

## Choosing to Unwrap Special Gifts

by Ralph C. Martin

After the death of my partner's brother, about three decades ago, we were all stunned. The time from our first awareness of his illness, until his death, was less than two months.

The Bereaved Families organization helped us gain some perspective. In particular, another person, grieving at the time, recommended the book by Rabbi Harold Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." What struck me then and has stayed with me is that we cannot influence much of what happens to us in a universe of random events, involving human agency and free will. Sometimes life just happens. However, we can choose our response. Life can become richer, as we treasure it.

Recently my good friend Peter Davison of Halifax published a book, Gift of the Hit ([www.GiftoftheHit.com](http://www.GiftoftheHit.com)), in response to his personal adversity. In his 40s, his hit was a diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease. This was a shock to him. For those of us who are friends and family, it was hard to grasp, since we knew him as a healthy and energetic force in our lives. Although his health is different now, he is even more energizing and inspiring.

Candidly, he discloses in the book that soon after coming to terms with "having an *old person's disease*, I thought about bluffing good health, since my symptoms were so subtle." Later he experienced a laughter yoga class with breast cancer and stage III cancer survivors. "The depth of the laughter from people who have looked death in the face and chosen to live fully was memorable and moving."

Despite pain and uncertainty, Peter says that "the gifts of my hit were beginning to unwrap, and my final surrender would be to let go and trust, falling into the supportive arms of my family." In a more surprising twist to me, he fell in love with a woman he had known years earlier, they married and now have 2 beautiful children. What a guy! He grins and says, "I am now surrounded by love."

Peter also invited twenty others to tell their stories, in his book. The stories begin with dramatic details about the hits in their lives and then go on to reveal how choices can transform hits into gifts.

Halina explains that her stroke was “a stroke of good luck whereby I was tapped on the shoulder and given a second chance to deal with stress, let go and surrender to moments.”

David survived a rare form of cancer four times and now as an interfaith chaplain he consoles others. “By focusing on becoming love, you really are doing the most noble, wisest thing possible. This is the hero’s journey, the universal love story of all our lives – to use our trials to discover who we truly are.”

Kelly, a burn victim as a toddler who endured numerous surgeries, was riled when she was confronted with a hurtful comment at a garage sale, as an adult. She paused and realized that it was her own opinion that counted. “That was a pivotal day in my emotional transformation from feeling like the ‘ugliest person in the world,’ to claiming my personal power and beauty.” How might the world be different if we all made this claim?

Thomas, an energetic young filmmaker, says his testicular cancer turned him 180 degrees from being me-focused to purpose-driven. “A life that was once about me on the red carpet capturing celebrities in their best light is now about helping shed light on the indisputable need for awareness and openness about men’s health.”

This year Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip is demonstrating how his cancer, diagnosed as terminal, is motivating him to endow Canadians with an enhanced consciousness about the possibilities to reset relationships with First Nations’ peoples. He is thinking of the long arch of history and recognizes that even if it takes us several generations to repair the damage of the residential school acts and attitudes, we should start now. He believes we can do it. As he faces a truncated life, he is reaching out expansively, in space and time, in our Canadian project.

I am learning that people who experience hits, can choose to grow into knowing their essence, while claiming their specific purpose. It is inspiring to see them go on to demonstrate gifts of generosity of spirit and practice, in their treasured lives. Do we have to wait for personal Job-like hits to do likewise or can we learn from their stories, thus honouring them, ourselves, and all our relations?

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