

cIMT and the Eternal Now

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD

CAROTID INTIMA-MEDIAL Thickness (cIMT) is an ultrasound-obtained measurement of the inner two layers of the carotid artery. It is a test that has been validated in hundreds of studies as a risk factor for heart disease independent of the other classic risk factors such as cholesterol, blood pressure, and smoking.

I explain cIMT to patients as a “running tally” of vascular risk. It reflects not only their current clinical factors and behaviors, but summarizes their entire life history as far as their arteries are concerned. Did they smoke for 20 years starting in the Navy? The arteries remember. Were they once a star athlete? The cIMT reflects that, too. In a graphic and useful way this tests reminds patients of a basic universal truth: At every moment we are the sum total of every past moment. The elusive, accumulative past lives on in us. We call it the present.

We have a paradoxical relationship with the past. It seems real in memories and photographs. It invites us to visit and change it through fantasy and speculation. (What

if I had gone to med school in San Francisco instead of Boston? What if my wife and I had had a second child after all? What if I had bought Google at 15?) On the other hand, our logical mind tells us that the past is fixed and immutable. When Shakespeare’s Macbeth quips, “What’s done is done,” the phrase is both obvious and ironic.

In medicine and in life, one of the “tricks” seems to be to comprehend the past as an “iteration machine” that has made us exactly who we are while at the same time not allowing that understanding to turn us fatalistic. Like so many things, the past makes for a good servant but a bad master. To the extent that our past helps us, we must capitalize on it. To the extent that our past haunts us, we must — as the poem says — let it burn. **SDP**

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A Lesson From My Candle

*This moment’s vanished down the hatch
Like every now before it
Distracted by our daily catch
We mortal fools ignore it.*

*Our human cloth unraveling
To lastly leave us naked
The show with which we’re traveling
Bestows life then retakes it.*

*The candle on my tabletop
First flickers smart and cheerful
When exhausted to its final drop
Leaves me bereft and tearful*

*The message of this meter isn’t
To carouse or practice Spanish
Whether hedge fund king or peasant
All you adore will vanish.*

*The lesson from my candle
A moment at a turn
The present we can handle
The past we must let burn.*