

Literary Club Presentation: Extra Innings

February 10, 2020 Jack Lindy

Introduction

I still believe no one wants to hear a paper about death or dying. I took a chance two years ago, after I was told I had a year to live. I presented my diary to the Literary Club. At its end, thanks to an experimental medicine, I said I was entering a new phase, and tentatively called it “extra innings.” I continue to write prose poems and short essays about this new phase. What is it like when modern medicine gives your death date a reprieve? What is it like growing older and weaker waiting to die? Or reframing that question are there new skills to learn, new challenges to master, new states of being that characterize this added period? In what ways is “extra innings” a suitable metaphor for these extra years? In what ways does it fall short?

As the calendar rolled around, I wondered, should I present a sequel to my last paper?

But, sequels can be a real disaster. If you will excuse the pun, the result might be doubly deadly.

That said, with trepidation, I begin.

Odysseus Rap

I doubt Odysseus, in his travels precipitous
Ever coped with so many medicinalists
Who imprisoned him so vociferous -ly

I muse ...

I used to be a psychiatrist
Dreamt I would write the definitive text
'bout psychoneurotic effects
That happen in trauma to all of us

But/ today, that dream can never be
That book bout PTSD
For now I see
The new medical text
is 'bout me

Last month my radiation oncologist said
I would have to see the otolaryngologist
To help him establish the proper diagnosis

The surgeon prods and probes and extracts
Tissue samples: punctures the lymphatic node intact
To locate the virulent cells exact - ly

They've already taken precious tissue from me
Like adipose
Lymphatic and metastatic
Marrow parotid, and heart
And that's only the start

Last week my cardiologist said
I need an electrophysiologist to see
Why I fall unconsciously on the marble floor
Then/again/as he closed the door he said
It might also be a suitable problem
For the neurologist to explore

“No it’s the amyloid,” says the amyloidologist
The damaged bundle branch stops/ goes into meditation/block
And wham that’s a shock
To find myself that pretzel on the marble floor

I try to explain all this to the phlebotomist
But she just looks at me intensely/without jest
Ready to puncture the juncture of my best vein

One more test /
To check for toxic effects

From this anti-sense mononucleotide
This wonder drug
That keeps me alive

Doc says/ wear this Holter,
If your heart falters
You’ll be a taker
For a pacemaker

Now inside my skin I live with this monitor
It speaks with my doctor/ over radio waves
I am lost in this maze
Of ambulatory telemetry
and nanotechnology

(pause)

Modern medicinalists explore
The very edges of knowledge
While they confine Odysseus
Prisoner in a labyrinth so vicious
That it can only be the doings
of the monster
Minotaur.

Part I We all grow older

The first thing that strikes me in this new phase is that, once the tension of the final regulation inning is over, extra innings are no different than others. In short the drama of deathbed advice, blessing, and final farewells give way to — polite disregard for my opinion. The fact is, I am simply growing old like everyone else. And like my peers, I protest.

“My arm’s not tired,” I announce.

“But you’re losing your stuff,” says the coach.

Driving

I watch little old people as they drive

Along the expressway
They grip the wheel too tightly
They wear blinders for lateral vision
And barely move at 55

Others pass them briskly
Or cut them off
Or call out to them: “get with the flow”
Or “get off the road”

My Fiatt 500 does best on local roads
But when it finds its way to I-75
My concentration constricts
Internal police repeat in my ear

Don’t exceed the speed limit
Keep your eyes on the road
Drive defensively
Keep in the lane that prepares you for your exit

My hands tighten on the wheel

As my Fiat reminds me of my full time task:
Don't forget where you are going
Or how to get there

I watch little old people as I drive.

