



Impermanence is Not Fragility, by Rachel Naomi Remen

Perhaps survival was not only a question of the skillful use of state-of-the-art technology, perhaps there was something innate, some strength in those tiny pink infants, that enabled both them and me to survive.Â I had never thought of that before.

It reminded me of something that had happened one spring day when I was fourteen.Â Walking up Fifth Avenue in New York City, I was astonished to notice two tiny blades of grass growing through the sidewalk.Â Green and tender, they had somehow broken through the cement.Â Despite the crowds bumping against them, I stopped and looked

at them in disbelief.Â This image stayed with me for a long time, possibly because it seemed so miraculous to me.Â At the time, my idea of power was very different.Â I understood the power of knowledge, of wealth, of government, and the law.Â I had no experience with this other sort of power yet.

Accidents and natural disasters often cause people to feel that life is fragile.Â In my experience, life can change abruptly and end without warning, but life is not fragile.Â There is a difference between impermanence and fragility.Â Even on the physiological level, the body is an intricate design of checks and balances, elegant strategies of survival layered on strategies of survival, balances and rebalances.Â Anyone who has witnessed the recovery from such massive and invasive interventions as bone marrows transplant or open heart surgery comes away with a deep sense of respect, if not awe, for the ability of the body to survive.Â This is as true in age as it is in youth.Â There is a tenacity toward life which is present at the intracellular level without which even the most sophisticated of medical interventions would not succeed.Â The drive to live is strong even in the most tiny of human beings.Â I remember as a medical student seeing one of my teachers put a finger in the mouth of a newborn and, once the baby took hold, gently lift him partway off the bed by the strength of his suck.

That tenacity toward life endures in all of us, undiminished, until the moment of our death.

--Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.