



Trouble Breathing

Howard Stein, PhD

(Fam Med. 2020;52(1):68.)

doi: 10.22454/FamMed.2020.166832

It began as
Difficulty swallowing
Several weeks ago;
Come to think of it, also
Some trouble breathing,
No doubt a medical condition
With a Latin name,
 In English, most physicians
 Call it “Shortness of Breath,”

But I don’t want to
Bother my doctor.

Aspiration triggers
A feeling of choking,
Struggling for air,
Sends me into panic,
As when I take pills, eat,
Even drink
 Small
Sips of water.

Always the thought:
I could die now,
 Alone.
No one would know
Until someone found my corpse.

In my struggle for breath
A second terror intrudes,
Not as memory but
 As Presence.
Maybe I am already dead,
Like half my family,
Seventy-five years ago
In the gas chambers
Of Auschwitz-Birkenau,
My pills, pellets of Zyklon B
Dropped from the ceiling
Into deceptive “showers”
Where gasping is futile.

I choke both here and there,
Now overrun by
 Then,
Dying but already dead,
Frozen in time,
Frozen in torment,

Until I awaken
From this
 Trance
In a wild coughing fit,
Heave the poison,
And, if only briefly,
Leave this prison
Of body and mind.

I breathe better now,
As if someone had rescued me
 By opening a door.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This poem replays the nightmarish physical experience of a cascade from difficulty swallowing to choking, gasping for air, and feeling I might die, together with the personal significance it evoked. The history of the incident begins in the relatively recent past (weeks), but reawakens events and emotions deep into family, ethnic, and religious history two and three generations ago.

CORRESPONDENCE: Address correspondence to Dr Howard Stein, Department of Family and Preventive Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, 1408 Oakhill Lane, Oklahoma City, OK 73127-3248. howard-stein@ouhsc.edu.