

WOBBLES AND BOGGLES (Originally published February 1977)

Last month in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (December 23, 1976 issue), we read a special article by Norman Cousins, the learned editor of *Saturday Review*; it was titled, "Anatomy of an Illness (As Perceived by the Patient)." Mr. Cousins relates the story of a strange and serious collagen-type disease, compounded by a self-diagnosed state of "adrenal exhaustion," which he felt had been triggered by exposure to diesel exhaust fumes during a visit to Moscow. He was ill for a long period in 1964, but eventually recovered in spite of the bumbling work of hospital nurses and dieticians, the ministrations of several New York specialists and a bizarre treatment plan of his own concoction.

In the course of his determined intellectual probing and grasping for some pertinent straws of medical research that might be applied curatively to his special case, are remarks regarding one of his hypotheses that it was "a mind-boggling train of thought."

Having survived a completely boggled mind once about thirty years ago, the term has always intrigued us. A boggle (or boll), according to *Webster*, derives from English or Scottish dialect, and is a terrifying apparition, like a goblin or specter, and, therefore, an object of fear or loathing. A boggled mind may or may not be a confused or fearful one, but it does seem to have a definite affinity for editors, writers and pundits.

In these parts, Ralph McGill, the late editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*, frequently suffered from the mind boggles, which may have done him in eventually. It is possibly a contagious condition because a series of later *Constitution* editors also have mentioned their minds becoming boggled. James "Scotty" Reston of the *New York Times* often experiences mind bogging, and, lest you think that this is an affliction of liberal thinkers only, conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick also admits to it on occasion.

In the case of the *Saturday Review* editor, his never-fully-diagnosed illness (particularized by one of his specialist consultants as an ankylosing spondylitis with a one in five hundred chance of recovery) eventually responded over a period of months to the unusual regimen of "pursuing salutary emotions"—specifically, laughter induced by watching old Allen Funt *Candid Camera* TV films plus a self-administered dose of 25 grams (!) of ascorbic acid daily by intravenous drip. Rather heroic measures, especially the Allen Funt treatments.

Well, we're happy that Mr. Cousins recovered and got back to editing his magazine, but we're not sure that his free-wheeling inductive and deductive mental excursions into the medical wilderness led him to the right diagnosis. He may just have found the cure for some other disease. We once owned a racehorse, which developed a strange central nervous system ailment known in horse circles as the "wobbles." Maybe what Cousins really had was a galloping case of the "boggles," a malady of the mind to which editors frequently succumb.

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