

The Next Time You Die:

"When I drove myself in, I was feeling a tightness in my chest. I didn't like it. I knew something was wrong." Well, he didn't drive himself in; he was brought in by EMT in an ambulance. My friend had a heart attack, a massive one. He did not save himself. He was in the ambulance and he was dead. Ten or fifteen minutes of CPR by his wife, then electrocuted back to pulse, not once but twice and on life support. Ventilation and current to simulate the process of a heart beat and respiration. Dead but not dead, left on his own, most assuredly dead. Put him in a bag and call the mortuary, "Cremation or burial 'mam? Do you know what his wish would be?"

They were giving his wife the look. In the ER they were giving her the look. You can't help it. The docs and nurses are people too. They were giving her the look. The look that says no one ever comes back from this far gone. No one. We have a good friend on the local police force who carried the AED for years in his cruiser. He was first on the scene a lot of times. He used the paddles many of those times. He kept two of those poor souls alive until they got to ER. They both died the next day. One day, that's what he bought them. One day. All of his cases over the years and not one of them made it. Imagine that.

Science tells us that the actual survival rate among the thousands and thousands who have been this far gone is about three percent. Three percent. Ninety-seven out of a hundred never wake up. I guess that makes our police officer friend just slightly unlucky and our heart attack friend enormously so. I guess that means you can attribute his survival to just about anything you want. There are so few survivors to talk to that there isn't much data to support one conclusion or another. So you choose.

Was it his wife's timely CPR or stupid luck or divine intervention or the work of dozens of talented, focused professionals or the tears of his friends or the clucking of his detractors or that 911 is on the job or his own stubborn psyche or the fact that it was a Friday in December in Wisconsin or, whatever. Choose one, choose them all. You choose.

Well, guess what. He's alive and he's cranky. He's a tad disoriented although that is receding. He's depressed and hating all the attention. He's facing changes which, for a man who loves life his own way, are daunting. Diet, cigarettes, stress, all of it. He cuts no slack and he

takes no prisoners. He is who he was before he fell over, except more so. He's harder on his wife and his friends and his temporary babysitters than he is on strangers because he knows that the strangers don't count. He's angry that this happened and he's madder than a wounded bear to be reminded of it. He's always been good at arguing and fighting. He's a master at it. Tangle with him on his own terms and you lose. It's like TV wrestling. It's a set up. We know it but we do it anyway.

Here is a man who just dropped dead and he's giving us all we can handle because we tell him that he's not in charge for now. Here is man who just dropped dead, who knows how to get under our skin and is doing it better than ever before. Here is man who just dropped dead and he's angry. He's going to make everyone pay. No meekness here, no "Boy, am I lucky." No charmingly graceful recipient of a cosmically fortunate second chance. There's no Jimmy Stewart holiday movie here folks. He's not thinking that it's a wonderful life. He's pissed, period. It's amazing. Maybe you have one like him in your life. I guess a lot of us do. Good luck. God bless us, every one.

Well, you know what? That's all just too bad, isn't it? Here I am working up a sweat because my best friend is a jerk. I've known that for years, nothing new. If it weren't for the fabulous times, spectacular memories and boundless laughs I would have walked years ago. We all would have. It's not like we're in chains here. It's not like he has a Svengouli hold on me. It's not like I don't have the choice to call a cab and tell our precious neurotic, "We're leaving...and don't forget to take your meds."

We choose this, don't we? It is our choice, isn't it? We have decided that the 70-30 ratio of great to garbage, of happy to un, of daisies to dysfunction is worth it. So, the unfortunate fellow has had the bad luck of dying, for a few minutes. If we didn't want him back we shouldn't have hoped and breathed and pumped and wrote and called and cried and prayed and paid and not slept and travelled all day for him.

We'll get over his stunning lack of manners. We'll get over his absolute refusal to back off. We'll get over his notion that all of this is a game that he can play at and win. We'll get over the incredible idea that what's wrong with this picture, that what he's really angry about, is that he didn't write the script, that this time it isn't his show.

It occurs to me that there is a lesson in this for all of us. It goes something like this.

This business of dying and coming back is new to us. It's a mess and we've all messed up trying to get it right. If any of the rest of us ever happens to be as lucky as you are, we'll try to come back more gracefully. Thanks for the lessons. And the next time you die, let me suggest that you handle your resurrection as something other than a painful inconvenience, as if you're actually glad that you lived.