

Excerpt from chapter "Am I crazy"

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(...)

Between 100,000 and a million women have been burned at the stake as witches. Few women who experienced seizures became recognized as holy: Sweden's Birgitta of Vadstena (1303-73), France's Joan of Arc (1412-33) and Spain's Teresa of Avila (1515-82). More men were canonized after having seizures, including in more recent times, from the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel (c. 593-571), to Buddha (c. 563-483 BC) to Julius Caesar 101-44 BC) and the Apostle Paul (c. 64) whose story is told in the Bible. Even Mohammed (569-623) had fits. And possibly also Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55).

"And the writer Fjodor Dostoyevski," adds senior doctor Jørgen Alving, who works as a consultant at the epilepsy hospital Filadelfia. He comes widely recommended. His psychiatrist colleague Jens Ahrenkiel - who describes himself as "experienced enough as a psychiatrist not to dismiss what patients have experienced" - calls Alving "as knowledgeable as they come, and he's treated more patients than I have".

"What you're saying doesn't have anything to do with a psychiatric diagnosis. It can't be explained. I've never heard of anything like it," states Ahrenkiel, who knows that "odd things happen in the brain that we don't understand. It's something you learn to accept."

That it happened while I was completely conscious and can remember the event in detail means, according to him, that I do not suffer from what is called dissociative fugue, which is when someone performs an action without remembering anything about it afterwards. Nor was I under the influence of drugs, or under hypnosis, or showing any evidence of a migraine attack. A possible explanation might be the little-known Geschwind Syndrome, characterized by seizures leading to personality changes that take the form of exaggerated social need, a heightened sex drive, compulsive talking or writing, and a more intense emotional life.

"That sounds about right," I tell him. But he rules out the rare diagnosis, because I don't appear sick, and I haven't experienced anything that comes close to a violent epileptic fit.

"But ask Jørgen Alving," advises Jen Ahrenkiel.

So one day, still eagerly searching for a medical explanation, I find myself sitting across from the slight figure of a doctor with a name-tag on his green polo shirt, discussing Dostoyevsky.

"The Russian writer had epilepsy, but there'd be short periods of about 30 seconds just before the actual seizures when he experienced euphoria. He experienced such extreme happiness, such bliss, that he described those moments as being worth an entire lifetime. He described it as being in a state beyond time. It reminds me of what you've been saying," says Jørgen Alving. And I nod a relieved yes. So I have a touch of epilepsy? At least I'm not crazy.

But immediately, the Superintendent of the Filadelfia Board of Consultancy puts a check on my relief.

"It's quite unlikely in your case. For a number of reasons. Firstly, with epileptic seizures you'll get the exact same experiences every time because it's triggered in the same group of nerve cells in the cerebral cortex. You'll get hallucinations and flashes of light in your forehead, and you'll be shaking. This isn't your experience. Secondly the positive feelings that Dostoyevsky had only last a very short time before they transform into something else, usually cramping. Plus their level of consciousness drops and they don't remember anything with the accuracy you do. Attacks involving light and tremors can indicate epileptic fits. But visions don't. And generally the experience you'll have during a fit won't be positive or reassuring, the way you describe them. A fit can provoke multi-sensory experiences in which all sense impressions become overwhelming, but not enjoyably so. So no. Your experiences can't be ascribed to epilepsy."

"So what's the explanation?"

"I don't know. There are some people who have this type of religious experience without our being able to explain them. People might make this kind of thing up if they're compulsive attention-seekers, but you're not. You're even risking something by coming forward. No, what you're describing is something that stumps us scientists. What you've seen are secrets of the soul."

"But can't you look into it for me?"

"We won't gain anything by it. You can have an epileptic fit without it registering on an ECG or a PET scan unless we know exactly when the attack is coming and we've inserted electrodes, but you don't have epilepsy. "

I wonder if it's a surge of energy known as a Kundalini awakening, as described in the Buddhist tradition.

"Might it be that?" I ask.

"That's not something I know about. As a doctor I can only help work out what it isn't. But speaking from medical experience and my own viewpoint, I can't see any clash between faith and science going on here. There's a whole lot we don't know. The traffic going on in the human brain is far greater than the telecommunications systems of the entire world put together. But we know that man cannot live by bread alone. Which is why we have the soul. There's a yearning embedded in us all. We can't prove it's there but it manifests itself in unusual phenomena such as your own experiences. The fact that you see Jesus makes it less unusual, because you're drawing on a common positive human experience from the culture you were raised in. All cultures have ecstatic religious experience. It's universal, just like near-death experiences which are often similar. We can't explain those either," says Jørgen Alving.

And he sends me back to Rold with the knowledge that I do not suffer from epilepsy – but that if I did, I would be in good company.