

When Will the News be Bad Enough?

Group Effort Prior to Covid-19

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The cardiac rehab nurse calls out each of our group's blood pressures and pulse rates. It is my first posthospitalization class and I am relieved to be in the middle of the pack. Although fully aware that numbers are not fate, I cannot help wondering if the worst performers will fully satisfy the dark needs of heart disease statistics. I presume that others are making similar calculations, yet wince at the ugly direction of my mind. Maybe it is not necessary to do better than another; if we take our meds, eat wisely, and exercise to the max, it is possible that our entire group will do well.

The nasty thought of a health contest triggers memories of the first day of med school with its grim grades-trump-friendship undercurrent, followed by the shrill take-no-prisoner clawing and scratching of subsequent faculty life. I am primed to see competition everywhere. Education has not helped; universal acceptance of survival of the fittest and the notion of selfish genes have fully prepped my suggestible mind to see human nature at its worst.

And yet the other rehab participants are gracious, reassuring, and encouraging each other without condescension or smugness. When finished with an exercise machine, each takes the time to wipe it down as though offering a gift to the next user. With a circling index finger, an elderly white-haired man peddling on a nearby exercycle urges me to go faster. I oblige and crank up the

treadmill. He gives a friendly thumbs up. A middle-aged man with a fresh purple scar peeking out from under his collar joins in with his own thumbs up. A couple women nod in agreement.

When the session ends, we mill around long enough to wish each other well. Several of us say in unison, "See you next time," triggering a momentary awkward uncertainty that is countered with savvy hand shaking and pats on shoulders. To my utter surprise, suddenly all feels right in the world. The group's collective kindness has transported me far beyond personal concerns. Despite being an inveterate nonjoiner, I belong, am part of a shared community, one of a dozen complete strangers whole-heartedly rooting for each other.

Although anxious to leave, I am already looking forward to the next class. My skeptical prove-it-to-me medical background argues that the good feeling is nothing more than a rush of exercise-induced endorphins, but I know better. I am seeing humanity at its best.

On the way home, a young woman in a shiny red Range Rover cuts me off on the freeway. I honk; she sneers and gives me the finger. We are enemies.

There is an insistent knock at the rear window to my mind; my rehab class partners are trying to get my attention. Shifting gears, I try to imagine how I would feel if the Range Rover lady were suddenly relegated to my rehab class, or

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worse. But it is too late. My mood has soured and once again I am a solitary traveler in a hostile world.

Several months later, after having uneventfully completed rehab, I often find myself missing my group. The initial exhilaration of their camaraderie has faded in the light of ordinary days with ordinary pleasures and concerns. Even so, there remains a quiet undercurrent of hope—not just for our small group, but potentially for all of us. Maybe, given the right circumstances, humans are capable of mutual respect and well-wishing. As supporting evidence, my mind offers newsreel images

of World War II victory parades and reminds me of the sense of solidarity most of us felt immediately following the 9/11 attacks.

And here is the rub. My mind balks at conjuring up such feelings on a grand scale during ordinary times. My personal rehab experience plus my reading of history remind me that a close proximity to death and annihilation is necessary to rise above personal differences. If so, here is the scariest of questions: How bad must the world get before we can rise above the mutual antagonisms that blight our times and threaten our future?