Death Is Everywhere

April 28, 2022 By Shawn Decker

Death is everywhere

There are flies on the windscreen

For a start

Reminding us

We could be torn apart

Tonight

“Fly on the Windscreen” by Depeche Mode

Last night, I was planning on writing a blog entry with that title and lyric, an homage to my favorite band and the recent events that have brought mortality to the forefront as of late. From the passing of one of my childhood friend’s mother and the unfortunate circumstances of our reunion and inevitable stroll down memory lane, to a friend who lost his son (age 22) in a motorcycle crash on the sharper side of the Reaper’s blade...

Death is, indeed, everywhere. And losing a loved one, whether it is expected sooner-rather-than-later or it blindsides you in the most nightmarish scenario imagineable, is a fear that we all carry. As a longterm survivor of HIV, I know my family was worried that every birthday I reached from 12 until 20 would be my last. Even after I started on effective HIV treatment in my early 20s, it was probably hard for them to breath easy where my future was concerned.

Me, personally? I’ve always been OK with the concept of my mortality. Growing up with hemophilia, I had a couple of scary incidents that resulted in a hospital visit. My mom did a great job teaching me to enjoy life, that our spirits go on after our physical existence ends. Now that she is getting older, I am for the first time wrapping my head around the fact that I might be the last one standing in my family when it’s all said and done.

I was much more comfortable with going first, to be honest.

As I’ve gotten older, my feelings about my own mortality have settled into a grey area. My attitude about it all is less cavalier as I’ve aqcuired more of my own things that will disappear if my number comes up: my love, my home, my friends... as insane as this world continues to reveal itself to be, I still like being here. And despite my medical resume, I feel like I’ve had it easy. I’ve always had a roof over my head, an emotional support system filled with care and access to life-saving

treatments, from blood-clotting products as a toddler to the pill I take to keep my viral load undectable as an adult.

In recent years, I've realized just how lucky I've been. I feel like a cat that can remember eight close calls, which means there's probably been at least twenty. It's why I've ramped up my self-care, from eating habits to incorporating more walks, talks, yoga and even accupuncture. I dont' miss my routine doctors appointments. As a result of my stable health, my prognosis is just about the same as someone without HIV in their mid-40s...

But I'm keenly aware of the added toll that HIV can have on aging. I often get complimented on how young I look, but I credit that to not having kids, keeping my phone on silent and getting a lot of sleep. My cholesterol is probably my biggest health problem- I tried medication for that but it made my liver enzymes shoot through the roof. Not wanting to awaken the sleeping bears in my body- hepatitis B and hepatitis C- I decided that I'd try to do my best to combat that negative side effect of my HIV drug regimen. It's one of the reasons why I decided to give four days on/three days off a week a try, which has kept my viral load undetectable but hasn't had the desired impact on my cholesterol count.

It went down a bit, but not as far as I was hoping.

Now, the reason why I didn't get to this blog post last night, as I intended to...

After the funeral for our friend's son, Gwenn and I got home. I took a shower, then we started dinner. Since the pandemic started, I have been having more mixed drinks than was the case before. That toned down a bit after the year that was 2020. But last night I made us a couple of old fashioneds and we had a nice dinner together. Now, for the foreshadowing: I usually do a good job of staying hydrated, but forgot to take a properly-sized water bottle to the funeral, which was an hour away from where we live.

Gwenn went to visit our friends and neighbors, and I settled into the couch for some rasslin. "I'll get that blog post after..." Then rasslin ended and I got my gaming chair- time to make some 12-years cry on Halo with my specialized combat skills that more than make up for my waning hand-to-eye coordination. As a first generation gamer, I'm like a species that has evolved over time, my senses and abilities have been dialed to keep me competitive against the younger lions. They run faster, but I realize that they can only run after what they see... movement. I'm a very patient man, I'll wait in a weird spot that only a serial killer would and surprise my prey with a goofy attack, like launching them over a cliff because they went for a powerful weapon I laid down by its edge, on that very quiet part of the map where nothing happens...

But I digress. I was halfway through a 10-minute game when Gwenn returned. I got out of my gaming chair, my full glass of water sat unsipped by my gaming chair on the floor.

