

## On Personal Health II: From Fear to Rage

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This thought is an update on “On Personal Health,” which I wrote back in August of 2007. In that writing, I underscored the importance of physical wellbeing and discussed long-standing health issues that have affected the nature and quality of my life. I was going to put the adverb “negatively” before the word “affected” in this last sentence and then realized that the effects of the health issues for me haven’t been completely negative; they have been positive as well as negative. I’ve decided that everything that happens to us in life carries with it positive possibilities. That’s a qualification on Nietzsche’s maxim that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. I don’t think it necessarily make you stronger, but if you play your cards right, it might. As I’ve reflected on my life more systematically these past nine months or so, it’s become clear that, for the most part without fully realizing it, I have found ways to capitalize on the positive possibilities in the negative circumstances and events in my life. That has been a gratifying realization, and I’m committed to continue doing that. With that said, however, my health issues have held me back in significant ways throughout my life.

At the end of the August thought, after sketching out the health improvement program I intended to implement, I wrote, “I’ll give it all I have while not shortchanging the rest of my life, monitor the results and change the program when it is advisable, and see where I am in January and report it here.” Well, this is March not January--March 11th, to be exact. I’m late with this report because I didn’t get enough done on the program I had set out for myself. Besides being disappointing, it has intrigued me, because I tend to doggedly pursue the accomplishment of goals once I get clear about them. From the vantage point of March, indeed, those were health improvements that needed to get done. But to my surprise and consternation, for many weeks after that August commitment I achieved got far too little. Around November 1st or so, I put it in gear, at least to some extent, and in important ways that has paid off for me. But I didn’t work on my health with the intensity the writer Yukio Mishima put into his own physical transformation (see the thought, “On Yukio Mishima”), which he described as doing “for

all I was worth.” I’ve failed by the Mishima standard, and that was the standard I set for myself.

A big job for me the past few weeks has been to figure out why I didn’t keep the commitment I made to myself to match up with the Mishima standard in this health area. I am interested in why people—not just me--don’t do what they know would make their lives better. I’ve concluded that it isn’t so much that we don’t know what to do with reference to the personal issues we confront. Rather, in most cases we know what to do, or at least we have a pretty good idea what will make things better for ourselves and those in our lives, and we possess the wherewithal to do it--but we don’t carry through. We are literally self-defeating.

With my own failures—or partial failures, I achieved some significant things with regard to my health--I’ve reached an explanation that feels right about what got in the way of success to the level of my standard. The past three weeks or so have been qualitatively on a higher, plane in all areas of my life than it was during the last months of 2007 and early 2008, and I attribute that, in good part anyway, to the “Oh, I get it” posture I am in now. I use the word “posture” because this intellectual understanding, this cognition, is now a physical sensation that pervades my body. It is part of who I am as a total being, part of the me that directs my life.

It has become clear to me these past months that part of bringing about personal change, physical or any other, is getting an accurate understanding of what is going on--an explanation that truly fits reality, not just one that makes conceptual sense or is palatable. A big handicap for me in moving forward on this health issue (and generally in my life, everything is connected) was that I wasn’t grounded enough in the truth about me. All clichés are true, at least partially anyway, including the one about truth setting you free. Truth alone won’t set you free—it also takes hard work—but the truth about yourself is a necessary part of personal change, and of achieving results in any area.

One thing that hasn’t changed since August, and that gives me hope, is I never quit trying to do things I consider to be important. I want to be healthier. I want to feel better. I want to look better. I want to live better. I want to get this health project done right. I’ll keep trying until I succeed at it or die, whichever comes first. What I write here is part of a process of regrouping and going at it again.

I hope what I write helps others who are confronting the same or comparable issues.

