

Fearing Death and Stephen Hawking

Today's human mind is not designed to be confronted by death.

It used to be, though. As recently as the early 20th century, meetings with death were regular, expected, and, while tragic, manageable. With the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in 1918, death was expected to be handled in the household, for death was expected *in* the household. In the words of Joan Didion on the subject, "Death was up close, at home. The average adult was expected to deal competently, and also sensitively, with its aftermath."

Do you know how to deal with death?

I certainly do not.

I want you to imagine, right now, that you're sitting in a coffee shop. You're one of few people in there, the nearly empty cafe smattered with the occasional business person on a laptop. All of a sudden, one of these strangers drops dead. Lights out, flat-EKG dead.

What would you do?

You'd probably pick up your phone and call someone.

Maybe you'd go over first and press your fingers to their neck, because you've seen it on TV. You're no doctor, but it can't be that tough, right? When you don't find a pulse, though, you'd call. You'd get it out of your hands as quickly as possible because now, unlike the 20th century, there are people who bear the burden of our mortality *for us*. They keep death tucked away in airless hospital basements and mortician offices until it's presentable enough for the wake.

We are no longer equipped for death.

So, what happens when death, suddenly, is everywhere? When you roll over in bed in the morning to stare into the cold eyes of your phone, and it stares back saying "COVID-19 deaths reach 500,000."?

You lose your shit. At least, I did.

I'm a huge hypochondriac. I blame it on a few things: A childhood spent watching *Grey's Anatomy* with my mother, for one. Secondly, a neurosurgeon for a father who enjoyed starting dinner off with "look at the size of this tumor I dug out today!" and a picture that suddenly made the meatballs in front of me much less appetizing. Shake those two ingredients together with a couple dashes of "genetic predisposition for anxiety" and you've got a cocktail that can turn a cough into lung cancer, a mole to melanoma, a headache to a tumor after a single sip. And I drank the whole damn thing.

Prior to the pandemic my hypochondria was at an all-time low. It was one of the only times I've honestly been able to say one of my mental health complexes had gotten *better*; and it was a point of pride, a point of hope. Proof that the horrible anxiety and OCD plaguing the last ten years of my life could, potentially, get better.

It was a hope that, of course, was dashed once the pandemic started. I was swallowed by a swarm of fearmongering, unable to disconnect myself from the media. Stories of people my age, people younger than me, fit people, 3-sport varsity athletes, contracting COVID and breathing through an iron lung a week and a half later gouged me with fear. My hypochondria

came back full swing. Every cough was COVID. My throat tickled, and it was COVID. Anxiety-induced shortness of breath? COVID, and *bad*.

Each excursion felt dangerous, each passing stranger a loaded gun ready to fire plague into my lungs. I existed with the constant mortal fear I suspect a small prey animal feels. Instead of talking about it, unpacking it, I internalized it, and it fermented.

Eventually, it released. Exploded, rather, all of that pressure building up, and I redirected all of that anxiety, that fear, to one unsuspecting scapegoat: Stephen Hawking.

In January of 2021, nearly a year into the pandemic, I was at my parents' home watching *the Bachelor*. One of the women on the show confessed (as the admission of trauma so often feels like a confession on these shows) that her father was in the late stages of ALS, and she left for the show unsure if he'd still be alive upon her return. It was a tragic story, but one I was ready to pass harmlessly by. Until my father said, "Ugh. Such a horrible disease."

That's all it took. All it took! To prompt the most harrowing, horrifying five months of my life. Because then, I started to think about it. Think about what it'd be like if it happened to me, how horrible it'd be to drift silently and motionlessly into death... I couldn't imagine anything worse. So, I started to panic. All of the mortal fear I'd internalized over COVID, the ten months spent surrounded by the daily promise of death, it all channeled toward this one, panicked idea.

I wasn't worried I had ALS until a week or so later, when OCD took over.

If you're unfamiliar with OCD, it's a strange disorder. While it's classified as an anxiety disorder, I tend to think it has one foot there, the other in the "delusional" camp. Since it developed for me back in 2017, it has been a whirlwind of delusions and odd compulsions. Scrape your feet on the threshold to your room three times, or you won't get into the college you want. Knock on the banister once for each step or your girlfriend won't love you anymore. Completely disparate ideas drawn together by the far-reaching hands of OCD.

A week or so after my Bachelor encounter, my obsession with ALS was building. I'd think of it for a panicked moment every so often, but it'd just barely miss the glue-trap that a brain with OCD dangles to catch new obsessions. Then, a couple of odd things happened: my legs felt tingly, and my muscles started twitching.

