

My Personal Bolt of Lightning

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By MICHAEL UTLEY

WEST YARMOUTH, Mass. -- I never believed that I could be in danger on a golf course — until I was struck by lightning on one last year. What I learned that spring day is that lightning is an underrated killer that fries minds and turns bodies into charred shells.

I was playing in a charity golf tournament on Cape Cod. The sky was clear when our foursome joined in a shotgun start — players on every hole teeing off at the same time. My group was just finishing at the 10th hole when a horn, the signal for a storm threat, began blaring. We rushed toward our carts, heading for the clubhouse, but we were still far out on the course when I was struck. My life changed in seconds.

I understand the strike had a halo effect. The other players heard a loud bang and saw me stumble to the ground. They say smoke came from my body. The charge hit my head and lower body and then exited through my feet. My shoes flew off.

For a long 10 minutes, my golfing partners performed C.P.R., forcing life into me. At one point my friends thought I was dead — I had stopped breathing. I "died" a second time in the ambulance.

I remember none of this. A few days later I woke up in intensive care, but I didn't recover my memory for more than a month. Now, more than a year later, I am still working at rehabilitation from the physical disabilities I was left with.

It is our cultural habit not to take lightning seriously. Winning the lottery jackpot or finding the perfect husband is said to be "about as likely as getting struck by lightning" — which is meant to convey that there's virtually no chance at all. Most Americans consider thunderstorms minor, if dramatic, inconveniences. Traffic keeps moving and outdoor games go on, despite the thunder, until pelting rain arrives. But while my experience may not be common, it's not freakish, either — and I invite casual risk takers to consider its severity.

Over the past 30 years, an average of 73 people a year have been killed by lightning in the United States, according to the National Weather Service, and about 300 are struck each year and survive. Since victims of lightning don't die from burns, but from cardiac arrest, it was my good fortune that one of my golfing buddies had just completed a refresher course in C.P.R. But still my body was profoundly shocked and my brain was damaged — and this is typical.

At 49, I am relearning basic motor skills — how to eat, shave, dress, walk down a hall without bumping into walls. I can't toss my little girl in the air. Sometimes the pain in my damaged nerves is intense.

I don't like the effect on my family. The people I most love are now caregivers. Insurers have told me that I will probably continue to need medical care — when I applied for long- term disability insurance, I received a letter stating I had been turned down "due to your medical history of lightning strike."

There are organized efforts to warn people about lightning. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issues alerts and disseminates the relevant advice: Go indoors at the first rumbling of thunder; stay clear of trees, water, wire objects and heavy equipment; don't use the telephone during a storm. The PGA Tour requires that a meteorologist be present at every event, to stop play when there's danger of lightning.

Yet I suspect most people are still as unaware of this particular danger as I used to be. More Americans are killed by lightning each year than by hurricanes or tornadoes — and many more than are killed by sharks. You'd never know this, however, from news coverage or even from popular lore.

Perhaps it is only natural that the press concentrates on dangers that threaten many people at once, and that stories are told and retold of events with many witnesses. Deaths and injuries from lightning are isolated and far-flung — easy to overlook or ignore. Unless, of course, you have been a victim.

Michael Utley is on leave from his position as a vice president at UBS PaineWebber.