

INTRODUCTION

Boarding the plane to Paris, I reminisced about the call I had received only two months before inviting me to speak at a scientific congress in Valencia, Spain. It would be the perfect opportunity for a family vacation as well, so I jumped at the chance. Immediately I called my three sisters. We agreed that two would join me on the flight from Los Angeles while the other, who lives in Greece, would meet the rest of us in Spain.

As my two sisters and I embarked on the first leg of our flight, we celebrated our holiday with drinks, dinner and laughter. After the meal, the lights dimmed inside the aircraft and we settled down to sleep. It would be a long flight to France. As we left the American Continent, we were four hours from landing at the Charles De Gaul Airport in Paris for our connecting flight. I closed my eyes and relaxed, looking forward to my time off from work and the festive days that lay ahead.

Suddenly, I was awakened by a strange cough from my older sister, who was sitting to my left. As I turned my head to see her, my heart plummeted with despair. She was rapidly turning blue before my eyes. Her breathing had stopped. When I searched for her pulse I found none. Nor could I feel her heartbeat within her chest. I yelled out loud for help from the flight attendants and I began to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) right on her seat—a couple of mouth to mouth breaths, followed by two thumps with my closed fist to her breastbone, then chest compressions. After a few very long seconds the flight attendants surrounded us. My sister had begun to breathe again, and, thankfully, she opened her eyes. Several flight attendants and I dragged her body to the nearest galley of the airplane. One

flight attendant grabbed the intercom and asked the cabin of passengers if there was a doctor on board.

“I’M A DOCTOR!” I shouted. “I’M A HEART SURGEON!”

I took my California Medical License from my wallet and showed it to her. It was finally then that they opened the first aid kit consisting of IV solutions, needles, medications and oxygen. A colleague of mine also happened to be on the same flight and he joined me in continuing the resuscitation. The flight attendant in charge then handed me the telephone and said that the flight captain wished to speak with me.

“We need to get this patient, my sister, down to appropriate medical care,” I demanded.

“Doctor, we just left the Eastern Seaboard of the North American Continent. There is a terrible snowstorm below us and, if lucky, our first chance to land will be in Iceland.”

“But this woman is sick, she needs help NOW,” I demanded again, begging. My heart was breaking.

“Well, I either kill two hundred people in a snowstorm or we lose your sister.” The captain said very gravely.

After a moment of reflection, I said, “Give me thirty minutes and let’s see if she stabilizes.”

Fortunately, my sister’s condition improved. For the remainder of the flight to Charles De Gaulle Airport, she lay flat on her back with an IV drip in her arm. I knelt beside my sister, who was lying on the floor of the galley with flight attendants all around us. I watched her IV drip slowly infuse into her arm. My sister opened her eyes up and gently smiled, not knowing how close she had come to her death. As I knelt beside her I could hear the whine of the jet

engines of Air France flight 45 bound for Paris, France. When we landed, an ambulance met us at the gate. A doctor came into the airplane and rushed her on a gurney via ambulance to the emergency room located within the airport. After three days of observation, she was stable enough to be flown back to Los Angeles. In the bustle of airplanes, gurneys, and emergencies, my sister lost her American passport. On our return flight, my sister had to beg the immigration officer to be allowed to return. The only choice was to go to the US Embassy located in Downtown Paris. The underwear bomber had just tried to destroy an airplane bound for Detroit from Paris and French officials were on guard. We bought tickets again to satisfy the requirements set forth by the French airport officers. Eventually we made it to America. I transferred her to USC-University Hospital and she underwent an extensive work up. After receiving a permanent pacemaker she made a full recovery. Needless to say, I never made it to my speaking engagement or to our vacation in Spain.

In my life as a heart surgeon, I have experienced many such harrowing moments where, in the blink of an eye, someone's life has taken an unexpected turn and they're suddenly teetering on the edge of forever darkness. Many of those instances have resulted in exhilarating triumphs as in the case of my sister. I was privileged enough to be able to use my education and skills with success to pull someone back from that brink and return them to their family and friends. At other moments, I have also felt the anguish, the absolute despair, of losing patients whom I desperately hoped would live. I have also had the doubly painful task of delivering the bad news to their loved ones. Such is the life of a cardiac surgeon. The daily tug-of-war between life and death, and all of the emotions that rise up in the dance of these extremes, are part of the job.

Despite this roller coaster nature, and the personal sacrifices it has taken me to do this work and undertake this voyage—the decades spent away from home in school and in hospital training, the emotional distance and eventual loss of my most valued and intimate relationships—I can honestly say that I would never change my life and my journey for anything in the world. It is all that I have known, it is who I am. I have given my life to this singular pursuit. Since I was five years old and knew I wanted to be a heart surgeon, my life has taken a straight and narrow path to accomplishing just that goal. What I did not know was how having the responsibility of repairing people’s hearts would place me in a front-row seat in the amphitheater of life—of the human condition. I witnessed firsthand the enduring nature of the human spirit and the mysteriousness of a sometimes-incomprehensible world.

After twenty-four years as a cardiac surgeon and thirty-five years as a physician, I am closing the door on a long and distinguished career. I merged the science of cardiac surgery with the life of a heart surgeon; my patients, their families and the spiritual energy that makes it all come together. I wrote this book to detail the stories that crossed my path and to honor the memories of the patients and their families that so greatly touched my life. Each and every one of them—the husbands, the wives, fathers and mothers, the daughters and sons—have left an indelible mark, teaching me in their own way of the profoundness of what it means to be human, to be connected to others, to love, to live, to forgive. Though their stories are unique, they reflect on us all.

I invite you to join in the journey that I have undertaken—to feel the courage, the trepidation, the grief, the hope, the despair, and the passion that permeates my life daily as I

operate on people's hearts and administer to them in post-surgical care. I will share with you my wins and the pure joy that comes from hearing a patient's heartfelt words of gratitude.

"Thank you doctor, you saved my life. You are an angel to my heart."

I will share with you my defeats, including my own personal tragedies. My father, my mother and my eighteen-year-old daughter all died in my arms. I will tell you of my uncertainties as well as the lessons I have learned, and the questions I still ponder in this vast and long journey of life. I want to prepare the patient, who may be dying of heart disease and who is about to undergo open-heart surgery for the upcoming journey. I want to invite you into a world of life, of medicine focused on heart disease. I want to show you that healing can come through inner strength. All you have to do is open up your heart.