

What are you afraid of?



Some elderly zombies

I know this. You know this. We all suspect it, but we don't let it in if we can help it, and quite right. Once we experience a death we see that life is finite. How can we stop living, we ask? How on earth can we accept such a thing? And yet, no matter what we think, say or do, at some point, we will, as my mother used to say, push off.

Life takes on more meaning once we accept it will end. It is a strange old journey, life. Every time we think we have it sussed, something happens and we realise there is more to learn, more to experience, more to do. Life keeps throwing us curved balls, but we have to keep going. In amongst the curved balls are times of real happiness too, like when we love someone who loves us back, or when our children are born, or when things go well for us and we can pay our bills or perhaps when our achievements are all that we hoped for. We plod on, but whatever life we have, and choose, death is the final state. Death puts life into perspective. Once we get over the shock that it is real, we can get a grip on our lives and make those decisions, do those things, be that person that we have been putting off. Our lives are in our hands. How will we live? Who will we be?

No one ever said life was easy. But it is amazing. It is up to us to make it work, and take risks. We may not end up with the thing we wished for, but the journey we took to get there will have been a whole lesson in itself. Realising that we have only so much time can focus us brilliantly on how we are actually living. It has a way of forcing the issue. I argued with and had a huge dislike of my husband Alan's political views. It seems that I was locked into being right at all costs and unable to concede an inch. I understood, after he died and it was too late to tell him, that I did not have to agree with him. It was not so much that I disliked his politics, it was that I could not be wrong. As part of my missing him after his death I made myself look at his views, remember what he said, and recall how he behaved in his life. I also remember his saying that he was once as rigid and uncompromising as me, and that he understood what I felt. I hated that at the time, but it makes sense now. He was a lot older than me, and had the gift of being able to change his mind if the arguments were good enough. The risk for me here was humility. My husband would never have laughed at me if I had listened to him and changed my mind a bit. He would have admired me.

Risks.



Probably don't take this risk

We can't avoid risk, things could always go pear shaped, that nice safe job that we took because it didn't ask much of us and stretched out over the years in secure and peaceful anonymity may suddenly tell us we need training in bomb disposal and single armed combat. That wasn't what we signed up for! We all know about the risks of being rejected, disliked, got rid of, abandoned, shown up, humiliated, shamed and so on. To some degree, these are present both in the tiniest of things, like making a phone call, to large things, like being shown up in public. But there is also the risk of things going well. We may take a risk and succeed with happiness, success, belonging, achievement. We may fear going to the doctor when we know something is wrong. When we do take the risk of being told we are in a bad way and we have only months left to live, quite the opposite happens and we not only have a clean bill of health but we marry the doctor.

I think, as with all things, it all comes back to how well we know ourselves, how much we like ourselves, and how much of our power we have given away. If I am afraid, my fear is likely to dictate how I act and react. That may feel like survival. Everything feels risky and a challenge. If I decide to take a risk first, and then I feel fear, like working for an exam, an audition, an interview, my fear is part of the process but not the instigator of it. If I know myself well, if I am self aware, I may make informed choices and understand risks to myself, my work, my surroundings a bit more - I may be able to pick myself up if it does not work out, and not give up completely. At the moment, I am seeing such huge aversion to risk, real or perceived, that I wonder if we have all lost the plot.

What are you afraid of?

My friend is a long term cancer survivor, a palliative care nurse, and over sixty. Over the past few months she has faced hostility for going to work, and returning home. She is

- vulnerable because of her cancer long ago, and the complications that are part of her life now
- working with people who are going to die in the hospice, some of whom are old
- old herself.

The hostility she has been dealing with is so strangely illogical and so unreasonable that it has left her sad. The main concern is that by going to work she meets people who are not only elderly, but moribund. By being outside in the air too, which is so buzzing with a single virus, she is perceived to be carrying with her this single virus that will kill not only her (which she asked for, she shouldn't have gone out), but all the neighbours and those in her village. She should know better than to put them all at risk by leaving her house to carry on supporting the dying, and herself an elderly cancer survivor too. The people who are angry with her are safe, well, solvent, and locked into a paranoid self concern. My friend knows herself well, is unlikely to put herself or anyone else in danger, and does not make unwise decisions where health is concerned. Over forty years a nurse, she has worked out what is practical and what is not. She has carried on working and has probably helped some of their relatives and friends die with a friendly hand

holding theirs, because not only are they not allowed in to visit, but they darn well wouldn't have gone anyway. Too dangerous. Every person for themselves.

She had dealt with this with grace and courage. She has begun to ask people what they are afraid of. It is her belief that they are all afraid of death.

At the moment, I wonder if death is our number one fear. Our fear of being ill right now is not just about having to rest for a day or two, it is about death. It is the certainty of death. We have linked the virus to our own death, and it is coming to get us. We do not know much about it but we know an awful lot about the risk it poses to us, to our families, and to the whole world. We know that the risk is too big to manage, and that we are encouraged to be terrified of each other, ourselves, and all known surfaces.

Our deepest fears of survival are triggered. I wonder if we are acting from our lizard brain, the oldest part of our brains that governs such things as survival, being territorial, hunger, thirst and habits. I think our need to survive this one virus has frightened us into a complicit isolation where our safety is so threatened, we have forgotten who we are. I do not blame anyone, the narrative we have is very frightening, and would challenge the most easy going person. But somehow, underneath it all, is, I think, a fear of death. As someone I know says, we have lost perspective, we are all OK and we will survive. And as someone else I know noticed, most people are more afraid of what others think of them if they do not join in the public dance around not getting the virus, than actually getting ill. I met with a friend a while ago who was delighted to meet me but not where anyone else could see. No, she said, she wasn't in the least concerned about getting ill, she just did not want anyone to see her and judge her. So perhaps it is not all about the fear of death, it is about the fear of social disapproval too. Heavy stuff.

We are all going to die.



That was quick

When my friend has enough answers to her question, "What are you so afraid of, " I will publish them. It will be good to see what people say, it will help me understand why we are so lost in our fear.

Until we do die, we are very much alive. I looked online to find an alternative view to the narrative on the pandemic, and could not find anything beyond the fact that all those who question it are Brexiters and climate change deniers. That made me feel a bit misunderstood. And so I am back to my main thought. We are all going to die. If that is so, and I believe that it is, I am going to take a risk and get on with my life. I do not see you as a threat. I do not believe that if you pass me by on the street, in a shop, on a bus, that either

of us will fall to our knees and pass away (unless we get shot, or have a heart attack). I am not going to wash my shopping bag if it touches yours, or put my shopping on a sterile mat for a few days before unpacking it. I will shake your hand if you offer it. I will hug you if you want it. When you are fearful and alone, I will come and visit if you ask me. What are we afraid of? I am certainly not afraid of you unless you want to hit me over the head. In our day to day lives, I am not afraid of you, and I am not afraid of this virus. I am taking the risk and celebrating life.

Antonia Rolls

25 August 2020