



parallel zero

# **THE MINDFULNESS OF SURVIVORS**

Chronicles of 20 near-death experiences

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They've experienced the frightening symptoms of Covid-19 on their skin. They have been in intensive care, where they have either been intubated or else put under a high-pressure oxygen helmet where the feeling is that you are going to suffocate. Indeed, they have been one step away from death and fully aware that they were, in a situation of excruciating isolation from their loved ones. Not only that, they were often obliged to watch the patients in the next bed die. Some remember almost nothing as they were under sedation. Others have very vivid memories, but sometimes they sound more like surreal hallucinations. Most coronavirus survivors describe the experience of the disease as a descent into hell. A traumatic journey from which, like Dante, you come out exhausted, but also more self-aware and, perhaps, a better person. Some wrote their wills on the pages of a book. Others promised themselves they would radically change their existence, others found faith in a different god, and one person, at the age of 102, understood that she still wanted to live. Many feel they have returned to a new life, but there are those who are convinced that, once the emergency is over, they will be obliged to live exactly as they did before.

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**Igor Prussiani, 48, entrepreneur,  
Curno (Bergamo)**

“I remember terrible images. People around me who couldn't breathe. You could see them raising their hands to ask for help, because they were choking, and the nurses couldn't do anything. People kept dying. It was like a nightmare: at one point I thought, what the hell am I doing in here? They told me not to worry, but how can you not worry when you keep seeing people dying around you? At a certain moment, when I started to get better, they told me to sit up to eat something, but I said I'd rather lie down, so I wouldn't have to look around me anymore. And in all this, I don't know why, I kept having spasmodic cravings for orange soda.”





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**Italica Grondona, 102, Genoa**

“I never imagined I'd be in this condition at 102. This disease still feels like a dream to me, it doesn't feel like reality. And it seems so strange that it happened to me. I had already had the Spanish flu, which broke out at the end of World War I, and I remember feeling more or less like now. But the pain I felt this time, I'd never felt before in my life. They did so many tests on me, one after the other, going in with the needle. At times I thought that if I died it would be my release. It was very painful: the image that comes to mind is fireworks. I didn't have the courage to throw myself out of the window: had I had it, I probably would have. Who knows, maybe I still want to live.”



**Carlo Giussani, 60, radiology technician, Cremona**

"We don't realise we're breathing. You only realise it when you lack air, like I did when I was under an oxygen helmet. There you realise you could die, and every time you try to breathe you feel like there's a clock ticking inside you. And just when you want the comfort of your partner, to be able to talk to her, you lack the strength to do so: I listened to her voice messages, but I couldn't answer. There was a moment when I didn't think I would make it. I saw my life again, I asked myself if I had done everything right, if I had loved as I should have loved. And with difficulty I also wrote my will: unfortunately, the only book I had brought was a comic book. That's where I wrote my last will and testament. I thought about many things, and I promised myself I would try and put them into practice. But if I have to think about the community, I don't think that this experience in general will make us better: if we were assholes before, we'll still be assholes afterwards."





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**Giorgio Seminati, 78, Gorle (Bergamo)**

“I was hospitalised at Ponte San Pietro for 20 days, under oxygen, and the pain was unspeakable. I saw three of my roommates die. And during that same period my brother, who was not just a relative but a friend and a life companion, also passed away: we were orphaned at an early age, I was two and he was five, and from the orphanage to boarding school and adulthood we had always been together. And I feel guilty, because I made it and he didn't. The experience marked me deeply and made me fragile. My salvation was my daughter, who works as a nurse in the same hospital where I was a patient. Whenever her shift was over, she would come to me to assist and comfort me. All the nurses were extraordinary, though they suffered in their astronaut suits, they had the strength to call me puppy, boy, love, and I'm a grandfather. I was afraid of losing my life, my family affections, the only thing that gives meaning to our existence. And today I'm aware that I was given a new life as a gift. During this experience I rediscovered the faith: we are all rosewater Catholics, but in those hard times I was surprised to find myself praying with a new fervor. Now that I have been hosted for a month in a Covid hotel in Bergamo, I always watch the Pope give mass on television. I know that my scale of values has changed: before this happened to me I wanted to buy a new car, now I don't care anymore. I must enjoy affection.”



