

Thanks for trying out Immersive Reader. Share your feedback with us.  



On My Mind: A newfound awareness of death



“Charlie, you have had several near-death experiences. When that happens, you come back reborn. You are a different person. You need to re-establish your roots, and that takes nurturance and time. Go easy on yourself; take time to be with nature, to get to know yourself again, and to do nothing,” a wise, spiritual friend recently told me.

It’s been nearly three months since I went through a serious medical ordeal (see bit.ly/hospitalpatient), and I’m finding that my perspective on many things has changed in surprising and sometimes confusing ways. At least for now, I have lost interest in travel, restaurants, and big parties. I am suddenly reluctant to leave home, and crowd-avoidant. I am less likely to dive off a dock with carefree abandon, and I’m hesitant to run or sprint. Until recently, I thought that I had lost my drive to write these columns or anything else.

A part of me wonders whether, at 64, I am turning into an old man. But curiously, at the same time, I find myself feeling more energetic both physically and emotionally. I am more grateful than I can easily say for my body that now feels like it is returning to its old self. I am eager to hike and bike, and I feel lighter and physically fit. I find it easy to love, have a deeper compassion for people who are suffering, and value my work more than ever. And yet, sometimes it feels as though a different person is inhabiting my body.

When I told my 27-year-old daughter about this, she said, “I know I haven’t been through what you have, but what you’re feeling — that sense of being a different person — is exactly what I’ve been feeling. Same with my friends.”

As we talked, we wondered whether, in the setting of the pandemic, we are all having a near-death experience and being reborn, wondering who we are in this new incarnation, and needing to re-establish our roots. My daughter noted that “for decades, people like me have been shielded from the constant awareness that sudden death is a possibility. Before COVID, it never occurred to me how easily I could get sick and die.” Whereas much of the world’s population (including in this country) has long been aware that we humans live on a short bridge between the present and the end of our

lives, privileged Americans who have not experienced serious illness and loss have perhaps been less aware. Now, my daughter points out, even those who previously felt sheltered are confronted not only with the looming risk of COVID, but also with massive forest fires, rising seas, mass extinctions, degraded air and water, and racial and political tensions. Our lives feel more tenuous.

It would be nice to be able to live under the illusion that we are safe, that death will always be far off, and that we know exactly what tomorrow will bring. But if this were ever truly possible, it is less so now. Perhaps the loss of this illusion weighs more heavily on teens and people in their 20s, and others whose course in life is less predictable, than on people who feel relatively well-established in their careers and routines. And maybe that's why, since the outset of the pandemic, depression and anxiety have burgeoned, particularly among younger people.

The denial of death and the illusion of certainty is sometimes a helpful coping strategy: it is difficult to go through life constantly confronting our vulnerability and mortality. Sometimes I envy people who don't believe in the reality of climate change, the risk of COVID, or the need for vaccines both to protect our own health and to reduce our risk of spreading the virus to others. I too find comfort in the denial of death, and in the idea that I and the people I love are immune to risk. Yet, having recently survived a couple of near-death experiences, I am finding at this point in my recovery that there is something invigorating about the awareness that life is tenuous. That awareness has opened me up to a stunning gratitude for the here and now, for each moment of life, love, and beauty. I also feel an increased sense of clarity as I plan for the future. Going forward, for example, I want to make sure I spend as much meaningful time as possible with my family and my closest friends.

My brushes with death occurred in the setting of a serious heart arrhythmia, followed by complications of a procedure that went awry and took me back to the hospital. This was followed by a few months of recovery time before I began to feel that I was back in my normally healthy body. At one point, my wonderful cardiologist, Dr. Aliya Browne at MVH, told me, "You will return to normal. It will be a new normal. You may feel like your old self, or better, or worse, but it will feel normal."

In studies of people who have faced tragedies such as the loss of a limb or a loved one, there is an initial period of grief, but by a year later, people generally have returned to their baseline moods. Dr. Browne's advice is probably good advice for all of us as we find ourselves reborn into lives that none of us would have predicted two years ago. Unexpected events like health scares and pandemics can rupture the foundations of our sense of who we are. Having paid our tuition to the school of life, we may as well benefit from the lessons that shake up our existences. For me, one of the biggest lessons is to take time to allow myself to create new roots.

The idea that I, and perhaps others as well, am experiencing a rebirth of sorts makes intuitive sense. I am certainly not the same person psychically or physically that I was before my medical ordeal. Perhaps none of us are the people we were before the pandemic. My friend's advice resonates: if you're not currently in crisis, take it easy. Be curious about how your story has changed. Give yourself time to settle into the new you. Relax into your new normal.

Dr. Charles Silberstein is a psychiatrist at Martha's Vineyard Hospital and Island Counseling Center, where he is the medical director. He is board-certified in general, addiction, and geriatric psychiatry. He writes regularly about issues Islanders have with mental health.

Laura Roosevelt is a poet and journalist who writes regularly for Arts & Ideas magazine and Edible Vineyard. She currently curates the MV Times Poets Corner.

