

DEATH is Your Soul Brother

by Dr. Joe MacInnis



The Lament for Icarus Herbert James Draper

A few months ago, I had a heart attack followed by a stroke. I spent three days in the ICU suspended in a web of wires, tubes and uncertainty. Drifting in and out of consciousness, the days felt like weeks. For three days, I was deep inside the twilight zone of mortality.

The ocean's twilight zone is 200 to 1,000m below the surface, beyond the reach of sunlight. When you're 85 years old, with your infrastructure crashing, you're beyond the reach of sunlight. It was an intimate glimpse of my final fade to black.

I'm a medical doctor who studies the psychology of leadership in lethal environments. The deep ocean. The battlefield and near-earth orbit. To be honest, I'm more like a journalist than a scientist. I think of myself as a guerrilla scholar.

I've dived three miles under the ocean with marine science teams, spent time in Afghanistan with military teams fighting the Taliban and worked with astronaut teams preparing to fly to the space station. A primary objective of my work is the prevention of injury and death.

As a young boy, I encountered death's dark force. When I was eight months old, my father, a Canadian Air Force flight instructor, was killed in a mid-air collision at Trenton airfield. My mother was at the base that day and witnessed two shattered aircraft spiralling to the ground. Death, and its emotional undercurrents, dominated my formative years.



Central to those years was a soul-searing truth. Death comes to all of us, hard and fast, like a blade in the heart or soft and slow, like a seed growing. Later, I discovered the collateral gift of this truth: Death is your soul-brother: how you confront death defines the beauty and urgency of how you live.

My curiosity about death and its complexities sent me to the University of Toronto medical school. In hospital wards and clinics, I witnessed how people respond to illness and its impact on their final days. Physicians introduced me the psychology of survival and the importance of humility and kindness. After my internship, I went to the University of Pennsylvania to study human performance in lethal environments.

I spent decades as a diving physician developing the techniques to allow humans to work safely in the ocean's depths. Along the way, I had numerous encounters with death; when Barry Cannon, my U.S. Navy SEALAB III teammate, was killed during a 200m dive; when our dive team, working for the Navy's Supervisor of Salvage, recovered the wreck of a Pan-Am jet with 136 souls on board. Confession: over the years, my respect for the lethal forces of the ocean turned me into an alpha coward with a PhD in fear.

Here are some perspectives on the destroyer of days . . . from an 85-year-old alpha coward.

Death is the hardest truth. You spend a lifetime denying it and ignoring him, but he's braided into every breath and heartbeat of your life.

Embrace death like the blood relative he is. His looming presence is a reminder to spend your time generously, massively, bearing witness to the black silence poised for reclamation.

Death is measuring your time in decades, then in years, then in heartbeats. The curtain closes with no second act. Raise a little hell. Relish the ride.

Death is easier if you fully understand the improbability of your existence, a chance occurrence like a grain of sand against the sun. Every one of your billions and billions of atoms is a gift from the cosmos. A gift you return.

Death is easier if you gaze into the eye of infinity—sunlit skies, starlit heavens and gleaming oceans. They are way stations to the bittersweet truth between now and forever.

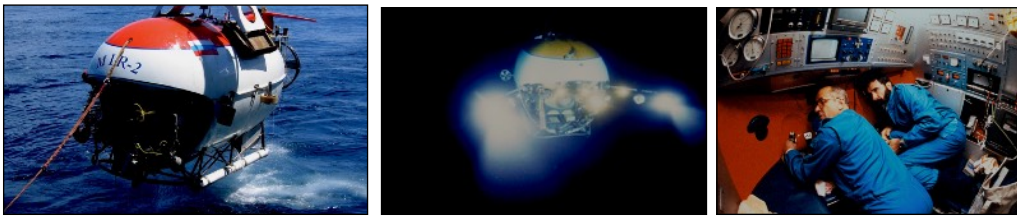


Five months before the Berlin Wall came down, I took a six-week trip across the North Atlantic in a Russian Academy of Science research ship the *Akademik Keldysh*. Designed to support the Russian nuclear submarine fleet, she had 130 officers and crew and two \$20-million research subs.

I made the trip with my old friend Emory Kristof, a deep sea photographer on assignment from National Geographic. We were producing a documentary film—*Comrades of the Deep*—showing how deep-sea science could help bridge the gap between Cold War enemies.

North of the Azores, the Russians asked Emory and I to join them on a dive into a steep-walled canyon. Surrounded by ridges and seamounts, the floor of the canyon was five-kilometres deep and geologically stable. Russians scientists wanted to know if it was a safe place to store radioactive waste.