Come Play with Me

He emerges from the playroom
Where jumbo planes carry
Family members to distant places
Like Chicago and Colorado
He must load the "Guggage"
And pour in the gas

The control tower signals all is ready
Round and round the room
The plane flies only to return to base
As he readies for the next adventure

I know the routine well
Only a few weeks ago
I occupied the powerful seat
Near the control tower

But today I must rest
Stationary in my living room chair
"Papap," he says, as he pokes his head next door
"We need to make a tent"

Last week Aaron and I
Made a tent of two chairs and a blanket
We were camping
Snuggled safely from the wild beasts outside

But today my shortness of breath

Takes away my legs
“I’m sorry Aaron, I can’t play today”

A few minutes pass and Aaron returns
“Papap come to the playroom I have a surprise”
“I’m sorry Aaron I can’t play today”

Still a few minutes later
“Papap, I have an idea”
“What is it Aaron?”
“You just sit here”

The large jet liner with his family aboard
Comes flying into the living room
I have become the landing strip for his trip to Colorado.
“See Papap, you can still play with me”

On Getting Up

Eyes open wide with adventure
Mouth tightens with determination
Eyebrows brim with expectation

She has read no instruction manual to prepare
And only once did it successfully before
But this time it will work
She knows this with certainty

So many elements to coordinate
Muscle strength and eyesight
Proprioception and reserve cushion
But most of all that precarious skill of balance

It will be years before
Such words enter her vocabulary
The time for action is now

Feet planted firmly below her
Lucy looks at her Mom
Whose outstretched arms await
And in one momentous effort
All her skills combine

She stands
Upright, tall

She checks to see if all around are still there
From this new height
Her smile radiates for miles

Parents applaud
Grandparents giddy
Joy contagious

The triumph is brief
It is dizzying being so tall
A sturdy bottom cushions the fall

Pop Pop smiles, laughs and claps
A rejuvenating wave enters his soul
Lucy watches as I struggle to get up from the chair
Only she and I know what a fete
Standing upright really is

Part II New Skills

In extra innings, because the roster dwindles, the team counts on a player with one skill-set to contribute using a previously underdeveloped skill. A pinch hitter must field. A pitcher may be asked to run bases. A sure handed infielder must hit.

Biblical Hebrew is hardly a skill for me, but in my extra innings it proved to play more of a role than I could have imagined. I was telling Rabbi David the story during one of his regular visits. It went back to childhood.

It was Rosh Hashonah, Philadelphia, 1951. I was to read the binding of Isaac, in front of a full congregation on the High Holy Day. No sweat. My overestimation of my 14 year old capacities was undaunted by my failure to prepare adequately. So, one-third of the way through the Hebrew reading, with a venerable rabbi on either side, I ran into trouble.

I could not recognize the Hebrew in front of me. Should I skip over the unfamiliar? Should I start over from the beginning? The rabbis whispered the right words, but nothing registered.

On the spot I decided to make up Hebrew words – random syllables that might to the untutored ear sound as if they were Hebrew – something like rad-mish-nu kala-einu mitzitonach l'chaglich echuv – which means – I had no idea – most weren't even words. Now the rabbis were elbowing me in the ribs, coughing and turning red. But I continued to fake it until I got to the part I recognized: "Avraham. Avraham," the part where the angel tells Abraham not to kill his son. Then I soared into the dramatic until Abraham had found his ram.

After services congregants came to wish us a happy new year. "Oh, Jack, you were fabulous, the way you read the Torah with such expression. You MUST become a rabbi when you grow up."

There it was. The naked truth! I had pulled the wool over the eyes of the congregation. I had "faked it." I hadn't prepared adequately, I screwed up, big time. And here were these adoring women who didn't know the difference. I felt triumphant. I also felt ashamed.

Rabbi David rested his hands on his ample belly, raised his bushy eyebrows and smiled.

“Well Jack, we know what your next project is going to be. “You’ll need to go back to that Torah portion and learn to read it properly.”

“An 81 year old learning biblical Hebrew!” I protested.

“Why not,” he countered. “Only this time I want you to understand what you are saying.”