I'll begin with some successes I've had since August:

I wrote about taking charge of my health. To a gratifying degree--the way I would phrase it now—I've taken responsibility for my health. I've read books and articles on the topic. (A book I just finished: Frank Condon, editor, *How to Go Further: A Guide to Simple Organic Living* (Toronto: Warwick Publishing, 2005).) I've monitored my body, and in one key instance, which I'll describe in a bit, I did something about what I observed, what I experienced, and, I believe, benefited significantly as a consequence. These days, I'm on my own health case, as it were. I make use of health care providers, physicians and others, but I don't depend on them to know everything that is going on with me or that I need to do, and I don't assume they are more that perfunctorily invested in what happens to me. And they work for me, not the other way around: I don't any longer just show up in somebody's office at appointment time and, in effect, go limp and let them do whatever they are of a mind to do. My contact with health professionals is integrated into my overall effort to get in the best health possible and stay that way; that's the meaning it has for me. It is instrumental to getting and staying healthy. I have an agenda for every health care contact. I bring a three-by-five card with a list of concerns and questions, and I don't leave the office until those matters get proper attention. I solicit providers' thoughts and suggestions, but I'm the one that decides what I am going to do about them.

In August I had lipids problems: my cholesterol and triglycerides were high. I have had this problem, and taken medication for it (Lipitor, 20 milligrams a day), for many years. The lipids issue is of particular concern because thirteen years ago I had a heart attack. I wanted to get better lipids numbers, and to lower the amount of Lipitor I take, or get off it entirely.

In late January, tests showed my lipids numbers had turned around to the point that they are now exemplary. My primary care physician described the improvement—which included a higher HDL count (good cholesterol)—as “remarkable.” However, he recommended that I continue with Lipitor at a reduced dosage for a

few months just to be on the safe side, and I'm doing that. I'm scheduled to see him again in late July. I'm hoping at that time to be able to get off the medication completely.

What accounts for the greatly improved lipids numbers? I'll list what I did that I think helped (that I'm aware of, anyway—perhaps I did things that were helpful that I wasn't consciously aware of doing). Before I do that, however, I want to get the disclaimer on the record that I am speaking from a layman's perspective. Obviously, before trying anything I mention, check with your physician. I took a scoop of Metamucil a day; two flaxseed oil tablets a day (two grams total); and I ate oatmeal for breakfast every morning. The only other thing I can think of that I did differently, I was on small doses of blood pressure medication—Lisinopril. Within the last week, I reviewed research that seems to indicate that Lisinopril helps with lipids—but again, don't trust me on this. My dramatic change—for example, my triglycerides went from 300 to 100—and the fact that Lisinopril was part of my daily ritual when it hadn't been before has led me to conclude that it makes sense to talk to my physician about Lisinopril's impact on lipids, something I haven't done. Also, I suspect that staying away from sugar, losing excess weight, and lowering stress helps with lipids, but I haven't been successful enough with any of that to attribute the greatly improved lipids numbers to one or more of those factors.

A third success area, I got my house and car in shape. I wrote in August: "My surroundings affect my mental health and my mental health affects my physical health." My experience since August appears to support the truth of that assertion. "Paint the inside of the house," I wrote. I did that. "Get a fireplace." I did that. "Clean the carpet." I did that. I purchased a big Bissell machine, which works great. "Get some good pictures on the wall, and some sculpture." I got the pictures, but after looking for sculpture, I decided it best to move a large clay pot to a prominent spot in living room. I feel great about the pot where it is now. "Keep the place clean." I do. "Healthy plants." I've really gone at this. I feel so much better at home now: more centered, calmer, more restful, in what feels like a haven for the first time. "Wash and wax the car." I did that and I feel much better in the car than in August. Indeed, our lives are all of a piece: everything affects everything else, and

we need to be aware of how what may seem disparate dimensions of our lives are in fact interconnected, and how each one affects all the others. In this regard, while it wasn't in the August list, I've greatly improved my wardrobe and personal grooming. Much more now, I honor myself in the way I dress and care for my body, new clothes and cared-for nails and careful shaving and shined shoes and so on, and it has made a positive difference. It's all connected and it all adds up.

