

In this series of short essays, stories, poems, and personal observations, Robert A. Burton, neurologist and writer, uses both fiction and nonfiction to explore many paradoxes and contradictions inherent in scientific inquiry. A novelist as well as author of *On Being Certain* and *A Skeptic's Guide to the Mind*, Burton brings story to science and science to story.

### *Plague Journal*

#### **Symptoms of Consciousness: Where Science and Story Meet**

Given a strong family history of early heart attacks, the future has always been an iffy proposition. Miraculously, I have bypassed the early off-ramps and find myself approaching 80, stents in place, considering the very real but previously unimaginable possibility of still more. But what kind of more? With dopamine on the wane and no longer supercharged by the push and shove of unbridled ambition and pride, bigger and grander are out of the question. Tired clichés poke through the widening cracks in my thinking to become uninvited bulletins of compromise and consolation. Be grateful. Relax, reminisce, enjoy sunsets, learn the backyard birds' names, maybe even sing to them, and count blessings.

Yet, there are moments in the day when I feel a brightly colored butterfly fluttering in my chest. My earthbound cardiologist diagnosed a benign atrial arrhythmia; I know better. It is a new me beating furiously against the constraints of old memories and habits. It wants out, to have its own brief moment in the sun.

Of course, a new self is impossible. Few legitimate observers of human

nature seriously believe that we can cast aside our basic stripes. Perhaps great effort can modify; redo is beyond discussion. At the same time, sages warn us that the self, like free will, emerges from inescapable deep grooves of biology and habit and is a purely fictive evolutionary trick to embody coherent desires and actions, meaning and purpose.

If the mind is primarily subconscious chatter and inclinations, my choices are limited: I could either regard the self as a set-in-stone hardwired illusion or as a free-floating blank page for continuous rewrites. From the vantage-point of the former, I opt for the latter; if there is no free will, there is no harm done running uphill against reason. Reinvention would be my late-life project.

I could go Thoreau. Practice deep breathing and mind-emptying. Purge myself of desire. Start an experimental novel or a collection of poems. Learn to improvise in Dorian mode. On paper, the options were endless.

I got out my scratch pad and was halfheartedly weighing choices and jotting down possible baby steps to get beyond myself, when, without fanfare or prelude, the virus struck and I was stripped of daydream and personal compass.

*Symptoms of Consciousness*

Thoughts were compressed into the complex logistics of how to best avoid unnecessary contact with people, surfaces, objects, and even potentially tainted air spaces. Given my age, self-isolation was likely to fill up the rest of my dance card. Going Thoreau was a necessity, not a choice. Spending your days in enforced solitude no longer constituted an accomplishment.

I have been left with the free time of the condemned awaiting execution, the lazy quiet of a secluded island resort, the sleep in late and stay up late of winter break or holiday weekend. All is down time and at last I am my own next chapter's blank page, ready to be written on or over. I have my pencil and eraser ready. At last, I am free.