The story of the binding of Isaac (or Akedah in Hebrew) is straightforward enough: God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as sign of his faith. The Torah tells each step in their journey to mount Moriah. Abraham binds Isaac on a sacrificial pyre. At the last moment, with knife drawn, an angel tells Abraham to stop. Only then does Abraham see a ram that will substitute for his son.

But learning to read and translate the story from Hebrew to English: that’s another matter. Biblical Hebrew is difficult not only because it has a different alphabet, and reads right to left, but also it is not an Indo-European language, but rather from an Afro-Asiatic family. Its root words consist of three consonants; invisible vowels alter meaning. I learned that biblical narrative is sparse, omits the thoughts and feelings of the characters, contains puns and repetitions and, most important, I learned, scholars disagree as to its meaning.

Unlike my preconceptions, medieval scholars were not simple apologists for a strict interpretation of Torah. Rather they, like the rabbis before them, lived with the stories until the stories themselves came alive. They added dialogue and color (midrash)

I learned how, rabbis found different aspects of the story to emphasize: It might be Abraham’s anger at God for being subjected to such a test; or a people declaring the prohibition of child sacrifice, or the voice of an angel as inner conscience. Studying the care and insights gleaned over the centuries from the Akedah, made the story come alive for me as well. And Rabbi David even convinced me to write my own midrash.

Fascinated by a psychoanalyst so immersed in the Akedah, the senior rabbi invited me to share my encounter with the text with congregation Beth Adam. About fifteen minutes into what I thought was an erudite discussion the esteemed rabbi suddenly appeared at my left, shouting

“Dr. Lindy, Dr. Lindy! I dreamt I was about to kill my son. What can I do? What can I do?” The first thing out of my mouth was “Get that man a

Rorschach” – then I caught on and spoke of the many Abrahams I had come to know as an analyst.

Not long after, he appeared on my right side, and in a child’s voice interrupted “Dr. Lindy, Dr. Lindy, I dreamt I was about to kill my father. What shall I do? What shall I do?” This time I was prepared. I realized my cue was to talk as psychoanalyst, about unconscious myth in the midst of a Saturday Night Live improvisation. It was a gas.

Soon after, I read the Akedah in Hebrew at Wise Temple. Rabbi David and his colleague, surrounded me as though I were that 14-year-old boy in Philadelphia. I read the Hebrew and translated as I went along. The three of us sometimes became so absorbed in the story and its translation that we forgot where we were. We worked together to find our place again, smiling, for the moment, colleagues. At the conclusion, the rabbi blessed my family in an emotional moment that I shall return to later.

Extra innings call for new skills in being a marriage partner

Marriage in a New Key

The two of us and time
flow together like mist.

News and puzzles mark mornings
TV and reading mark evenings
Sometime one of us has something interesting to say
Most time however is presence without words

Each night we fall asleep with different blanket weights
and tussle with them until the covers fall in disarray.

We tend to each other’s bodies in intimate and yet new ways.

I try to call for help gracefully
Yet all my years of independence cry out silently in indignation.
I try to empathize with the burden of caretaking,
but my appreciation is skimpy.

My taste buds accommodate to no salt, very low sodium,

But Joanne's only cry out in protest.
No salt cooking is a nightmare.
Dining impossible.
Restaurants heap salt on their "specials."
Waiters simply lie.

Old habits of hospitality become overreach
Too tired to reason, some time each day
She must make the decision

She says you're a "good sport"
I am so grateful you cherish me in sickness and in health,

Yet anger breaks through one of our carefully layered covers.
We fight, a flood breaching its dikes, but not for long

Then there are talks about when I am gone: never easy,
Suddenly I am on the floor, not breathing.
Good-byes and last breaths resume their awful poignancy.

Extra innings: moments that open windows into each other's soul
Opportunities for new forms of loving.

