

THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED TO ME

BY RALPH KEYES

Toward the end of what she calls her "brat" phase, actress Debra Winger was thrown from the back of a pickup truck and suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Her 19th year was spent in and out of hospitals because of paralysis and damage to an optic nerve. She almost died. Then, as she got better, Winger resolved to pursue the dream she had always considered impossible: becoming an actress. Seven years later she won raves for her performances in *Urban Cowboy*, *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Terms of Endearment*. *Terms* was voted Best Picture of 1983 and won her an Oscar nomination. Looking back on her nearly fatal accident, the actress has called it "a huge hunk of grace that propelled me into doing what I wanted to do."

Walker Percy always wanted to be a writer. Instead, he took the more "practical" route and went to medical school. In the midst of his residency, he contracted tuberculosis. During two years in a sanitarium, he had a lot of time to think. What Percy decided was that he didn't want to spend the rest of his life practicing medicine, and he began writing the essays and novels that have won him critical acclaim and major awards.

Just before moviemaker George Lucas was to graduate from high school with a barely passing average, he ran his tiny Fiat into a walnut tree. By the time he reached the hospital, Lucas had lost so

much blood that doctors could barely detect a pulse. He could easily have died, and Lucas realized it. The feeling that his life had been given back to him motivated this indifferent high-school student to attend college, then film school and finally to produce the movies that have made him famous: *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *American Graffiti* and more.

Before an auto accident interrupted her life, *Dallas* star Victoria Principal was studying to be a chiropractor. Jacqueline Susann did not begin writing her best-selling novels like *Valley of the Dolls* until after she had lost a breast to cancer at the age of 44.

Until the day her heart stopped beating,

Why do so many people successfully turn their lives around after a brush with death? Is there anything we can learn from them?

Connie Kennard of Wichita, Kansas, never thought of herself as anything but a wife and mother. She seldom left her home alone and didn't even write her own checks. But in 1966, at age 26, she suffered cardiac arrest while undergoing a back operation and, for the next four minutes, was technically dead. Doctors were eventually able to restore her heartbeat, but she had to spend seven weeks in the hospital. During this time, her life began to feel different. "I just felt special to myself," she says. "I felt sure there was some reason I was hanging around." Although she had a beautician's license, Connie decided to go to college. Years later, she ran for Wichita's City Commission and went on to become mayor of her city for two terms. Today she works for the Center for Urban Studies at Wichita State University and is writing her first book. She doubts whether any of it would have happened had her heart not stopped for a few minutes nearly two decades ago. Without that, "I would still be home baking chocolate-chip cookies," she says, laughing, and adds, "Of course, I baked some yesterday." Then she grows serious: "It just seemed as if someone was trying to tell me something," she says.

Such stories do not make any dramatic new psychological points, but it is always interesting to hear the different ways in which a brush with death can enhance an individual's life. / turn to page 15



PAUL TSONGAS

The ex-senator recalls a friend writing: "No one on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'"



BETTY ROLLIN

credits her disease for a new life, new husband. "I think cancer made me nicer," she says.



DEBRA WINGER

describes her near-fatal accident as a "huge hunk of grace that made me do what I wanted to do."

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Last year Paul Tsongas did not run for reelection to the U.S. Senate after learning he had a treatable but incurable form of cancer known as lymphoma. His illness had given him a sense of "urgency," explained Tsongas, and made him want to spend less time on politics and more with his family. A friend had written him, "No one on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'"

A changed attitude toward time is one of the commonest reactions. Over and over again survivors describe one characteristic of their new outlook as a profound awareness that life is too short to waste on fourth, third or even second priorities. Yet, as in Senator Tsongas's experience, this new perspective doesn't necessarily translate into a rush to get everything done while there's still time. While some survivors speed up the tempo of their lives, others slow it down. Balance is the common goal.

Consider Betty Rollin's bout with breast cancer, which began ten years ago. Because of her illness, Rollin left a successful but hectic career in network journalism for the more relaxed pace of writing books, including *First You Cry*, which was about her mastectomy, and *Last Wish*, which is sure to be one of this year's most-talked-about books. Recently, she turned down a new offer of a full-time job in broadcasting because it isn't the way Rollin wants to spend her time. She prefers a life with room for new interests, for cooking, for friends, for chatting on the phone. "I enjoy that," she says. "In the old days it would have been, 'Can't talk now. Gotta go!'"

As with many ambitious people, Rollin's life used to be dominated by what she did on the way to doing something else. Now she often lingers. "Before cancer," she says, "I had a very exciting life, a full life. But it just didn't have the quality. It wasn't even close."

Perhaps another common response of brush-with-death survivors is a new way of looking at the people in their lives. Rollin says that having cancer motivated her to end a tolerable first marriage and begin a second one that she describes as "blissful."

A second, more recent mastectomy has not only left her "symmetrical" but has also reaffirmed her sense that illness has contributed to the quality of her life. Unlike an auto accident, Rollin points out, a disease that could recur at any moment forces you to live each day as fully as possible. Cancer, according to Betty Rollin, is both the worst and the best thing that ever happened to her: the worst, obviously, because it could shorten her life; the best, because the fear that it could recur makes her live better.

"I think cancer made me nicer," Rollin suggests. "Not that I was mean before. But I think when you've been scared to the bottom of your toes you're more sympathetic to people, especially people who have had such an experience. I'm more empathetic now."

But do we have to go through such shattering experiences to get our own lives in order? According to two recent studies of people who were facing death, there are valuable lessons we can learn by listening to others who have gone through such crises. UCLA psychologist Shelley E. Taylor spent two years studying 78 mastectomy veterans to determine how they were coping emotionally. Taylor had assumed the worst for these women, but she was wrong. "Those who were ennobled," she found, "far outnumbered those who were devastated." More than half of them told Taylor and her colleagues that they felt better emotionally than before their mastectomies. The shock of facing death had made them more self-aware, better able to enjoy each moment and to keep things in perspective. Some had made tangible changes in their lives: One secretary even quit her job to write.

One of the profoundest results of her study was the impact it had on Taylor herself. Most of the mothers she interviewed told her that having cancer made them realize how much their children meant to them. The story was repeated so often that it forced Taylor to question her own priorities. She and her husband had been married for 13 years and had more or less decided not to have children. Then, after one more interview with a "tough-cookie" type who only softened when discussing her three children, Shelley and her husband decided that

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day to start a family. Today she is the mother of a three-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy. She's given up the laboratory research that used to dominate her career and prefers people-oriented projects, such as the breast-cancer-patient study.

This 38-year-old psychologist has tried to keep the lessons of her research prominent in her own life, especially the one about priorities. "You really have to keep this lesson in front of your mind at all times," she says.

"I was unprepared for the amount of thought they gave to the meaning of life and the eloquence of their expression," she says of the women she studied. "It had never occurred to me that life itself could be so enriched by a life-threatening event."

What these survivors are telling us is that a key ingredient in enriching any life is the active fear of dying. At some level we all fear death, but this fear is usually so deeply buried that only an accident, an illness or the onset of old age will force it to the surface. And, while it may not be pleasant to contemplate such things, realizing that our days are numbered can force us to stop and smell the flowers. A reasonable fear of dying, analyst Otto Rank used to say, can invigorate life. And, in *The View From Eighty*, Malcolm Cowley reports that even in old age death can be "a stimulus to more intense living."

Of course this is not true of everyone who suddenly faces the prospect of death. During interviews with 115 individuals, many of whom were dealing with such life-threatening events as heart attacks, accidents and cancer, Robert Veninga, professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota, found a great number who were distraught and angry about the turn their lives had taken. But, like Shelley Taylor, Veninga found many who said they actually felt happier than before their misfortune. The difference between the two groups hinged on the amount of unfinished business in their lives. Those who felt frustrated by unresolved problems were agitated at the thought of dying on such a note. By contrast, those who were motivated by their crisis to confront personal problems later referred to their brush with death as "the best thing that ever happened to me." What intrigued Veninga was the way resolving misunderstandings could improve a patient's prognosis. One woman with cancer developed a better outlook after getting permission to return home, where she left letters for her husband and each child in a desk drawer. In other cases, the relief of resolving old problems actually improved the health of some patients. But, even when death appeared inevitable, the mood upswings were remarkable.

From the outside, this response to the prospect of death sounds preposterous.

Nor are those who have faced their own deaths Pollyannaish enough to be perfectly happy with their afflictions. In his memoir, *Heading Home*, Paul Tsongas writes that, if he had the power to revise history so that he never contracted lymphoma, he would do it. But this former Massachusetts senator hesitates before saying this. He has made many changes for the better in his life. It took cancer to make Tsongas realize and pursue what makes him happiest: a life built around his family. Now a lawyer in private practice, Tsongas says he dreads the possibility that this newfound awareness might go into remission along with his illness. As he writes, "My great worry is that I will lose my current sense of values and perspective. . . . If I'm not ill for a long time, will I go back to the mind-set I had before . . . ? I pray not. I want always to feel as I do now."

Can normally healthy people really learn anything from these lessons? Both Shelley Taylor and Robert Veninga think so.

Veninga finds himself lingering longer with his students, trying not to rush from one project into the next and making time to walk in the evenings. "I have a strong desire now not to live my life in the future," he explains. "Every morning I ask myself, How am I going to live this day so that if it ends it will not be an occasion for tragedy but for celebration?" ■