

Hepatica

Had I known in advance, I would never have signed that form. As an expert in life – after all, what is biology if not the science of life – I never really delved into the possibility of existence after death. In fact, I never dared – except perhaps as a joke amongst friends – to even express an opinion on the subject. I was interested purely in the living organism. What happens to such an organism once its vital functions cease, once tiny mites bring about the process of liquefaction of body tissues – or in simple terms, once it starts to rot – is clear to any old fool. You don't have to be a scientist or an expert to comprehend that. I didn't particularly fancy being liquefied, so – aware of the potential priceless value of living tissue – I signed up to posthumously donate any part of me that might still be of any use or value. All the rest should be taken care of by the flames of the nearest crematorium. Posthumously, obviously; but, although what I have now is not exactly life, it sure ain't death either. What exactly this state I'm in might be and what it might mean could be written up in a brilliant scientific paper which, I can guarantee, would automatically attract every existing award. But, just as writing about such a subject earlier would have been considered too far ahead of its time, it now comes too late, particularly as my state is so delicate and so radically changed that I have yet to understand what exactly happened to me. For the time being, all I have on the matter are mere hypotheses.

This is how it happened. I was on my way to an international academic conference with my scientific – in fact visionary, no, I shouldn't be modest – simply genius – contribution on curing cancer by reprogramming stem cells. I was over-excited at the prospect of finally revealing to the scientific community all the findings of my research, to which I had dedicated my career, indeed my entire life. Apart from myself, the author and inventor, my scientific research was only known to my two lab technicians. Both swore an oath of silence

until the time of my public revelation: the first, a hypochondriac, swore that all the healthy cells in his body may begin to divide like mad the moment he so much as uttered a word about the research, and the second, a devout Baptist, placed his right hand on a black, calf-leather bound New Testament.

In the scientific community speed and timing are extremely important. The fact that we all have access to the same information and that neural networks work in more or less the same way, can easily mean that, after you have completed all the research, the processing of all the data on lab rats and rabbits and perhaps even verified the results on human tissue, and all you are waiting for is the right moment to reveal your closely guarded research, someone appears out of nowhere with similar, if not identical, conclusions. And pop! – in an instant the balloon you have so carefully been blowing up bursts, and with it years, if not decades, of exhausting experiments and analyses, sleepless nights which result in a weakened immune system with serious medical consequences on your health, not to mention family and relationship problems and arguments, the inevitable collateral damage of total dedication to science, all vanish into oblivion. Here you have it – just as you humbly lower your tired scientist's head to embellish it with a halo of what is the most important achievement civilization has to show for our entire era, you are pushed aside by an elbow whose arm greedily stretches out and grabs the garland of fame, placing it onto the ambitious cranium of your rival. Thus, you are doomed to remain forever second; in other words, the loser, the zero, the nobody, whose name in the best of cases appears in some small print somewhere. I admit I was incredibly ambitious and always put my career before family, relationships and everything else. But personally I find nothing wrong with career-mindedness; after all, it was precisely this conscious choice of complete devotion to work and the so-called neglect of my family that allowed the latter to have a financially comfortable life. Besides, it is indisputable that without ambitious visionaries like myself, we would still be jumping about hanging off

branches rather than using cars and aeroplanes for getting around, not to mention the satisfaction that scientific discoveries can give you. To be quite honest, it is at least as strong as sexual satisfaction and definitely lasts much longer.

Driving along, rehearsing my performance to the praying mantises of the international scientific community, I never noticed the light drizzle turn into a downpour. My concentration on the speech also inhibited the reflex that would normally, under such conditions, on an otherwise relatively empty road, make me reduce speed. So, at some point, I swerved to the right and then to the left before being thrown about a bit, and all I remember is a sharp bend and the screeching of the brakes, at which the image on my life-screen was suddenly cut and the transmission automatically switched to another channel. On this new programme a sort of three-dimensional DNA spiral appeared and started to wind around me and spin me down a kind of tunnel where, in the grip of this snake-like bundle of genes, I travelled past giant protein molecules and nucleotides that gave way to fat reddish-yellow octahedral viruses; I pushed past greedily metabolising cells, some of which were dividing and others dying off, right until, at the end of this metaphysical tunnel, I reached a mass of a dozen or so huge cells rubbing against each other. It suddenly occurred to me, of course, that this was a morula! So, in this frame of logic, stuck in my own embryogenetic sequence, I first developed the idea that I am currently a moving blastocyst being turned into a morula, after which I would expect to become a mass of cells in which a slightly reddish centre has just developed. It all became crystal clear: I was returning to where I'd come from – not to god or some cosmic light source or anything like that, but through a morula and back to a zygote – a fertilized egg, ready to absorb me and then split into male and female parts, ending my life by simply vanishing out of existence. So, I thought, this is what posthumous metaphysics looks like to a biologist – instead of angels, divinities and gentle abstract sources of light, scientists like myself are sent off into nothingness via primal cellular matter. I believe that's only fair; no complaints from