Evolution of a Philanthropic Flop

I look about this room and see many team players. You are stalwarts of our community, its arts, culture, institutions of care and learning. You have skills as philanthropists that I have never mastered. I helped people in my clinical role, but prior to extra innings I would call myself — a philanthropic flop. Not that I didn't write checks for good causes, but always something was missing. Was it my taking only a passive role? Was it guilt for not doing more?

In extra innings Joanne and I find ourselves with financial resources we never expected. So, I ask Rabbi David “how might I think of this unexpected windfall? How might I improve this undeveloped skill?” He replies, “remember, Jack, the money is not yours, it is God's.”

What! I silently protest. Isn't the money mine; after all, I invested it, not God. Days later my thoughts settle on tikkun olum, the legend that God's work at creation is incomplete, and it is our job to help Him complete it. Oddly, with this in mind, my perspective gradually changes. With God as my ally I feel free to devise projects based on my priorities rather than a retreat where I respond only to the pressure of others.

So, here is another new role in extra innings: C.E.O. and C.F.O., of a small charitable trust. I design projects with creative passionate people who teach our kids, respond to people's needs in disasters, who deliver medicine's most disturbing news, create spaces to reflect and grieve. Through this I am refueled by younger people's creative energy.

I am grateful to discover this new role during extra innings.

Part III Living with Illness and the Threat of Death

As extra innings advance, they take their toll on the players managers and fans. No one knows when or how this will end. So, too, extra years take their toll. Symptoms do not go away. One lives with a wariness lest any new symptom spell the end.

The Test

The pastel walls, paintings and easy chairs clearly set this doctor's waiting room aside from the usual institutional ones. Carol Congenial smiled as she lifted her head from the computer screen, "Lindy, welcome to the St Thomas Women's Clinic," she said directing her comments to my wife, "I have a few questions, before Dr. Wonder sees you."

"You must be referring to my husband; he is Jacob Lindy," said Joanne.

"Oh," said Carol, blushing and looking at me with compassion.

Soon, Nurse Mosher filled the doorway. She led me to a small but comfortable x-ray room. "Dr. Wonder likes her patients to have a mammogram before she sees them," she said, "the procedure will only take a few minutes."

I sat on the edge of the examining table, naked shoulders covered in a light blanket I did not ask for, thinking of the events that led me here. Weeks earlier, as I lathered in the shower and passed the soap over my chest I felt something irregular, a lump near my left nipple, the size of a half-dollar, moveable and tender. Strange I had not felt that before. So, with the due diligence of a recently retired physician — I ignored it, at least for a few days. Then I asked Joanne to feel my left chest. "Hmm," she said. "You have a lump in your breast."

Two weeks later my internist added profoundly, "Jack, you have a lump in your breast."

"But what do I do?" I asked. "You'll need to see the breast surgeon."

Nurse Mosher brought out two paddles connected to an x-ray machine. “We’ll need to mash your left breast between these,” she said.

You have to be kidding me. But looking at her stern expression and powerful arms, I realized she was not kidding. So mash she did, until some small portion of my chest wall made it between the paddles.

“Ow,” I exclaimed, as the clamp closed. I had newfound respect for my wife and all women who go through this not only once but annually.

Nurse Mosher disappeared, instructed me to hold my breath, then returned.

“Now for the other side.”

“What other side?” I asked

“The side without the lump. Dr. Wonder likes to see a comparison between the two breasts.”

You must understand, I am as skinny as a rail to begin with. There is no fat tissue. “You’ll have nothing to mash I said confidently.”

“Oh, we’ll see,” said Nurse Mosher.” Again, the mashing began, and it continued and it hurt. Finally the two paddles clenched shut. Again she was out of the room. Again I should hold my breath. — Never again will I dismiss a woman’s distress at going for her annual mammogram.

Wouldn’t it be odd, I thought, after battling neck cancer, coronary artery disease, malignant melanoma, and cardiac amyloidosis, wouldn’t it just be my luck to die of breast cancer? For some reason my predicament tickled me. Suddenly I began laughing out loud. What a hell of a way to go!

