

*In Sickness* | September 5, 2018

## *DID YOU FIND EVERYTHING OKAY?*

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I've never enjoyed the company of people whose health problems I know about. That may sound weird coming from a guy who is documenting every detail of his illness in public essays. But my motivation can – I think – fit through the eye of this needle.

Let me explain:

I am tyrannically opposed to discussing my health in person, using mouths and ears. Not because I fear it will bore my audience; rather, I lack sufficient coping skills to endure the conversations. I only write my essays during times of uncharacteristic emotional durability, which are pretty scarce. Every few days, I might experience an hour or two when I can confront these issues and get more out of them than they get out of me. That's when I write. And the reason I write is out of a hope that other people who are coping with their own afflictions might find in these words a little bit of empathy and company.

Now that I have generously buttered my intentions and shoved their bulk through the eye, let me return to the topic of people who dominate every conversation with the pains and woes of their tragic condition.

Before receiving my first *meaningful* diagnosis –back in the age when every trip to the hospital was either boring (e.g., physicals) or cool (“*Whoa!* How did *that* happen?”) – I held a deep aversion to life's malady braggarts. Today, I have a shallower aversion. My scorn has softened, but only slightly. Excepting the terminally ill, I still believe this:

If your health problem is real, you don't want to talk about it. It's too stressful to discuss. Or even think about discussing. The mere possibility that someone might begin probing into your condition can be detected in your pulse.

“I don't want to talk about it.” That's what the genuinely suffering snarl when assaulted by an inquiring coworker. Or dinner guest. Or even doctor if the questioning occurs on a particularly difficult day.

So when the courtesy clerk at the supermarket manages to learn all about your itchy kidneys (or whatever) before bagging the last of your yogurts, the only thing you're really suffering from is loneliness. That's the reason you're having this conversation. You're self-medicating with attention.

I used to think this exchange was simply boring. And that's why I grocery shopped at such weird hours: I hated the lines. Today, I realize it's a bit more corrosive than that.

It's not just the badgered bagger withstanding tedium for minimum wage. That's okay. It's an abuse we should all experience from time to time. Just to give our compassion a little exercise. What I object to is the invitation to pry into that lonely pretender's health. Because that creates an impression that illness is something the next person in line might enjoy discussing as well. And that person might actually have a *real* illness.

So after I, too, have heard all about the yogurt guy's additional itchiness if he so much as *licks* a tomato, I move my cart forward and empty its contents onto the counter.

As the twenty-year-old stranger in the apron scans the barcode on my almond flour, I can feel my pulse changing. *Please just ask if I found everything okay*, I think. It's the least interesting exchange a clerk can have with a customer, but I won't receive it as assault.

As he moves my giant bag of frozen broccoli across the scanner, he looks me in the eyes and says, "You staying healthy?"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carthy'. The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'C' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'y'.