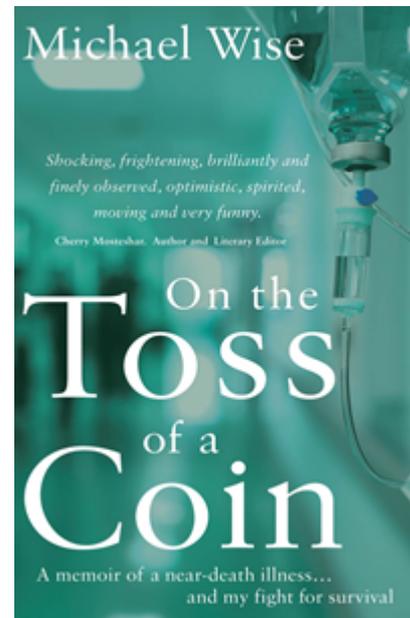


An incredible memoir of a near-death illness and a fight for survival

Michael Wise – On the Toss of a coin



Here is a brief version of Michael's incredible story

Reflections

What Has The Effect Of My Journey Through Illness Been?

I had sepsis: causing toxic shock that shut down my organs nearly killing me.

On 21st January 2009, deadly bacteria invaded my body and rapidly multiplied, spread and infected my blood. I had sepsis. The effects were devastating, causing toxic shock that shut down my organs in quick succession, nearly killing me.

I had been happily living my life as husband, parent, grandfather and successful dental surgeon, without any idea of what was about to happen when this took over my body in a matter of hours. I had to be rushed to an Intensive Care Unit where I was in a coma and unresponsive for ten days.

My heart was damaged, my kidneys failed and gangrene started to spread up my legs. At one stage, the family was called in to say goodbye, but I beat the odds and survived. I slowly regained consciousness and left intensive care after two weeks. However, I remained on the critical list for several weeks and was left with total, irreversible failure of my kidneys. This was initially managed by dialysis, followed fourteen months later by a kidney transplant from a live donor.

My journey through illness and recovery has been filled with hope, challenges, superb medical care, an abundance of love and human kindness. In a matter of a few days, I was taken from being an active, fit

human being to the very edge of the line dividing me from life and death. Then, with considerable struggle, I once again became a vital, pretty fit, active, thinking person who loves his new lease of life, can take pleasure in his family and can participate in and take delight from life and what it has to offer. I see many things with clearer vision and have been given back not just my life but also the ability to live my life; these are two very different things.

Did the journey change my need for belief in a god?

Has this experience resulted in an epiphany, completely changing my view of life and the way that I live? Well, I have not had a sudden (nor slow) rekindling of faith. I had no need for an external supernatural power to help me through the most momentous, negative experience of my life. It was my inner strength, gained from all life's experiences combined with the external support of family, friends and the medical profession that saw me through. We have to take personal responsibility for our reactions. We can spend our lives bemoaning our lot, being angry, sinking into self-pity, blaming others and the injustices of life. Of course these feelings are natural and should not be repressed but what really matters is how we, our internal selves, respond and react to the world around us, the people we contact and to the vast array of circumstances in which we find ourselves. I do however recognise and respect the need for many humans to have a god figure which they believe will protect them from harm or will explain why they suffer.

A helpful parable

Many years ago, I was very influenced by a parable which has remained with me and become even more significant as a result of my illness. "If a jug is filled with rocks, there will be space between the rocks for pebbles. Between these, there will be space for sand followed by some water. If on the other hand, the jug is first filled with the water, there will be no room for the rocks. If the jug represents the finite limits of time, whether this be for a day a week a month a year or longer, the important aspects of our lives, namely the rocks, should be placed into it before anything else. If the jug is filled with the water, sand or pebbles, namely the trivia, unimportant or wasteful activities, there will be no space for the rocks." I often visualise this jug and probably try even harder than before to ensure that the rocks take up most of the space. What are the most important aspects of my life? Am I wasting the precious time that is left to me, not knowing how long or short it may be? The image has been a great help to me.

Some changes to my life

Of course, my experience has precipitated many changes, some small and some large, nearly all for the better. It has changed the way that I live. It has certainly reinforced my view of what is important in my life but this has been a reinforcement of existing values not a sudden realisation of new ones. The happiness, well-being and fulfilment of my family is a prime core value and I frequently reflect upon how fortunate I am to have a loving, caring and close family unit consisting of people with the moral and ethical values that are so important to me. My relationships with my immediate family and close friends are stronger, more meaningful and fulfilling, as if a spotlight is shining on the areas of life that really matter, these should be cultivated and enjoyed.

