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Being Mortal Is a B*tch



By Marty Kaplan

David Wicks was walking to work in TriBeCa last Friday morning when a 565-foot construction crane toppled onto Worth Street and killed him. He was 38.

I didn't know him — I saw it in the paper. Workers had been lowering the crane as a precaution from wind gusts when it crushed him. From the noise and vibration, people on the block thought a bomb had exploded. He was remembered as warm, decent, “unusually gentle for someone who lived in this city.” Czech immigrant; Westinghouse Science Talent Search Semifinalist; a math degree from Harvard; a career in finance; a bolt out of the blue. “Despair and shock,” the *New York Times* said, “hung over the family’s quiet Upper West Side block.”

Drunk drivers, earthquakes, cancer, shooters — and now cranes. It’s rattling to be reminded how vulnerable we are. We busy our lives to distract ourselves from mortality, to extract meaning from absurdity, to pretend we control a cosmos of chance. At best, what I get from Worth Street is the gong of mindfulness. Savor the moment. Hug your children. Don’t go back to sleep. At worst: Grow up. It’s all hanging by a thread.

Now David Wicks’ whole life story is shadowed by how it ended. This is cruelly unjust. An ominous theme underscores all of it, imposing dread on ordinary moments, robbing them of their quotidian glory. In the wake of a freak accident, casual snapshots become fraught with foreboding; light words become last words. David plans, but God laughs.

The tyranny of endings defines us all, even if we’re lucky enough not to be unlucky. We experience our lives as stories. As each day unfolds, we update the narrative in our head, recasting Before in light of After. Life delivers randomness, but we’re ingenious at discovering cause and effect in its depths. We are as adept at rewriting as at writing. Our nimble revisionism allows us to believe we’re the authors of our existence - not the journalists reporting it, but the screenwriters creating it.

But no matter how good we are at reverse engineering our path to the present, our appointment with mortality guarantees an ending. As we succumb to the inevitable deterioration, we lose not only our health, but also our power to control our own story. “The terror of sickness and old age,” Atul Gawande writes in his best seller *Being Mortal*, is the terror of people being denied the power “to keep shaping the story of their life in the world - to make choices and sustain connections to others according to their own priorities.” The failure of modern society is that “we have come to assume that debility and dependence

rule out such autonomy” for the sick and the aged. We fail to recognize that “they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer,” that “the chance to shape one’s story is essential to sustaining meaning in life.”

I’m as fearful of bad luck and decrepitude as anyone. I know the genetic hand I’ve been dealt is as determinative as how I play it. But life choices matter. I see their effects, and I find my optimism, in two inspirations. At 93, Norman Lear is producing a Latino remake of his series *One Day At a Time* for Netflix. At 93, Deborah Szekely, founder of the fitness resorts Rancho La Puerta and the Golden Door, is running Wellness Warrior, a national advocate for healthy, sustainable living. Regular exercise, good nutrition, meaningful work, commitment to larger purposes, laughter and gratitude, love and friendship: these surely contribute hugely to their longevity, and I do my best to emulate them. (Disclosure: I’m a beneficiary of Norman Lear’s generosity and I’m on the board of the Ranch.)

Yet I know what a crapshoot it all is, and I’ve tried many ways to reconcile myself to that. The Yom Kippur ritual of simulating one’s death has been an anchor for me. So has the mystic tradition that embraces nothingness as the ground of being. So has art, which can turn the most infuriating, terrifying, ugly and stupid realities into experiences of confounding beauty and grace. So, even, is science, which situates my whining in an unimaginable and strangely comforting infinitude.

I’ve also tried what I guess could be called exposure therapy. The first screenplay I ever wrote was a black comedy called *Dying for Love*. It was based on a true story: I knew a guy who stopped his girlfriend from leaving him by telling her he was terminally ill. In my version, he’s a bit less of a rat. As she’s about to dump him, a lab test mix up makes her think he’s dying, and when he learns the truth he doesn’t set her straight, because, well, the sex is incredible. What he didn’t count on was her becoming his homeopathic drill sergeant, forcing him to endure every New Age cure from colonics to fire walking. And when she discovers his lie, she makes him do time in the cancer ward and look real death in the eye.

You will not be surprised that Disney never made the movie. I don’t know how I got them to pay for the script in the first place, though I do recall pitching it as “*Tootsie* meets *Love Story*.” To write it, I read every self-help book about death I could find, and I tried out everything from chanting to ozone (no colonics, though). I’m sure I thought that if I spent enough time around death, it wouldn’t be so scary. But of course none of that made my parents’ journeys to assisted living and hospitals and funerals any easier, and today I walked a block out of my way to avoid a construction crane.

Bette Davis said, “Old age isn’t for sissies.” Come to think of it, no age is.

This is a crosspost of my column from the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you’d like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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