

Compared to What?

Written by Jack Sparacino

Wednesday, 15 November 2017 06:34 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 November 2017 07:28



You've probably heard that older folks have a habit of more frequently checking the obituary pages. "If I don't see myself, I must be alive" seems to be the thought pattern or . . . just maybe . . . the simple realization that our time on earth is relatively limited and certainly finite. Here today, gone tomorrow.

So forgive me, during a birthday week no less, for noticing that I've been clipping more death notices from the newspapers and magazines cluttering my office. Two of them were rock stars from my generation: Walter Becker, a cofounder of Steely Dan, and legendary Tom Petty of the Heartbreakers. Both were born, like me, in 1950. Petty was barely three weeks older; Becker, like me, was born in Queens, NY. Steely made quite a splash with "Reelin' In The Years," which it seems is still circulating on those endless Musak-y loops they play in big stores. You know,

*Are you reelin' in the years
Stowin' away the time
Are you gatherin' up the tears
Have you had enough of mine?*

Petty made it with "American Girl" which, while evidently a big hit, didn't make it into my overstocked (note the euphemism) brain.

Sure, I've been doing some self-reflecting lately and not just about old rockers - those that come with guitars or antique pillows. Initial conclusion? Mine has been a very lucky ride overall. That thought was further cemented just last month by an article of Audra D.S. Burch's in *The*

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New York Times

. She chronicled the pathetic life of Rob Sullivan, age 43, whose traumatic childhood in Hartford, CT cascaded into a miserable adulthood riddled with alcohol and drug abuse punctuated by imprisonment in nearby Enfield. He has enough self-awareness to let his failures and shortcomings bring on strong emotions, believing that he is trapped in a misery-go-round of unhappiness. As Burch quoted Sullivan, "I have never followed through on anything in my life," he said, tears in his eyes. "It's hard. I know if I end up back in the streets I will end up drinking and using again."

There but for the grace of God. Reinforced in real life by several folks I ran into while doing errands around town, including a muscular 50ish man on a prosthetic leg at Rite Aid, a deeply tanned and wrinkled 60ish woman at Publix who weighed perhaps 80 pounds if her purse was laden with bricks, and an 80ish man with hair the color of bleached flour - also at Rite Aid - hunched over his cane at the magazine rack. Should I have offered to buy him something? Or what about the two young women, also at Publix, who were gimping arm in arm, both ladies deformed. Yikes.

Good heavens indeed I've been lucky in life. 1950 was a great time to be born, especially in the United States, and to children of the Great Depression who never took any of their later great good fortune for granted. I was a healthy, happy kid who grew up in rural and suburban America and was never wanting for love, food, or a stable home.

I went to excellent schools, worked hard enough to do very well, and spent much of my adult life working in one of the world's great manufacturing and engineering companies. Whereas Americans' combined credit card debt hit a record \$1 trillion (yep with a 't') this year, I owe nothing. I'm not fixated on social media or saddled with the brain disorders associated with endless hours on a smart phone (don't even own one). I've never broken a bone, though dental problems, kidney stones, prostate cancer and arthritis have taken their toll and I have yet to crack six feet in height. Or really learn how to cook or dance or fix anything or remember where Lake Whatchamacallit is on the map.

Like many other Beaufort County denizens, Jane and I evacuated away from Hurricane Irma recently. Writing this, it seems preposterous that in a luxury suite, no less, I got a little (OK, maybe a lot) crabby about the small refrigerator, lousy coffee and the windows that leaked when it rained so hard that Monday. And the funky little restaurant across the street was out of that hummingbird cake we liked so well the last time we visited. Ah and there's this. One of my room service bagels was under-toasted for Pete's sake!

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The solution to that babyish nonsense? Easy, just remember Enfield's Mr. Sullivan or any of those poor souls I encountered at Rite Aid and Publix.

Or, how about this one, much more serious - at least at the time. On our last evacuation night during Irma we decided to celebrate with a nice dinner out at a lovely place, Calvert's. Jane ordered some high end wine and an entree that now escapes me. I ordered salad with my broiled lobster and cheese-stuffed potatoes. With only a half dozen tables occupied, we could really enjoy the lovely ambience and the courtesy extended by our attentive waiter. There we were in the cat bird seat, enjoying the lap of luxury with home only hours away.

But before I could finish the lobster, my sense of well-being went off a cliff. I began to hiccup violently, uncontrollably and - no surprise - could no longer eat or even swallow a sip of water. Our waiter brought me a pitcher to use as a motion discomfort bag, so to speak, and I did just that. Couldn't get to the bathroom. Ten minutes later the hiccupping was even more severe and was now accompanied by upper chest and lower throat pains. *Could this be a coronary event?*

We called for a cab and returned to the Marriott - with one regurgitation pit stop - where my symptoms persisted overnight though the pains diminished. I hiccupped all the way home and was unable to eat a thing for 46 hours before being saved. My friend Joel is a GI physician and he diagnosed me with diffuse esophageal spasm (DES). Google said "DES is a condition characterized by uncoordinated contractions of the esophagus, which may cause difficulty swallowing (dysphagia) or regurgitation. In some cases, it may cause symptoms such as chest pain, similar to heart disease. The cause of DES remains unknown."

In coordination with my primary care physician some medication was prescribed which worked immediately. It was 100% effective for about five bucks. It would seem I had dodged (another) bullet. And it got me thinking - again - about these often strange lives we lead. With all kinds of genetic and environmental advantages thrown my way, there have nonetheless appeared plenty of scares and near misses in my life. I can take only some, perhaps a little, credit for whatever "success" I have achieved. Someone, somewhere, has been looking out for me.

The great Fats Domino died recently. In 2007 he remarked, "I'm glad that people liked me and my music. I guess it was an interesting life. I didn't pay much attention."

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Maybe, like me, he once hiccupped so hard his life began to pass in front of his eyes. In any case, perhaps we could all pay more attention. As they say, life is short.