me. Let those who believe in God land in a posthumous landscape of hells and heavens or let them hang around at some intermediate station of temporary nothingness waiting for some possible resurrection, and let others be reincarnated into people, plants, animals and minerals if that is what fulfils them. And let us, biologists and all the rest, who never, not even at the worst of times, gave in to the temptation of kneeling down in front of some deity, begging for our life and health, haggling over salvation from boundless despair, be physically and spiritually de-atomized and thus disappear completely and definitively.

Alas, it is not that simple. The swan song of my thought process started to slow down in its progress through the blastocyst phase, moving the origin further and further away. A kind of force – perhaps this is what one could truly call a primal force? – hit me with great momentum just as I was regressing into a morula, spun me round and, I assume, threw me onto a what was an already differentiated layer of stem cells of the endoderm, out of which internal organs develop. These are all my own logical assumptions. How else is it possible that I found myself in this state of existence? At that indefinable moment of time my journey ended and everything turned to darkness – that, of course, assuming I can even talk about darkness, since darkness is just a colourful expression for nothingness, total, absolute nothingness. That describes well the state of my – I cannot say existence, nor is it non-existence – probably the most appropriate term would be “extra-existence”, if I am allowed to express myself in a more philosophical tone, now that I have the time to take my thoughts along patterns I used to mock and despise from the bottom of my heart.

I didn't see any operations or any surgeons bending over my dead body, poking around it with scalpels or sticking any useful parts of my body matter into anyone else. The next moment of awareness, or to be precise self-awareness – and it seems that there is in fact little but self-awareness left – only switched on much later. At least ten days must have gone by, but to me it is all blank. I remember suddenly becoming aware on what seemed like a

hospital bed. The thought that first sprung out of the re-activation of my awareness was *Where am I?* It seems that I had an accident, but was lucky at the same time, since I obviously survived. In the next moment, when I checked out the state of my limbs, I realised in horror that perhaps I wasn't so lucky after all. This was the first serious bad turn. Only at that point did I realize that my perception of space was somehow changed. I could sense my surroundings, but the angle at which I saw things somehow didn't seem right. If I'm lying on a bed, I logically assumed, I should, when I open my eyes, be seeing the walls and the ceiling. But I wasn't. My field of view – maybe the better term would be *re-view!* – was warped in a manner I imagine space distorts at the extremities of the universe. Before I even tried to move my head, arms and legs, I could hear a snoring sound. It wasn't next to me; it seemed to be coming from some suspiciously close proximity from which I deduced that I was far from alone in the room or on the bed. And, as I soon discovered, things are likely to stay this way. Though I could actually sort of feel my arms and legs, I suddenly realised that the reason I could not move them is because I no longer have either arms or legs, not to mention a head. How terrifying, nevertheless surely only temporary, I thought. After all, humans can feel a whole load of things that turn out not to be true beyond the actual neurological process that, for god knows what reason, manipulates and distorts our perceptions. But I never expected myself – someone who always swore by logic and was always astonished by the laziness and liability of those whom life throws about like a small boat on rough seas – would find myself in a state that closely resembles psychosis. This feeling only increased when a nurse entered the room and came towards me. Well, towards something, though not literally towards me. She played about with a thermometer, poking it into something outside my field of view. *Who am I? What am I?* I kept asking myself, but asking as what? *What is myself? Where from? What am I listening, thinking and observing all this as?* All these questions started eating away at me and I had no way of knowing whether they will remain unanswered in the future.

What is this thought entity – and me with it, my identity, attached to? To what kind of matter? I suddenly became furious and scared; surely it must be attached to something? I'm not just a spirit or something, am I? For me, a scientist whose remains were reduced to some kind of scientific phenomenon, this was absolutely too much to handle.

