

Chronicles of Diversity

Your leadership weekly



St. Paul's Mission in NE Washington

Post-operation Edition

New Life

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One of my first guests who visited me after I returned from the hospital last Thursday mentioned, that "You now have a concept of your own mortality."

While logical, this struck me as strange, because really what I learned during the last couple of weeks I believe relates to my immortality much more significantly than the natural days of our lives. But before I get into that discussion, which we will begin next week, I would like to give you some of the details of my eleven days in the University of Washington Medical Center. If I wasn't a Husky when I went in, I now have that right, including large remaining purple bruises, a couple of places on my right thigh.

I arrived at the hospital early in the morning on Monday February 24th. At that time, my schedule was to have an angiogram later that morning, with surgery to replace my aortic aneurysm Tuesday morning.

During that angiogram it was determined that I did not have any heart disease related to my coronary arteries, which was good news. What they did find however, was that my aortic heart valve was slightly leaking, allowing a small amount of blood to flow back through the valve, and also to continually flow forward through the valve.

After consulting with my surgeon, Dr. Aldea, it was hoped that they might replace just the affected portion of my aorta, leaving the valve alone, however if it was appropriate they would replace that valve with either a tissue valve, harvested from a highly genetically engineered pig, or with a mechanical valve.

By selecting the tissue valve, I was told it should last 15-20 years, but once I am stabilized, I will not be required to take any additional drugs. If I chose to receive the fully mechanical valve, while it

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would last forever, I would have to be on anti-clotting blood thinner the rest of my life. These drugs, are extremely controlled doses of the rat poison you now buy at the hardware store. The decision was therefore, another possible valve replacement in the last years of my life and no drugs, Or a lifetime fix, and continual drug treatment and possible other complications in the future. I chose the tissue valve replacement, which once made, Dr. Aldea informed me would have been the choice he would make for himself, if he ever needed such an operation.

Those decisions being made, I was sent to my room in the coronary unit, awaiting my surgery early Tuesday morning. My part to play in this preparation was to take a shower late at night to clean the skin as well as possible, followed by another early in the morning. After finishing this procedure, I settled back into bed about six Tuesday morning, waiting my soon trip to the operating room. At about 8 AM I was informed that my operation had been bumped for a heart transplant, and I would get the opportunity to spend another night in the hospital, repeating the same old, same old, the next morning. At that time I also learned the University of Washington performs about fifty heart transplants a year, and that this heart was being sent in from Montana.

Having had a dress rehearsal for my operation, Wednesday morning went according to schedule. After being in a large room with the other pre-operative patients, and the administration of the sedative before being moved, the next thing that I remember was in the intensive care unit, sometime around three in the afternoon. I had survived..

As I became more with it, I learned that I had my aortic valve replaced, along with the ascending aorta with a dacron vessel. After the fact I felt much more secure that this was the way to go. The aortic valve in the heart is basically made up of three flaps which securely close tightly in a normal heart. One of my flaps was somewhat fused to another. Just enough for some slight leakage to occur, but not enough for this leak to be detected in a routine exam. It was then speculated that overtime, this leakage caused the aneurysm. The question that will not be answered on this side of eternity, is when this occurred?

My dad's, as well as other heart problems in my other relations, were caused by rheumatic fever. The general way this occurs is for the child to have a strept throat infection and in some way that infection, attacks the heart valves. The only problem is that I never had strept throat as far as I am aware, and any of the other childhood diseases I did have, they do not have such complications, and even so, I always had excellent medical care. So it remains unknown what may have caused my problem. I could have been born with it, or it may be something I have had most of my life, or something that happened in some other way.

This is where my situation begins to get amazing. First of all, my personal doctor told me that most of the time problems such as mine are discovered by "accident" or postmortem. As it now is verified, I have probably had my leaking valve situation for a number of years, the reason I am still alive begins to move more toward the miraculous. Then if you realize, I now have health insurance for the first time in almost a decade, we now add a few more pieces in the miracle puzzle.

From where I now see the situation, the insurance company has been extremely helpful in getting my situation fixed, and not just looking for the cheapest alternative.

I also had the opportunity to be prepared physically, emotionally, and spiritually for this very major surgery. When I walked into the Medical Center that Monday morning I was as prepared as can be humanly possible for what was about to take place. That included not only belief in the skill of the doctors, but God had prepared me to come out on the other side. Even though I did not understand at the time, more fully alive, than I had ever been before.

So as I came to my senses again slowly Wednesday evening, I actually could look at what I had just experienced as the most amazing gift I could receive in this life. I had been given the opportunity, not just to trust in God, but to trust in God through the hands of gifted people, who sincerely wanted to save and add quality to my life.

I was removed from intensive care in about 24 hours and was making strong and steady progress to go home from the hospital some time on Monday.

After watching all the television I could handle on Sunday evening, about 10 PM, I decided to walk another three laps about the floor, so that I could sleep well that night. When I got back to the

room my nurse came in and stated that my heart had become arrhythmic (one part was not beating at the same time or rhythm as the other), and that my total heart rate was approaching serious levels.

What happened over the next eight hours will be the subject of next week's installment, But as best as been described to me, I was one sick puppy. Not only that, the whole floor was filled with chaos that night. Consequently, I remember the nurses only coming in to check my vital signs at scheduled intervals.

Put another way, the nurses knew I was alive, because of the external monitoring of my life responses, but they were far too busy to do much nursing. There was not much place for "how are you feeling." Neither during that time was I in any position to receive human contact.

When I set up in bed about seven in the morning on March 3rd, I again was even more grateful for this gift of eternal life that God had given me the opportunity to experience in this world. Next week, I will endeavor to share that experience, but even the word experience is inadequate, of 03/03/03 at about 3 in the morning. But at that morning hour my nurse looked at me somewhat in amazement, as to ask, "Why are you so alert?"

From the moment I awoke last Monday morning, I have gotten stronger, many times feeling that strengthening by the hour. Last Wednesday my Physician's Assistant came in and stated he had just decided to keep me in the hospital another day. Just a hunch on his part that the extra day in the hospital would be good for me. By the time I was released about noon on Thursday March 6th, this I knew was also a gift from the Lord.

Because of the arrhythmic heart beat, they have had to change my medications for about the time I will need to recover from the rest of the physical aspects of my surgery. But in a month or so, I will probably be only on blood pressure medication, and I may be able to get off this in a few months after that.

In order to perform open heart surgery, they now just essentially dilute your own blood to operate the heart-lung machine. Consequently, I weighed about thirty pounds more when I came out of surgery than when I went in. Now if that seems like a lot, it is. About 3-4 gallons of water. I still have about fifteen pounds left to go. Most of it in my abdomen and legs. Therefore right now the pain in my legs is about equal to the pain of my incision. Which I guess shows us just how quickly the unimportant aspects of our lives again demand their attention.

Please continue to pray for my continued physical healing, in addition to the wisdom about how to write next week's installment.

Under His blood

Jerry