

NON-FICTION | Fall 2019

Retrospection Series

By Joseph Burns

Two months before beginning medical school I underwent open-heart surgery to replace my congenital bicuspid aortic valve.

Part One: The Hospital

February 7, 2015 - 1 PM

We met with the surgeon today. He took me to a small room to explain the options. I don't want to be anticoagulated for life. We opted for a more complicated procedure, one that should last longer until I need to this again. We talked through it. He began, "We'll begin by sawing through your sternum". I then found myself on the floor. Nicole heard the whole thing through the door. We drove home and tried to forget about it. We have a couple of months until then.

May 4, 2015 - 4 AM

The past couple of days have been tortuous. No amount of Xanax could have kept me from being afraid. I wish I was a child who was more naive to what was happening, maybe this would have been easier. I have spent the entire night near the toilet. I have been puking since 10 PM. I have not slept. Nicole tried to come in and comfort me but I am embarrassed. I know that she will see the worst of me in the coming days and I want to protect her while I am still in control.

May 4, 2015 - 7:30 AM

They wheeled me to the surgical suite. My family has said goodbye. They cut off the bracelet that she gave me when we started dating. They put it in a sterile plastic bag for her. The nurse assured me that someone would check in with them throughout the operation. They're both crying now. I don't want to let go of her. The anesthesiologist is starting some lines. He's a weird dude. I'm trying to make conversation but he's not reciprocating. I suppose he'll like me better when I'm asleep. The surgeon came to see me briefly. He's wearing a batman scrub cap.

May 4, 2015 – 10 PM

I am groggy. I think it's over. I desperately want this tube out of my throat.

May 5, 2015 – 8 AM

My heels are screaming. I wasn't expecting that. I can't tell anyone that they hurt because this pipe is still in the way. I feel like I'm choking constantly.

May 5, 2015 – 11 AM

The tube is out. I can speak, but my voice has changed. I fade in and out of consciousness. The warmth of the morphine flowing through my veins is the best part of my day. I know there will be relief. The incision is covered by a bandage. I don't even want to look at it. Nicole has been holding my hand all day. I woke up to see her sleeping at the end of my bed. She doesn't deserve this.

May 5, 2015 – 5 PM

"The Lego Movie" is on for the seventh time today. I still haven't seen it in its entirety. I will add that to my Netflix queue. They took out my chest tubes. Finally. It felt like two octopi wriggling out of my chest at the same time. 5 AM x-rays are getting old. Turns out I had another line in my neck. I didn't feel it until they pulled it out.

May 5, 2015 – 9 PM

They made me stand up today. I stood up and immediately fell back to the bed. Nicole laughed, that's good. This is without a doubt the most difficult thing I have ever done. I am winded, panting after just standing. They want me to start walking every hour. Also, I want to throw this spirometer out the window.

May 6, 2015 – 9 AM

I looked at the scar. It is thin. They say it may thicken over time. I'll be just fine if it stays like this. I can't do anything alone. Today she bathed me. She has seen me at my absolute worst, but still holds my hand through the night. She has been pushing my IV pole around as I struggle to walk.

May 7, 2015 – 2 PM

I am walking better every day. Today is the first time I have eaten a whole plate since the surgery. I'm getting better. Sea World's Dolly the Dolphin visited me today. Pretty certain they did not expect a large, hairy man in this children's ward.

May 8, 2015 – 12 PM

She went home today. Hopefully I can get out of here soon. I cannot bear another moment in this place without her.

May 9, 2015 – 8 PM

I miss her.

May 10, 2015 – 1 PM

I will go home today. They wheeled me out through the same halls I had been walking all week. I can walk well. I still have the damned spirometer.

Part Two: Home

June 10, 2015

I feel like an Olympian. I have been walking a few miles every day for the past month, and have recently started running. The driveway has gotten all too familiar, but as I gain speed, the sights and scents feel different. The scar has begun to thicken. I had to pull a stitch out of the holes where my chest tubes were. I still get winded sometimes. If I stand for more than an hour or so I get short of breath. There is a pain between my shoulders, like the scar is trying to pull the rest of my body inwards.

I miss her desperately. The best moment of my day is sending her my run map and times. I feel like she is proud of me. I wish that I could earn that beautiful smile in person. That is the best motivator—not progress for the sake of my health, but improvement knowing that it means I will have more time with her. That has become my goal, not just a rapid recovery, but to ensure that this valve lasts until our final moments together.