The nurse took the temperature. I gathered this from the electronic thermometer she raised up to her pointy nose a moment later when the doctors making the rounds marched into the room. Salvation at last; here come my scientific colleagues who have come to explain my state to me and tell me what I can expect – well, of course, in as much as “scientific” is the right expression for hospital staff who frequently just become arrogant, lazy routine-practitioners with little real interest in science.

But the rounds began to address me with a name and surname totally unknown to me, and when the surgeon began to explain to the mysterious bearer of the unfamiliar name that the operation had been entirely successful and that his body had accepted the donor liver well, I realized I was in deep shit. Or, more precisely – allow me to express myself metaphorically in this instance – that shit all remained of me after the accident, something the transplant experts were truly glad of, because they could diagnose without any further reservations that I was brain dead and keep my body on life support for just as long as was needed to extract any undamaged organs and then, as per my own instructions, send the remaining pulp of tissue off to the crematorium, meaning it has by now probably already had a decent burial. The liver, or *at least* the liver, had been transplanted into the man inside whose body I now live as his new liver.

I live, I suppose, in some manner, but can one really call this life?! I began asking myself after we arrived home with my host a few days later. During my real life, when I was me with my entire body, I never listened to surgeons' stories about transplant patients returning to them after an operation and fidgeting and dithering until they finally manage to

come up with a question like: what if ... do you think it just might be possible that the donor's memory lurks in the transplanted organ, because they keep having this feeling that someone else lives alongside them, that for example their tastes have changed, that football no longer interests them despite the fact that before the operation they were devout fans, or that they get this tingle in their fingers that makes them want to sit at a piano and start playing despite being totally clueless about music? In accordance with the prevailing doctrine of the profession, they are reassured that this is not possible, are advised, in the same sentence, to be glad of their new organ and the new life it has given them, presenting it as a re-birth, and suggesting that if they follow all the medical recommendations they will live well and, if they are lucky, for quite a while yet. What else are they supposed to say? They have never had an opportunity to discuss the situation with a mind stuck inside a donor organ. Not possible, since, as I have experienced myself, no one can hear me, despite the feeling that my monologues are no quieter than my rehearsals for various presentations whilst I was driving along alone in the car.

Now I know that when I signed the organ donor form, I should also have set out conditions for their recipient, but now I might as well stick the donor card and the form right up my arse! Well, I could, if I had an arse, but I don't! This guy into which they have stuck me, well, my liver and thus me, is an insult to my lifestyle and beliefs – at least I still have my beliefs! – and is absolutely unacceptable. I have been implanted into a total moron, someone who spends all day walking around his flat in his slippers, staring at the telly and babbling on about a load of rubbish, such rubbish that my scientific mind finds it difficult to put up with. When he starts explaining down the phone about how he feels and how his transplant was done, I really feel like slapping him across the face. He hasn't got a clue about the basics of biology and medicine, and scientific terminology comes shooting out of his mouth like shit comes out of a donkey's arse! At such moments a person – even if one is, like me, only a

trace of a person or what!? –, realises how very different we all are and just how mentally lazy some people are. The flat in which he lives with his wife – well, in which we now all live together – is far from modest. They are also not stingy with their food that I, as his liver, together with a load of immunosuppressive drugs, have to help digest. At least after the operation, now that it directly relates to him and he has twenty-four hours a day to do so, he could read up on the subject. But no, the idiot lounges around on the sofa and we watch a load of TV programmes I never knew existed. The guy is, it seems, also religiously insane or at least religiously self-interested. He now believes that he has God to thank for everything and watches the kind of religious TV programmes where a bunch of maniacs shout whilst waving crucifixes and microphones around. He is convinced that God heard his prayers and provided a new healthy liver on time. But do you ever realise, you primitive egoist, I far too often think, that your wish: *dear God, come on, find me a new liver*, contained an unspoken part that went: *but since – regrettably – we cannot for the time being grow livers like we might grow cucumbers, I humbly ask you, dear God, for someone to die so I might live*. For if there exists such a thing as God, who listens daily to his own creation of whingers and actually grants their wishes, then, actually, this guy and his god killed me! What a pair of perverted speculators!

