

Unsuspected Symphony

Category: Stories

written by Jeremiah Horrigan | April 8, 2013

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No one goes to a hospital to heal. They go because they must—as I did three years ago, when a one-hour colonoscopy turned into a four-day surgical sleepover.

My grandfather had warned me long ago against hospitals. “You don’t want to go there,” he said. “That’s where the sick people are.” Pop died at the age of ninety-four, at home.

His warning came strongly to mind as I walked into the place that I’ve come to call HospitalWorld. Silently, I replied: *Hospitals are where the sick people are, all right. They’re also where the doctor people are. I have no choice.*

I was fifty-nine years old, and, after years of foot-dragging, this would be my first colonoscopy.

I was not a particularly healthy specimen—a good twenty-five pounds overweight, living the helter-skelter, stress-ridden life of a newspaper reporter. Nevertheless, I harbored a teenager’s blind belief in his own immortality. Since I’d shown no symptoms of disease, I fully expected to make it home for dinner.

But fate intervened. No sooner had I emerged from sedation than my gastroenterologist leaned over my hospital bed and told me he’d found a “mass” during his inspection.

Oh? Still groggy, I looked over at my wife, who was standing near the foot of the bed, as if to ask, “What’s this guy getting at?”

Before she could answer, the doctor spelled it out: dinner this evening would consist of ice chips.

Came the morning, I was back in recovery, having been relieved of two feet of my colon. Five days later, initially positive prognostic indications were confirmed: I received a rating of 2A. There was no sign of spread, and no need for chemo.

The next few days were a blend of gratitude and hunger, the latter induced by the hospital diet.

Unsurprisingly, I dreamed only of escaping. Soon, but not soon enough, I got my wish.

I was discharged one lovely summer’s day, clutching my suddenly too-large

trousers to my waist, intent on healing myself in the best way I knew how: by indulging every dietary whim I'd been denied.

My doctor had told me I had no food restrictions. So upon arriving home, I took a pub-crawl through the pantry and into my past. After the hospital's rubbery Jell-O cubes, it was pure joy to savor the deep-fried, the fat-drenched, the cheese-covered. And if anyone raised an eyebrow, I had a ready answer: "Doctor's orders!"

I hankered most after long-forgotten childhood treats. A glass of cold milk and a graham cracker slathered in summer-warmed butter transported me to a time fifty years gone, when calories didn't count, sunshine didn't cause cancer and sugar was one of the basic food groups.

Suddenly—I don't know if this was the result of my new diet—ordinary things I'd paid little or no attention to all my life sparkled with meaning. They made sense, seemed suddenly alive. I walked around the house smiling like an idiot.

One morning, maybe the second day after my release, I was sitting on the back deck of the house. It was July, and a breeze had sprung up and gotten tangled in my hair, giving me a moment's respite from the baking heat. I leaned back in my chair, cast my eyes upward and noticed how the breeze was playing in the leafy treetops. In that moment, the psychological distance between me and my surroundings vanished. I found myself wondering, *Can trees feel relief? Or maybe even delight? They certainly feel the breeze. Why not pleasure?*

The trees didn't answer, of course. But I wasn't looking for answers. My wonderings, unmoored from the grind of the everyday and habitual, drew me into the depths of a larger picture—one that embraced the natural world but also extended beyond.

This new world captured my senses. The sound of a car passing down the road sounded as musical as birdsong. The matte finish on a ball-point pen, the glint of the ceiling light on a spoon floating in greasy water in the kitchen sink, the smell of laundry detergent wafting up from the basement—all were part of a newfound, unsuspected symphony.

In this symphony, I was both instrument and player, sound and listener, individual and collective. I felt awake to a world that had always been there, but that I couldn't access under ordinary circumstances.

I avoided examining or questioning this enthralling condition, for fear I'd see it dissolve under the microscope of rationality. I knew that I'd been granted not a religious experience but what formal religion often claims for itself: a sense of spiritual wonderment.

Some part of me knew that this new way of being was, esoterically speaking, an old way—perhaps the original way of being. And that same part of me knew it couldn't last.

I knew I'd been granted standing room, not a permanent seat, at Symphony

Hall. Too soon, I'd have to slip back into harness, fettered by duty, responsibility and the need to make a living. I'd have to put on clean clothes, shave, gas up the car and return to the newspaper job I've held for most of two decades.

I resolved to squeeze every last juicy moment from these days. If surgery had indeed saved my life, this was what life was, and why it was worth saving.

Alas, with each passing day, I noticed less and less about the breeze, the trees, even the food. Even as I mourned the passing of those exultant days, I also began to yearn for a return to the ordinary. After all, what was so wrong about shaving my face, getting out of my pajamas, stepping back into ordinary life? My day-to-day groove might actually be a rut, but I longed to get back to the way things had been before I'd been so rudely hospitalized.

As grand as a symphony may be, I realized, I can't spend my entire life listening to one. A life needs contrasts. Heard in the concert hall, Beethoven's Ninth can bring me to tears, but only a few bars of it can sound as sweet if recalled in the midst of ordinary life, while emptying the garbage or tying a shoe.

If it took cancer surgery to allow me to see a more profound and true dimension of life, then here's to HospitalWorld.

I entered it hoping that it would save my body. I left it happy to be alive. And I never expected that it would enable me to experience the extraordinary.

The day I went back to work was the day that my healing came full circle. If all I'm left with today are memories of that unsuspected symphony and my role in it, that's okay. It was a gift. As with any gift, I'm grateful to have received it.

My experience was no hallucination, nor was it imaginary: it was real. And for me, now back amid the routines of ordinary life, the challenge is to remember that and live accordingly.

About the author:

Jeremiah Horrigan is a prize-winning reporter for the Middletown (NY) *Times Herald-Record*. His work has appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times*, *The Miami Herald*, salon.com and Talkingwriting.com, where he is a featured writer. Horrigan has taught feature writing as an adjunct professor at SUNY New Paltz; several of his essays have appeared in national anthologies, including [Woodstock Revisited](#) (Adams Media).

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