

**“Most persons have died before they expire — died to all earthly longings, so that the last breath is only, as it were, the locking of the door of the already deserted mansion.”**

- OLIVER WENDEL HOLMES SR

**I**S THERE AN INNER “DEATH,” AS THIS HAUNTING IMAGE ASSERTS, THAT OCCURS WELL BEFORE THE OUTER ONE?

Is it avoidable? This same 19th century American poet created another memorable image--the legend of the “incredible one-horse shay.” It was a kind of carriage, put together in this case so magically that each single part of it lasted exactly one hundred years. At that point, they all failed simultaneously and the thing fell apart. Both these themes have a lot to do with my own approach to vitality and the process of aging.

But who am I to speak to you about this? Well, today, as I write this, I turned 63. Most people take me for “fifty-ish.” I could easily keep three bodies busy with what excites me--a steady, increasingly enjoyable stream of things to explore, create, resolve, or heal. I am not a Pollyanna, and these are not glib, superficial remarks. In fact, I have spent decades healing damage received in my family of birth. But somehow, in this long, sometimes meandering, often confusing recovery--I seem to have gotten at least some essential things nearly right. So what might those things be? If I am, on the whole, more vital now than in my early thirties (when I was closest to that “inner death”)--how did that come to be?

Let’s start with the miraculous carriage. The body I walk around in is a colossal community of colonies of mutually supportive living beings. My goal is that they should all pretty much exhaust themselves around the same time. No sense having a stomach good for another fifty years if the heart and lungs have given up the ghost. On this basis, I direct load and stress to the stronger of these colonies. Lets wear them out faster, and preserve the weaker longer. What this might mean to you--well, that’s your homework. But for me, for instance, it means left-leg really shelters right-leg, because right-leg has so many old athletic injuries. And if I



## Dancing to the Edge of Death

### VITALITY AS YOU AGE

by Cougar (Michael Reddy, Ph.D.)

were unable to be without vices, then I would be more tolerant towards those that stressed, say, stomach than those hard on lungs--because stomach seems invincible, whereas lungs are bit fragile.

But the carriage metaphor only takes us so far. Unlike axel and wheel, there’s also a sense in which our human sub-systems build strength through use. Sitting, driving, eating, viewing, talking, and typing--the primary activities these days--do nothing for the musculoskeletal system. The older I get, the more meaning “use it or lose it” has for me. I used to work out for sports. Now I work out for life (yoga, weights, and light aerobics). Life is my new sport. And while the pace is slower (“do less more often,” and “push harder only when it feels good”), still--no wallowing. Every system works to its comfortable limits.

Right-leg can’t run anymore? Sad, really, scary too (I **am** going to die...)--but that’s no excuse not to walk a lot. And guess what... After the grief and several years of walk-a-lot, we found a very springy treadmill, and right-leg **could** run again on it. But if

we hadn’t kept on walking in the interim, both right-leg and left-leg might not have been able.

[As to food, yes, it’s important. But sorry, no space here. Read Marc David, **Nourishing Wisdom**. It’s the ultimate mind-body-spirit approach to diet. Also, **Gut Wisdom**, by Alice Sorokie is great if you have any digestive issues at all.]

Of this body, this community of colonies of living beings, I am the primary companion, healer, and lover--because their entire existence is pledged to my earthwalk. Outsiders (friends and alternative healers, primarily) may help, but it is profoundly my responsibility. Most conventional medicine I avoid “like the plague,” because its purpose is to discover, and, increasingly, **induce** disease for profit (“turn off the

continued on page 22

TV's drug and hospital commercials"). Even the New York Times agrees (look up "What's Making us Sick is an Epidemic of Diagnoses," 1/2/2007). Whereas I have been very successful in viewing pain and symptoms of "disease" in the way my native elders taught me--as invitations to transform something I am "stuck" on.

I'm not suggesting this approach is trivial, or always easy--but I can look back and say that symptoms correlated with several major diseases created better versions of ME and then disappeared. Thank you, "arthritis." Finally, don't try to heal everything at once ("leave some leaks"), or think that making one or two sub-systems perfect is the answer. You'll get stuck. You're here to evolve the whole of you--not just your diet. Remember, those strong, easily perfectible parts of you might have to blow off some stress so that weaker areas get a chance to heal.

Now, to the poet's image of the empty house, in which death is but the locking of the door. As I am the steward of my body, so is the sense of purpose of all those colonies of living beings tied intimately to my deeper dreams and desires. If I abandon those dreams, there is a despair that settles in this or that colony, and says, "ok... no sense in prolonging this... he's already moved out." So this little guideline is something like "passion saves." The most amazing lesson for me in this regard involved the onset of symptoms usually associated with lung problems. With a lot of fear, I worked through over a year of dialogue with myself and kept getting the message that, "well, you want to create a certain sort of sailboat so badly you can taste it... believing that you can no longer do that in this life is shutting down your breathing." Two years down the road, having reinstated that dream, the boat is materializing in my garage in some fairly miraculous ways--and I don't experience those symptoms anymore. Thank you, "lung problems."

Beyond caring for the miraculous carriage, and the staying true to the personal dreams it is meant to support, there is one other aspect to this. As cells and organs are parts of me, so I am a part of larger entities--society, Mother Earth, the Divine Energy itself. The prayer I make is this: "Great Mystery, help me always to affirm and reach for those things I most love, enjoy, and am best at. And, out of the **overlap** between *those*, and the needs of your ever-evolving harmonies--let us find the best dances for me." There is simply a lot less ME in the way now than there was 30 years ago. Many dreams burn ever so brightly, but so much of the wounded ego armor has fallen away. And which of those dreams actualize exactly how, I am more and more content to leave up to Spirit. In sum, what I have lost in physical vitality seems to be way more than made up for by gains in emotional and spiritual vitality. It's a very worthwhile trade-off. ▲



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