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Waking From the Dead

Joe Tiralosi is a married father of two and a New York City chauffeur. At the end of a shift one afternoon in August of 2009, he felt nauseous and warm. He turned the air-conditioning in his limo up but continued to perspire profusely. He tried to push through the rest of the day hoping the ill feeling would pass. But it became unbearable. He called his wife.

"Don't take chances," she said. "Go to the hospital."

But he was unable to drive any further. She called a coworker who found him pulled over at 18th Street and Second Avenue and rushed him to New York Presbyterian Hospital.

As Joe described his symptoms to a nurse, the color drained from his face and he collapsed. His heart stopped beating; his breathing stopped; his reflexes were gone. Joe Tiralosi was dead.

Doctors and nurses raced in from every direction and began CPR. They placed him on a gurney, cut off his pants, tore open his shirt, and attached defibrillator electrodes to his chest. They placed ice bags in his armpits and along side his head and injected his veins with cold saline. His body temperature began to drop.

They did all this in one minute. Then they settled into a steady rhythm of CPR with occasional injections of adrenaline and defibrillator shocks.

After ten minutes, they had no pulse

Ten minutes used to be a dividing line. Without a heartbeat, brain damage from lack of oxygen could become permanent. Without a fully functioning brain, Joe's memories and personality could be altered

or erased. Joe would no longer be Joe – just a body. But the medical team continued rhythmic chest compressions and occasional shocks.

Twenty minutes without a pulse

Medical scientists have been studying what actually happens when we die. It's not a single event whereby we're alive one moment and dead the next. Many physiological processes play out over time. For example, the loss of heartbeats triggers a chemical process in the brain whereby nerve cells start to degenerate and swell. Cooling the body slows this process. This was why they had placed icepacks and injected him with cool saline. These also reduce the brain swelling and allow blood to flow more easily to nourish neural cells.

Thirty minutes

By now, Joe had received thousands of chest compressions and a half-dozen heart shocks. The room resembled a war zone with traces of blood and medical debris around the gurney and empty vials littering the floor. It was up to the doctor in charge to call off the attempts to bring him back. But he kept going.

Forty minutes

Ten years ago, trying to revive him at this stage was considered foolhardy and perhaps unethical. A scan might reveal damaged areas in the brain – black spaces where neural cells once held thoughts and now no longer functioned. But today medical understanding and technology have advanced. So the doctors pressed on.

Forty-five minutes

People have been fully resuscitated after as long as two hours in ideal circumstances. But just because it's been done with a few people didn't mean they'd be able to do it with Joe. His chances were remote. The staff was exhausted and discouraged.

Forty-seven minutes

"I feel a pulse," someone yelled. "I think we've got him back."

Suddenly the cloud of despair was replaced with elation. Joe's heart was flickering.

The emergency was not over. No one knew why his heart had stopped in the first place. Dye was placed in his veins to determine if there were any blockages around his heart. There were. As they investigated, his heart stopped. He was dead again.

Fifteen minutes later they had him back. A common balloon procedure opened the blocked vessels and restored his heart function.

Today Joe Tiralosi is a smiling, vibrant man with a lean, well-groomed mustache and goatee. He is home with his children and wife whose advice had helped save his life. Newspapers and television stations called his recovery a miracle. Like Lazarus rising from the dead or Jesus walking out of his tomb on Easter morning, the story transcends conventional understanding. The fact that Joe's resurrection was administered through advanced medical science made it no less miraculous.

Easter Story

The Easter story tells of a great teacher, Jesus, waking from the dead and walking out of his tomb into the bright morning sun. He was so transformed that two of his closest students didn't recognize him when they encountered him later that day on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus's resurrection from the dead is a cornerstone of traditional Christian metaphysics. This morning I'd like to reflect on this story not as a doctrine but as a metaphor for how we can awaken from spiritual deadness to greater aliveness and wellbeing.

The metaphor suggests most of us are entombed in old habits, conditioned feelings and biological reflexes: we see the world through a cloud of opinions, thoughts, preferences and inclinations. Spiritual traditions around the world use similar metaphors: awakening, enlightenment, breaking out of a trance, being born again, opening our eyes, coming alive.

Two thousand years ago, seekers of life's mysteries consulted priests and rabbis. Today we consult science. So let's consider scientific data on the experience of death and then reflect on how this might encourage us to awaken from metaphorical death to see life with fresh eyes and open hearts.

Resuscitation

Doctor Sam Parnia specializes in resuscitation medicine: bringing people back to life or medical resurrection, if you will. His book, *Erasing Death*, draws from over 500 cases including Joe Tiralosi.¹

Earlier works on near death experiences didn't distinguish between someone who almost died and someone who actually died and came back. All of Parnia's cases met the scientific criteria for death: no heartbeat, breath, or brain function. These stories are more cogent and less varied.

About 20% of resuscitated people report some memory of the time they were

¹ Sam Parnia, *Erasing Death: The Science That Is Rewriting the Boundaries Between Life and Death*. HarperOne, February 26, 2013, Kindle Edition. Pages 1-5

dead. Their stories fit into a common pattern though the details vary and not everyone reports all aspects of the pattern.

Love and Wellbeing

Joe Tiralosi reported just one aspect: meeting a luminous, compassionate being who gave him comfort and love. Joe struggled to find words to describe it because it had no mass or shape – just a presence. He said the experience showed him what it was like to be “on the other side.” He no longer feared death.

Whatever this being or feeling was, it transformed him. Years later, he was still lighter, happier, and more present.

This is remarkable because most people who have a brush with death or die and come back with no memory are traumatized or emotionally fragile. But those with memory have a serenity and gentle fearlessness that permeates their countenance.

My body has not missed a heartbeat in 65 years. Yet, in deep meditation when the senses fall away, I don't find this emptiness to be a deep, dark, arctic void. Rather it is filled with warmth, kindness and intelligence that is impersonal yet intimate. Mystics around the world describe this phenomenon. And so do most people who recall death.

The experience is ineffable so people use whatever language and concepts they have. A sincere Christian may describe meeting Jesus. A Hindu may meet Ram or a guru. One young child described a “nice lady” who held his hand. Years later when he saw a photo of his grandmother for the first time, he said, “that’s the nice lady!” Joe Tiralosi described overwhelming warmth that showed him death was absolutely safe.

Out of Body

Another common death memory is separating from the body: patients describe

looking at their bodies from the foot of the bed or from the ceiling. They may report conversations amongst the medical team or relatives in the waiting room down the hall. These reports can be detailed and verifiable.

For example, one man died on the operating table. The cardiac emergency team rushed in, including a nurse who put a tube down his throat. In the process she knocked his dentures loose. She placed them in the second drawer beneath him for safekeeping. She left the room before he woke up.

Two days later she went into his room as part of her nursing duties. He said, “You were in the operating room.” She was skeptical he knew because no one had told him she was there. “Yes,” he insisted, “You put my choppers in that second drawer down.” From where his body was lying, he would not have been able to see where she had put them.

Other Aspects

Other reported phenomena include life review, light, tunnel, barrier beyond which there is no return, and so forth. Perhaps we can look at these some other Sunday. The luminous presence and out of body perception give enough to consider on one Easter morning.

Mind/Psyche as a Smart Phone

The reports of the luminous presence are phenomenologically real – they’re reported by many people. We have no scientific way of discerning if they’re a hallucination or a literal description of reality.

But the reports of seeing dentures removed and other events occurring while the patient was dead are often verifiable. The accuracy of these reports raises fascinating questions.

The physiological apparatus that sees, hears, feels, and stores memories was off

line when the dentures were removed. Current science has no way to explain how such memories could be recorded without a functioning brain. But we have a growing body of verified reports.

They suggest that the mind or psyche may exist apart from the body.

The materialist model of the mind says the body generates consciousness: it is the subjective by-product of biological processes. When the body dies, so does consciousness.

However, out of body experiences suggest the body does not generate the mind or psyche like a movie projector but receives it like a smart phone. Our physiology receives consciousness signals and shapes them according to our biological hardware and software. When a phone is turned off or broken, the signal is still there. When the brain flat-lines, there is still something that can see, hear, and record memories. We have something like a soul that functions even when the body doesn't.

Turning Off Biology

Let's take this a step further.

Evolutionary selection has bred into us emotions that help the body survive and reproduce: emotions like fear of death, fear of harm, sexual urge, hunger, and more.

Everyone we see in this room has one of these living bodies. What if we could turn down our biologically wired emotions like territoriality, anger, and anxiety? I don't mean turn off all our biology. We'd still have eyes that see, ears that hear, tongues that taste, bodies that feel. But what if sensory data was no longer filtered and shaped by desire, greed, fear, sexuality, aversion, envy, urge to control, or other dense emotions.

The evidence from people who remember a death experience is that without a body, life feels safer, kinder,

more luminous and loving. They came back feeling gentler, happier, and more generous, grateful, and serene. They were less preoccupied by me, mine, and "what I want." The death experience was so real and profound that it stayed with them for years, more or less permanently changing their attitude toward life.

Throughout the ages saints and spiritual adepts have used the stillness of deep meditation or surrender of prayer to step away from body-based emotions. We might imagine this as a kind of dying. But, like those with death experiences, they describe it as a kind of waking from the dead, arising from a sleep and becoming truly alive for the first time.

It's hard to describe this. So people have used whatever concepts they had. The little boy talked about death as "a nice lady holding my hand." Two thousand years ago people described Jesus waking from the dead, being surrounded by luminous presences called angels, and being so different as to be hardly recognizable on the road to Emmaus.

Perhaps Easter's resurrection story was not meant to be a doctrine to be believed literally but a metaphor to encourage us to relax, wake up, and be transformed into a luminous presence. Perhaps. And perhaps not.

Implications

Whatever the case, on this Easter morning, let me offer two suggestions:

Relax

Knowing that our biological fight or flight neural circuits are roused by stress and overstimulation, let's value simple relaxation and rest. It brings out our higher capacities.

