

Return by Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

*I am confident that there truly is such a thing as living again,
that the living spring from the dead, and that the souls of the dead are in existence.*

Socrates

Lázaro was a beautiful child at birth. His baby pictures, fading sepia shots in his mother's album, show him as a little round-faced angel, blondish curls cascading on the sides of his face, smiling impishly at the camera. He continued to look handsome and healthy years later, in his first communion picture, in which he posed gazing with untroubled eyes at the image of a wooden Jesus. However, that was about the time in which Nature began decimating Lázaro's body.

The first casualty was his appendix. The appendix is a small pouch of flesh that sticks out from the colon on the right side of the belly. Often, as happened in Lázaro's case, it gets inflamed and must be surgically removed. It was a useless organ but its extraction left the boy a tad less complete than he had originally been. Not long afterwards, Lázaro's tonsils, two oval-shaped pads of tissue at the back of the throat, had to be removed because they were enlarged and potentially infected. The tonsils serve a useful function by helping trap pathogens that may enter one's mouth; but there were other mechanisms available to do the same thing, so their removal was not a big loss, yet their excision diminished Lázaro a little bit more.

Lázaro navigated into adolescence without other bodily losses but, when he got braces, two teeth had to be pulled out to provide room for other teeth as they shifted into place. Later, when his four wisdom teeth emerged, they did not have enough room to grow inside his mouth and became impacted, causing pain; so, they too had to be taken out.

A period of grace lasting over a quarter of a century ensued, during which Lázaro remained in good health and suffered no physical diminutions. Then, as he went into his forties, problems began to crop up. First, there were his knees: he had been a long-distance jogger and would sometimes go for a five to ten mile run without warming up sufficiently. As a result, he began experiencing bouts of severe knee pain that resisted medications, injections, and physical therapy, and ultimately required removal of his worn-out knee joints; the damaged bones and cartilages gave way to parts made of metal and plastic. Years later, excruciating arthritic pain required Lázaro to undergo another round of surgery, in which the damaged sections of his hip joint were removed and replaced with artificial parts constructed of metal, ceramic and plastic.

Starting in his late fifties, Lázaro's health problems multiplied. He was diagnosed as suffering from incipient prostate cancer, prompting the destruction by radioactive irradiation of his prostate gland and the extinction of his sex drive. Then, discovery of a tumor in his left kidney required the performance of an operation to remove part of that kidney.

At this point Lázaro questioned how much was left of his original body, and how much more suffering he would have to withstand during his remaining years on Earth. He was not particularly religious, but felt a kinship with Job, and wondered whether a vindictive god was testing his endurance and his will to survive.

He decided to hold onto life: “The flesh is weak. A strong spirit endures,” he vowed.

The next health challenge tested his resolve. Three months after his partial kidney removal, an MRI of his abdomen revealed that the cancer in his kidney had metastasized and cancerous cells were now growing in the liver and adjacent lymph nodes. This, Lázaro learned, was an almost certain death sentence: he was not anticipated to survive for more than two years, depending on the effectiveness of the chemotherapy, radiation, and other treatment options. All such options came with severe side effects, including neuropathy, nausea, diarrhea, swelling of the limbs, and other discomforts.

As he reconsidered whether it was worth it to subject himself to further suffering to prolong his life, Lázaro realized that all his body was in open rebellion and, sooner or later, each part would secede and go away. He expected that it was only a matter of weeks, or even days, before the cancer showed up in his pancreas or elsewhere in his abdomen, or his lungs, or his esophagus. He doubted any treatment he undertook would achieve anything except buy him a few more days at the cost of increased suffering. So, he chose to forego further attempts at recovery and opted for palliative care to relieve the symptoms of his medical condition. Thus, Lázaro became a regular user of heroin to mask the pains associated with his deteriorating health.

Lázaro’s agony lasted a little over a year. By the end, he was a walking skeleton; only his heart and brain remained active. Then the disease ran its final course and his tired heart stopped beating.

Just before the heart took leave, Lázaro’s brain became quite busy. It went through a large increase in the high frequency neural oscillations known as gamma waves, which are commonly observed in the brain when dreaming sleepers access their memory center, in a region called the hippocampus.

