



In July, 2006, my father's heart underwent some rather extensive revisions to ensure that enough oxygen rich blood would continue to flow into the muscle that has kept him going for the last 73 years. He was well aware of the sudden change in its status three weeks before the Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting was accomplished by Barry "Flash" Davis, MD at Greenville Memorial Hospital in Greenville, South Carolina. He remembers that day in July when he suddenly felt a new sensation of pain in his chest that occurred with an activity he was used to doing. His first inclination was to solve this problem by figuring out what he could do to relieve himself of that uncomfortable feeling. He found that taking long, deep breaths did the trick.

In Norm Grimshaw fashion, he then set upon the internet to figure out what this thing was that was newly happening in his chest. After all, he was due to walk with his trail walking club the next day up into the foothills of the Appalachian mountains on one of their weekly multi-mile trail hikes. He and mom live in the remote and extraordinarily beautiful country that graces the northwest corner of South Carolina.

When he decided he had *angina pectoris*, and understood that this meant there was a problem with the coronary artery circulation to his heart, he figured he might ought to tell Maryellen, my mom and his wife of 47 years about it. It was about two weeks later when he actually did the telling and they went together to see the doctor about it. My dad approached the matter with the usual stylistic grace afforded by his lifelong experience as a successful and pragmatic professional engineer. He knew what was up, and told the doctor straight out he had angina pectoris, and he could get it to go away with deep breathing.

It didn't take the doctor long to confirm this. On the morning of the stress test, results in one hand and phone in the other, he suggested with enthusiasm that mom just hop right in the car and drive over to Greenville Memorial half way across the state behind the *ambulance* he was procuring for dad to give him a special kind of ride there. That streamlined the introduction to the cardiovascular diagnostic team in Greenville for a cardiac catheterization that same day! After he and mom were helped with getting settled into his hospital room, going through a hundred pre-operative conversations, the famous CABG surgery video, lab tests, x-rays, and a get to know you social with the nursing staff, they decided to give their offspring a call to let them know that he was going to have a plumbing job the next morning on his.....HEART!!!

This picture came into my view finder by means of a call from mom with the attempting to be cheerful news of dad's upcoming adventure. To this day I love the way my dad talks about it all. He relates, "I knew what was wrong, and what they had to do about it. There was no need to worry over it. I knew they could fix me back up good to go, and I wasn't interested in all the details." He doesn't ever read directions, either, but he can take anything apart and put it back together again; his only requirement of himself is that he leaves it in better shape than he found it. Then he'll give it to you, if you need it.

Dad was nice enough to ask the surgeon to send me the operative report at his follow up visit after leaving the hospital. Since I am a physician, he figured I'd be interested. Dad's only question of the surgeon was "why *seven* bypass grafts?" "Well," the surgeon said, "my nickname is *Flash*, and I just got going and didn't slow up 'til I hit seven." That was a good enough answer for Norm, and funny, to boot.

I didn't expect the kinesthetic equivalent of being kicked in the chest by a horse to occur when I read the operative report: INDICATIONS: This is a 70-year old gentleman with unstable angina.

Cardiac catheterization showed significant multi-vessel coronary artery disease, diffuse in nature, with preserved left ventricular function. FINDINGS AT OPERATION: All of his coronaries were heavily diseased and calcified except for his posterior lateral branch of the right coronary artery. The LAD had to be bypassed in 2 spots due to its heavy calcification and diffuse disease."

HEY! We're talking about my dad, here. You know, the guy who taught me how to swim at the YMCA on about a hundred Saturday mornings, and as my assistant scoutmaster started me on a shared journey of discovery of some of the most beautiful remaining places of wilderness in North America? That guy. He was the one who said good night to me every night, woke me up every morning, drove me to high school every day, and encouraged me at the critical moment to stay the course and become an Eagle Scout. He was there when I played my trumpet at All-State. The approval in his eyes afterwards meant the world to me. He cheerfully took me to college at 17 to study whatever I wanted to learn, and when I graduated, he and mom bought me *every* book on the list I gave them for suggestions of what I would like for a present! On my wedding day, his advice to me was "Take good care of her, son." 15 years after that, when we proudly watched my wife graduate from seminary, he said "You're doing a good job." He's been there for all our kids: births, baptisms, confirmations, graduations--and many of those special events in between, too.

