

## **Change of Heart**

by Gene Van Shaar 12/3/17

For several days I had a funny feeling in my chest. Then there was a pain that woke me up at four in the morning. I decided that I would go to the doctor that day to see if I had some sort of a lung ailment.

Our gas range had been giving off a slight gas smell and I wondered if that might be the cause of my problem. First thing in the morning, I called the gas company and they sent someone out to check it. The stove did indeed have a small leak and he put a red tag on it and closed off the gas line behind it. Barbra had never liked that gas range so we decided to replace it with a new electric one, which we went shopping for that day.

About three in the afternoon I went in to see the doctor. I told him I thought I might have a problem with my lungs. He checked me out and took a chest x-ray. Then he said, "I don't think you have a lung problem but you might have a heart problem."

I said, "I doubt that because I have low cholesterol, have never had a heart problem, and there is no history of heart trouble in my family."

He responded, "Regardless, I want you to go to the hospital emergency room and have some tests done."

"How soon should go, tomorrow?"

"I want you to go now."

I went home and told my wife that the doctor wanted me to go to the hospital for some tests and that I would just drive there myself. About a block down the road I had a pain in the chest like the one I had in the morning, and started to sweat. I drove back home and asked Barbra to drive me to the hospital. Once we were there, things were calm as they conducted several tests. A short time later a cardiologist came to the room and told us that tests indicated that I had had a mild heart attack. He said that they were going to keep me overnight and do an angiogram in the morning. We were shocked. The next day the doctor told me that they expected to find a small blockage and would probably put in a stent during the procedure. After the procedure the doctor came in and said, "We did not put in a stent."

"Why not?"

"We found much more than we were expecting. In order to correct the problem it will require open heart surgery, specifically, a quadruple bypass operation, which we need to perform as soon as possible, before you leave the hospital."

The next day (October 5, 2017) before the surgery, I met with the anesthesiologist, Dr. Call, and explained that I had a history of serious and extended nausea and skin problems after surgery. He said he would make extra efforts to help prevent that. The surgery lasted from about 1 P.M. to 8 P.M. My heart and lungs were actually stopped for 88 minutes. That night and for the next two days there was a lot of pain but, wonderfully, there was no nausea or itching. Dr. Call later explained that he had used the technique called TIVA (total intravenous anesthesia) and the anesthetic agents propofol and remifentanyl in order to prevent complications.

The third day after surgery my heart started having periods of atrial fibrillation (afib). The surgeon quickly started treating the afib with the medication amiodarone.

Almost immediately I was afflicted with severe nausea and hives. I pleaded with them to stop the amiodarone treatment but they persisted for two days. At the end of the second day another doctor finally intervened, stopped the amiodarone, and switched to sotalol to treat the afib. Later I looked up amiodarone and found that it is well known to cause serious side effects including nausea and hives. I also discovered that it stays in the body for a long time.

After about a week of great suffering from nausea and hives which resulted in lack of nutrition and sleep, I passed out. My son was visiting and tried to rouse me but I was unresponsive. My wife and son called 911 and I was transported to nearest hospital by ambulance. The ER doctor, Dr. Bair, quickly confirmed that I was in diabetic shock and my heart was in afib. Treatment was administered and I regained consciousness about 45 minutes after I had passed out.

Thinking back, I remembered not being able to respond to my son and knowing that something serious was wrong. I assumed that something had gone wrong with my heart and that I was dying. I felt surprised that I was dying but realized that there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. After that, there was darkness and a series of flashes and mechanical noises. When I began to come around in the ER I was surprised that I was not dead. One of the first things I said was, "No amiodarone." Dr. Bair responded, "Don't worry, your wife already told us."

Soon someone asked me why I was smiling and I responded, "The nausea is gone." Miraculously, the nausea never came back, for which my gratitude is boundless.

The hives did not go away and even got worse. Let me give you some background. I started having severe skin problems in my early twenties when I was diagnosed with eczema. The itching was horrible and scratching made it worse and caused it to spread. No topical treatment did much good and I suffered much for many years. Whenever it got really bad doctors gave me prednisone treatments (pills or shots) which helped a lot. After great struggles I finally developed the willpower to resist scratching, and it went from being a big problem to a little problem. Eventually I coined the phrase, "No matter how bad it itches, you don't have to scratch it." That phrase became a maxim to live by. Eventually I learned that no temptation or sin was as hard for me to resist as the urge to scratch eczema. I used this analogy to help myself and many of my students to resist temptation. Those who have not experienced serious itching don't understand it on the same level as those who have.

