

Panic

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SOMETHING was terribly wrong. I was gagging and felt as though I would vomit. As I reached for my mouth, four hands suddenly appeared and feminine voices admonished me to put my own hands down. “Don’t they understand I’m choking?” The voices calmly assured me that I was in the Intensive Care Unit and they would soon remove the breathing tube, but I had to keep my hands down. All I could think was, “Please hurry! I can’t take this any longer!”

A few moments later the breathing tube came out and I could relax. But where was I? Oh, that’s right. I went to surgery to have my gallbladder removed. It was supposed to be a brief laparoscopic procedure, maybe 3 or 4 hours at the most. I was expecting the voice of a nurse to prod me awake or the soft touch of my wife’s hand. Yes, something was terribly wrong.

The nurses came to my side and touched my arm, stroked my forehead, explaining again that I was in the Intensive Care Unit and everything was going to be okay. But why assure me unless someone was in doubt? I fought to open my eyes. They fixed upon the clock above the door which read 8:00. Was it 8:00 P.M. on Friday? That might be about right since I went into surgery at 1:00 P.M. on Friday. But if the surgery went without a hitch, why the concern? Why the Intensive Care Unit? Why the breathing tube? “What time is it?” I asked. They told me it was 8:00 A.M. Saturday. Then I knew. Something went terribly wrong.

I gradually became aware of the sticky dryness of my mouth and the hissing of the oxygen. In the dim lighting I began to see the beloved faces of my wife and mother. Surely they knew what was happening. I hoped to find assurance in their eyes, but they both wore the tired expressions of those who had struggled with worry. They provided no explanations and again I was troubled by an uneasy feeling that the surgery didn’t go as planned.

Then I saw the empathetic face of the surgeon. She explained that I bled a lot during the surgery—so much she had called the department head into the OR to help her. I struggled to picture what

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happened as she told me that the gangrenous organ was not removed and another surgery loomed in my future. As she left, I still wondered what had happened to me in the OR.

Later an anesthesiologist came to see me. This was not the exuberant, cheerful anesthesiologist I'd met at the beginning of the case but another, who explained that he had rushed into the OR to place an internal jugular line in my neck and give me a life-saving blood transfusion. I didn't feel as though I had been on the verge of death, but the message of the anesthesiologist was clear—I narrowly escaped death or other serious consequences.

As the hours passed into days, I was able to use the moments of solitude to sort through the events surrounding this surgery and reflect on the many reasons to be grateful. Foremost in my thoughts were the calm, empathetic, and reassuring voices of those who bore with me through a time of uncertainty. How wonderful it is to hear a voice of compassion in a moment of crisis and the assurance that everything will be okay. Thank you to those who provided it in my moment of panic.