Our sub is six meters long and weighs 18 tonnes. Its main feature is a steel crew sphere that holds Kristof, myself and our pilot Anatoly Sagalevitch. Three of us are jammed into a small space filled with dozens of dials, gauges, switches and screens.



Sagalevitch is a marine engineer from Moscow. Co-designer of the sub, he knows every inch of his extreme machine. Fortunately for us, he's articulate in English.

On the surface, Sagalevitch fills the sub's ballast tank with sea water. We slowly free-fall through the sunlit zone and the twilight zone. The batwings of fear flutter in my chest. We're going five thousand metres. Three miles. The first time the Russians have dived both subs this deep.

It takes almost 4 hours to get to the bottom. To pass the time, we talk about our objective: land on the seafloor, pick up rock samples. Place them in the recovery container beneath the sub.

At 4,000 metres, I glance out a viewport. And see *light* . . . reflecting off something solid. Suddenly, there is the sound of steel grinding on stone. The sub tips back. The lights go out. A current has pushed us into the side wall of the canyon.

I smell my adrenaline burning. My biggest fear is that the impact has torn away a through-hull fitting. And the full weight of the ocean will burst into the crew cabin. And turn the three of us into pink slurry.

In the darkness, Sagalevitch examines the electrical system. I fight back my panic and check the oxygen supply. Breathing like a racehorse, Kristof checks the communication system.

Kristof and I have made dozens of dives together. I know if things go wrong, he'll help save my life. And he, bless him, believes the reciprocal is true. At one point, he leans in and whispers: "Don't worry old friend. If that through-hull fitting has sheared off and water comes screaming in here . the only thing you're going to feel . .Is my footprint. On your forehead. Trying to get out of here."

It's the best thing he could have said. I'm on the edge of a Category 5 panic. Kristof is telling me to stay calm. Focus on the checklist.

Ten minutes later—the longest year-and-a-half of my life—Sagalevitch switches the lights back on and backs the sub away from the cliff. As we hang in the water, he checks every system for a second time. And a third. Everything is okay, he said. *Hara-sho*. In the long silence that follows, we look deep into each others eyes. We will complete the dive.

We spend two hours on the bottom. Collecting rock samples. Taking pictures. It takes four hours to get back to the surface. I've never been so happy to see sunlight.

Sunlight, being truly alive, means three things to this alpha coward. Learning. Laughter. Love.
Learning accelerates your understanding who and what to love.
Laughter is soul-music, the shortest distance between two hearts.
Love is the virtuous mastery of paying attention to things that matter.

Here are four ways to enhance your understanding of your soul-brother. Study the masters.
Build a library. Seek challenging encounters. Find a mentor.

Study the masters like the English poet John Donne. In the 17th century, Donne informed us that death is a wake-up call to the beauties and joys of life. He suggested that embracing death is the only way one can truly live.

Build a library of books and articles on death. Ernest Becker's book, *The Denial of Death*, is a good start. Keep a journal of your ideas and insights.

Seek challenging encounters with men, women and children close to death. In your family. In the hospital. Listen. Learn. Offer to help.

Find a mentor to help you understand the art of dying. One of mine is the writer Hunter Thompson. In his words:

*Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely
but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up,
totally worn out, loudly proclaiming, Wow! What a ride!*

For many of us, one of the earliest and most accessible introductions to death is the *Titanic* story. The unsinkable ship. The iceberg. The loss of more than 1,500 souls. The story allows us to examine death at a distance, but also begs a question: how would you react if suddenly confronted with the loss of your life.

Some years ago, I was the co-leader of a \$7-million expedition to produce an Imax film of *Titanic*. Here are some images from a 60-minute television special we produced for CBS News. Death haunts every inch of the majestic ruins.



Here are five ways to enhance your understanding of your soul-brother.

Pay attention. You don't know when you will die. You never get this moment back again.

Don't waste your time doing stupid things. Doom scrolling. Conspiracy theories. Road rage.

Make a long, candid list of things you are grateful for. Treasure the ways you've been fashioned by ancestors, parents and mentors. Be honest; you are far richer than you deserve.

Prepare those you love for your final exit. Be humble and kind. Tidy up your affairs. Share poetry, prose, music and memories of good times together.

Be grateful to your soul-brother. He's your guiding light—bringing emotional and moral clarity to what you are doing . . . right now.



Two days after my heart attack, as I was blinking my way into a new existence, a friend stopped by the hospital to offer advice. “You’re 85 years old,” she said, “You’ve lived 30,000 days and used up half-a-billion heartbeats. But the two stents in your heart offer you extra innings. Heal fast. There’s beautiful work to be done.

**Dr. Joe MacInnis is a motivational speaker. His audiences include IBM, Visa, Rolex and Microsoft.
This is a script from a speech he’s preparing for the World Stroke Organization.**