There's a golden rule for people with anxiety, for hypochondriacs. It is a rule so incredibly essential to their sanity. It is also the rule that I broke, that sent me spiraling: *never*, and I mean *NEVER*, google symptoms.

Google "tingling limbs" and "muscle twitching" and the results are not good. More specifically, one of the first ones is ALS. I flipped out.

I will never cease to be amazed by what anxiety can do to a body. Within a week, I was convinced I had ALS. I was getting twitches all over my body; my hands and my feet were tingling; I even started feeling like my speech was slurring (another symptom).

The muscle twitches were the worst. It's not a full-limb twitch or anything, just a small *blip*, as if there's a boiling puddle of magma beneath the skin, and every once in a while the gas bubbles up. I'm sure you've felt it too, in your eyelid, most likely, or your legs. My Twitch Per

Minute rate was out of control. If I had to guess, I'd say I was averaging 5-10 TPM. With every single one of these twitches also came a jolt of anxiety. Mortal, crushing anxiety, each one like a little text from my body saying "Hey! You're going to die! And the process of getting there is *not* going to be fun!"

Where does Stephen Hawking come in? One of my most dysfunctional OCD rituals is one of "contamination." It's extremely difficult for me to explain, both to my therapist and in writing, but I'll give it a whirl. The idea of contamination is a common obsession for people with OCD; one of the biggest stereotypes surrounding the disorder is of the kooky-OCD guy washing his hands over and over. Through illogical leaps and bounds, it's believed that if hands, feet, clothes, etc., are dirty, contact or even their mere presence can contaminate other surfaces or people. The contamination obsession usually leads to compulsive hand washing, showering, clothes-changing, etc.

My OCD decided it'd be fun to put a nouveau twist on the age-old contamination ritual. Instead of a contamination of germs, it'd be one of ideas, of images. It'd be an obsession over things that remind me of mistakes from my past, things that remind me of the horrible ways of our world, things that remind me of whatever I'm anxiously obsessing about at the present moment. OCD elects a symbol, a scapegoat, into which to funnel all of the fear and anxiety. In this instance, that symbol was Stephen Hawking.

For those who don't know, Stephen Hawking is a famous astrophysicist who, for the majority of his life, had ALS. If I entered a room while thinking of Stephen Hawking, I needed to leave and try to enter again, forcing another image to the forefront or everything I did in that room would be "contaminated." I usually had to enter three or four times to get it right. If I was watching a video and it mentioned or showed Stephen Hawking, everything within my eyesight at the moment of the mentioning was "contaminated," and I'd need to rewatch four times, blocking my view of everything except the screen, for the contamination to be cleared. If I touched a picture of Hawking, I would need to go wash my hands, or else anything I touched would be contaminated with the idea of death and suffering. As much as I feared death, I feared the chair-bound astrophysicist. He dominated my thoughts alongside the twitching and the tingling.

There's no better way I can describe this than the word "torture." I truly was in mental anguish. Nearly every moment of every day, with every little twitch of my calf, I was reminded of the horrifying death I thought I was approaching. With anxiety and OCD, it feels *certain*. As ridiculous as it may sound to an outsider, to the person obsessing it is terrifyingly real. I felt as though I might already be dead. The amount of stress I was suffering under was constant and gargantuan; like waking up, strapping a boulder to my back, and carrying it around until it was time for bed. The undertone of global death that laid beneath every sunrise during the pandemic was mirrored by the fear of my own death that became the foundation of my every waking moment.

Something you don't often hear about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is that it is so, so lonely. Going on a year of necessary, government-mandated isolation was, frankly, enough

already; then OCD came and fenced me off from the few blips of connection I'd managed to maintain. OCD made me, and still makes me, feel like a lunatic. The compulsions are brutally illogical. How can I explain to someone that the reason I'm panicking right now is because the book I'm reading mentions ALS and now I need to hide the book because it's contaminated and I can't look at it or else my room won't be safe? How can I explain to my girlfriend that the reason I can't take a walk with her on campus is because the Wahoo's cart on the arbor has a picture of Stephen Hawking on it and if I see the cart I'll be heart-thumpingly anxious for the rest of the day? OCD is *embarrassing*. How can I talk about my issues, how can I explain to you what's *ruining my life*, when it sounds like a joke?

