



Reflections

Listen to thy heart, and write*

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Some time ago, I had aortic valve replacement surgery and, like anyone who goes in to hospital as a patient, I had to deal with heightened vulnerability and the loss of independence and control. In addition (and I imagine it is the same for anyone who undergoes sternotomy) my perception of my body changed. I had felt whole; I now felt divided. What I did not share with many Canadians, however, was the context in which I had my surgery. I had left Canada to join the Arabian Gulf University, an Islamic institution founded and supported by the Gulf Consultation Council, located in Bahrain.

This island nation, situated in the Arabian Gulf, is ambitious and dynamic in many ways, including in its health care system and, especially, its outstanding cardiac care centre. I was fortunate to be in Bahrain in my hour of need. My surgery was highly successful, which is ordinary there. At least, that was the impression I got from my doctors and nurses. My experience of it, however, was extraordinary, and to help me cope after my surgery, I started writing short notes and verses about the people around me, their everyday tasks and functions, and my reactions to them. I wrote late in the day and in the silence of the night.

In others' hands

Beatrix was from South Africa and cared for me from "babe-in-arms" to "early childhood" of my recovery.

I need to wash, I need to bathe,
Beatrix, are you near?
Of course I am, of course I am,
in two shakes I'll be there.
I'll soap you down, I'll rinse you clean,
I'll pat you pink and dry,
Then wrap you in a blanket,
and sing a lullaby.

Helen was from Scotland and came from that tradition of positive, empowering physiotherapists who encourage you to climb stairs and, without missing a beat, compare that energy output with the demands of sexual activity. In her eyes, I had made some developmental progress but was in need of firm handling. She, and perforce I, were obsessed with chest drains and full lung expansion.

Breathe in,
hold your breath, hold, hold.
Breathe out.
Breathe in,
hold your breath, hold, hold.
Breathe in!
Catch you? Good!

Vinnie and Fatima, from India and Bahrain (with styles similar to Helen's), looked after my multiple drains with total effectiveness and breezy good humour.

Take two breaths and hold the third,
today's the day of drains;
where these tubules come from,
I'm afraid we can't explain.
We're just here to pull them out,
you're just here to let us;
take two breaths and hold the third.
Now they're out! God bless us.

Writing and coping

I wrote most easily when the last visitor had gone. That could be very late, as hospital visiting assumes its own complexion in Bahrain. Food, in covered pots and on piled-high dishes, was brought and shared. Families met, ate, dispersed, and met again, with all the formalities that their culture requires. Most times I welcomed the food and the inclusiveness, but sometimes I felt overwhelmed by the demands that accompanied the cohesiveness and intimacy of my adopted society.

Hospital visitors are all very well,
but why can't they leave when I hear the bell?

When not writing, I found the nights difficult. Before surgery, I had been warned by the anesthetist to watch for tricks of perception and imagination that were common after open heart surgery.

I dream and wake, and images linger;
I pluck at objects through closed eyes seen.

In addition, I was concerned with the incision that had bisected my chest, that had bisected me. That concern underwent dramatic change while showering one morning.

My perception has changed since yesterday morning
when my body comprised two separate parts;

*With apologies to Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586).

the sponge circles round and crosses the midline,
not up and down, protecting my heart.

My surgeon focused on less ethereal matters. He worried that I did not eat enough and that I was losing weight. Beatrix encouraged me with suggestions about diet and a hands-on approach.

Then you come, and with cool fingers
caress the shoulders where strong flesh had been.

Chocolates, not part of the dietary suggestions but welcome all the same, and flowers filled my room. So much so that, at times, there was stiff competition for air and space. One afternoon, I awoke to find a bunch of yellow roses by my bed. They had been sent by a family medicine colleague, active in the national residency program. I was overcome.

Twelve pristine yellow buds
from Ebtisam, alone.
How did she know such blooms as these,
could touch my heart with particular ease?

Going home

Soon I was home. I missed the formal nursing care that had contributed so indelibly to my experience, but which was now replaced by that of family and friends. The informal nutritional supports continued, as did other habits. I had gotten used to keeping myself to myself.

I closed my eyes and kept them shut,
contracting my muscles, and keeping you out.
You're frowning, you said. No! I'm crying.
Should I let you see
this side of me?

How is it you know
just what to do, just where to touch?
Is it because you love me so much?
Or is there some ancient force at play,
Helping me heal in some other way?

Of course I'd sensed it for some time,
that in this man, this son of mine,
a gentleness had grown.
Preparing hot towels,
making mint tea,
soothing taut muscles,
and comforting me.

Writing played an important part in my recovery, as it has for others. It could not have happened, however, if I had not learned to listen to the real heart inside me (not the one that makes itself known through clicks and beats—the other one). 🌸

Dr Grant is a Professor and was Foundation Chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain. Previously, he was a member of the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont, a member of the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Task Force on Curriculum, and a winner of the Donald I. Rice Award.

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