I imagined a psychiatrist opening the door — definitely certifiable.

Instead, the door opened slowly. Dr. Wonder smiled like an angel. “Dr. Lindy,” she said, “I am happy to inform you that the mass in your chest is simply normal breast tissue. There is actually some on the right side as well. There is nothing to worry about, no cancer, it is gynecomastia.

Yes I knew about that condition. But, why me? Why was I turning female as I turned 80? There was a long set of explanations about hormonal change in the male over 80. I didn’t know, I muttered to myself. I didn’t know.

Two weeks later the following letter arrived.

Dear Lindy,

We hope that your visit to the Women's Clinic was comfortable. We share with you the good news that your breasts are healthy and you are not due for another mammogram for one year. Enclosed you will find a questionnaire on how you found our facilities. Also please answer a few questions about your menstrual cycle before your next visit.

In the meantime we wish you a good year.

Sometimes in extra innings the hometown strategists disagree.

My Docs Get Competitive

I hear Dr. Upbeat's padded footsteps in the corridor as he scurries from room to room, cheerfully greeting similarly unclad bodies whose muted mouths mumble in response.

The door opens. A warm smile, friendly handshake, quick look at the chart and ... "oh, I don't like that."

"Neither do I," I respond, referring to the mole on my nose. "I think it has grown darker and slightly larger."

Dr. Upbeat brings out his measuring instrument.

"It is a malignant melanoma, you know."

"Yes, I know,"

"If only I had a crystal ball," says Dr. Upbeat. "In my earlier days I would have recommended surgery. But the surgery may be disfiguring, often requires skin flap from your forehead, and an extensive recuperation. I'm not sure, with all your other medical problems, if that's the best idea." (translation: if we let it alone you will probably die of your cardiac amyloidosis first.)

I say, "Dr. Upbeat, if it won't kill me in two years, I'm for letting things be."

Dr. Upbeat lowers his glasses and with a conspiratorial smile, nods his head. We are on the same page.

Dr. Quixote, the doc running the trial with experimental drug 405219 for amyloidosis, remarks,

“What’s that?” pointing to my nose.

“It’s a melanoma. Dr. Upbeat is looking after it. Dr. Quixote examines my mole. His eyes furrow. Meanwhile all the test results on my heart’s functioning are unchanged. I know he has a special interest in my case as patient #7, is featured in his newest publication.

“I am going to take a picture and send it to a plastic surgeon friend. I’ll bet he can remove this thing and leave your face looking better than ever.”

I think to myself this is pretty unusual behavior for Dr. Quixote, his intense interest in my nose. Dr. Quixote is not one to upstage other physicians. So why the opposite opinion from Dr. Upbeat? Do I detect a glimmer of panic in Dr. Quixote’s voice?

Several days later he calls to say that his friend is ready to operate.

I reflect, uncertain about the wisdom of either option: keeping my old nose or turning it in for a new one with dubious outcome. But, this much is clear. My specialists are competing over which reading of the crystal ball supports his own interests. Dr. Upbeat is betting that the amyloid will do me in. Dr. Quixote forecasts the melanoma will kill me first. But that would be truly bad luck not only for me but also his study. After all I am model child for the success of the new drug. What a waste to have me dead and therefore unable to continue in his study.

My specialists battle. On whose turf will I die? Not mine, says Dr. Upbeat; not mine, says Dr. Quixote. Do I detect some competition?

In extra innings, sometimes a single pitch or swing of the bat might mean “sudden death.”

The Ride

I’ll bet you can’t spell it.
The clean-shaven man in uniform and clip-board
Shifts his butt on the flip-down bucket seat.
Out loud he spells

A M...
This prick will hurt just a bit says his companion
A-M-I
No it’s A M Y — cardiac amyloidosis.
I spell it out for him, slowly.

