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The Dance

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I lost my sense of smell about 15 years ago. I didn't think much of it then, even as a physician. But, I missed the scent of Cathy's skin, her hair, and perfume. Smell is part of the aphrodisiac of loving. I'm a hiker, and smell is part of the deep breaths you take in the forest. Coffee in the morning; the smell of turkey roasting, my grandchildren's sweet smells.

I still have taste.

Seven years ago, Cathy and I were hiking, and she asked me, "How come your right arm isn't swinging?"

"Oh, it's just my rotator cuff."

Now I consider myself a good diagnostician. Months later, one afternoon, the muscles of my right hand felt as if they were shaking, but I looked down, and my hand was still. It was an internal tremor, like a tremor before an earthquake. Almost as if my body was reading a medical text, I noticed my fifth finger twitching and that's when the thought, immediately dismissed, came to me.

A few months later, I had developed constipation, which I had never had before. Still, I wasn't adding up symptoms. As I sat there on the toilet reading *Sports Illustrated*, my right hand started a classic pill rolling tremor. I knew right there I was done. I had *it*.

Then, I went to Lucas, my son, the doctor. I told him all the signs; it was unfair of me to lay this on my son's shoulders. He didn't want to say it; he wanted his father to have a long healthy life. It got in the way of his pronouncing the words neither of us wanted to hear.

Finally, Cathy, Lucas, and I went to a movement disorder neurologist. We drove from Taos to Albuquerque, keeping things light and optimistic. They joked, "You just have a twitchy body, Larry." "You probably have an atypical essential tremor; you're getting old, Pop."

We arrived at the doctor's office, and she invited us in. There were 3 chairs set out. She watched me walk, moved my arms around checking for rigidity, watched me write, and 10 minutes later said, "You have Parkinson's."

Parkinson's. Paralysis agitans. I had always liked the contradiction in the name: paralysis and agitation. You can't move when you want to, and can't still

yourself when it matters. In medical school we would mimic the shuffling Parkinson's gait, and festination—inability to start, and once going, inability to stop. And now I had *it*. I was shocked to my marrow, literally. I had become that caricature, that patient.

On the way back, Lucas driving, we were quiet for much of the ride. I felt it was necessary to call those members of my family who could have a predisposition, if there was a genetic link: my brother and my sister, my younger son, and my 2 daughters—I told them the same thing: "I have early Parkinson's. It's just starting. Don't worry. I don't even need meds. Just rasagiline, for its potential neuroprotective qualities. Nothing for the symptoms, yet." One daughter sobbed, the other asked, "Am I going to get it?" My son was quiet, my brother was speechless, and my sister, as always, said, "You'll be alright."

In medicine we say, "Genetics loads the gun; environment pulls the trigger." Deep in the basal ganglia lies the substantia nigra, dark black, where dopamine-producing cells ordinarily thrive. Dopamine affects your movement, your mood, your emotions, and your sense of self. By the time I began having symptoms, I had lost 70% of my dopamine-producing cells. There was no going back.

A few months later, I had my DNA checked, and I had none of the known genetic aberrations. I was glad; it meant that my biological children had the same chance of having Parkinson's as the general population.

So, there I was on the computer, looking up Parkinson's. I was searching as a patient, but the doctor in me asking all the questions. Were there environmental triggers for me getting this disease? Environment.

As a child, when I visited my grandparents, in Lake Hiawatha, NJ, trucks, loaded with DDT, sprayed the neighborhood to kill mosquitoes—and my friend Steve and I would run behind the trucks, playing GI Joe, thus inhaling the pesticide.

In San Cristobal, New Mexico, where I live, I had a 20-year battle with prairie dogs that were destroying my fields where I grew alfalfa and wheat. They carried fleas that cause bubonic plague, so, every summer, I tried to kill the pests without chemicals. I threw

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bubble gum down the holes; I shot them with BB guns. Nothing worked. Then I got the bright idea of using cholinesterase inhibitors, a close relative of nerve gas. I was actually trained by the Department of Agriculture to be an “official” killer. Here’s how you do it: first you insert a long black plastic tube in the prairie dog hole. Then, you carefully take out the aluminum phosphide pellets. Using surgical gloves (what was I thinking!), and a surgical mask over my mouth and nose, I’d force the pellets down the tube, and then pour water in the tube to activate the poison.

But, what probably did me in was the misuse of pesticides during my 3 months in Cambodia. I went to Cambodia as the director of a medical team working for the International Committee of the Red Cross. I was one of only 2 American doctors on the Thai–Cambodian border in the spring of 1980. It was there that I ran a “hospital” serving 60,000, often starving, and always ill, refugees from the Khmer Rouge. Treating diseases such as malaria, cholera, and beriberi.

Near the end of my time there, the British doctor, who was responsible for Public Health, came to me one day with panic in his voice. “I’ve been spraying

the hospital, as you know, Larry, to keep the flies and mosquitoes off the infants. But I just realized that I was spraying the insecticide undiluted. I think I’ve made a mistake.” The instructions stated that the poison should be diluted 200 to 1. I remarked, “So dilute it!” and I went back to work in the chaos of the camp. I wasn’t worried about the future. I was in the moment.

Well, I believe the moment eventually got me.

I’ve done my bargaining with God. If I do everything right, will you let it progress slowly? If I continue working, will you slow down my tremors? If I accept my condition, will you help my daughter become pregnant? If I love everyone to the best of my ability, will you ...?

And now? I do all the right things: I exercise, I move, I climb mountains, do tai chi, and I even meditate. I try to stay positive and accept what has been dealt to me. And, actually, it’s been a pretty good hand, so far. Yet, sometimes I have to balance my acceptance with my frustration, and fight. Then I say, “F–k you tai chi, f–k meditation, and f–k you, Parkinson’s. Do your worst. Try to ravage me. If I live long enough, you and I will fight to the end.”

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