

Facing our leopards with the faith of a fox



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Actor Michael J. Fox was only 29 when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He's now lived for over 30 years with the illness, making the best of deteriorating health. With loving and supportive family and friends, privileged to have excellent medical care, Michael (I'll use the familiar) helped form a foundation that has raised over a billion dollars for Parkinson's research. Though he's had to retire from acting and slowly drop beloved activities like golf, he keeps his trademark humor intact.

In his 2020 book, "No Time Like the

Future: An Optimist Considers Mortality," he draws from his characteristic wit to blend the humorous with the poignant and painful. Describing numerous falls, injuries and serious spinal surgery, he can be self-deprecating as well as self-reflective. He knows his limitations and continually learns from his disability. Michael can be very insightful, with lines such as: "The deliberation with which I approach each day, each second, each movement, each intention—can literally slow me down to a crawl. All of those seconds, all of those minutes, are considered; I have a mini-conversation with myself about my every move. I'm taking my time. Time isn't taking me."

In a particular meaningful passage, he describes his experiences in the Kingdom of Bhutan. After a harrowing flight over majestic mountains ("Flying over the Himalayas is like housesitting for God"), he enters the country where

happiness is highly valued. In the high altitude he finds his symptoms aren't as pronounced and he settles into a "very palpable sense of contentment," joining in several Buddhist rituals. "Although I'm not a Buddhist or subscriber to any particular orthodoxy, while in Bhutan I happily and respectfully observe a number of Buddhist [practices]." He finds the silence of temples presents him with an opportunity to experience a new kind of stillness in mind even while shaking in body and "possibly transforming and changing on a molecular level." A depth of learning about the world, and himself.

Following some major setbacks in managing his disease, and recovering from a serious arm break, he quips: "if optimism is my faith, I fear I'm losing my religion." During a time when he is forced to more deeply settle, to honestly face his optimistic mantra, he finds his

mind is "muddy"; instead of using the time to learn hard lessons, he'd rather watch television. Instead of searching for deeper lessons, he pauses: "I seek a time-out."

One of the most perceptive sections of the book leaps off the pages when Michael is telling the story of a family safari in Africa. When they encounter a leopard on a tree branch with a fresh antelope kill, Michael looks up, gazing into the eyes of the powerful animal, and feels both danger and security among others in the truck. Later in the day, when the vehicle gets stuck by a watering hole, Michael imagines a leopard in the dark; a primal apprehension bites him. Finally reaching the safety of camp, he experiences some panic trying to move in the dark of the tent, unfamiliar surroundings and furniture make

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even a nighttime trip to the restroom a frightening trek.

While contemplating this day in Africa, Michael tries to tame the wild experience, to gain an invaluable insight. He reasons these events “represent three fears” present in his life. The leopard in the tree is the fear you can see, you face it and sense danger but “if you’re careful, you will survive it,” and learn from it. The leopard you don’t see could still hurt you, but you may simply be imagining something out there—fear of the unknown. Finally, negotiating in the dark, crossing “an inner minefield that you traverse as you identify, accept and process truths.” One truth he faces is his aging and his mortality, that “we all have an expiration date.”

For Michael, the first leopard is Parkinson’s. He can see it and has to deal with it. The second leopard is the fear

something is out there in the dark, ready to pounce. The uncertainty of what may be coming next, potentially harmful events. The third leopard is the foggy future, the vulnerability of the path ahead, desperate to find a handhold, some stability: “I pray that I’ll find my way, however unsure I may be of the path.”

The beautiful meditation Michael J. Fox presents in this book is that although we may have a personal optimistic outlook—and we may need that—it has to be honest, real, and not stuck in an imagined idealistic future. This is the young man who journeyed “Back to the Future” to help his parents and ends up learning as much about himself.

Time, like life, is a gift. And so are leopards.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).