As gamma brain waves were launched in quick succession, Lázaro experienced a feeling of peace that was accompanied by the cessation of all pain. He sensed that a part of him was rising above his body, ascending through a darkened tunnel, and arriving before a glowing mass from which emanated a blinding light and a feeling of love. Lázaro then underwent a rapid review of the key moments in his life. As recollections piled on, Lázaro came to understand for the first time how all his actions, good and bad, had affected him and others.

When the review ended, he became serene. Despite his body’s betrayals and the constant suffering, his life had been well lived and worthwhile. He was ready to go on to meet deceased friends and family, a thought that filled him with joyful anticipation.

And then, like the diminishing notes that ended Haydn’s Farewell Symphony, everything ceased and the stream of gamma waves left his cadaver.

Everything ceased, but all was not extinguished. The being that once was Lázaro would never exist again, and he would not get to rejoin those that were dear to him. But an anonymous version of him lingered on, incorporeal, traversing time and space as an orderly set of gamma brain waves. It went on

seeking an anchor, a transfiguration that would enable it to gain a different set of experiences and sensations, a new life. The waveform had no knowledge of itself and was ignorant of what it sought. But, at some point, it found its destination and occupied it.

It was a very small, narrow, confined space; an elongated tube on the surface of a somewhat larger, three-layered disk. The waveform that once was part of Lázaro attached itself to the tube and, in so doing, lost all lingering traces of identity. In time the disk, and the tube it contained, would develop into a living being – a mouse, or a tiger, or perhaps a human. Whatever it became, it had no knowledge of the waveform that it had absorbed and had no memories of what other beings, if any, had previously hosted it.

There were some exceptions. If the waveform was embedded in a being that was very similar to another it had previously occupied, some sequences of events could correspond to patterns that the waveform had encountered before, in which case the rat or tiger or human might have occasional “recollections” of experiences sustained in a former life. These recollections could be vague or very specific. Either way, implantation in a subsequent human of a waveform that once was part of Lázaro might cause the new host to experience “*déjà vu*” instances in which he or she had a vague sensation of living through an event – or sensing a sight, sound, smell, or tactile perception – that had been experienced by Lázaro. On the other hand, if the waveform ended up implanted in a non-human, the instances of remembered events would be extremely rare or non-existing.

A new person on which the waveform that once was Lázaro became implanted might likewise suffer from a misbehaving appendix or an enlarged pair of tonsils, or go through other incidents that were reminiscent of events in Lázaro’s life; or meet a stranger who was disquietly familiar and evoked feelings of attraction or antipathy that were undeserved. These occurrences would reinforce the commonly felt suspicion that there was nothing entirely new under the sun: in a sense, Lázaro would never entirely go away, and traces of him would keep perpetuating themselves for as long as the species remained viable and the hosts were compatible with the one that Lázaro had been.

Nobody would ever know all that Lázaro had enjoyed and suffered, but a small part of him might endure for a long time and achieve a form of immortality: a successor might even run into someone Lázaro knew in life and the memory, if pleasant, would make the holder of Lázaro’s trace happy for reasons he or she could not explain.

On the other hand, Lázaro’s brain gamma waves could end up implanted on a slug or some other lower beast. The mechanics of waveform transmigration are unknown and possibly, but not necessarily, random. Motions up and down the evolutionary scale may occur with some frequency; the *samsāra* (karmic cycle) is unpredictable.

An even more interesting question is perhaps that of causality. Could a “downgrading,” if occurring, result from the meeting of certain conditions? Could reincarnation in a lower being be retribution for past misdeeds? Lázaro may have been a naughty boy. Was there a price that his errant brain waves would have to pay?

Could the reverse process also exist: might the brain waves of a “well-behaving” monkey find their way into a human fetus? And what cosmic powers or process would come into play to guide the transference of brain waves from one species to another? If not a random process, how are decisions on the pilgrimage of a set of brain waves made, and by whom?

The brain waves that once were Lázaro would know nothing of these things, and that is all for the better.



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