I am very fortunate to have my parents here with me through all of this. My mother joins me on my frequent walks. I know that when she looks at me she still sees a sick baby. She has become far more protective in the weeks since the surgery. It is evident that she is returning to a form that she knows all too well as the parent of a sick child.

I will move to Miami for medical school in one month. I haven't been in the front seat of a car in thirty days. I have lost weight that I didn't expect was possible. With every bite I think of my heart. I am still scared. I am frustrated. There are times where I feel great, but there are just as many where I feel worse. I know that it will get better with time, but as I get used to my new normal, I still have to live through these challenges. I try to ignore it, but inside my chest, my blood beats past another person's valve. I am thankful for their donation. Their family deserves to know that I have a new lease on life because of their son's or daughter's choice to give me a piece of him or herself. This is the greatest gift I could ever receive. My unnamed guardian has given unto me the most profound act of love and selflessness—a deed of anonymous kindness and sacrifice that after the end of their time in this existence, they may prolong mine. I cannot thank them with words or thoughts, but with every pulse, I live and breathe because of them. I will devote each contraction as my representation of gratitude and eternal thankfulness—my life a representation of their ultimate act of charity.

Part Three: Medical School

August 15, 2015

I have been reluctant to share my history.

It was a secret that was contained within the walls of the physical exam simulation rooms, held in confidence by my peer examiners. In this setting it was impossible to hide.

My surgical scar traverses my sternum, more than a foot in length. When first inspected by my classmates, it was only three months old.

We were learning the dermatologic examination when my classmate was prompted, "Describe what you see."

She stuttered, almost as if she was afraid she would hurt my feelings.

She attempted, "I see a large pink scar beginning at the sternal angle extending the length of the sternum. There are two horizontal scars on the abdomen, roughly 3 centimeters in length each."

Again she was prodded further, "What about on his neck?"

Even I was unaware that the small stitch from my central line was still visible.

I was asked about my history. It would be my first time sharing my story with people outside of my family.

"I had surgery to repair my congenital bicuspid aortic valve."

Assuming that I was a child when corrected, I was asked about the age at which I had the procedure, to which I responded, "This was in May. I was twenty-three."

May 4, 2016

One year has passed since the most difficult day of my life.

I hardly think about it now, as I am far too stressed by school to think about my health. The only time that I talk about it is when a classmate asks me. I continue to think about my donor. I am sincerely trying to pay forward his or her gift to me by doing all that I can to become the best physician possible. In doing this for him or her, I am also studying and writing for the doctors who have cared for me, so that I may provide the same standard of care that I have received for the last twenty-four years. To be a part of a similar experience has become my sole ambition in life, to be the one who provides care, love, compassion, and primarily hope in situations where all may seem lost. I am determined to become a pediatric cardiologist of the highest caliber.

One week ago, we studied congenital disease of the heart. We talked about me. We talked about what my life had been like prior to correction. We talked about long-term outcomes. We talked about the statistics. We were talking about me. However, I am more than my heart. I am more than a scar. Though it will forever be an important part of my life and my drive to become the man that I aspire to be. My professor left out how badly your heels hurt after laying on a table unconscious for half of a day. He left out the pain that your family endures, unsure of what is happening in the operating room. He left out how impossible it feels to take those first steps, hours after your chest was cut open. He left out the fear of looking at the scar for the first time. He left out the knowledge that after all of this torture, you may have to do it all again in an undefined number of years. He left out that I have to explain it every single time I go to the beach. He left out that the anti-smoking commercials use the same scar as mine as a scare tactic.

It wasn't his fault. I was the only person in the room that had lived through these details. He didn't know he was talking about me.

Part Four: Residency

September 12, 2019

More than four years after my surgery, I find myself amid my next step in my aim to live a life of significance as a pediatric cardiologist. Now in New York, I have once again had to adjust to a new environment, culture and health system. However, I have acclimated rapidly and feel that I am well-prepared to make a difference in the lives of the children I treat.

Though there is still much to learn, I know that I have grown in more ways than I ever could have imagined. Nicole, who stood by my side during the most challenging period of my life is now my wife. The physical struggles of rehabilitation are behind me. There is no hiding my scar, but now, rather than a reminder of my disease it is a testament to my commitment to a career as a pediatric cardiologist. It is the unspeakable bond that I share with countless patients across the globe. It is the experience that enables me to connect with families during the most trying times of

their lives. It is the truth that allows me to relate to all children with chronic disease. It is me, at my most raw, most vulnerable form.

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