

Einstein in the Time of COVID-19

It is an unseasonably cold May morning on Cape Cod, and I stand outside my 97-year-old father's first-floor window at the nursing home, shivering from both the chill and the news my 94-year-old mother has died of COVID-19.

Dad's curtains are open. He is propped up in bed, frail-looking from yesterday's onset of a cough. Near the entrance to his room, his favorite nurse has been awaiting my arrival. Dressed from head-to-toe in personal protective equipment—pale yellow gown, plastic face shield, and gloves—she moves towards his bedside with the encumbered grace of Neil Armstrong on his moonwalk. She hands him a phone wrapped in cellophane, and points to the window. Dad's eyes momentarily brighten, then cloud over with uncertainty: I am here way too early; they haven't even served breakfast.

Since the pandemic, I've lost sense of time—the usual activities and rituals that mark its passage either suspended or prohibited. An oppressive sameness has settled in: social distancing, disinfecting, horrible statistics in the news.

The nursing home has been on lockdown since March, so I've been unable to visit my parents. I've missed Mom's laughter as she watches "Funniest Animal Videos" on my iPad; I wish I could hear Dad's stories about growing up in Italy and serving with the U.S. Army in the Pacific. Rules of quarantine even forbid leaving their favorite treats at the front desk: oranges and Dove chocolates for my father; a Dunkin Donuts jelly stick for Mom.

In April, the National Guard arrived to test residents and staff for infection. The line of employees, wearing blue masks and standing 6-feet apart, curved around the building. Many waved when they saw me crossing the lawn for a window-check on Dad.

Several days later, I notice fewer cars in the parking lot.

Inside the building, social interaction among residents has ceased: no more meals in the dining room; no communal activities. This is especially hard on Dad; separation from his wife feels like punishment.

For three years, he has followed a routine: After lunch, he tucks two Dove chocolate hearts into his shirt pocket and wheels himself to the elevator. Wednesday afternoons are his favorite: a pianist volunteers in the Alzheimer's unit, and Mom sings along. Her soprano is pitch-perfect and undimmed by age; despite her affliction, she still remembers all the words to "Over the Rainbow." Dad parks his wheelchair next to hers and beams.

Now I must tell my father his wife of seventy-three years has died. I press my cell phone to my ear. Flatten my left palm against the cold window. I search for the right words. But none come. So I just say it. "Mommy is gone."

In less than three days, Dad is gone too.

For years, Einstein struggled to understand the concept of time and the theory of relativity. After calculating the speed of light, he devised an experiment to explain how we perceive events.

In the experiment, he imagines an observer standing on an embankment as a train goes by. As its center passes directly in front of him, two simultaneous lightning bolts are fired at its front and its rear. To the observer, the flashes occur at the same time because they have traveled the same speed and distance to reach his eye.

Next, Einstein places the observer in the middle of the train. Simultaneous lightning bolts are fired again, front and rear. This time, the observer perceives them as separate: the forward light reaches him first, because the train is moving toward it; the rear light reaches him later, because it must catch up to the forward speed of the train.

So much of perception depends upon our place in time and the relative speed at which events occur. The pandemic rolls on, with the world riding in the middle of it—simultaneous bolts of uncertainty and of hope firing every day, reaching us as distinct and separate, rendering the future as blurry as scenery passing outside a train’s window.

Yet my parents’ deaths, within hours of each other, gives me an alternative way of viewing time and the relativity of events. Mom and Dad always told me they wanted to leave this world together. So I climb to a place where the vista is limitless—where distance provides perspective, and everything appears interconnected.

I stand on the embankment.

And the lights that reach me are beautiful.