

Readers' Forum

==== One More Day ====

On April 18, 1995, I developed severe problem of coronary heart disease for which I had to undergo coronary angioplasty on May 10. The procedure was complicated by the rupture of the inner side of my coronary artery on the angioplasty table, necessitating emergency introduction of metal stent in the coronary artery. I survived, thanks to the loving care by my wife, Rani, and my cardiologist Dr Bidwai. I recently completed the first year of my new lease of life. How did this close brush with death affect me? I share this personal story with you because it may have something for you as a person.

My grandmother survived till the age of 107 years. My parents, in their late seventies, are healthy and very active. I have been working in the voluntary sector in rural and tribal areas for the last 18 years. Hence, I had always assumed that I was immune to the 'diseases of affluence' — diabetes, hypertension, and coronary artery disease. These were somebody else's problems. I was sure to live at least till the age of 80 without suffering from any major disease.

I developed diabetes at the age of 42. Subsequently when I developed severe angina on April 18, 1995, my first reaction was of disbelief and dismay. "How could this happen to me? Of all people, to *me*? Why *me*?" It was a terrible agony — to face that I

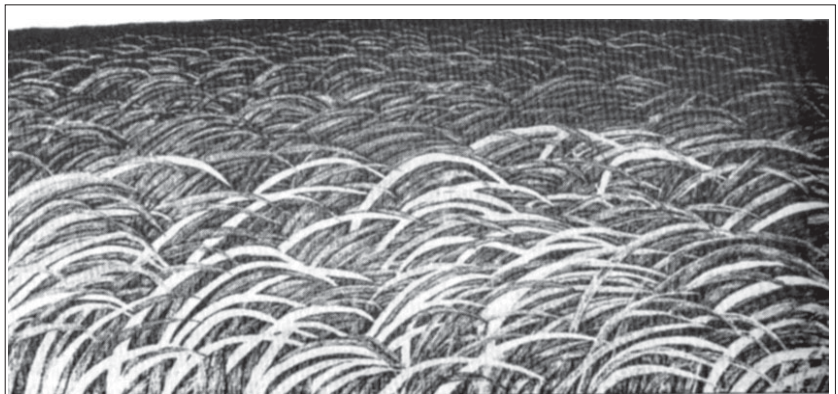
may die at any moment. "O God! I haven't lived my life yet! What about Rani and our two sons, Anand and Amrut? How will my parents feel? What about my work and about the movement against alcohol? What will happen to these? How can I depart so soon? So abruptly?"

I was completely unprepared to face death. All these years I had taken life for granted. Lived very little. Real life was yet to begin. I always postponed it with the thought that I was only 30, then 35 or 40 or 44 years old. I had cared little about my health. The risk of disease and death was remote, though I always thought, "I shall start taking care of my health soon someday."

I was a fool! It was only after my disease and encounter with death that I started consciously collecting information and reading, and I realised that people from the Indian subcontinent have the highest risk of diabetes and coronary heart disease, more than any other people in the world. Once they adopt a sedentary

middle class lifestyle, Indians rapidly develop diabetes, high cholesterol level, central obesity, hypertension, and coronary artery disease (the so-called 'Syndrome X'). The genetic propensity of the race as a whole, decreased physical activity, a lot of fat in the typical Indian diet, and the mental tensions and stress of modern life — all together have made the Indian middle class fall into the highest risk group. And if you look around, Indian males are getting heart attacks and are dying in their early thirties and forties in very large numbers. I was one such example. Life was slipping away from my hands and I was lying helplessly in bed.

While I was still on my hospital bed, a book arrived for me; Dean Ornish's book titled *Reversing Heart Disease*. It was as if I had a tryst with destiny, since I had ordered this book three months earlier for my own reading as a medical person. It arrived when I needed it as a patient. This book really gave me hope and courage to pull through. It gave a concrete



programme of personal health care with theoretical explanations and convincing scientific evidence which substantiated the claimed benefits.

When I was discharged from the hospital, I was free from angina, but I did not want recurrence. Hence, in the past one year, I have diligently followed Ornish's programme. It consists of a rigorous control of fat intake, limited to less than 25 grams of oil per day, completely stopping the intake of sugar and animal fat (including butter or *ghee*), switching to fat-free skimmed milk, and increasing vegetables, fruits, beans, germinated whole grains, and pulses in the diet. It also includes a daily brisk walk for half an hour in the forest, a half hour of *yogasanas* and *pranayam*, 15 minutes of meditation, and deep relaxation through *shavasan* twice a day.

