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STAWAR: Halloween fear factor



Terry Stawar

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By **TERRY STAWAR**
Local Columnist (<http://newsandtribune.com>)

> SOUTHERN INDIANA — “It’s time to get back to the real meaning of Halloween. Fear!”

— *Sue Sylvester, from the TV show “Glee.”*

I scared myself the other night reading a book about the Bell Witch. This book tells the story of a poltergeist that haunted the Bell family of Adams, Tenn.

The haunting began in 1817 shortly after John Bell Sr. was out hunting and shot at a strange animal, that he said had the body of a dog and the head of a rabbit. All sorts of strange phenomena followed, including bizarre knocking and gnawing sounds, facial seizures and even invisible attacks on the Bell’s young daughter, Betsy.

Bell died mysteriously three years later and a vial containing poison was found near his body. For some reason, the weird animal seemed especially frightening to me and I find myself looking out into our woods to make sure there’s nothing there.

I suppose life is full of real scary things, like layoffs, newly discovered lumps, registered letters or grown-up children threatening to come back home. While we always hope to dodge these realistic frights, Halloween is a time when people consciously seek out scary experiences as a form of entertainment.

In addition to wearing scary costumes, reading frightening books and watching horror movies, the National Retail Federation predicts that 23 percent of Americans will also visit haunted houses this Halloween season.

According to the Los Angeles Times, the horror film “Paranormal Activity 3” topped the box-office

competition last weekend, beating out action movies, comedies and even doing better than favorites like “The Lion King 3-D.”

Americans also plan to spend \$6.9 billion this year on Halloween activities, costumes, decorations and candy. Martha White, a financial writer from the Moneyland website, says that troubled economic times usually lead to an increased interest in escapism. She points out that the sale of romance novels increased during the last recession and elaborate Hollywood musicals were popular during the Great Depression.

In 2008, Michigan cardiologist Nathan Foster attempted to quantify Halloween fear by measuring the blood pressure and heart rate of people waiting in line to get into a Detroit haunted-house attraction. Everyone in line was technically hypertensive at the time. After going through the attraction, participants’ heart rates increased from an average of 60 to 70 beats per minute, well into the aerobic range of 150 to 160 beats per minute. This is similar to what is seen in vigorous exercise. Some believe that in rare cases this could be sufficient to cause a myocardial infarction that resulted in death.

Traditionally, there have been two theories to account for why we voluntarily submit ourselves to frightening situations. The first asserts that since people know these are staged events, they are not actually afraid, but instead are just excited. The second theory holds that people are willing to submit themselves to scary situations, mainly to enjoy the sense of relief that occurs at the end of the ordeal. It’s a negative reinforcement model, sort of like the apocryphal story of the man hitting himself on the head with a hammer. When asked why he did it, he said, “Because it felt so good when I stopped.”

In an article in the 2007 Journal of Consumer Research, Eduardo Andrade from the University of California and Joel B. Cohen from the University of Florida challenged both theories and asserted that contrary to conventional wisdom, people are able to experience both positive and negative emotions simultaneously. They posit that people may actually enjoy the feeling of being scared, not just the relief that follows.

Mark Cristal, a neuroscientist at the University at Buffalo says that from an evolutionary perspective, fear is adaptive. He says, “It’s like pain. We may consider it negative, but it serves a very important function, and that is to mobilize us when confronted by danger and threat.”

Fear is the primary emotion we experience when our body prepares to use its resources for “flight or fight” by flooding itself with hormones. These biochemical changes create a heightened sense of awareness, which is adaptive in emergent situations. For many people, this arousal can be quite pleasurable and become addictive, as they begin to seek extreme experiences to recreate the effects of the stimulation.

It’s all about control, according to psychologist Susan Putnam, from Canisius College in New York State. She says, “You can turn off a scary movie or get up and leave. That’s where the enjoyment of Halloween comes in. It’s a controlled experience.”

Most people seek experiences that are scary, but essentially harmless so they can enjoy the thrill from the physiological response. Dr. Paula Franklin of Bupa Healthcare in the United Kingdom says, “A celebration like Halloween, when scary situations are controlled — or not real — is the perfect opportunity for us to enjoy being afraid, safe in the knowledge that we will come to no real harm.”

According to psychology professor Jack Mayer, from the University of New Hampshire, there is another reason people seek frightening situations. He says it “is out of a sense of curiosity and a desire to better manage their own emotions ... Halloween’s scary events allow people to play with their reactions to threat, to learn about those reactions and to come up with creative responses to them.”

However, if you want to experience something really terrifying, you can always do what my wife Diane and I did last week — see a retirement planner.

— *Terry L. Stawar, Ed.D., lives in Georgetown and is the CEO of LifeSpring the local community mental health center in Jeffersonville. He can be reached at tstawar@lifespr.com. Check out his *Welcome to Planet-Terry* blog and podcast at www.planetterry.wordpress.com.*