

'What I Learned' serves as a true wakeup call

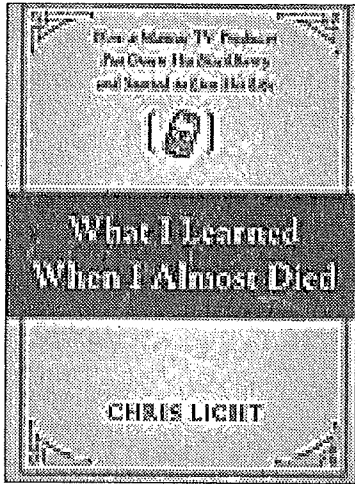
"I never thought about dying before any of this," Chris Licht writes near the end of his new book, "What I Learned When I Almost Died: How a Maniac TV Producer Put Down His BlackBerry and Started to Live His Life."

"On that day in April, I knew my life would be different, but I never imagined it would become what it has," he adds.

"What I Learned" consists of 18 relatively brief chapters and can easily be read in one sitting. The book is a very personal account of an event that caused an intensely driven workaholic to pause and take stock of his life on a number of levels. The book chronicles Licht's coming to terms with his life before and after he experienced a life-threatening brain hemorrhage on Wednesday, April 28, 2010.

"On a cool, partly cloudy spring day not long after nine in the morning, my brain went audible, emitting a pop from deep within," Licht explains. "Not a loud one, more like a balloon had been pricked in the distance." At the precise moment he experienced this sensation, Licht was on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C., on his way to hear Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski give a speech at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel.

"Now came something else," he continues. "It was as if a glass of water had tipped up, there and spilled its contents; only this didn't feel like a liquid, just a sensation of movement inside, from the back of my head toward the front." After a brief cellphone consultation with his parents, who live and work in Connecticut, Licht asked his driver to take him to the George Washington University Hospital emergency



"What I Learned When I Almost Died: How a Maniac TV Producer Put Down His BlackBerry and Started to Live His Life" by Chris Licht. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011. 165 pages, \$23.

room. As it happens, Licht's father is a doctor — an internist — and his mother is a physician's associate. Knowing what can happen in an emergency room if you do not appear to be in any real danger, his father gave him some advice that Licht only understood and appreciated in retrospect:

"When you get there, you need to tell them that you do not get headaches and this is the worst headache of your life." This suggestion got him in immediately as the receptionist instantly recognized this symptom as a major indicator of a person who may be experiencing a stroke.

For those who don't know, Licht is the co-creator and original executive producer of MSNBC's popular sunrise talk show, "Morning Joe." The show features Scarborough — a former congressman —

Brzezinski and Willie Geist. Previously, he was the executive producer of "Scarborough Country," which also aired on the same network.

Licht's motivation for writing the book was fairly straightforward; "It would be nice, I thought, if everyone could get the education I had gotten without having to nearly die. So I decided to write a book."

The author intersperses what is essentially a medical narrative about the eight days he spent in the hospital undergoing various tests and scans with flashbacks from the past to illustrate his perspective before and after the "event," as he refers to it throughout the book. In one particularly poignant passage that illustrates how he typically approached work, he describes why he felt he was ideally suited for his job as executive producer for "Morning Joe."

"Joe wants a producer who's organized, has vision, and gets the impossible done," Licht emphasizes. "He wants someone with 'rocket fuel' in his veins. He wants a killer. I like to think I fit all the criteria. I lived the show." But this kind of myopic career focus can also take a heavy toll on an individual's personal life, and this was certainly true for Licht: "I gave 100 percent, which means I was always shy a few percentage points to give to family. As our newborn was being taken to be circumcised, I was on the phone doing 'Morning Joe' work, obviously not fully in the moment of fresh fatherhood. Why did I even have it on?"

"I skipped the wedding of one of my best friends because it was Sweeps Week," he continues. "That failure is one of my all-time

regrets, but it was an easy call at the time. If you love what you do, as I did, the thought of not doing it can be scary. For me, the fear was not about losing a paycheck."

The experience even affected Licht on a spiritual level, something that he had not anticipated.

"I am not religious, and in the past my reaction upon hearing that someone was praying for someone else was entirely cynical," Licht confesses. "Now people were going to pray for me. All this felt rather good, surprisingly. I like the idea that spiritual thoughts were traveling through the cosmos on my behalf. Whatever might work to get me out of this, I was in favor of."

In the final analysis, "What I Learned" is a cautionary tale — most of us could learn a great deal about our own lives by vicariously experiencing the author's coming face-to-face with his own mortality and the tenuous nature of life itself.

"What happened to me was an unsolicited, but invaluable, reminder that none of us gets to choose how many days we have," Licht concludes. "Everybody's supply is limited, some far more than others."

I found "What I Learned When I Almost Died" to be both inspirational as well as a kind of wake-up call. Our priorities truly do dictate how we spend the precious time we have been given in this life. Ultimately, it's not what we do or accomplish that matters most — it's the relationships we have with those closest to us that give meaning to our existence.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University

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