Speaker's corner

The future, complexity, death and surprise

During the past months, I have almost been overwhelmed by the deaths of friends. I had never believed that I would be awash in all this death and dying. The earlier dying of my parents was calmer, and almost expected. My mum's death is less full of feeling now, but sadly, memory of her death has faded over the years. What is left from the deaths in the past 10 years, are rich memories. Most are good, and full of the stories and doings, that helped make up my own rich life.

I take a quick look at them all, and they take me back to the years where not a thought of mortality occurred. I was free, and like most younger people, almost full of my sense of immortality and the future. There was, and still is, other adventures ahead, mostly coming from sharing time with those I truly care for.

The richest anticipations are with my children and theirs. I'm proud of them, in all their difference. They are all favourites of mine, each in different ways. Gathering them together, as just occurred was full of joy, pleasure, and a proudness of whom they are.

From the past, are images of all the surprises in my life. Most have been truly superb, from getting jobs with freedom, maintaining my values, and caring for people. Others are the places I have been and the people I have met, and loved. Some were tempestuous, others just exciting, and still others learning experiences. And so must the current epidemic of death and illness, brings pain, joy and possible surprise.

Somehow, the question of past and future decision making comes up, as many of my choices were not made rationally. They seemed to have just happened, or were self fulfilling prophecies. Though, I talk and think of complex systems, I often forget that the imponderables are part of the equation. These can be anything from the contextual environment, to my particular mood, or those that are close. Indeed as children grow, they are often less affected by the official learning environment, as they are by the unstated inputs that have other overt purposes. What one sees, hears, feels, or even smells.

In my life smells have been important in homes I visited, in judging hospitals, or people. Negative smells of perfumes repel me, as do houses that smell of decay or cooking fat. What I have later observed was that those clues proved themselves over time.

Where did this come from? My first thought was the smell of my mother, when she was caring and comforting. It was the security coming from family homes. Even now, the family homes smell similarly to me. Thus, smell determines acceptance, no matter what the other data show. It is interesting, in all my contact with poor, minorities, and illness, most smells are positive. So, it is not the dis-ease or the poverty. It is something else.

With some, there is a negative smell of death, one of decay. Some deaths are fine, because they smell of love and caring. Even in death the smell of love is present.

As I remember my wife singing to my father, and a few close friends at their deathbeds, there was a true sense of joyousness in the interaction. It touched some part of me, far from my cognitive and analytic self. It sent ripples of feelings, much like what occurs when I get—or a patient—gets an enlightening interpretation of behaviour. Or, when, I walk around a corner and am surprised by a sight that was unexpected. It is a new smell, colours, sounds, and touch. It's a new relationship to something old, or new. Marriage and longtime friendship are full of such surprises, for the new turns around corners brings new insight, and refresh old ones. It is so much more than a momentary romance. It is part of the joy of aging, as well. It is what we often lose in death of someone dear and close.

Surprise is important to me. David Stendl-Rhast said "Surprise is another name for God!" What I believe he means is that surprise opens us up to the infinite, to the new, and to the unknown—to everything that exists. To me, it is an opening to all complexity, systems, chaos, the unknown and to the infinities of time. Surprise brings feelings of "Ah! Ha!" ecstasy, love, closeness, and being part of something bigger than I can imagine.

For those of us concerned with healing and health, we find they have the same root as holy, whole, wellness and more.

Part of the joy of being a parent, grandparent, physician, therapist or teacher, is what happens later. It is the part one plays in a process, which mentors someone on, to heights, that is a surprise to us both. It is what comes from non-control with guidance that lets organisations self organise and people grow. It is mentoring at its best. It also helps in decision making, for one that makes too thorough or decisive decisions may prevent the surprise of innovation and change. To return to Brother David, to allow oneself to find God, to permit oneself to push the boundaries, be anti-authority, and be surprised.

The community and the diverse people within it, is a great challenge to those of us concerned with healing, health promotion and every aspect of health. We are finding that politics and values are at its core. Communities are ever changing and rich. What we call illness and health is the same. We must keep ourselves open to all that is, and not let rationality be the only guide to our actions. Let's embrace a world of surprise.

Even death, has its surprises. It often permits a rebirth in others, and frees them from even unspoken control. What happens after death, I never understood. That there is hope from one's dreams of a future life may be enough. If it's something else, it's a surprise. Whatever, it will be new, and a change.

That is the only future I know.

LEN DUHL