

Editorial

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Author for correspondence:

William Breitbart, Jimmie C. Holland Chair in Psychiatric Oncology, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, 641 Lexington Avenue, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10022, USA.
Email: Breitbartw@mskcc.org

William Breitbart, M.D. 

Jimmie C. Holland Chair in Psychiatric Oncology, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY, USA

*I am an old woman
Named after my mother
My old man is another
Child who's grown old*

John Prine, Angel from Montgomery, 1971

I am an old man. Named after my grandfather and my father, in the Jewish tradition. Zev Ben Moshe. Wolf son of Moses. An unofficial committee of Holocaust surviving refugees came up with the “American” name for my birth certificate. A shoe repairman, a barber and a butcher, all with adjoining shops on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, played alliterative games with my paternal grandfather’s Yiddish name “Wolf” until somehow the name “William” was produced. Then it was official. The beginning of becoming who I am, and I did not have the opportunity to participate. As soon as I became aware of my existence, I put an end to the practice of others deciding who I am and who I was to become. Kierkegaard would have been proud. I have made a conscious effort to create my own life and become my authentic self. At least I tried. Not always successfully, but the intention was there.

In fact, I’m not really an old man. But these past 3 years of COVID, and war and the death salience that confronted us constantly and unrelentingly, has, on occasion, made me feel older than my years. Certainly, our work with palliative care patients intensified this death salience and forced us to confront our own mortality in unprecedented and unrelenting fashion. Like many of you, I struggled frequently, in between periods of family joys, or moments of freedom and laughter and enlivening meaning. I must confess that I gave in to one of my more persistent friends and started the practice of “journaling.” From time to time, I would write down my thoughts, ideas, etc. It was not a practice of “gratitude” reframing. Like most humans, my brain goes automatically to the negative, dangerous places to ready myself for actions aimed at survival. That means I worried a lot. Turns out most of the time spent worrying was a waste unless it got me to act. The actions often led to solutions, but sometimes, just time led to resolution of worrying circumstances and events. But, the “journaling” was interesting. I started out with a beautiful leather-bound journal I had bought in a leather shop in Hamburg in 1993 at the World Congress of Psycho-oncology. It was old, but not really. It was in very good shape. My first entry was actually a Preface. It was a message to my wife and son about my life, my love for them, my hopes, and dreams for them and how I hoped they would remember me, despite what they might read as they continued on with the journal. I eventually thought the better of that idea and switched to keeping my journal entries on my phone as private Notes.

Perhaps I will live to regret this. I hope not. But I thought it might be interesting to share two brief entries in the journal that I wrote during the height of the pandemic, when confronting death was inescapable.

Meanwhile (December 25, 2020)

Meanwhile.

I’m scared of dying. Of getting sick and knowing that I’m going to die over time, sooner rather than later. Maybe very soon.

But then there is the Meanwhile.

In the Meanwhile, I’m actually alive and breathing and laughing and loving.

The Meanwhile. Wow! That seems important.

Is it merely the Present, or the Moment. As in “live in the present, live in the moment,”

I don’t think so. It feels like it’s about the fact that in the meanwhile you’re still alive, so hey!?!

Live! Take the ride on the roller coaster of life.

“Mean.” “While.”

“While” I suppose is Now. In this time, These days, months years. But we also “while” away the hours doing nothing in particular except just “being.”

So “While” is “Being.”

“Mean” is meaning.

“Meanwhile” is therefore

“Meaningful Being.”

The Next Big Idea: Death (December 31, 2020)

The Next Big Idea. Death.

The pursuit of a Meaningful Death. An honorable death.

Being unto death.

At some point in Life the focus starts shifting from creating a life of meaning

to creating a death of meaning.

I'm 70. I've been fearing death. Why?

Because I've been obsessed and attached to life and the pursuit of a life of meaning, awe.

Then I shift towards trying to imagine non-existence and it's terrifying! Paralyzing! Panic!!

I can't bear the intense fear of anticipating my death – anticipating non-existence – feeling time is spilling through my hands and fingers – losing precious time with each moment and second that ticks away.

I'm alive, but then I focus on the fear of pain and suffering and time running out and being debilitated. Having to deal with Being

distressed by demoralizing illnesses, physical and mental deterioration.

Then suddenly today the idea of pursuing and creating an eventual masterpiece of a death.

The honorable death of a warrior, a hero dedicated to a cause.

A death with a purpose a meaning.

A death that has an impact and significance.

Do I show the world how to die?

And then there's "Meanwhile."

William Breitbart M.D.

Editor-in- Chief

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Reference

Prine J (1971) *Angel from Montgomery*. Memphis, Tennessee: John Prine, Album, Walden Music Group, Inc.