

Put on Your Hospital Gown

About 3 ½ weeks ago, for our 14th wedding anniversary I gave Em a coronary event. Talk about a surprise... for both of us. Truth be told, it was actually the day before our anniversary, July 28th. We were in Guatemala with a group from St. John's and it was our second day of work in the village of Nueva Providencia. The morning of the "event", some of us were working in the river where we were building an underwater ford for trucks to drive over. Others in the group were up in the village painting the new school building that St. John's had funded. At lunchtime we sent the group up to eat but I sat down by the river, not feeling very well. One of the group members stayed with me, Kath Burns, an old friend and the reason we became connected with the Mission in San Lucas Toliman in the first place. There were also a few folks from the village, Pablo and Valentine and one or two more.

I sat there with my head between my knees, wet bandana covering my head, just feeling vaguely crummy when I felt for my pulse. After a few seconds of frantic searching, I told Kath, "I can't find my pulse." Suddenly I felt a tightening in my chest, which quickly escalated to an intense pain, like someone was reaching through my sternum and squeezing my heart as hard as they could, I said to Kath, "I think I'm having a heart attack" and then lost consciousness.

There was no tunnel with a light, no angels escorting me over to the other side, no clouds parting in an azure sky... I just went away. I could hear voices but they didn't seem to be the voices I had been hearing, they seemed very far away and disembodied. I think I was the one who was disembodied, and then, just as quickly as I left, I came back. Still seated. Still with Kath and Pablo and Valentine. Still sitting by the river. The pain in my chest was gone but I felt like something quite momentous had just happened, like a planet had just passed very close, like I had just missed stepping off of the edge of a cliff.

I lay down on a tarp we had there to help with the river diversion, curled up in the fetal position on my left side and immediately began saying to myself, "I am NOT going to die like this... I am NOT going to die like this." Equal parts prayer and command, "I am NOT going to die like this."

Everyone sprang into action, Kath frantically talking to me in English then Spanish to Pablo and Valentine, Pablo going up to the village to get Em, Valentine getting on his phone to call for a ride to get me to the hospital in town, Kath not leaving my side and me staring at the orange bandana that had been on my head, the vibrant blades of green grass that cradled it and the concrete step surrounding the building that housed the turbine where I had been sitting moments before. Pablo found Em and calmly told her that I wanted my blood pressure cuff, she grabbed it and slowly they walked back down to the river, as she rounded the corner in the road and saw me lying on the ground she turned to Pablo and asked, "Is it an emergency?" And he said, "Si, si" as she ran down to me.

When she got there, and put her hand on my shoulder and asked, "Are you OK?" I burst into tears and said, "I think I just had a heart attack." And I felt so disappointed in myself, like I was letting everyone down, my family, Em, the group, there was so much left to be done, on this trip, in my life, and it all seemed to be slipping away from me, as I lay there, afraid to move, afraid to turn my head, afraid to close my eyes.

I swallowed a couple of baby aspirin and then Abraham arrived in a battered old pickup and drove into the river to get as close as he could. They all helped me into the river where the pickup sat, but because we had diverted the flow of the river for our project, it was now deeper in the middle and the truck got stuck. So, as I sat in the front, Abraham gunned the engine and popped the clutch and 4 Guatemalans pushed and rocked the pickup until we finally made it back across the river. Em and Valentine hopped in back and I reached out through the window to hold Em's hand as we began the harrowing ride back to town.

Now keep in mind that the baseline for driving in Guatemala is to drive as if there is someone in your vehicle who needs urgent medical care, like someone is about to give birth or is bleeding profusely, this is considered a Sunday drive. Now imagine that there is someone in your vehicle that really **does** need medical care, a gringo no less, and it was as if Abraham had just chugged 3 Monster Energy drinks, he got to the road, popped the clutch and we were off in a slurry of rocks and dust. I shouted across the river to some of our group that had gathered, "This doesn't mean you get the afternoon off!" as we raced up hill toward the town.

About halfway there we could hear the sirens from the ambulance screaming down the hill toward us and with a wave of his hand, Abraham motioned them to stop and I was transferred into the back of the only ambulance in San Lucas Toliman, a vehicle that surely did service in Eastern Europe in the 1950's. With the siren wailing like a dying rooster they got me on the gurney in back, or as much of me as would fit, and with my feet wedged against the back window we tore off toward town. Em in back with me, Valentine following in the pickup and the poor Guatemalan EMT trying desperately to get a blood pressure cuff on me as we were being tossed about the back slaloming in and out of oncoming traffic.

We raced into town and the next thing I knew I was being helped into the emergency room where Dr. Tun waited for me. Dr. Tun, the only doctor serving the 20,000 people in the area; Dr. Tun, who was only a doctor because his brother had been tragically killed falling out of the back of a pickup when the brother was in medical school, and so, to honor his brother, Dr. Tun left law school and instead became the doctor his brother was trying to be; sweet, gentle, unflappable, Dr. Tun. Em valiantly tried to resurrect whatever medical Spanish she had ever studied (we are pretty good on construction vocabulary, a little less so on medical terminology) to describe what had happened and Dr. Tun, who has seen everything and anything in his years of practice calmly walked us through the next steps.