The effect of a close brush with death

I think that it would be impossible to be as near to death as I was, with the subsequent long road to recovery, and not be affected by a realisation of my own mortality. I do not fear death, although it would be stupid to say that I have no fear of a painful or disorientated demise. Of course, when the time arrives I would hope to slip into a quiet and peaceful nothingness, surrounded by my family, with the ability to tell them how much I love them. My experience has, however, left me with one principal fear of my own death. It is the effect that it will have on my wife, if she outlives me, and on the rest of the family. Having felt some of the pain of their anguish, which resulted from the early stages of my illness in particular, I have no desire to put them through that kind of pain again. However, realistically, I recognise that we have no choice in when, through natural causes, illness, violence or accidents, we or our loved ones die and in what order. But maybe that is not so in all situations. In the face of terminal illness, it seems eminently desirable to have frank and clear conversations with physicians and family about the likely prognosis and what I may want for my remaining time.

Perhaps the ever-increasing spiral of medical intervention would not be my or my family's choice. The time to make that decision is not when you are in intensive care. It is pertinent to add here that only once, and that was when I was in a coma, did I lose the will to live. At no other time, even in my darkest moments did I think, feel or contemplate that ending it all would be what I wanted. When faced with the inevitable, I do feel that the part of grief which is related to the regret of "things undone and unsaid" will be reduced if we live caring, moral and fulfilling lives with good relationships, telling our loved ones that

we love them and not leaving it until tomorrow, since tomorrow may never come. Certainly trying to never end a day with bad feelings or words unsaid, there may not be the opportunity to correct that.

My life now

I retired from my specialist dental practice and that has given me more time to spend with my wife, which is a tremendous bonus. After all, one of the reasons for deciding to share our lives together was so that we could be together. Now we are more together than ever before, timewise, mentally, physically and spiritually. Without work, there is also more time to spend with the grandchildren and our immediate family and friends who we value so highly.

I get up a little later in the morning, spend about an hour and a half most days exercising and showering after a light breakfast. Interestingly, there is not as much time as I thought there would be to pursue the many activities that I planned for; it is therefore still necessary to ensure that days are filled doing the things that I really want to do, rather than with things that I don't. That does not mean being selfish but ensuring time is spent wisely and not frittered away.

Certainly, I live much more in the moment. My desire is not to sleepwalk through what I have left. Interestingly, I thought that I lived in the moment before my illness but I now realise how frequently I didn't. The number of times I would be playing tennis, for example, and my mind would wander to a lecture that I was preparing, I really don't do that anymore.

I smile when I hear people getting angry, frustrated and intolerant about things that really don't matter. I feel like saying, "Get a life, can't you see what you're doing," but I don't. I try to avoid things that make me unhappy and that is sometimes very difficult to do because the last thing I would want is to become selfish and hurt others but, by having a greater awareness of this objective, mostly it is possible to achieve it. I find that I am more able to take pleasure in life's uncertainties, realising that however hard we may plan the path for our future, life may get in the way. An unplanned event can be treated either as a disaster or as a way to see things through different eyes and gain from the new situation. Even my illness provided me with new opportunities to enrich my life.

Of course, it is not possible to have everything just the way you would like it to be but if I am happy with my life, with all its imperfections, then that is good enough. With minor adjustments from time to time, I find that this is the case.

Discoveries about being a patient as opposed to being a clinician.

I made discoveries about being a patient as opposed to being a clinician. Not being afraid or embarrassed to tell clinicians how you are feeling and make sure that they really listen to what you are saying are both very important. Recognise that there's a subtle difference between superficial hearing and listening. Being real with them. You are not in a competition to prove yourself to be anything other than who you are and what you are feeling. You are trying to overcome your illness or, if that is not possible, nor what you want, to live with it as best as possible. If you feel that you are not being listened to, something is not right, a mistake has been made, you are not being treated with respect and dignity, speak up or have a relative, friend or other advocate do so for you. Remember that if a junior doctor is treating you, they may have only just started training in that field and their knowledge will be limited. It may be necessary to ask them to obtain an opinion or help from someone more senior. Never be afraid to ask and don't accept being fobbed off. Try to take each step one at a time. It's helpful to have a long-term view but with serious illness, I suspect that most people can only focus on the here and now. Try to have positive thoughts but, of course, not everyone can, nor is it possible to do so all of the time, the circumstances may not be conducive to that. Try to be realistic about your situation and develop strategies and thought processes to help you and not destroy you and your loved ones. In the waiting rooms, try not to listen to other patients' interpretations of your illness, each of us have our own condition. Others, unless they are passing positive messages, may be giving worrying information that is not relevant to you and is based on their own fears, concerns, experiences and illness.