## **Franco Pugliese, 67, doctor, San Polo di Podenzano (Piacenza)**

"In the hospital they put an oxygen helmet on me almost immediately, my colleagues told me in no uncertain terms that otherwise I ran the risk of being intubated. I had a panic attack after an hour. I tried to calm myself down in order to endure what was real torture. I didn't know I was supposed to do that for 18 days. At a certain point I had the distinct feeling that my head had separated from my body, which I could no longer feel. I was convinced that I had become just a head. I no longer had any sense of time, and I felt I was in another dimension. I was obsessed with the fear of dying, and I was very aware that I was on a ridge from which I could slide down at any moment, towards death. The moments of my life passed by randomly, floating like pieces of cork. The thing that gave me courage was watching the sun come up every morning from the window near my bed: with every new day, I felt I had won a small battle. The most terrible moment of despair was when I saw my son, who's also a doctor, come in wearing the suit. He shook my hand and couldn't speak. We both had tears in our eyes, and finally he said to me, 'You know I've always loved you'. In those moments I took stock of my life, telling myself that it was unfair that I should die, after having dedicated my life to helping others, but I also made a long list of regrets. It's an incredibly powerful experience: it makes you understand the meaning of the word 'life' like nothing else. I think I understood what it must be like for prisoners who are told they will be executed tomorrow."





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**Ida Cappa, 56, craftswoman, San Vittore Olona (Milan)**

“I was hospitalised in Castellanza. The symptoms worsened rapidly, until the day I was told that they would have to intubate me urgently. It was night, they told me there wasn't much time left and I had to call a family member quickly. I called my sister, telling her in tears that we might never see each other again. At that moment I was sure I would die. Down in the ICU the doctors surrounded me and told me that they would put me in an induced coma, but that I needn't worry as I was in good hands. I woke up after two weeks. While I was asleep I dreamt I was in a green meadow full of light and animals, and I could hear everything the doctors said: they were afraid they couldn't save me. I was unconscious, but I understood perfectly well that suddenly, in despair, the doctors had decided to put me in the prone position, i.e. lying on my front. I remember I wanted to protest, but I couldn't talk. Later I learned that one of the doctors had phoned my sister, telling her that there was almost no hope for me. I could feel my father's presence next to me, though he died a long time ago: he put his hand on my leg and kept saying to me: 'You have to fight, you have to make it,' while I told him that I couldn't take it anymore and I wanted to die. Then I woke up. I spent the next two weeks on oxygen, and I continued with the hallucinations, I was sure I had my whole family around me. People were dying around me, and the personnel would seal the bodies in bags. I begged the nurses to put a screen so I wouldn't have to see it, they apologised and said there weren't any. I remember a doctor who had been on duty at the hospital for two consecutive days: he came to take a blood sample and collapsed at the foot of my bed because he was exhausted. Before this illness I had stopped believing in love or friendship, I had isolated myself: I was amazed to find out how many of those people I thought were lost had cried and prayed for me.”



## Angelo Cortinovis, 48, priest, Bergamo

"I spent a week in intensive care in a medically induced coma, in the prone position, i.e. lying on my front. According to the doctors, my recovery was a miracle, since I was literally one step away from death. I remember almost nothing about that week. The only memory I have is that I suddenly convinced myself that I had ended up in a video game, a stupid game in which I was the player. It was completely absurd, since I've never played a video game in my life. And I had a recurring thought: since I was terribly thirsty, I obsessively longed for a Pepsi. I don't know what the point of that is either, because I don't like Pepsi, but drinking one was the first thing I did when I got home."





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**Yaoling Zhu, 43, businesswoman, Milan**

“While I was hospitalized, my thoughts were focused on my brother, who was also in hospital in Bergamo, waiting for a bed in intensive care, which they couldn't find. I woke up at night full of anguish and I thought of him, I thought that he would die away from me, or that I would die away from him, and that I would never see him again. Then one day I saw on my mobile phone that terrible image of the army trucks taking the coffins out of Bergamo, and I cried my eyes out. In those moments my Buddhist faith helped me to accept the idea of death, but I was desperate because I thought I would leave my children all alone. While I was in the hospital, I promised myself that if I got out alive I would do many things, but I realise that I am not keeping those promises. I'm a Milanese woman after all, and I've gone back to the usual frenzy of life, where you're not an individual, you're just a cog.”