His wife listens to him and is at his service with incomprehensibly understanding pity, and he takes the caring as her self-obvious obligation, but I gather from her selfless devotion to him that, in some idiotic perverse way, she actually enjoys her martyrdom. As far as I have managed to gather from his whining, the reason for his liver dysfunction was hepatitis C, which he – or at least that's what he's telling the entire universe – managed to get infected with ten years ago through some kind of blood transfusion. His wife, an even greater dimwit than him, actually believes him, instead of sitting down at the computer and typing *blood transfusions and hepatitis C* into the search engine, where she would soon find out that all

blood donated for transfusions has been vigorously tested since 1993 in all the civilised parts of our planet. We don't have sexual relations with the wife, so, when we are alone in the house, we sit on the sofa in front of the television gently rubbing cock at the sight of some full-arsed black guy fucking and switch channels at the first close-up of a vagina; reaching back to find the fat serpentine cock again, plying it vigorously between the owner's fingers.

One can't choose one's parents, nor, it seems, one's host body. The survival period after successful transplants, with adherence to the recommended medical regime, can be a good few years, and just the thought that I am doomed to living in the body of this idiot, in this closed category prison without any hope of parole, and that I will – so it seems, until his death or at least until his next liver transplant?! – have to listen to his stupid grizzly monologues, makes my stomach turn – metaphorically speaking, of course. We rarely go out for walks because the lazy bastard hardly ever leaves the flat. When he does, it's to step out on the balcony, lean on the railings smoking and watching teenagers in sweaty T-shirts running after their ball in the courtyard. Fuck, I suddenly thought in one such smoking session – and we're talking about me here, a person who never smoked in his life: years ago I donated some sperm which should still be in a deep freeze somewhere and thus without thought activity or any other activity. So, there is still hope that some candidate for artificial insemination will appear, that my sperm will be unfrozen, and, if my hypotheses are correct, it is likely that space for my consciousness will open up and I might be able to completely move into them. Unless, of course, a new bizarre surprise is awaiting me and my consciousness in my sperm cells is going to activate itself autonomously and independently and I will end up with two sources of consciousness. They could then have a sort of post mortem internal dialogue or what? I haven't got a clue ... I don't even know what to think ... I am probably going mad ... not in my head of course! Who knows where and how?!

If my hypothesis is not correct and all my consciousness, my identity and all the rest of this personal stuff has simply been reduced to my liver, then I might have another option: to somehow make contact with what little remains of my body matter, then study myself scientifically on a cellular level and use the findings of my research – I really want to know which career-minded hyena has stolen my research and now poses about with it at various conferences?! – in reverse, just like nature quite commonly does on a daily basis. To take a healthy, ambitious cell and persuade it that it can stay forever young, only if it is prepared to start dividing into infinity and thus reprogramme the stupid cow to mutate into a cancer stem cell which is sure to kill this guy eventually. Well, there is one more option: I could figure out the technique of rejection from the immunosuppressive agents, thereby causing a terrible infection that is sure to send him to his grave. But then it occurred to me – what if that isn't the end of it and my form of posthumous life is just one form of human existence and such a retarded thing as karma actually does exist? Does that mean that with such an act – first suicide followed, as a result, by murder – I may affect my karma and in doing so totally mess it up? In my next life, or rather in my next life form, I might end up stuck in some human tissue which, for example, develops into a vagina whose owner might, whilst still in her youth, give in to low-budget prostitution, and I'd have dozens of hygienically and medically dubious cocks slide through me daily. Or I might be incarnated in the mucous lining of some corrupt politician or slimy lawyer that I so absolutely despised in my previous life. So, in this state of extreme despair I only have two hopeful scenarios to hang on to. The first is that body-wise I survived the accident, but the brain damage was so severe that I am stuck sitting around some secure unit of a psychiatric hospital day after day while, somewhere in the depth of my brain, all these thought processes I have are going on. Then, there is the second scenario, according to which I am currently in some deep coma and at some point I will come out of it and everything will be more or less back to normal.

I used to mock clichés like *Hope always dies last*. When I heard such statements I always rebuffed the clever clogs concerned – hope dies next to last, right at the end, after hope, the person hoping dies. But now I can see that this sentence is actually true. For me, formally dead and informally just a mass of self-aware liver, all that remains is hope. Everything else, it seems, is dead or totally dysfunctional.

What can I say about this life and death thing? For the time being, whichever way I look at it – it seems I can never sleep either – there's only one thing I can ascertain: there's no end in sight ...!

translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh