FROM THE HEART

Reflections on a Posthumous Existence

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I got an 8 AM call from the hospital: all my cultures were positive for *Staphylococcus aureus*. I told my wife, "Honey, I'm in big trouble!" and indeed I was. I'd had a transaortic valve replacement a year before, and as a retired cardiologist, I knew the dire implications of *Staphylococcus* endocarditis on a prosthetic aortic valve.

My son had taken me to the emergency department the night before with fever (temperature as high as 104 °F) and chills. It was flu season, and the physician thought I might have influenza or COVID-19 infection. But a physician friend, who knew about my prosthetic aortic valve and my fever and chills, had told my son to be sure they got blood cultures. In my fever-altered mental state, I might not have asked. My friend was so right. He also said I'd be in the hospital for a month. And he was so right about that, too.

We immediately returned to the hospital where I was admitted—and where I stayed for the next 40 days. I was very ill. A transesophageal echocardiogram showed that my prosthetic valve was almost completely occluded with vegetations. I was thrombocytopenic, I had septic emboli to both cerebral hemispheres, and I had a small subarachnoid bleed. I needed urgent valve replacement, but the neurologist caring for me recommended delaying surgery for weeks. However, my thoracic surgeon said we could not wait: "You will die if we don't operate." "You might die if we do operate," was what I heard. So they operated. They replaced my infected prosthetic valve, scraping out an abscess from my left ventricle, reconstructing my aortic root, and reimplanting my coronary arteries. My operative report said that after I came off bypass, I had a "tremendous coagulopathy" that lasted for 2 hours. In the ensuing weeks I had a gastrointestinal bleed, acute tubular necrosis, atrial fibrillation, and ventricular tachycardia.

But I recovered.

Now, 3 months after my surgery, my mind is drawn to a comment by the poet John Keats. Less than 2 months before his death from tuberculous, in his last extant letter, he wrote "I have a habitual feeling of my real life having been past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence."[1(p376)]

Keats' situation was different from mine. The year before he wrote that after a long ride on a cold winter day, he coughed up blood. He examined it, and trained as a physician, said, "I know the colour [*sic*] of that blood; it is arterial blood; I cannot be deceived by that colour [*sic*]; that drop of blood is my death-warrant; I must die."[2(p64)] He knew he had consumption (tuberculosis), and tuberculosis was incurable in 1820.

Keats lives a posthumous existence through his poems. I won't live on in the minds of millions. Neither did I say, as Keats did, "I must die," as my condition was not incurable. But the possibility of a catastrophe was exponentially higher than it had been the day before I became ill, and I had stared death in the face for the 7 days before surgery. These days as I work to regain function, I often think, "I could be dead. I could be posthumous."

And then I wonder, what am I to do with this posthumous life that I have been granted? Obviously, remain grateful for every day, every hour I'm alive. But beyond that? Get the Porsche I've always dreamed of? Buy the condominium at the beach with an ocean view? Or, more seriously, supervise medical students at the local free clinic? Oversee a problem-based learning class at the medical school at which I worked for more than 30 years? Volunteer at the local hospice and sit with dying patients?

Some of my friends tell me that I have been spared. Sparing suggests to me that some sentient force paid special attention to me. I'm not sure. In fact, I'm not sure I'd want to be associated with such a force anyway—not one that would spare me but not the 3-year-old with a brain tumor or the young father of 3 with metastatic colon cancer. Yes, I have been spared but by the expertise of the physicians and nurses caring for me. And by the luck of the draw.

No matter what sparing means, I wake every morning, ever so grateful to be alive. And it's different from 6 months ago. Rationally or not, I feel that I have been granted additional time. But then I think: how many other potentially deadly events have I dodged unaware? What about the patch of black ice on the curve of Route 23 that I missed last night driving home at 65 mph? What about the cancer cells that perhaps arose in my pancreas when I was 50 years old, cells that were destroyed by neutrophils before they could multiply? And on that flight to Los Angeles last year—the flock of starlings that missed the jet intake by a foot—maybe the pilots were aware, but none of the passengers had a clue. All are sparings of which I am not aware, real sparings for which I don't even know to be grateful, sparings that do not cause me to examine my life—these make me wonder what to do now.

We all lead a kind of posthumous existence. Maybe we all would do well to ponder the words of another poet, Mary Oliver, who wrote in "The Summer Day," "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"[3(p89)]

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1. Keats J. *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*. Colvin S, ed. Macmillan; 1928.
2. Brown CA. *Life of John Keats*. Oxford University Press; 1937.
3. Oliver M. *House of Light*. Beacon Press; 1990.

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