

Navigating the Unfamiliar

Category: Healing

written by Lisa J. Hardy | March 17, 2021

The scar from my appendectomy is now over my heart. Last January I traveled to have surgery that I hoped would put me back together again. "You'll love it," said the leader of an online group that housed no pictures of what people look like after.

"Deep Inferior Epigastric Perforator" surgery is a reconstructive procedure involving the removal, replacement and rerouting of parts. A thick layer of my midsection was rolled back like a weighted blanket and cut to be relocated above. A surgeon scraped bone off and moved an artery from one place to another. Now my lymphatic capillaries and sliced nerves are trying to regenerate. Ends are trying to find each other again.

I didn't get my body back. I don't love it. I don't love winding scars where everything got put back together. But they're mine, and I'm alive.

Days after the surgery, I stood on the deck of a hotel talking to a friend. Headlines rolled about a faraway virus. We thought it might be extreme to worry though we both, having been through life-threatening illness, knew far-fetched fears have possibility. "Watch, it will be a pandemic," we laughed. Sort of. On the flight home, I wore a mask. The woman next to me did the same. We joked about our paranoia while maniacally wiping down seats and tray tables and settled in.

A few weeks later, I launched a writing project on the pandemic. I listened to hours of interviews. From stories of the first days, when people yelled at one another in grocery stores, to the dark winter of uncertainty and tales of illness and funerals online.

The first phase of healing was long, and my body is only now familiar. One year later bulbs are waking, and birds are nesting after a long winter. Everything is rearranged.

People are, albeit unequally, obtaining vaccines. Interviewees wonder what comes next. Many proceed with trepidation toward plans-to-make-plans for small gatherings and quick hugs.

I talk with long haulers whose bodies work differently now. Symptoms are unpredictable and unfamiliar. People ask, "What was your first symptom?" and "Is it normal to have visual hallucinations?" A sniffly nose becomes a fearful event.

Things are different after relentless loss.

Vessels reach out to connect. Severed nerves grow slowly. Only a millimeter per day. Lymphatic systems reconfigure themselves differently, finding new paths. Healing takes time.

No one knows what the end will entail, or if there will be one, but healing feels close, though everything will be different. Many are lost. And still, here we are, alive.

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