Poetry of the Spirit, a class taught by Professor Rick Benjamin through CCS, is what began to turn things around for me. It's a poetry class revolving around spirituality, community, and meditation, as the name might suggest. I took it in the spring, three months after my presumed death sentence had been declared.

I've had somewhat of a circular experience with spirituality; though, it's an illusion of a circle. Something that, from above, appears to be a circle, but when looked at from the side is actually a spiral, the point you thought completed the loop actually ending miles below the beginning. I started out as a vague kind of Christian. It's what my family was, though, we only went to church on Christmas and Easter. I just accepted that as the way, because I was too young to think otherwise (or, care). That changed once I entered what I refer to as my "shithead era," which took place throughout middle school. I was aggressively contrarian, loved hating on everything people loved, and I became a staunch, anti-religion, anti-spirituality, atheist. Unsurprisingly, I lost a lot of friends during this time. As I chilled out and entered high school, that atheism slowly faded to a more realistic agnosticism. I don't know anything about our universe, so who was I to declare there wasn't a god? That's the stance I took back then, and I appreciate it as a much more open-minded approach than I had in my "shithead era."

At the start of college, I began to develop a vague sense of spirituality surrounding the human connection to nature. I hadn't thought too much about it; all I knew was that I felt loved and at peace while walking speck-like through a vast forest or floating deep in the ocean, and that those feelings carried a sense of spiritual potency.

Poetry of the Spirit took those spiritual seeds and grew them into beautiful, fruiting plants. Despite attending the class over Zoom, I felt, for the first time in my life, the power of community. Prior to the pandemic, I took community for granted. Our campus community, my smaller communities within on-campus organizations, my community of friends... they had always, without fail, been there for me; so consistently, in fact, that I didn't even realize their importance. When they were suddenly stripped away, I felt lost, I felt *scared*.

In the depths of my two-sided seclusion, mental and pandemic-related alike, Poetry of the Spirit invited me into a warm, loving community. One that I didn't realize how desperately I needed. Within a few weeks of soul-spilling poetry, of communal meditation, of discussion, I began to feel family in the small, square Zoom boxes. I began to let people in. I was able to

allow myself to be seen and be healed through my writing. I felt unconditionally loved, I felt supported, I felt like a single cell in a living, breathing organism of writers. Poetry of the Spirit pried open the wrought-iron gates the pandemic welded over my heart, and from that opening climbed vines that bloomed with vibrancy. Poetry of the Spirit taught me to feel connected to the people around me, the world around me, and alongside the spiritually-thematic readings, I developed a sense for the circular rhythm of the universe: that connection bleeds into death. That when I die I'll be dissolving into the natural world, feeding what for so long fed me.

This burgeoning spiritual high coincided with one of the scariest mental lows I've faced during the pandemic. I refer to this moment as my "Buddhist Understanding Moment." In my previous explorations of various world religions, floundering desperately for a faith to call my own, I'd always found the ideas and practices of Buddhism agreeable. However, as much as I may have wanted to, I could never call myself a Buddhist, because I couldn't come to agree with one, central tenant: that life is *dukkah*, or suffering, and death is the release from that suffering.

I *love* being alive. I love to smell the roses into which a fulfilling life blooms; beautiful art, delicious food, good friends... I fear death so intensely because I love these aspects of life so deeply. However, in April of 2021, after nearly four months of the constant mental brigade that is OCD, after four months of starvation, the torture of every moment feeling like it was one of my last living a normal life, I understood what Buddhists were talking about. I, for the first time, realized that death might not be so bad.

My spiritual growth took to that realization like a vine to a trellis. Is death better? Is death beautiful? What could be more beautiful than returning to the earth, spreading your soul through oceans and roots and insects and birds? Imagining my body as the wind was thrilling. The feeling of connection to the natural world was euphoric, and eventually that feeling extended towards people, as I realized that not only is there divinity in trees, in the depths of an alpine lake, in every frond of a fern, but there is god in a good hug! There is god in the warmth born between two clasped hands, between two soft lips. Conversation is prayer, laughter a hymn, the golden thread of love woven between two caring people a greater manifestation of god than I've ever known.

My thoughts once again turned toward Stephen Hawking. I had built around his life a monument to death, to horror. The worst possible scenario, my greatest fear. For the first time, though, in five months, I considered that this might be unfair. Maybe I'd misunderstood, maybe his life wasn't so horrible. He still had people around him. He could still watch the sunset. He could still sit in the middle of the wind and be moved by the breath of the earth.