



## Notes from the Valley of the Shadow

I am a survivor of a medical complication that should have killed me. My account thanks those medical care providers at all levels who helped me to heal. I have been in the valley of the shadow of death, and found it an evil place without comfort. My memories may help medical personnel, because I have been where few of them have had to go.

I was a scholar, living at the age of 61 in my apartment with my cat and research materials. My background was in world travel and cultural anthropology. My relatives were my brother, who had medical Power of Attorney, and two married daughters. I lived in a small academic town and received medical care from the local HMO. For exercise, I took long walks and swam. I felt very healthy for my age, except for annoying bowels (constant constipation and sudden bouts of diarrhea). No-body knew that I had diverticulitis.

Late one night in July, I felt a sudden intense pain in my lower left abdomen. Within two minutes, I felt so faint that I dialed 911: "I know this sounds crazy, but I think my bowels have exploded. Please rush an ambulance. I may faint, but the door is unlocked, so come in." Ten minutes later, after I had strapped my purse to my body and looked at my frightened cat, the medics rushed in. Sirens blared as they put me on a gurney and placed a mask over my face. That is all I remember.

While my family raced to my bedside in an ICU nearby, believing I would die at any moment, and while a team of dedicated surgeons struggled to save me despite the *E. coli* flooding through my system, I felt and knew nothing.

*I was in Barcelona, building a bizarre cathedral of glass shards. My daughters were propping me up so I could add more shards. I could not stay upright. Glass, cutting, danger ...*

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but I did not die.***

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Surgeons gave me a colostomy and intubation to help me breathe despite damaged lungs. My family gave me the last rites, but I did not die. My brother refused to permit the withdrawal of life support, because he believes there is always hope.

*I was in India in a hospital bed. My brother was in the next room, but I had no voice with which to call him. An evil medic lowered a large meat book just over my head with a pulley system. He warned me that if I made a sound, he would let it down to rip open my face ...*

I was in a coma for five weeks, wandering in the valley of the shadow of death. My mind knew only that I was in a hospital, fighting for my life. I had a series of horrible death dreams, morphine-induced hallucinations.

*I was in a Native American burial mound. Two large bodies were buried beside me, one male and one female. My body was buried but my head was clear. I did not dare to cry out for rescue because someone might bury my head. I lay still and silent ...*

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*I floated over a hospital operating room and saw my own body on the table. Surgeons were taking me apart in unknown ways. I reentered my body and lay very still ...*

*I was in Kenya with a large group of MauMau. They were holding the genitals and other body parts of their enemies in their hands and celebrating. My surgeon was among them. He opened his hand and extended it toward me so that I could see that it contained genitals he had amputated. I played dead, afraid to breathe, so that he would not mutilate me ...*

*I was lost in a vast wilderness where hills were in sunlight and valleys were in darkness. Those gloomy valleys terrified me. My face wrinkled, and my hair whitened within minutes ...*

*It was night in the darkest recesses of the valley of the shadow of death. A funeral chariot drawn by black horses kept circling in front of me. My daughters, in black mourning attire, were driving the chariot. They held up torches that emitted streams of poisonous vapor. As the vapor passed by me, I could not avoid breathing it. I sank into a dreamless, endless sleep ...*

Nothing happened for a long time. One day I woke up in a nursing home. White curtains were draped around my bed. I had no voice and could not get up. One of my daughters sat near my feet. I have never been so glad to see anyone. I asked, in a hoarse whisper, how she found me. She said that I had been in a coma for five weeks and that family members had been taking turns sitting beside me. The other daughter had adopted my cat and would arrive tomorrow. I whispered to her to hold my hand. Her strong hand literally pulled me back into the world of the living.

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***I learned how to navigate the HMO care system and found a primary care physician who takes time to listen.***

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I learned that I had a colostomy, a large bed-sore, and dyslexia. I had lost so much weight and strength that I could not even rise to a sitting position. Therapy at that nursing home was inadequate. My daughter transferred me to an excellent nursing home, where I learned transfers: how to swing my legs over the side of my bed and pull up onto a walker, how to transfer from walker to wheelchair or from walker to raised toilet seat. It was a great day when the urinary catheter finally was removed. I remember small acts of kindness

that mean so much to a bedridden patient: the CNA who washed my matted hair, the CNA who gave me a sponge bath, and later, the CNA who gave me a sitting bath and clipped my toenails.

My daughter visited me several times a week and walked behind me up and down the hallway, a harness in her right hand propping me up as I moved slowly with a walker, a wheelchair in her left hand in case I tired. Once a day, a physical therapist took me for a walk until it became easy to use a walker. One day, my daughter and I walked out into the sunlight, down a step, and went home.

My daughter cared for me until I was able to move into my own apartment. I was able to live independently with the help of Senior Services that sent me Meals on Wheels, a weekly housekeeper, a Senior Companion, and the use of the Lift. I learned how to navigate the HMO care system and found a primary care physician who takes time to listen. I found surgeons who know me as an individual, not just as a medical chart. My bowels were re-connected, and I walk well.

I no longer have temporary amnesia, and my voice is clear. I do a little teaching and am finding my public voice again. Four years after my devastating illness, I'm getting my life back. It took compassionate medical care, deep family love, loyal friends, and available Senior Services to help me.

Each of my daughters has a baby boy. I could have died and missed knowing my grandchildren. Life is very beautiful. Cling to it, no matter what you must endure. ❖

## Mind Makes the Body

It is the mind that makes the body rich.

*Taming of the Shrew, Act IV, Sc 3, William Shakespeare, 16th century English poet and playwright*