**Marco Cavalli, 52, craftsman, Curno (Bergamo)**

"I went into hospital on March 12, at the Giovanni XXIII in Bergamo. At first, when I was on oxygen, I saw many stretchers parade in front of me with those who hadn't made it. I'm one of the lucky ones. I've been here for a month at the Covid hotel in Bergamo, even though I've had my fourth consecutive positive swab. In the beginning I was afraid I wouldn't make it, especially because I saw the news on television, it seemed that we patients were all going to die, and the hospitals were in no condition to save us. I was thinking about my family, unfortunately I had plenty of time to think about them and imagine how they could have gone on without me, if I had died. Now that I'm almost out of it I think about my job, I'm afraid of what the future will be like, of how I'll be able to start again, if the conditions are right. In the darkest moments I thought I had to sort out my life, especially find suitable accommodation for my family. The current place is too small for five people, we only have one bathroom, and also for this reason I can't go home. And then I want to forget everything: I want to start from scratch."





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**Gian Luca Rota, 88, priest, Bergamo**

“I was in the E.R. a whole day before they found me a bed at the Gavazzeni hospital in Bergamo. Then they put me on high-pressure oxygen right away. I felt like I was running out of air, it was a terrible feeling. Two of my bed neighbours died, one after the other. One day they told me that my brother, who was four years younger than me, had also died of Covid-19 in another hospital in Como. There was a moment when I prayed to the Lord and told Him: 'Do what you want with me.' From that moment I started to feel better. Then I dreamt of a room of my own, a small room with a bed, a bathroom, just mine. I dreamt of intimacy. Sometimes at night I wake up and still hear the sound of stretchers carrying the dead.”



**Sergio Picchio, 75, building designer,  
Genoa**

"I went into hospital on March 12th. After a few days they put me under the helmet with pressurized oxygen. But it didn't work, so they induced a pharmacological coma and intubated me. I spent a week like that, before I woke up and understood the situation: they told me that I got so scared that I tore the tube myself. In my nightmares, I remember having developed the lucid and total certainty that I had been kidnapped by a private clinic that wanted to extort 200 thousand euros from me for treatment, while the Carabinieri were also in cahoots with the clinic. And this certainty continued to haunt me even after I came out of the coma. So much so that as soon as I was able to make the first phone call to my wife, I told her this story and asked her to call the police to come and save me. At a certain point I also became convinced that the doctors wanted to kill me by injecting me with drugs: in fact I had tried to make defensive weapons by modifying the cutlery they brought me to eat. They told me that I even attacked a doctor once. And I'm sorry for that, because the medical staff was absolutely extraordinary and I'm immensely grateful."





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**Silvio Caligaris, 65, infectologist,  
Brescia**

“During the first three weeks of the epidemic, I worked gruelling shifts at the hospital non-stop to cope with the huge number of patients. Many of them were dying, some of them because we had to make some very tough choices, as the places were limited, and I think that all this caused me a stress that weakened my immune system and eventually led me to contract Covid-19. In the ICU I was afraid, I was afraid I was going to die, and I cried a lot seeing other patients dying around me. The thing that scared me the most were the eyes of my colleagues, those I work with every day: above the mask I saw them becoming increasingly worried about me, and as a doctor I realised that my situation was falling apart. My wife works as a head nurse in the same hospital, sometimes she would come and look at me through the glass, and I could see her crying. It was devastating.”

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**Gianmario Della Giovanna, 51, priest,  
Bergamo**

“As soon as I was admitted, they put an oxygen helmet on me and left me in the emergency room. The next morning they took me to the IC ward. The most intense memory is that of the pain: I had never suffered such atrocious pain in my whole life. Especially the one caused by ABGs, the arterial samples, which was frightening. A thought helped me to deal with all this: if a needle was able to cause me such pain, what it was like to have had a nail hammered into a wrist, and left there for hours, on the cross? This helped me to connect myself in a powerful way, which had been unthinkable before, with my faith, to feel its incarnation on me. I entered the hospital with one God, and I came out with a completely different one. I still need to process this experience.”





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**Cristina Marenzi, 56, Cremona**

“My husband was admitted for Covid-19, and he's been in sub-intensive therapy. At the same time, my daughter and I also tested positive, and the experience of having a loved one at the hospital, far away, while I was in that condition and in isolation at home, was psychologically devastating, it was like being in a war. When my husband started feeling very sick and couldn't breathe, we called the emergency number, but the ambulance never arrived. My daughter and I took him to the hospital. I remember this bright, white, intense light that illuminated the deserted hospital parking lot, it was a ghostly vision. And the silence between us. That was the last time I saw my husband before he came home.”



