not embalmed but pasteurized. And

don't forget these healthy people walk everyplace because try getting a cab in the Himalayas. I mean do I really want to pass my days in some remote place where the main entertainment is seeing which guy in town can lift the ox highest with his bare hands?

Summing up, there are two distinct groups, hypochondriacs and alarmists. Both suffer in their own ways, and traits of one group may overlap the other, but whether you're a hypochondriac or an alarmist, at this point in time, either is probably better than being a Republican.

Woody Allen is a filmmaker, actor and writer.

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