For me this was a desperate attempt to survive. At the same time it was going back to my roots of Gandhi's ashram where I spent my childhood. The lifestyle proposed in Ornish's therapy programme was very similar to the one practised in Gandhiji's ashram, which I had abandoned for the last 25 years, especially after I entered medical college and adopted an unhealthy lifestyle consisting of no exercise, a diet rich in refined carbohydrates and fat, and a good deal of anxiety and stress that comes with trying to achieve things. Now I was experiencing the negative consequences of this lifestyle at the age of 44.

I made a special effort to learn *yogasanas*, *pranayam* and meditation by attending training workshops, and I collected and read many books on yoga and meditation (The best are B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* and *Light on Pranayama*; Vimala Thakar's *Meditation in Daily Life*, Vinoba's



Mahaguhame Pravesh). In addition, an inner message constantly spurred me on — “Today may be the last day of your life. You don't have an unlimited amount of time.”

After waking up every day, I used to stand in the garden in the early morning and feel a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of one more day. It was a gift, a grace. I had not earned it. As I stood there watching the trees and the sky, and feeling the breeze, I used to feel a deep sense of oneness.

I got this feeling for the first time on the coronary angioplasty table. During an attempt to dilate a difficult obstruction in my coronary artery, the inner layer of the vessel gave way and there was a tear, making everybody in the room gasp. I could see on the screen what was happening in my left coronary artery. I knew what it meant. “This could be the end of my life. This could be my last heart beat.” For a few moments I was intensely anxious and frightened. And then, suddenly from somewhere, two streams of thought started flowing through my mind. One was from the *Ishavasyopanishad*:

*Oum, Poornamada,
Poornamidam,
Poornat Poornmudachyate,
Poornasya Poornamadaya,
Poornamevavshishyate!
Oum Shanti, Shanti, Shantihi.*

(This universe is a whole, that power which made it is also a whole. It is infinite. There is neither growth nor destruction, it is eternal. It will always remain. Let peace be there.)

I felt a tremendous assurance.

The second stream was from modern physics: “The universe originated when the Big Bang released infinite energy, which solidified in to elementary particles — electrons, protons, etc. Everything was composed of these particles or energy. My body, my existence was also one such combination. Even if I died, the atoms would remain — albeit in different combinations. I was born with the Big Bang and I would be here eternally in the form of these particles. I was indestructible. So what was death? Merely a recombination of the particles!” My fear literally melted. I was ready for dissolution.

During next three hours of emergency repair of my coronary artery, my doctors were anxiously working but I was absolutely at peace. On the fifth day, I was discharged from the hospital — alive and intact!

This experience sparked an urge and inquiry which I have tried to pursue in last year, along with my efforts to regain physical health. I've

read the Geeta, Ishavasyopanishad, (translations and interpretations by Vinobaji), J. Krishnamurti and Vimala Thakar's books, and am finally re-reading Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography.

A simple statement in Gandhiji's autobiography suddenly had a new meaning for me. At one place, he writes, "God is not a person, it is a principle." The hesitation about accepting God in some form of a deity or image was suddenly resolved. If God is a principle, what principle? At another place Gandhiji says, "Truth is God." If the principle of truth itself is God, then it is something which can be searched for, experienced, and realised. The truth is everywhere; hence 'God' is everywhere. This line of thought helped me overcome my intellectual reservation about 'God'. It also provided a harmonious meeting of spiritual and scientific inquiries. Both are seeking the truth. I probably had a faint glimmer of this truth on my

angioplasty table. Where am I at the completion of one year?

I am physically healthy. I have lost 10 kg of weight, my cholesterol level came down from 240 mg to 140 mg percent (nobody who had a cholesterol level below 150 mg got a heart attack in the 40 years of the famous Framingham study.) Hence the desirable safe level of cholesterol is not 240 mg as commonly believed, but 150 mg), and my blood sugar control improved. I can walk, run, or cycle without any complaints. My exercise testing and stress thallium scanning was recently done at Bombay, and all tests were normal. My coronaries are open!

Mentally, I am more at peace, emotionally stable, and enjoying each day of life more than I ever did. There is an intense urge to live each moment more fully. This moment is the truth. I am gradually realising that nothing more than 'this moment' ever happens in life.

A new interest is surging in me — an interest in yoga, and an urge to explore and experience the universal truth through meditation.

Though I continue to do the same work as earlier, with the same vigour, I feel less work pressure and tension. The restless anxiety that 'something' should happen, that I should reach 'somewhere', is much less. I have nowhere else to reach.

I realise that what I went through was not a personal experience alone, but a growing social need. Chronic degenerative diseases have come to India in a mega-epidemic form, and our society needs to learn to prevent and cope with them. This is a new challenge for public health. A renewed holistic way of life which is harmonious with health, with human needs, with the environment, and which prevents heart disease, needs to be learnt and lived.

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