

"Surrender"

by Steve Kline

"Surrender, and let these people take care of you."

That's what I told myself just before I lost consciousness in the ER at Midlands Hospital, Papillion, Nebraska, on Sept. 23, 2007.

There was a slight burning sensation from the nitroglycerin tablets the nurses had slipped under my tongue. My left upper chest felt as if someone was boring into it with a power drill. I was acutely aware of my hands at my sides. They were warm. I felt them going limp. The excruciating pain in my chest stopped.

There was a brief moment when I experienced a frustrating sense of trying to break through or go around a barrier, which seemed to be made of concrete and had a rounded look to it. (The same thing happened to me when I was in the 5th grade and put under a general anesthetic to have my tonsils surgically removed. Now, 50-some years later, it was happening again. But this time, it was because my heart had stopped.) The deeply disturbing sensation quickly passed.

Then I was at rest, at peace.

Seemingly outside of my body, I could see the ER and hear the frantic activity going on all around me. I could see the medical team working on me. I was utterly at peace.

The "angels" (as I called them later) in the ER shocked me back to life. I do not remember the jolt. I remember opening my eyes on a scene that, with my eyes closed, I was already seeing (if that makes any sense). As my eyelids popped open, the effect was as if two stereoscopic images were being brought into register and focus. It was a little like the "Star Wars" jump to hyperspace.

"Did I die?" I asked. I knew what had happened.

"No, you did not," said one of nurses.

The physician looked at me levelly.

"You are having a heart attack," he said.

"Did I die?" I asked again.

"No."

My wife, and my friends Kraig and Michelle Thelen, were in the room. Kraig came to the bedside and placed his index finger into my left hand. He said something like, "We're here for you, Buddy." I squeezed his finger, and felt good that they were there for Jeanne.

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At some point, they had cut my jeans and shorts off. I felt cool sheets being draped over me, which was comforting.

My head dropped back on the pillow. The pain had slightly lessened. I could not keep my eyes open.

For a second time, I told myself to give myself over to the care of the people in the ER. I was completely in the hands of Others. No matter what happens here, I told myself, there is nothing I can do about it.

Again, I had sharp awareness of my hands. They were at my sides, my fingers lightly grasping folds of the sheet. I felt the warmth in my hands again, then I felt them go limp a second time.

The pain in my chest disappeared entirely. There was quiet, restful darkness (but it was a shimmering dark) around me. I had a vague awareness of voices.

The only thing visually that I remember from this second flatline experience is of a red-hued box squarely in the center of my field of vision. All else is darkness, except for hints of light at the periphery of my vision.

There are no words to describe the sense of peace. It was unlike anything I had ever known. Ever. It was as if I were bobbing lightly in water, at night, on my back, with my eyes closed. No physical pain. No discomfort whatsoever.

Perfect peace.

And “presences.”

At one and the same time, I was aware that people were working on my body, and I was aware of the presence of people who were in the same place I was – in the calm, peaceful darkness.

I did not see these presences. I felt them coming close to me. I want to be careful about this next part, because I am not 100 percent certain that I could individually identify any of these presences. But it seems as if my Dad and my first wife, Susan (both of whom died in 1982) were among them. And there were others. These were loving, quiet presences that seemed to want to embrace me.

I never felt the second shock that brought me back.

The sound of a blaring alarm pierced the quiet. My first impression was that it was my alarm clock, that I was home in bed, and it was time to wake up. Someone had his

fingers on my forehead, lightly rocking my head to the left and right. He said something like, "Come on back to us." And then, when I opened my eyes, "There you are!"

I tried to sit up, turn around and turn off the alarm. Gentle hands kept me on my back.

"What's that noise?" I asked.

"It's just this monitor," someone said.

It was a few seconds before someone turned off the alarm on the monitoring device that I assume had been triggered when my heart stopped.

"Did I die?" I asked the nurse at the foot of the bed. The room was filled with medical personnel. Nearly a dozen of them, as far as I could tell.

"The important thing is that you opened your eyes," she said.

Even in the midst of the return of the pain, and the continued intensive scramble to save my life, I had a calm, amazed sense that something extraordinary and profound had happened to me.

Dr. Atul Ramachandran, who did the angioplasty and placement of the stent that repaired the artery that was 100 percent blocked, got my attention and described for me the risks of the procedure, which included death. There was no hesitation on my part when he asked if I wanted him to perform the procedure.

"Yes," I said.

My fear of death was – and is – gone.

Previously, I had faith that was true.

Now, I have journeyed twice to the brink of death, and it is not the end. You can see other places from that brink. We are eternal, and we are eternally with the Peace of God. That was proven to me that day in the ER.

As they wheeled me into the cath lab to perform the angioplasty, I tried to hang onto the details of what I had just experienced. Thinking of the experience comforted me during the procedure, through which I remained conscious.