

DYING IS A NEW EXPERIENCE?

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Dying is not a new experience for me; I have been at death's door twice and now at 88 years old it will soon be three strikes and you're out.

My grandfather was a refugee. He ran away from his village in Russia to escape having to serve in the Tsar's army, swam alone across the Dnieper river, made his way across the European continent, and ended in London. My father was born there, but they had to leave London because the police were after my grandfather who had joined the mafia in London, so they came here. When he was an old man he developed a kidney infection and was hospitalized. He knew death was coming so one day in his hospital gown he climbed out the window and groped his way down the outdoor fire escape ladders until he came to the ground. He took a trolley and went home, where soon after he suffered a heart attack and died. And all my uncles and male cousins on both sides of the family died of heart trouble, as did my mother, grandmothers, and many aunts.

So it is no surprise that 29 years ago in my 60's I had open heart surgery; five coronary artery bypasses and an artificial aortic valve. My recovery was very stormy, necessitating many near death ambulance trips to the emergency room for arrhythmias, and I finally ended up with chronic atrial fibrillation. This means I have been on coumadin for 29 years, with innumerable finger pricks to check the INR, spontaneous bleeds and once, when I was hit by a car while on my bicycle, a massive bleed into the leg that took months to resolve. During the emergency room visits and repeated hospitalizations I was at times close to death and I have described my experiences of it in my recent book of memoirs: *Apologia Pro Vita Mea: An Intellectual Odyssey*, published by Routledge in London and also available on Amazon. This was my 18th

and last book. I stubbornly persisted in regaining my health, although the surgery left me a total physical wreck; I even inscribed my tombstone at the family burial plot. A kind of stubborn Kleinian manic denial but I did recover and continued my full time practice and teaching.

That was perhaps a good thing because two months ago I had another near death experience. I have a lot of arthritis now and am a hiker and biker and taker of long walks so I was trying to reduce the pain with various NSAID's including aspirin. I narcissistically thought that amount of aspirin would not get me in trouble but it set off a massive gastrointestinal bleed and my hemoglobin dropped from 12 to 7. I was hospitalized and transfused and for a few days could do nothing but lie in bed and look at the ceiling, perhaps waiting for the end. I kept thinking of that wonderful scene in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* where Prince Andrew is badly wounded on the battlefield at Austerlitz, covered with blood:

“What is this? Am I falling? My legs are giving way,” thought he, and he fell on his back. Above him there was nothing but the sky – the lofty sky...with grey clouds gliding slowly across it. “How quiet, peaceful and solemn...not as we ran, shouting and fighting. . . how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? How happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky*.

How different the world appears as you move towards death, how foolish the quarreling and scrapping and narcissistic clashes, ambitions, insults and retaliations, and chasing after money and fame suddenly appears.

For a couple of days I lay there with this going through my head, almost visual hallucinations of what it must have been like for Prince Andrew. Then in came the doctors. Few of them bothered to even introduce themselves and they were from all kinds of consultations. Finally the gastroenterologists appeared. They decided I had diverticulitis and wanted to gastroscop me and do a colonoscopy. I stubbornly insisted that they were wrong and that this episode was from aspirin combined with coumadin. I stubbornly insisted that they wait two days more, during which I would eat nothing, even though I had a mild case of diabetes 2. So for two days we were at a standoff and by the time it was over the bleeding had stopped. I was discharged and have gradually recovered my strength and energy yet again.

All because of stubborn adherence to what I believed was correct, like I stubbornly marched against the Viet Nam war. Where did this refusal to back down and collapse come from? I believe tenacity and love of life is built into the infant by archaic selfobject experiences that constitute the basis of the ego from early in life. These archaic selfobject experiences form a rock on which the vicissitudes of life smash themselves over and over. If they are not there, the ego crumbles and, since it is primarily a psychosomatic ego, it shatters. I would like to go on with the psychoanalytic aspects of this in detail some day if, like Ishmael, I live to tell the story.

*Maude translation, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942, pp.301-2.