

A TOUCH OF FOLLY

Boris Cyrulnik – Now I would like to tell you a crazy short story about a serendipitous discovery because I happen to have learnt about this discovery at close hand. At Toulon before the Second World War, there was a doctor Despinoy who was a psychiatrist but who was doing a post-graduate in neurophysiology. Since he was a sailor, he was sent to Africa and there he saw an African in a trance where the witchdoctor calmed the victim by getting him to lick a white stone. As he was doing a post-graduate in neurophysiology, he promptly concluded that on the white stone was a substance that calmed the agitation since its effect was to calm the man in the trance. He took the stone back to the marine laboratory of Toulon who told him: ‘It couldn’t be Sodium, it couldn’t be Potassium, it couldn’t be Calcium, traces of Lithium, that’s what it must be!’ And he extracted the Lithium and made it into pills and a young Danish researcher called Mogens Schou promptly contacted him to ask ‘I would like to give some Lithium to someone in my family who is suffering from bipolar psychosis’. She was therefore given some Lithium and it was found that she got much better. I have the publication that shows that those around her, two nurses, a cousin and an aunt, confirm that she got better and it is published in a review of the time.

Then Mogens Schou gave some pills of Lithium to some guinea pigs and the result was that these little rodents got calmer because as has been noticed, animals run around much less quickly when they have a toxic encephalopathy. Now what is toxic cannot be commercialised, then the war unfolds and Mogens Schou revisits his hypothesis whereupon the flame spectrophotometer appears. It was learnt what are toxic doses of Lithium and how to give doses with the right precision to be therapeutic. Dufour who was a researcher at Marseille with Priguey, his pupil and mine, invited me to take part in the study. Of one thousand patients who had taken Lithium, more than eighty per cent had returned to stability from their stupefaction. What I conclude from all this is that if there had been a single doctrinaire scientist with us, nothing would have happened because the hypothesis was crazy, the method was ridiculous and the results were extraordinary. So I think that sure, we should respect traditional scientific training but from time to time we need to tolerate a touch of madness to get incredible results like that. Despinoy spent the rest of his life as a psychoanalyst and totally abandoned psychophysiology, Dufour couldn’t get far, Pringuey had an outstanding university career and more than eighty per cent of his patients benefit from a serendipitous discovery.

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