Because of the nature of consciousness itself, we have the capacity to live well, live fully, and live immersed in love and kindness. The higher, deeper, more

peaceful consciousness suggested by death experiences is actually with us all the time. The signal is there. But it is soft and easily drown out by denser body-based emotions.

We don't actually have to stop our hearts, respiration and brain function to sensitize ourselves to the quieter awareness. But we do have to relax some of that biology. Simple rest and relaxation help: letting things be for a time.

Presence

The second thing we can do is to be more present. Our neural circuitry tunes us into things that are attractive or threatening and it ignores everything else. Each moment we're bathed with a vast amount of data irrelevant to our biological survival: the beauty of a flower, the colors of a sunset, the cool air on our skin. We can ignore 99% of what's happening around us, particularly when we're stressed.

But we have the capacity to be more present. We can stop, open our awareness, and notice things around us that we pass over lightly.

During a retreat of our Spiritual Grounding for Leadership program last year, one member guided us in a simple exercise in a backyard: find an object in nature and be with it for ten minutes.

I stopped in front of a large bush to look at the leaves. As my attention calmed I saw more and more detail. There were tiny filaments on the underside of the leaves. A spider smaller than an eyelash moved through these filaments like they were a huge forest. Part of the leaf was missing: ragged bite-marks hinted a giant creature the size of my little toenail had eaten a chunk and moved on.

I was taken into this vast world. Leaving it behind and returning to the conventional world of the backyard, I saw it anew.

We don't have to fly to the moon to get a fresh perspective. The underside of a leaf, a little backwater on the edge of a river, fully taking in a squirrel sleeping in the sun, can awaken senses that have been dulled. We just allow our preconceptions and habitual responses to relax so we are like a small child filled with the wonder of a brand new world.

During a walking meditation on a retreat here a month ago, one of our members came upon a flower. He was so captivated by its beauty he couldn't even remember its name. And didn't care.

We can't do this all the time. We have schedules to make, appointments to keep, TV to watch, news to digest, errands to run. But we could do it a few times a day: step out of our habits and let ourselves be surprised for a few minutes.

Contemplation

Along these lines I'd like to close with a six-minute video. The words are from the Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindler-Rast, who has inspired me often over the years. A little girl introduces his words. The entire piece is a contemplative prayer.

To prepare yourself for prayer, I invite you to wiggle for a moment. Now close your eyes as you are comfortable or let them rest.

Relax.

Let your body soften. Let your mind release. Let your emotions float gently in the background. Smile.

Allow tension and stress to drain away with each out breath. You can sigh if you like: "Ah."

Invite ease to fill you with each in breath.

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Now imagine you are an explorer traveling to faraway worlds. You can't move your body to distant stars. But for short periods you can

send your awareness into beings whom you have never known.

Your consciousness is now in a new species whose body, senses, and feelings you now experience. Imagine that you've never before have you felt these sensations. It's all new: the sensations at the bottom of your feet; the movements of the breath; flickers of thoughts and memories; the sounds from around the room; the tingle on your skin; all these are brand new.

Savor them. Be with them. Cherish them. Be like a newborn. You know they will soon fade. So savor everything.

...

Now open our eyes and ears

...

A Good Day by Brother David Steindl-Rast²

You think this is just another day in your life. It's not just another day; it's the one day that is given to you today. It's given to you. It's a gift. It's the only gift that you have right now, and the only appropriate response is gratefulness. If you do nothing else but to cultivate that response to the great gift that this unique day is, if you learn to respond as if it were the first day of your life, and the very last day, then you will have spent this day very well.

Begin by opening your eyes and be surprised that you have eyes you can open, that incredible array of colors that is constantly offered to us for pure enjoyment. Look at the sky. We so rarely look at the sky. We so rarely note how different it is from moment to moment with clouds coming and going. We just think of the weather, and even of the weather we don't think of all the many nuances of weather. We just think of good weather and bad weather. This day right now has unique

weather, maybe a kind that will never exactly in that form come again. The formation of clouds in the sky will never be the same that it is right now. Open your eyes. Look at that.

Look at the faces of people that you meet. Each one has an incredible story behind their face, a story that you could never fully fathom, not only their own story, but the story of their ancestors. We all go back so far. And in this present moment on this day all the people you meet, all that life from generations and from so many places all over the world, flows together and meets you here like a life-giving water, if you only open your heart and drink.

Open your heart to the incredible gifts that civilization gives to us. You flip a switch and there is electric light. You turn a faucet and there is warm water and cold water – and drinkable water. It's a gift that millions and millions in the world will never experience.

So these are just a few of an enormous number of gifts to which you can open your heart. And so I wish for you that you would open your heart to all these blessings and let them flow through you, that everyone whom you will meet on this day will be blessed by you; just by your eyes, by your smile, by your touch – just by your presence. Let the gratefulness overflow into blessing all around you, and then it will really be a good day.

Closing

In the Auguries of Innocence, William Blake wrote:

*To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.*

Happy Easter

² A text and video version can be found at <http://www.gratefulness.org/brotherdavid/a-good-day.htm>