I practice medicine. That operative report had a lot of meaning for me. First, I felt distressed about the less than glowing report about the status of his coronary arteries. Second, I felt relief that he was able to get help before damage had occurred to his heart muscle. That felt like a stroke of grace! Third, I just kept thinking over and over.....*seven...seven...seven*. Dang! That's a b-b-b-b-big number. It's sacramental, in fact. Sacred, you might say. Maybe you are supposed to be learning something here? What could it be? He and I are alike in so many ways. We get the same kind of headaches, hurt in the same spot behind our shoulder blade, and get stiff in the same sacroiliac joint. Double dang!



I thought back to my medical school days, and remembered there was one anatomy lab practical that first year where I got a perfect score—the heart! That was unusual; considering sometimes they seemed to be able to make the needle for the structure we were to identify hover by itself in thin air! I thought about the amazingly complex and elegant anatomy of the heart and was suddenly struck with the memory that the coronary arteries are the very first branches that come off the aorta—the large artery that leaves the heart carrying freshly oxygenated blood to the whole body. Forming literally from the root of the aorta, extending both left and right as descending spiral-shaped branches that encircle the heart like vines carrying sustenance to the fruits they are growing, the

coronary arteries are the blood supply for the heart itself, its lifeline to oxygen, nutrients, hormones, and immune cells. *The heart gives itself what it needs first*—it makes sure its muscles and nerves have life sustaining nutrients and oxygen—and then it sends them out to the rest of the body.

This hit me with about as much finesse as a pile-driver. My heart is his heart—His heart is my heart. Our genes are so similar. What does this mean for him? For me? For us? A little voice in my heart spoke up then, and suggested in the piglet—te way small voices from the heart are known to speak, saying ... "Peace in your heart will come from taking care of yourself. Follow the lesson you learned in anatomy and fashion your life in the way your heart has shown you to live." I came closer to an understanding that day of the famous saying that is shared by many spiritual traditions: "Be in the world treating others as you would want yourself treated."

Since then, I have been trying to let my dad's heart and my heart teach me more about how to live. First, I discovered there lives in my heart a sense of gratitude that we both are still in fact here and alive. I am granted – unearned-- this grace filled gift of life. Dad has helped me find my way and –thanks to his awareness, the skill of his doctor, and the support given by mom, my siblings, and many others who helped him recover-- he is still here to walk beside me in our journey through this life together.

As human beings, we have these wonderfully energetic spirits placed adroitly into these astoundingly complex bodyminds, and we are given the task of learning how to be human in a world that is overwhelmingly b-b-b-big. Like the words in the opening song of the musical and movie *The Lion King*, we quickly realize there is far too much to take in here, more to do than can ever be done. But the heart is a structure whose function is marvelous and mysterious, and it serves with its very presence as a sign and symbol of how our individual nature can be part of a complex, interwoven, and interdependent network. We are built of structures (cells, tissues, organs, systems, and networks, all kinds of pipes, wires, ropes, struts, joints, and coverings, big and small) that work in a magically coherent way to unify us into an organism that can act with intention. With intention, we then relate to other beings, and the relations persist, resonating with each other in ever expanding and contracting ripples and interference patterns, forming the harmonics of our world.

Making decisions with one's heart is different than making decisions with one's mind. The operating principle is different. By its structure, location, and function, the heart sends messages which remind us to return to center, keep our balance, stay in rhythm with what is around us, take what we use and clean it up, recycle, let go of what is not needed while receiving new things that are needed, and then head back out and do it over again. Lots of practicing is required to do it well and keep it going.

It reminds us that change is always with us, mixing it up in the center of our chest, and that we need first a place of emptiness in order to have room for fullness. The heart operates on the principle of abundance, recognizing that it cannot work without being in relationship to the body within and the environment outside. If we attend to our living so that we maintain harmony within our body and with our environment, the heart will receive just what it needs over time, and will have just the right amount of resources to sustain it. Too much or too little of these resources would make it lose its equilibrium. If we hoard our resources we overload and eventually experience congestive heart failure. If we are deprived, we go into shock. If we pinch ourselves off from being in relationship, we suffer the effects of ischemia (oxygen deprivation) and have angina. If we fail to stay in harmony with our environment, we develop an arrhythmia, irregular or missed beats.

I am thankful for the lessons I continue to receive from my father. (Thanks, dad – your sacrifices have not gone un-noticed – but can we go for something a little less exciting like *ear wax* next?). I am learning to apply the principle of abundance, giving thanks for what I receive, making an effort to use it wisely, mixing it up so that it can be used for what is needed now, and then sharing it with all that is around me. I am learning that this creates a network of other beings and an environment that will support me and my family over time with what we need. This helps me to feel more in harmony with the people, living things, and land around me, and is opening my eyes to see how I can belong to this big world and still feel peace in my heart.