After many years of having little trouble with eczema I had my right knee replaced. The hardest part of that painful recovery was dealing with nausea and a severe outbreak of eczema, both of which lasted for over a month. Later I had my right ankle and left knee replaced which each resulted in another major struggle with nausea and eczema. I have already mentioned the complications related to my next major surgery, the recent heart bypass. In this instance I suffered from hives that covered most of my body for more than three weeks. I spent many a night mostly awake concentrating on not scratching the terrible and intense itching associated with the hives. Even one day of that felt like more than I could bear.

In his book One Silent Sleepless Night Spencer W. Kimball described a night in 1957 following cancer surgery which resulted in the loss of one vocal cord and part of another, followed by a staph infection. He wrote, "Time marches on, they say but that night time ceased to march. Its feet had lost the rhythmic beat; it slowed its pace,

stumbled, crawled a little on its leaden feet, and finally stopped (p. 9) ... "My wound is hurting again. It is nearly unbearable (p. 22) ... The pain is more than I can bear." (p. 26)

During that night he remembered and reminisced about many interesting experiences during his life. Some of them were tragic, many pleasant, and some inspiring. Sadly, there were few pleasant thoughts during my nights of suffering because of the almost constant concentration required to avoid scratching the burning itch that covered my body. Like his experience, time dragged on and on, and the suffering seemed to be unbearable.

Even though prednisone works on hives and eczema the doctors were reluctant to give me that treatment because it has negative effects on healing. After more than three weeks of intense suffering one of my heart doctors finally authorized some limited prednisone treatments which knocked down the hives. However, after that the eczema outbreaks started, which seemed to have been bought on as another side effect of medication. Even with numerous trips to doctors, including dermatologists, I still suffered with serious skin problems and itching for more than two months.

Other side effects were feelings of being in a fog or haze, irritability, helplessness, and depression. There were, and continue to be, issues with my heartbeat and blood sugar. I don't know how I could have survived without the Lord's help which was promised in several priesthood blessings. One time I was totally at the end of my rope, physically and mentally, when my bishop came to our home and gave me a blessing in which there was assurance that I would get totally better and my suffering would be less from that time on. After the blessing I hugged him and cried for a long time.

Some great people have said that suffering can be a refining and uplifting process. In the midst of suffering that was hard for me to understand or relate to, but recent experiences have affected me in some positive ways. Experiencing what I thought was death gave me a greater appreciation for life. It also gave me a greater desire to improve physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Healthy eating and exercise used to be difficult for me. Compared to what I have been through those things are now comparatively easy. I have also noticed that it is easier to read the scriptures and pray than it used to be. It is now clear to me that I would have suffered less if I had been more wise and disciplined years ago. I have tried to explain this to some of my loved ones, and some of them seem to be working on learning the easy way, instead of the hard way.

In addition to the miraculous things already mentioned, I need to list a few more that occurred during recovery: (1) My need for insulin ceased. (2) I found a new editor. (3) I found a new home.

During my times of suffering I prayed many times that I would be quickly healed. Because I believe in miracles, there were several mornings that I woke up surprised that I was not healed yet. I had to learn to be thankful for the strength to endure and even small improvements. I have a good friend that is an emeritus member of the quorum of seventy, who has suffered in many ways for many years, that lovingly explained to me that patience is one of the most important things we need to learn in this life.

I have learned from my own experience that building faith, discipline, and patience is easier if done sooner and harder if done later. I have also learned that easy and hard are relative, especially compared to what feels unbearable.

Elder Kimball ended his book with the following words: "Pain, the ugly, sadistic companion of the past three weeks, has moved out to give place to the mild-mannered gentleman Distress, which in turn has now given way to the friendly person Comfort. And with comfort comes peace, and with peace a return of memory of a certain Time, the Time with which I was formerly acquainted; The Time which has now rubbed its eyes, taken a deep breath, saluted, clicked its heels, and come marching its way back into the normal sixty-second minutes and sixty-minute hours and twenty-four-hour days. Time has been resurrected, peace restored, and life is good again!" (p. 62)

As I finish this account, Distress is on his way out. Comfort is coming through the door. My old friend Peace has found his way to my heart.

Postscript 1/15/18: One of the medications that I had to discontinue in the middle of the above described process was Sotalol, which helped control my heart rhythm. Since then my heartbeat has been faster than expected. Subsequent to the ending paragraph above, some of the skin problems and itching returned. Working closely with my doctor we switched or stopped taking one medication after another for weeks trying to find the problem. The last one we tried was Jardiance, a medication that helps lower blood sugar. Within a few days of discontinuing it, my skin condition started to improve. Finally, Comfort has become my frequent companion. We are still working on controlling the diabetes without insulin.