See, you learned something new today.
My voice sounds like the old professor no one listens to anymore
Finger hurts like hell.
I pretend to be in charge
But moments ago I was an unconscious heap on the floor

Here’s a look at your ekg
Says the man who just skewered my finger.
Quickly I squint the squiggly lines and spikes
But nausea squeezes
Looks unchanged to me

Got an 81 year old doc here.
Passed out and fell.
Hit his head.
Congestive Heart Failure and atrial fib, no chest pain,
Some rare heart disease I can’t pronounce,
Says his ekg is unchanged.
Be at E.R. in about five minutes.

I ride backwards on my rollercoaster,
It rocks me gently in the noisy silence
Muffled sirens sing our song/
City streets and traffic lights/ all different from this angle
Retreat behind our wide rear window

Companions, these men by my side,
Solace on this solitary ride

You guys have a tough job
I say as they lift me on the gurney
You do it well. Thanks

Sliding

Slipping fast
They say of those approaching death

Slipping slow
That's something else
Sometimes only Joanne and I can tell

Hope demands a new plateau
If only I can find it

Since last I lost consciousness
I feel fragile
Try to regain footing
but fail to find firm ground

Old tactics don't hold

Fatigued, dizzy, breathless,
I sleep longer.

Happy dream: my vehicle has cogged wheels

Like ones that used to climb Liberty Hill
Though descent be steep,
Fallback is secure

Frightening dream: I spin on ice
Glide out of control
Slip as I prepare to crash
I try to stay the nightmare ride

Hope demands a firm plateau
If only I can find it

Part 4 Our Town

There are special events, particularly poignant, that do not lend themselves to the metaphor, “extra innings.” After all life is more than a game you try to play well.

In Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, Emily, a character who dies in the second act, returns in the third. She is given permission to watch moments from what might have been her own future had she not died. From the perspective of the afterlife, she sees so much more than when she was alive. The characters have more psychological depth; their actions are part of a more understandable life trajectory. Emily is grateful for the opportunity to have known these people. The opportunity to experience these moments from the afterlife touches her. I, too, have felt like a visitor, at a place I was never supposed to be. During my own extra years I have given the name *Our Town* moments to them:

There was the moment at my gala 80th birthday party when the lights dimmed and my adult children from two marriages came out dancing and

singing together to rock music, then bolted out the chorus: the “fabulous five” articulating each syllable in unison.

Ja-a-ack Lindy — he’s ...STAYIN’ ALIVE...STAYIN’ ALIVE

There was the look in Rachel’s eyes as the two of us walked into the wedding scene: “are you ready for this, Dad? Am I ready for this?” she asked. “All these people. and I invited them all.” We were both trembling, she out of fright, me trying to digest that this was a moment I thought I would never see and was now being permitted to experience it first hand. My job was to remain upright as we walked the sixty feet to the aisle, then to walk down the aisle and remember to let go of her arm so she could join her new husband.

Then there were my students, their confidence, poise and access to their own emotions that they demonstrated as they presented papers for my Festschrift.

There was the look on Ben’s face as 99% of the votes had been counted, and he had won a seat on the Cincinnati School Board, a look of pride, competence and integrity after a very tough campaign.

After my reading of from the Torah recently, the rabbi called my wife and family to the bema for a blessing. In the corner of my eye, I felt the warm presence of three generations that are my family: parents, children, grandchildren — a family once broken, now whole.

All these experiences and more, I felt so deeply, yet it was as if, experiencing them like Emily. I was permitted to see only out of the corner of my eye, as taking in the whole scene would be more than I could digest.

I am forever grateful for moments that I had resolved that I would never see. Yet, with the new experimental drug, here I am experiencing them in the flesh. It makes my skin prickle even to speak of them, these Our Town moments.

Extra Innings: new risks, new challenges, new opportunities for “stayin’ alive.”