Do not be too proud to ask for help if you need it, nor too proud to accept it if offered and needed. Recognise that your carer, if you have one (a spouse, partner, son, daughter or other carer), needs a break, is human too and can only do so much. Don't beat yourself up over what might have been, it's the reality of today that matters and how you respond to it.

My awareness of the increased risk of infection due to the immunosuppression is ever present and I do take precautions that were not necessary before. That is not to say that I now suffer from an obsessive-compulsive disorder like Howard Hughes: he wouldn't touch anything without a tissue intervening, but I always carry hand gel with me and use it when travelling on public transport, for example. I am careful about contact with people who have coughs and colds. So far, I have not acquired any infections of real consequence, and long may that last.

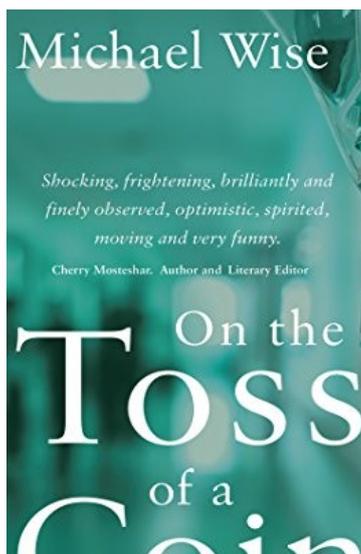
Further changes to my life

Avoidance of people with obvious false selves is also high up on my list of reinforced objectives. The authentic self is the core of who you really are, not what people tell you you should be. The false self is a façade, a fictitious self. The individual may actually believe the lie and will present it to the world as if it is the true self, using it to hide the true self. I wish to spend my time with real people not façades. In this respect, a quote from John Ruskin, the British art critic, who was born in 1819, frequently comes to mind. It has been a guiding principle for my life and I suppose for my appraisal of others. He stated, "What we think or what we know or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only thing of consequence is what we do."

My experience has really taught me not to worry about things that may never happen. I appreciate that it is far easier to say these words than to live life according to this principle. However, how much energy is lost, stress generated and probably ill health caused only to find that the very thing you were worrying about never occurred. Worrying about the outcome of the multitude of medical tests that I underwent would probably have done nothing other than make me more ill. It could also have been projected onto my family whom, in turn, would have their already high stress levels heightened. The life-and-death medical scenario is perhaps the ultimate regarding this but once the concept sinks in, it is remarkable how it applies to so many situations, both small and large. But, it would be disingenuous to say that I never succumb to this ill-advised thought process. Most of the time I do not worry about the prospects of further heart problems or of the kidney failing but there are odd occasions when something triggers negative thoughts. The one that is most likely to do this is when I meet other transplant patients and I ask how they are. Sometimes the response is, "OK, but as you know we all live with the prospect of something going wrong." I don't usually think that way but that can then trigger the question, "What happens if the kidney fails?" I am happy to say the question doesn't linger.

I have spent my adult life in a caring profession, helping people and frequently changing lives but I now feel an even greater desire to help other people if I am able to do so. This can range from small things, such as opening a door for someone to be helping in projects to improve care for AKI patients. Teaching has always been one of my first loves; it facilitates the passing-on of knowledge and certainly helps people. Its effect is similar to dropping a stone into a pond and watching the ripples. Satisfyingly, as an effective teacher, you will never see the distant ripples but you know that they will be there. By not having the pressures and distractions of running a practice, it has become possible to devote more quality time to teaching and presenting my patient experience, a very positive outcome.

There are so many ways in which pebbles, sand and water, not the rocks, can fill the jug. Time is too precious to allow this to happen without a fight. Of this, I am certain.



Further information about Michael's journey can be found in his book.

"On the Toss of a Coin" is available through Amazon.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B01N7Z6D67/ref=dp-kindle-redirect? encoding=UTF8&btkr>