After an EKG and some medication to bring my blood pressure down, we had exhausted the resources available to us and as we were leaving to go back to the hotel when I asked Dr. Tun if he thought I had had a heart attack. He said, "No," but holding his finger and thumb very close together, he said, "Muy cerca." "Very close."

That evening we decided Em and I should return home. We knew the group was in good hands, several Spanish speakers and 4 adults who had been there before would be more than enough leadership to get them through the remainder of the trip, and, after changing our tickets, the next day we headed off to Guatemala City and the airport. We arrived back in Minneapolis on Wednesday night, our anniversary, and, thanks to MyChart and email, had a stress echo scheduled for Thursday.

In a surprise to me, I did pretty well on the test, but it was just abnormal enough to get an appointment with a cardiologist the following Monday. So on Monday afternoon I found myself undergoing a CT Scan to try and see what, if anything, was going on in my heart. The results were a little stunning. I had a 99% blockage in my Left Anterior Descending Artery, a blockage they call "The Widow-maker" and was immediately put into the hospital so that I could get a stent inserted the following day.

I am 57 years old, I have been a vegetarian 37 years, I lead an active lifestyle and am in decent enough shape, I have never smoked, so how was it that I almost died by the side of a river in Guatemala? The simple answer is genetics. One grandfather died of a heart attack at 55, another in his 60's, my father had his first heart attack in his 60's. I had done almost everything I could to be healthy, but the deck was stacked against me. Fortunately my prognosis is good. The rest of my heart looks clear, there was no damage and, as they said, I should be able to run marathons, which, as the joke goes, is a little surprising, since I never could before. But I am on my way to full recovery, already accused of being an overachiever by my cardiac rehab specialists.

But what does it all mean? What have I learned? 3 and a-half weeks ago I was facing the possibility of not getting back here at all and now I am standing here talking about it as if it is simply, "What I did on my summer vacation." The suddenness of the onset and the quickness of the resolution creates unique challenges for processing what happened. But surely there is some part of this that will change my life, make me a better person, help me appreciate life more, bring me closer to God, my family, this community.

And, I think there is, and I think it has to do with hospital gowns.

The good news is that in my almost constant meditations on death and near death the last few weeks I never thought, "I really need to change everything about my life." No sudden relationship changes, no red Corvette, no new job. I love my job, feel privileged to have it; I love Em more than ever, feel privileged to be married to

her; I am quite content driving around in my orange Honda Fit. And, yes, the sky is a bit bluer, food tastes wonderful and I will try and never take for granted what time I have left. I told someone that I feel like I am at that point in a soccer game when you get bonus time. I am living in bonus time.

But more than anything, what I will take forward with me has to do with hospital gowns.

Those of you who have ever spent time in the hospital know what it is like to put on a hospital gown. You immediately transform from a reasonably competent, self-assured, independent person, into a vulnerable, dependent, child-like adult. You lose all sense of dignity and decorum, you cannot move without exposing yourself to the world, you cannot even dress yourself – no one except a circus contortionist, can tie those impossible to reach ties behind your back. This is a garment whose sole reason for existence is to let strangers have unfettered access to any and all parts of your body. You cannot get out of bed, walk down the hall or even sit in a chair without risking a complete wardrobe malfunction.

But with all that vulnerability comes a tremendous gift, the gift of insecurity, the gift of allowing yourself to depend on other people, the gift of allowing yourself to be cared for: to be loved, to be supported. The gift of having friends and family just sit with you, hold your hand and be there. The gift of no longer pretending that we always feel strong, that we always have confidence. For when we remove our uniform and put on the gown of vulnerability, we become what we are created to be: real humans who need each other, who depend on the care and support of others, who only find strength when we realize how weak we truly are.

I think that, in some ways, this also explains today's really uncomfortable passage from the gospel. Jesus is clearly speaking from a place of extreme vulnerability, a man who is facing his inevitable death and cutting through all the pretense, all the bravado, all the rules of polite society and he lays it all out there in language so graphic as to make us – and many of his followers – squirm, and shuffle our feet and think, "Did you really have to say it like that? Really? Eat my flesh and drink my blood?" But Jesus doesn't have time to play games, so he cuts to the uncomfortable core of what it means to follow him. And what it means is to become part of him and for him to become part of you. And the fact of the matter is that NONE of us have time to play games either, none of us have the time to hide behind our titles and our roles and our uniforms, our armor.

I know that what I am suggesting flies directly in the face of the Epistle from today. And surely there is a time and place to put on the armor of God. But for me, today, in the wake of the events of the last month, I feel more called to put on the gown of vulnerability than the armor of God; I feel more called to do more than just accept my mortality, I feel called to embrace it; more called to love and be loved; more called to sit with each moment rather than race through life because in the words of that old blessing, "Life **is** short, and we **don't** have much time to gladden the hearts

of those who travel the way with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind,”
and whenever you can, put on your hospital gown.

Bill Peterson

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John 6: 56-69

Ephesians 6:10-20