Those are the successes. In the other areas I discussed in the August thought—again, I'll mention them as I go along—I either made no progress or such little progress that it didn't amount to much. I think I've come upon one major factor that accounts for that: anxiety; or another name for it, fear. I'm anxious. All the time, including right now. I'm afraid, right now. And this has been the case since I was a very young child. My conscious awareness of the fear rises and falls, but at some level, now I realize, anxiety, fear, is always there and has always been there. And not just in every conscious moment. Since August, I have been recording my dreams, and it has become clear that I'm often afraid in my sleep too. To illustrate, a recent dream:

A young man and I are walking rapidly toward an airport terminal. He is about 27, hefty, taller than I am, curly brown hair, glasses, a conservative wrinkled suit, studious looking. I'm late for my plane and hurrying along at an increased rate, but he maintains stride with me. I want to get away from him. He makes me uneasy. "I have to go on ahead and catch my plane," I tell him, and walk even faster and he falls about thirty feet behind. I am afraid of him. I hear him yelling angrily and look back and see him rushing toward me. I stop, freeze in place. I can't make out what he is shouting at me. He is mad at me about something. As he comes near me I smell what appears to be gunpowder and hear a hissing noise. Still shouting, he engulfs me in his arms. I am immobile and feel helpless. I don't speak. The smell is stronger. The hiss is louder. He has a bomb, I say to myself. I wake up in a cold sweat.

I have concluded that more than anything, or at least as much as anything—I am trying not to oversimplify matters--the health issues

I experience are due to the pervasive fear I experience and my attempts to cope with it.

In October I became aware of an ache in my groin area—always there, but varying in intensity—and a virtually constant urge to urinate that was particularly noticeable during nightly sleep. My father died of prostate cancer, and I was worried about prostate cancer. In mid-December I finally made an appointment with a urologist to check out the situation. I realize that contradicts my claim to being on my own health case. Basically I am these days, but here was an exception; I should have seen a urologist sooner. I got scared, and I did what I have too-frequently done in my life when scared: put my head in the sand rather than deal directly with the issue. The urologist appointment was scheduled for mid-January.

The urologist told me my prostate was OK, and that he thought the problems I was experiencing—the ache, the frequent urination--were due to muscular tension in the groin area. I took that to mean that I carried stress in that area—that was the word I used for it, stress. The urologist referred me to a woman who uses biofeedback techniques to help people loosen muscular tension in the groin area. I made an appointment with her for late January.

The biofeedback specialist devoted the first session to familiarizing me with the biofeedback process and discussing my situation. What became clear to me during that hour was that stress isn't the best word for my problem—*anxiety*, or *fear*, is. If you are in a constant state of fear, that can lead to an aching groin. And it also became clear during our talk that my problem isn't just in my groin but rather it pervades my body. My father's prostate cancer death had sensitized me to the groin discomfort, but the reality is I ache all over: my shoulders, my neck, my arms and legs, every inch of me from head to toe, and that means right now as I type this.

In the August thought I talked about my life-long problem with all-but-overwhelming fatigue—I'm "bone tired" all the time is how I would describe it. The biofeedback woman pointed out that whatever else might contribute to the fatigue (I suspect refined carbohydrates is a cause), being in a "fear or flight" mode over extended periods of time can result in profound fatigue. If you are "on guard" all the time, eventually you run out of gas, simple as that.

The anxiety angle makes sense, feels strongly “Yes, this is it; or at least yes enough to move forward with anxiety as the—or at least a--conceptual handle for understanding and dealing with my health issues. I don’t feel stressed out; that’s not it, or not quite it. And I don’t feel depressed either. Basically I’m an upbeat person. But the word fear fits me. I’m afraid, and I’ve been afraid since I was a very small child. That has been a constant reality at some level of my awareness since as early in my life as I can remember.

What am I afraid of, was I afraid of? There were some things, some people, I was afraid of as a child, and with good reason, and I don’t feel the need to go into that here. While the circumstances in my childhood years have passed obviously, I believe the fear that they generated in me, and the thoughts and images associated with it, has persisted and accompanied me through my life, and that it has contributed to the creation of fear-inducing circumstances and events in my adult life.

I speculate that what happens to children and what they are told directly and indirectly about themselves and their place in the world remains within them as an organic, physically felt, inner reality into adulthood, and just possibly for the rest of their lives.

