It's a wonderful thing, when stuff normally taken for granted goes missing for a bit, then pops back up, reasserts itself, and gets appreciation flowing in your veins again.

Like gravity.

Toward the end of the end of my month-long experimentation with colds, flus, and pneumonia-wannabes, I was thrilled when all those sumpy pockets and pools of rippling gravity faded from the swooping and swerving, eerily unfamiliarly, looking-through-binoculars-backwards, miles-long hallway between bed and bath -- into the Great Beyond, where all the cold and flu products danced in a long conga line, like a 1950s theater intermission moment, when all the popcorn, drinks, and candy bars danced themselves out into the lobby for your happy, refreshing treat.

Those transparent pockets of flexible gravity would ripple like rings in pools of water, but only at the perfect bodily temperature pushing into triple digits -- just as snow will only squeak underfoot at just the right temp, no warmer and no cooler. Those patches of sneering hallway gravity were unpredictable, alternating between slick and snide.

Now that I am back in The Tricky World of the Vertical, it's nice to know there's no need to be on lookout for malleable wells and sprouting fluctuations of variable gravity, ready to make you involuntarily lurch and sway.

(Here, I am tempted to ponder the delightfully high value a tavern named The Lurch & Sway might bring in general terms, located anywhere at all, let alone if established in Iowa and New Hampshire, where such unplanned banana-split ballet motions, come balloting time, are painfully traditional.)

So, yes, put me down as being pro-gravity. I have come to again appreciate not suddenly finding myself opening doors with my face. Not having to rely on elbows to keep oneself upright is pretty handy, too. Sparing the shins on their having to run interference is also a nice relief.

I am grateful for small evolutionary favors, such as bones beneath the flesh, to help step in, be strong, and keep it all together, while the flesh is fumbling for something to hang on to, to grab on the way down.

I am elated to no longer feeling like a lab rat in the Phlegm-and-Phlu-Phactory for Big Pharma. My time at the Carny Cold & Circus Obstacle Course seems to have run its course, and me, right to the finish line -- but not actually over it, to the Finished Line, where variable gravity is no doubt *de rigueur* for those touched by *rigor mortis*.

My own little victory has come at some cost, however, and has left me with a sense of what I can only call *Survivor's Gilt* -- a sort of combination of low-grade survivor's guilt and an attempt to put the best possible face on mixed happenstances.

Yes, I am alive, and back to relative sameness again. (Not to brag, but in explanation: I have gone through the Grim Reaper's Game of Chicken once too often, so, the fact of surviving Certain Doom, while still exhilarating, has lost some of its glint and gleam -- a name, by the way, that no self-respecting tavern would select as its banner.)

However, my ongoing survival has seen the loss of much, of many, in this period -- has seen many cross the Finished Line, while I've been playing tag with high temps and footsie with fevers.

- Among the crush of the departed: Meadowlark Lemon. David Bowie. Natalie Cole. Alan Rickman...
- Yes, and, not to sneeze at the snatched absences of yet more persons as I coughed: Dan Haggerty, Glenn Frey, Wayne Rogers...
- And, yes, in the brief lull between our breaths yesterday, Abe Vigoda, also gone.

Since my first brush with the Reaper's cloak in a hospital at age seven, I have never stopped wondering why we are here -- me, you, any of us, all of us -- and what this might be all about, if anything beyond random chance, pluck, and bare-bones luck.

After my own Houdini escapes from death, I go through my own processes of renewal and

re-invigorated appreciations of life, as if jump-started from a truck battery the size of Saturn. Alas, as a mere human, this soon wears off, The Rut of Reality takes hold again, and off I go, to Sleepwalkersville once more.

- This is true, even knowing I have so far survived the military, a heart attack, stent surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation to bodily cancer, radiation to brain tumor, a physical mutiny of self that is typically called a seizure, and so on.

I have joked with doctors that I should start a club for people who have survived these exact same things, and would, but that I am totally stumped what the clubhouse logo and rallying cry should be... A globe with many suspended question marks floating above it, out in space? A lightning bolt through a silhouetted body, with all limbs stretched as far out from the torso as possible, as in complete existential shock? The phrase *Carpe denim* in flowing script, under an image of a cosmic hand grabbing the seat of one's pants? You see the problem here.

Despite it all, I suspect the habit of simply waking up each day takes a lot of the potential for surprise and delight out of the equation -- like waking up on Day #36,427 in your own private *Gr oundhog Day*
movie. But, waking up each day is the only Life we all know, so we tend to wear out its welcome, accidentally or not, especially as we have nothing else to compare it to, except whatever our imaginations, hallucinations, and superstitions can conjure -- which is another nightmare altogether.

But, all of that aside for a bit: The passing of celebrities is something else. Their departures seem to provide another angle of view of life or an alternative contemplative state that becomes available only as they go.

Part of it, of course, is tangled up in something relatively new in human culture: *global fame.* I mean, people all around you -- relatives, friends, distantly-recognized names, whatever -- would check out of the Human Hotel all the time, but the circle was small. With global notoriety, for good or ill, one has the illusion of actually knowing the individual person based on his or her own works.