**Alberto Matteelli, 60, infectologist,  
Passirano (Brescia)**

"Once I was admitted to hospital, the process was rapid, in a few days they put me in intensive care. It's a period of time I have few memories of, and when they got to the point where I had to be intubated I no longer have any memories whatsoever. I had the opportunity to read my clinical diary, from which it is clear that my condition was extremely serious. Reading that was a shock. It was only then that I realised I had nearly died. The loneliness in the room where they took me once I was out of intensive care, and where I spent 12 days, was very tough. But those days were useful to me for understanding the enormous value of the little things in life: they may seem unimportant but they actually give you true happiness."





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**Roberto Timpano, 50, postal worker,  
Lecco**

“On March 5th, after many days at home with a high temperature, I suddenly had a lot of difficulty breathing and was admitted to intensive care. I spent several days under an oxygen helmet. When it wasn't fogged up, I could look out the window in front of me, and I could see ambulances coming in all the time. One night I took off my helmet, I couldn't take it anymore, and a nurse rushed over, and I even had the feeling that she had taken off her mask to yell at me: 'If you want to live, you have to put it back on right away'. She told me so emphatically that I got scared. I've never had a real fear of dying, but today I wonder how my social relationships will change: will people be afraid of me, because I might still be infected? Or will I be afraid of them, because I fear that they will infect me again and plunge me into that hell one more time? Today I feel lucky not to have seen anyone die next to me. In my company, where there are about 300 employees in the whole province, there were three of us who got sick. One colleague died, and another - with whom I've worked side by side for 15 years - is still in a very critical condition. And I feel guilty towards them, for having made it.”

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**Angelo Vavassori, 53, anesthesiologist,  
Treviolo (Bergamo)**

“When they put the oxygen helmet on me, I was afraid I'd suffocate. It's a horrible feeling. As a doctor, I knew that physiologically the opposite was happening, that the forced pressure was actually opening up my lungs. But my body and my mind were telling me that I was choking to death. Only then did I really understand what my patients had been feeling: I had often seen them panic and tear their helmets off. I would have done the same thing. When they took me to the hospital, the same place where I work, I said goodbye to my children as if it was the last time. Under the helmet I realised that I wasn't getting better, and I was already thinking about what was next: either intubation or a ventilator. I was sure I wouldn't come out of it and I prayed to God to at least give me the chance to see my children grow up. One day, a colleague of mine came and shook me hard and shouted at me: 'Angelo, you have to make it'. That jolt was the thing that gave me the most courage, just what I needed at that moment. Another image that helped me was that of the Telgate crucifix: my mother sent it to me on the phone. I don't know how she did it, she never knew how to use a smartphone.”





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**Fabio Chiodelli, 56, teacher, Cremona**

“I was admitted to an orthopedic unit that had been converted into a Covid ward. I saw a lot of patients spend more than a night sleeping on chairs because there were no stretchers. I was one of the first patients to be admitted, when there was still no perception of just how lethal the virus was. I began to worry when I saw the staff in overalls, and the head of infectology instructing the nurses, who came from wards that had nothing to do with it, about the safety precautions typical of a department with a high risk of infection”.



## Daniele Silvani, 65, municipal employee, Crema

"When they took the ABGs, the arterial blood gas samples, it was incredibly painful. The most vivid image I have of that period are the eyes of the nurse, who came several times a day to take a blood sample. They were eyes that said 'Sorry, I have to do it'. I can't believe that a person who treated me, and who was risking her life in doing so, found the strength to apologise to me. Just as I find it hard to accept that some of the patients in my ward didn't survive while I did. You could see those steel stretchers leaving with a body on them, and you could hear the wheels squeaking, and you thought: 'Here's another one who didn't make it.' When I was really afraid of dying, I clung to the thought of my family back home. I desperately wanted to go home. Now that I'm here, I feel like I've been reborn. My new life began on April 7, 2020. There are a lot of people to whom I must apologise. And I must review my relationship with my daughter: we need to talk and talk, and tell each other everything."





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**Serajul Islam, 47, construction worker,  
Gallarate (Varese)**

“When they told me I had the coronavirus, I almost went crazy. I had to leave my son at home in Gallarate while my wife and the rest of my family are in Bangladesh. I was afraid to die, and we cried a lot together on the phone. I was afraid I would never see them again. Since I recovered, this is a new life for me. And I want to live it by helping others, as the Koran teaches. This was the purpose I gave myself when I was afraid I would die: to live according to the principles of the Koran.”