

Life from Death

TJ Senters

I have been blessed to have had many invaluable experiences in my life. I learned early on of the need to protect patient confidentiality, in all that is said and done. It is with that consideration that this is written.

I had awoken early on that cool, December morning. Little did I know that this day would have such a significant impact on my life. It was just after 4:00 and I was anxious to start what promised to be a day filled with extraordinary experiences. I was shadowing with the cardiothoracic team at a local medical school. There was an unusual case posted that I couldn't wait to see. I had been studying the anatomy and reading-up on the procedure. I was ready!

Up until that time, I was more focused on the technical aspects of medicine. The knowledge and skill of understanding how to correct the patient's condition. It is the person with the condition that is far too often overlooked.

As I arrived, I went through my morning routine of changing into scrubs and reviewing the schedule to see what had changed overnight. It was the Friday after Christmas and I knew to expect the unexpected. The case I was looking forward to seeing was still posted, but a bypass had been posted as first case. I headed to the OR, with eager anticipation.

The first case had just gone on bypass when word began to spread that a heart transplant had been posted. In between cases, I heard that the transplant was confirmed and that the heart would be coming from out of state. It was now late morning and plans were being put in place for one of the surgeons to fly out and retrieve the donor heart.

As this was happening, the case I had been so looking forward to seeing was just getting started. This was expected to be a long, complex case, lasting several hours. It was all I had imagined it would be. The surgeon meticulously dissected the anatomy and I was in awe of his skill and expertise. As I began to ask questions about the anatomy he was resecting, I could imagine him smiling under his mask with each confirming answer. What I wouldn't give to skip through the next few years and to be scrubbed at that table. For now, I was content with just taking it all in.

As time passed, my thoughts turned to the transplant that would soon be starting. The thoracic case was closing, so I went to check on the transplant case that was just starting. The surgeon wasn't back with the heart, but, as soon as he landed the case got underway. There was preparation that needed to occur while the heart was in transit. The patient had to be prepared for the transplant. Meaning his heart had to be removed. I was asked to go check on the progress of the thoracic case and provide an update. Just as I returned, they were going on bypass.

As the surgeon cross-clamped the aorta, it dawned on me for the first time that this heart will never beat again. The life that this heart sustained will be forever changed. With surgical precision each vessel was cut away from the heart, in "preparation" for the donor heart. When the heart was removed, it was placed in a bowl, quivering with the last few beats it could muster.

As the patient's heart was being removed the donor heart arrived in the room. As the new heart was lifted out of the ice, it was a stark reminder that earlier in the day this heart kept another human being alive. That life was now gone. It is the finality of realizing that no matter how hard they try, there are limitations to what physicians and surgeons can do. There comes a point, when, despite all efforts, there is nothing more that can be done to keep a person alive. For that family, their world is shattered and will never be the same. Yet, somehow, they mustered the courage to

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agree to allow another life to go on. Perhaps, it is knowing that somehow, some way, their loved one will live on in another. However they reached this decision, someone, who was facing certain death, a complete stranger, now has another chance at life.

I watched with wonder as each stitch grafted the heart in place. As it got later into the evening, fewer and fewer people remained in the room. I was captivated by the interconnectedness, as both surgeons worked together tirelessly to complete the anastomosis on each vessel. I looked over at the heart lying in the bowl; a heart that gave up its struggle to beat some time ago. As the surgeon removed the clamps and flow was reduced on bypass, the donor heart began to fill with blood. It was the moment of truth, when seconds seemed like minutes, waiting for that first beat of life. And, with that first beat came a huge sigh of relief. What was an erratic heartbeat began to normalize. Bypass was weaned off and they began to close.

As the surgeon broke scrub, I couldn't wait to get a picture to memorialize the occasion. The mood was light-hearted and jovial, a stark contrast to the palpable tension just minutes before. Another life saved, as though it was routine. Though, it was clear, this was anything other than routine. Still, I thought about the sacrifice one family made for another. The way Life came forth from Death. This was not just an eventful day. I could feel the effect it was having on me, personally. It hardly dawned on me, that here I was, an 18-year-old pre-med student who had been in the OR for sixteen hours. I should have been exhausted, but I was full of energy, living on adrenaline with a renewed sense of purpose. I knew this was a day I would look back on as being truly profound and life-changing, in so many ways.

I had a two-hour long drive ahead of me and I would have been up for twenty hours by the time I reached home. This is my passion and my calling in life. More than anything, I knew any sacrifice I made paled in comparison with the sacrifices of others made on this day. This is an experience for which I will be forever grateful!