Naturally, a lot of what we have come to *know*, and *think* we *know* about a celebrity, is complete fiction and fabrication. (A lot of this rant, if I follow this track about Celebrity itself, and

its transmogrification from the Fame of Production to the Fame of Consumption, will wind us up in a far field, miles from here, dazed, and feeling more than a bit cheated, stunted, and stunned, so, hang on -- I'm sounding the collision klaxon, and veering back on topic again....
mark
.)

But, in celebrities, we also have our perceived peers and colleagues and contemporaries -- the people we have the illusion of having known and grown up with. As we see them go, we are reminded of the nearness of our own mortality, of our limited time on this plane, in this place. We recognize we will miss them. Many, if not most, gave us joy, or, at least, some pleasure for a time, and helped erase or enrich the pitfalls and pratfalls of our own daily lives. We feel their absence as they go. Our own load of burdens increases again...

And, in such moments, I also wonder: How was it that Talents so great -- Strengths, if you will, Blessings, if you must -- could be bestowed on any one individual? How is such a thing possible? More to the point: How and why is it accomplished, pulled off, made, or done?

I mean: What are the rest of us -- Aunt Sally's lime *Jell-o* mold of pork 'n' beans at this potluck of Life? Are we here simply to appreciate and provide an applauding audience for the truly gifted? Is that our true roles here, to be spectators for the spectacular amongst us?

As always, I have no idea. *I confess I am new here, on this planet. I was dropped off by mistake. With luck, my people will be back soon. Meanwhile, I haven't a clue what is going on around here. I'm an agnostic -- which means,* I dunno, beats me, buddy. *You want the sense of certainty of illusion and/or delusion, go find yourself a nice little religion. Meanwhile, I'm just doing what I can here, since I have been thrust into this ungainly situation, and I'm doing whatever triage and damage control for the common good as fast as I can....*

- I imagine the truth is simpler, far less humorous, and far more heart-cracking: *We lose astonishing people of incredible talent, and in vast numbers, every hour of every day, but, since they were not famous, we do not know -- can never know -- who and what we lost when they left.*

Me -- at least, I get to receive Gravity back into my life, as a respected and orderly member of

my personal community again, having once known it on good terms, and having had it complete its correctional rejuvenation in parallel with my own return to better health. (Funny, how odd it is, that so much boils down to timing...)

However, even clueless as I am, I do seem to simply seethe with one singular -- and thoroughly useless -- talent: the ability to ask very serious questions in a marginally entertaining way.

To bring it on home: *Ahhhhh -- the first time, as a kid, in person, I ever saw Meadowlark play, dance, and swirl, all mad magician and fluid, anti-gravity wizard.... The first time I ever witnessed what David could do with the staid times in his constant re-invention of reippling culture-flash, music, and himself.... The first time I ever heard Natalie sing, coaxing down various angels of paradise heather or smokey bourbon or springtime rain or summer picnics... The first time I ever sat, captured, mesmerized by Alan's riveting performance, the full velvet of his diction and the perfect musical tone of his voice sealing the atmosphere...*

The thing is: Celebrity is an odd beast, obviously patched together by stand-ins and apprentice try-outs for the Elephant's Creation Committee, wit participants practicing their craft while immersed in tragic doses of magic mushrooms -- while the resident keepers, controllers, and key-handlers were away, healthfully vacationing in restful Obscurity.

Nonetheless, I will miss these apparent friends, whom I knew -- or so I thought -- and I can and will celebrate them as I am able, and with all the atoms of difficulty and awkwardness available only to those who survive.

Epilogue

And, adding to the unending list, of those snatched, before and since, is one Henry Worsley...

I do not pretend to know him, just of some of his efforts and activities. Henry Worsley attempted, 100 years later, to complete the solo, unfinished journey of his hero, Sir Ernest Shackleton, who died trying to cross Antarctica.

Part of his reason for going was to do what he loved, as well as follow a trek in his hero's footsteps. Another part of his reason to go? To raise money for a fund meant to help wounded soldiers -- male and female. He told the BBC, when asked if he was "mad" for taking on that challenge: *What will drive me on is raising money for these wounded soldiers.*

We could use more celebrities, and more everyday people, and more leaders, like Worsley.

Meanwhile, the rest of us can honor those already gone, and honor our own lives, by doing what we love, and by following in the footsteps of our own heroes.

May we each and all of us, then, pick our heroes, and our footsteps, at least as well as we pick our celebrities... at least as well as we might pick the toppings for our pizzas.... and nowhere near as haphazardly as the Flu, or The Reaper, appears to pick us.

....especially in Iowa and New Hampshire, where survivor's guilt, and survivor's gilt*, will both loom large, again, for those left behind, so to speak, as well as for those forced to move on and stay right here, slogging along, one day at a time.*

Resources:

A primer for the news and story of Henry Worsley: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35398552

The banality of celebrity -- a brilliant and insightful piece by Anne Helen Petersen, from the May, 2014, issue of The Believer magazine: http://www.believermag.com/issues/201405/?%20%20read=article_petersen

(Disclosure: I receive no compensation or reward of any kind -- aside from the satisfaction stemming from spreading the word -- for telling you that The Believer *magazine is one of the top ten periodicals in the world, among the mix of giants like*
Smithsonian Magazine
and
The New Yorker
. The other seven on my list I will leave as mysterious fodder for another day. -- AB)