



THIS QUARANTINE PERIOD

By Kalpana Mohan

It's not something I discuss now that I've transcended even menopause but there was a time during daily life in our home in India when, every month, I was "quarantined" for three days. In some orthodox Hindu families in south India, if you were menstruating, you stayed home for the entire time and were relegated to a specific part of the home. By the time I came "of age", some of the restrictions were relaxed owing to the exigencies of modern life.

I found the quarantine limiting—and embarrassing. I fussed and demanded leniency but my parents' rules didn't change as long as they lived. I mingled freely when I was outside the house although when I was inside our home I couldn't enter the kitchen or linger within ten feet of the prayer alcove. There were many other social distancing measures in place inside our four walls for the duration of those three days and nights. I had my own quarantine plate and cup. On the morning of the fourth day of my period, after an early morning shower during which I washed my clothes and all my bedclothes, I was considered clean and "touchable" again.

You can see why these recent "social distancing" diktats have taken me back to the monthly quarantines of my early life. I was never given a logical explanation for those

monthly distancing rules but one of the things I was told was that women were particularly vulnerable at the time of menstruation. They could not do housework or heavy lifting of any sort. As far as I was concerned, that was likely relevant to the early part of the 20th century and before that, but how did that apply to me when I, as a teen, had very few chores around the house? In any event, I just obeyed the rules of our house. It was a short "quarantine", after all, and I tried to enjoy being left alone.

Recently, I came upon a fascinating paper analyzing the history of quarantine. The word originates from the Italian "quaranta," meaning 40, and it "was adopted as an obligatory means of separating persons, animals, and goods that may have been exposed to a contagious disease," according to Eugenia Tognotti whose paper culls out lessons from quarantines through history.

I learned that the notion of a quarantine was first introduced in 1377 in Dubrovnik, for many centuries one of the largest cultural centers in Croatia and a major trading center on the Dalmatian coast. It laid down the law for all ships suspected of harboring the bubonic plague which had decimated a third of the European continent's population in those times. Ships had to wait 30 days (trentino) before any passengers or goods could come ashore and in some cases, this waiting period was extended by another ten days. As part of this post, I've shared an 18th-century watercolor painting that depicts quarantine activities at the port of Dubrovnik. A friend sent a picture from her recent trip to Dubrovnik and you can see the fortifications and the walkway leading to the keep of the castle in that picture too.

Typically, ports had “lazarettos” that were buildings used to isolate ship passengers and crew who had or were suspected of suffering from the plague. Merchandise from ships was unloaded to designated buildings. To create a barrier between a city and these buildings, they would often be separated by a moat or a wall. I read that these buildings had a doctor, a barber, a gravedigger, all “essential workers”, I suppose, who watched over these people. Tognotti’s paper talks about how certain objects—wool, yarn, cloth, leather, wigs, and blankets—were considered the products most likely to transmit disease and so there was an elaborate treatment of goods to ward off all disease.

It’s so very easy to forget that there was a time in the life of this earth when people traveled long distances by sea, especially now in this day of air travel when we pack 3000 miles into five to six hours. In February and March, we watched with horror as countries made cruise liners float around in the water for days. We couldn’t understand the viciousness of leaders who dithered.

Upon reading some of these historical reflections, however, I realize how we cannot make any of these decisions without reflection and deliberation. This also brings me to the nonchalance of the recent decision to not support the World Health Organization (WHO). In 1829, a major worldwide outbreak of cholera ultimately led to a series of international conferences on sanitation to standardize international quarantine regulations against the spread of cholera, plague, and yellow fever. These meetings would ultimately lead to the formation of the WHO in 1948.

When I read about the terrors of these medieval times and just how far we've come to eradicate disease, I'm appalled at the inconsistency of our leadership in the United States and the mixed signals regarding social distancing measures. I worry also about how many deaths will be directly linked to flouting the rules.

I go back to my own childhood when for entirely different reasons, I didn't rebel against the orders of the high command; I just followed the philistine practices in our home out of respect to my parents, however, outmoded their beliefs. Our home overflowed with visiting elders, many of whom were more orthodox and hidebound than my parents, and I suppose I just wanted to keep the peace and not alter the equilibrium.