As young children--before the age of twelve, say--we experience the world directly, without filter. Whatever we are told about ourselves, explicitly and tacitly, we accept as true, and it becomes part of the being we experience as us. That “truth”—it doesn’t have quotes for us; to us it is a fact--is stored as a diffuse-but-discernable, felt-but-not-completely-articulate, sense (again, I am emphasizing that it is primarily a physical sensation, organic) of who we are in the world and a guide to our conduct and responses to what happens to us.

After the age of twelve or so, we can use language and ideas to mediate external reality. We can put something between ourselves and what comes at us and thus ward it off, deflect it, re-interpret it, put it in a context such that we aren’t diminished by it. To put it simply, we acquire the ability to talk to ourselves: “What you are saying is not true of me.” “What you are doing is wrong.” “I don’t deserve this.” “You have no right to do this.” “I don’t have to do what you say.” “I don’t have to be who you say I am.” “I can do something about what is happening.” And so on. As young children, however, our brains aren’t developed enough to give things conceptual meaning in this way, to defend ourselves in this

way. Added to this lack of a, call it, cognitive defense, as children we are small and dependent and weak. We aren't physically capable of protecting ourselves. We can't fight back, we aren't big enough.

Given this circumstance, a child can internalize some harmful messages, such as: You aren't wanted. You don't matter. Everyone is more worthy than you, and it doesn't matter how capable you are or how good you are or what you accomplish. No one has any responsibility to care about you, or respect you, or do anything for you, or to treat you fairly or respectfully, or to look out for you, including defend you. Anyone that wants to hurt you may do so at any time for any reason, it's what you deserve, and there is nothing you can, or should, do about it. In fact, you should be nice and servile and entertaining to those who negate you, boost them up, because they deserve to be happy and feel good about themselves; how you feel, bad or good, and what you do and what happens to you, who cares. Plus, if you please people they might decide to endure you rather than scorn and reject you, and even toss you a crumb every now and again, and that's the best arrangement you can expect to achieve in your life.

Needless to say, a person who has these inner realities accompanying them through life is likely to feel alone and different and vulnerable, and very anxious. People who appear alone and different and vulnerable and anxious, who emit those messages, who embody them, who communicate directly and indirectly that they deserve neglect, derision, exclusion, and cruelty, that they have it coming, and that they will accept it and do nothing in defense of themselves, and more, will actually reward the people who do it, are targets in whatever the context--school, work, a social situation, whatever it is. And when they are, indeed, attacked, as can be readily predicted, that reinforces their "target," "punching bag" self-perception and their fear.

Living with that inner reality and the external circumstances and events goes a long way in explaining hiding out with junk food and spectator sports and television until it is time for a nap or bed. It explains smiling and placating and fawning and serving and performing and self-deprecating and deferring ones eyes and pitching oneself beneath others. It explains dressing in old clothes and living in old houses and driving beat-up cars, and staying on the periphery and trying to be invisible. Those are ways to nurture oneself (no one else will bother) and get some pleasure and relief

and avoid attack--I'll feel a bit better for a while, and I'll lessen the chances of bleeding today. And it explains the failure to fight back against the ones who cause the bleeding when it occurs, including showing contempt for them or simply getting away from them.

Sad as it is, unfortunate as it is, it all makes sense. What else can a person do? Well, there is one thing a person—I--can do: become Fenris. In Norse mythology, Fenris is the child of Loki, the foster-brother of Odin, and symbolized as a wolf. Fenris breaks the chains forged by dwarves that fettered it and becomes the manifestation of unrestrained strength and rage. The attacked becomes the attacker.

How does someone become a Fenris wolf?

He becomes aware--present not deadened, not numb--and physically healthy and lean and strong and graceful. Whatever contributes to that comes into his life, and anything that detracts in the slightest from that goes out of his life.

He expels the negative conditioning about who he is and what he deserves in life that he has allowed to control him. He replaces it with "Fenris" thoughts and images and self-conceptions: those of a proud and valid force of nature.

He gives of himself only to people who are willing to value and be worthy of Fenris. Others he sheds or ignores or viciously tears to pieces.

Most of all, he lets the rage be there, all of it, for all that has happened and all that is happening. He replaces fear with rage.