As we chatted in the kitchen, I started to feel parched. Ten minutes into our conversation, I said, "I'm sorry- I need to go drink some water." I had a quick case of the spins, and realized that maybe I was a little heavy-handed with my pour. It was a very heavy day, grieving with our friend

over his unexpected loss. Plus my week started on Sunday, I visited my own mom before reconnecting with my childhood buddy over the loss of his mom. I drove past our old neighborhood, which was a couple blocks from the funeral home.

And I cried. That street is where I experienced a normal childhood, despite hemophilia. My teenage years, which commensed a year after my HIV diagnosis were, thankfully, “normal” too. It’s not to say that there wasn’t some added drama, a lot of which I have covered ad nauseum, but I ticked off all of the boxes that any middle class kid did… just with more style and pinache! Still, without that first chapter and all the people involved, I wouldn’t have been set up or emboldened to just live my life the way I did.

The way I do. With my own mom getting older, the thought of having to say my own goodbyes hit a little bit harder as I drove slowly around the bend, looking at each house where friends lived as children, yards filled with joy and power struggles, reconciliation and celebration that is a lifetime away but felt like yesterday as I rounded each corner before the twenty minute ride on the interstate back home.

Oh, and in between the family visitation for one friend on Sunday and the funeral on Wednesday for another, Gwenn and I witnessed someone in our neighborhood actual fucking die from a drug overdose before being revived by paramedics. I’d never seen a dead body outside of a funeral home before, so witnessing that and my first resurrection in one sitting may have also contributed to the heavy pour last night…

After I clumisly excused myself to hydrate, I immediately felt like I needed to use the bathroom. It was a coin flip as to whether I’d be sitting down or utilizing the incredible acoustics of the toilet bowl to sing to the porcelain Gods. Either way, I once again excused myself in haste. Since I’m a gentleman, I opted for the bathroom upstairs, not the half bathroom downstairs.

“Shawn… SHAWN?”

I was sitting on the stairs, beside Gwenn. I remember the spins hitting me three steps up. As a hemophiliac, I decided I’d better sit as opposed to risking a fall. I’d passed out. Confused, my goal was to relieve Gwenn of her concern. My breathing was fine, I didn’t feel dizzy anymore. I did agree that the downstairs bathroom, considering what had happened, was the better option. I promised Gwenn I wouldn’t look the door. “I love you, Shawn,” Gwenn said, as she guided me to the bathroom before saying, “DON’T. LOCK. THE DOOR.”

I promised I wouldn’t.

I closed the door and ran the water in the sink to give my face a splash of cold water, which might help me determine how I’d position myself for optimum relief. But before I even cupped the water into my hands I opened the door.

“I love you, Gwenn.”

I wanted her to know I was okay before I got down to whatever business would be happening behind that door.

“Shawn?! …. Shawn?!”

Apparently, I’d closed the door and, immediately after doing so, Gwenn heard a loud crash. I was laying in the small wedge between the wall and the toilet, with my elbow on the closed toilet seat. Whatever business I was about to embark on, I didn’t even have time to lift the damn lid. We chatted as I came to, and as I was once again trying to alleviate Gwenn of the concern I could see on her face, she said, “You’re on the bathroom floor, you passed out again. I’m calling 911.”

That’s something we’ve never had to do before. The closest was a snow storm about fourteen years ago, when I had a negative reaction to a hemophilia medication that caused water toxicity- the exact opposite of the problem I was now facing. That night, the roads were snow covered- we’d just been sledding down the street with friends. We have a four-wheel drive Outback, so Gwenn got me in the car and we slid our way to the hospital, slowly.

Last night I lightly protested, but reasoned that, of course, it was better to be safe than sorry. The EMTs arrived very quickly, and I sat up with my back flat against the wall in the bathroom. They stuck my finger to test my blood sugar levels, which were fine. The lead EMT was about my age. He suggested I take the ride, because checking my heartrate and other vitals in the ambulance and at the hospital was warranted. I agreed, but tried to bargain a little after I stood up.

But I’d fucking passed out twice. Something I’ve never experienced. So I wasn’t exactly in a decision-making position, even though I didn’t feel particularly scared for myself. Gwenn’s expression and the quiver in her voice was all of the convincing I needed.

On the ambulance ride they ran EKG tests, which were coming back normal. My blood pressure was pretty low, and the EMT said that further tests at the hospital might provide some answers. They ran an IV, and the direct-line of hydration certainly helped. As I was answering questions about my medical resume, the EMT and I bonded over being Cancers, having been born one day and two years apart- he was actually younger than me. I would have bet he was five years older, but he clearly has a stressful job thanks to assholes like me. He probably has kids, too. I’d take hemophilia, hepatitis and HIV over that any day.

“They’ve made so many advances in HIV over the years,” he said, as I explained how well HIV medication has worked for me over the years in keeping the virus in check. I was about to disclose that I was an HIV educator, because I really like to make myself accesible when an opportunity provides itself, especially to somebody in the medical field who clearly has an overview of knowledge about HIV.

But I stopped myself short.

You’re a patient now. Not an educator. Be the best patient you can possibly be.

So I shut the fuck up. I knew Gwenn was that set of headlights that I could make out through the ambulance windows, and when we got to a stop light, I'd raise a hand to wave at her a couple of times. Just so she knew I was doing ok. By being the best patient I could possibly be, I was able to be the best partner I could possibly be, too, given the situation.

The hospital was hoppin'. No emergency rooms were available. As I was being wheeled in, my EMT buddy asked me, "Are you always this calm?" "Oh, with medical stuff, yeah. I've had a lot of experiences in hospitals." On the ride over and before we left the house, I was incorporating the square breathing used in yoga. When I was a kid in the hospital with a severe nosebleed, my mom taught me the value of controlled breathing. "If you're in a panic, your heart is beating faster... which probably makes your nose bleed a little bit more."

I was temporarily placed in room 101. Depeche Mode 101, I thought, as I realized that blog entry I was planning on writing had developed a little more meat around it's bones. Death was certainly everywhere, though I was personally feeling better with each passing minute.

"How do you feel?" My EMT buddy asked, as his co-worker who rode in the back of the ambulance stood by and the two new faces, triage nurses, were explaining that the night had been less than quiet on this 11th hour on a Wednesday night.

"I feel okay... actually. No, I feel like a fucking dork, here in my Golden Girls socks, pajama bottoms and 'PARTY!' t-shirt when you all already have more than enough to deal with." The quiet EMT laughed out loud, before he and my EMT buddy left for their next adventures of the night. Initially, I thought I was fine to leave, but one of the triage nurses said that there was no harm in just hanging around for awhile. They rolled me out in a wheelchair to where Gwenn was, and we talked for about an hour or so.

I felt so much better and was pretty confident that we could go home without incident. To make sure, I stood up, and continued our conversation. I felt stable, stone-cold sober, hydrated and ready to sleep. I felt no bruising, or physical trauma from the fall in the bathroom, paying special attention to the back and side of my head. Even as I type this, I don't have a bruise... I'm thinking I must have sat down on the toilet, much like I did on the steps, before going out and falling onto the floor.

And, that my friends, is the tale of a cat who lost his next-to-last life to lose. Can you imagine surviving hemophilia, HIV, AIDS, hepatitis B and C only to go out because I didn't drink enough fucking water? If I'd had a more violent fall, if I'd instinctively or absent-mindedly locked that door... every day, things both in our control and out of control occur, and as a result of those intangibles and the limits of what our human bodies can endure is why we aren't guaranteed another day.

Of course, there are little decisions we can make every day that at least give us more of a chance to stick around a bit longer, or to make the quality of our lives better. But there are no guarantees. One minute I was laughing to myself as I knocked a noob off a cliff playing a video game, and ten minutes later I was being told that I'd passed out. Before passing out again...

When we got home, Gwenn and I watched half an episode of Golden Girls and I ate a bowl or two of Golden Grahams. I picked up the full glass of water that was sitting beside my gaming chair, drank it, and took two glasses of water upstairs with me to bed. After watching some Ridiculousness in bed together, it was time to retire for the day.

The day.

Not the life.

The day.

After all of the opportunities my life has presented in terms of exit ramps to whatever the next adventure may or may not be for my precious little soul, I'm fortunate to be here to even experience a tough day, like yesterday was. And a tough night like last night was, when my guard was down and I was in full chill mode before fucking chaos ensued. Now I'm lucky enough to be here, having a regular Thursday in my life, and I hope you're having a regular day in your life.

I guess the big challenge we all have is to enjoy our somewhat tumultuous lives while we have them, and maintaining our health to the best of our abilities... and to be good patients when we are humbled into no other options.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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