Lessons From the Heart

Category: Stories
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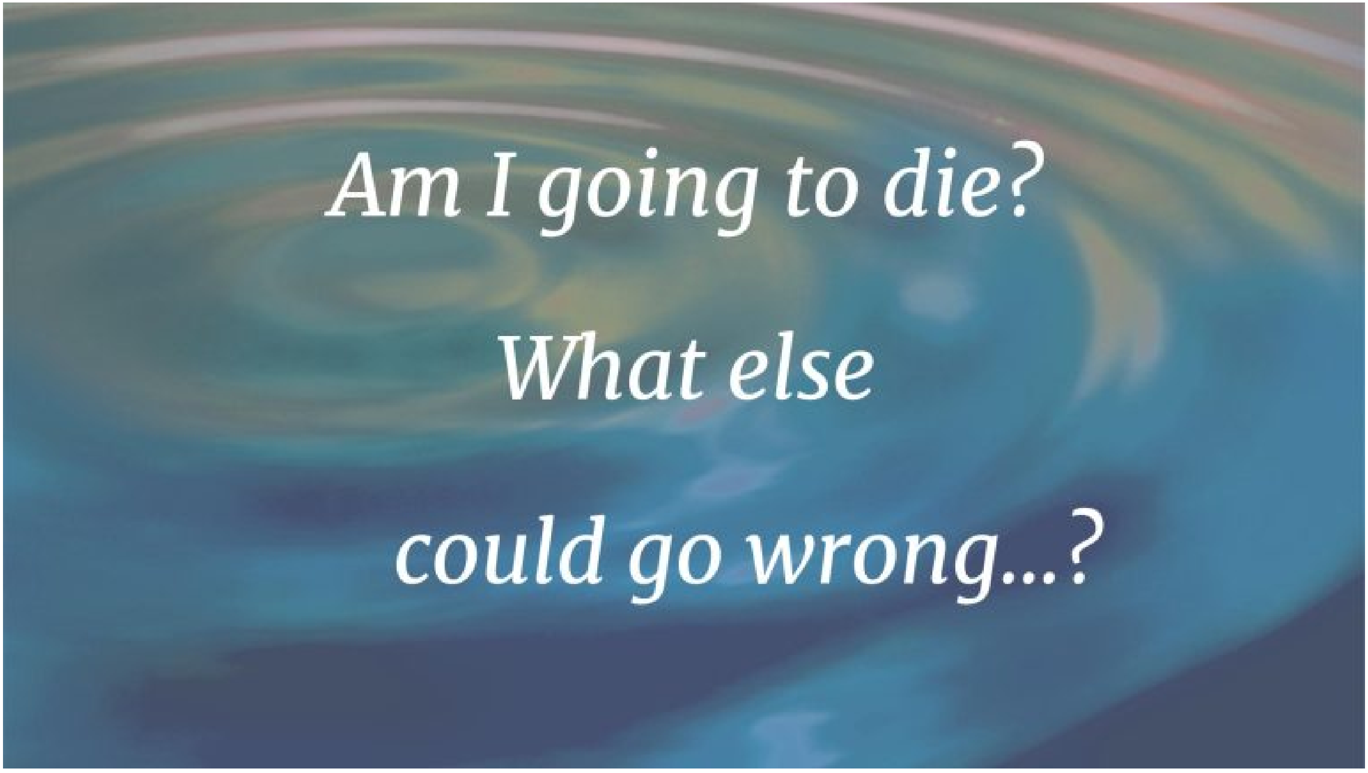

This can’t be happening to me, I thought. Yet here I was, on a gurney being wheeled into a cath lab for an angioplasty and possible stent.

This can’t be happening, I thought again.

But it was.

A little background: I have always thought of myself as healthy. As a health coach, I know my way around smart nutrition and exercise. I work out every day. Don’t drink or smoke. I meditate. I’m thin. A little hypertensive, but otherwise in good shape.

But as a copywriter who’s spent years studying and writing about women’s health, I also knew enough to know that my blast-furnace heartburn, lightheadedness and hot flashes were likely more than indigestion. They were a “fire bell in the night,” warning me to see my cardiologist. STAT.

An echocardiogram, a stress test and a serious conversation later led me to that cath lab, where I had a stent implanted in my right cardiac artery. During the procedure, the interventionist later told me, they discovered that the artery was 90 percent blocked.

“You don’t fool around,” he said—adding, rather chillingly, “If you hadn’t been so fit and so alert to your body, we could have been looking at a very different outcome.”

Because I am a writer and feel better when I work, I wanted—well, *needed*—to create a story around this scary time. Here are some lessons I learned. I offer them in the hope that they will be useful to you, if ever you're facing a similar situation.

First, know your body. Whatever feels weird probably is. Get it looked at. My blast-furnace heartburn was likely chest pain, but because it was "unconventional," I first thought horses (epigastric trouble), not zebras (cardiac event).

Women's symptoms are often dismissed, but fortunately there are also thoughtful, alert and caring practitioners who will believe and respect you. In my case, everyone—from the admitting physicians to the attendants who wheeled me to my room—took my pain, anxiety and fear *very* seriously. My deepest gratitude to them all.

You may love your doctors, but nurses are the best. And vastly underappreciated and rewarded. No matter how many patients the post-op nurse had in her care, she took the time to answer my questions and keep me calm as I waited and waited to be discharged.

You can be in great shape, as I thought I was, and still get a kick in the head from your body. Only a few things, like diet and lifestyle, are under your control, but in the end, it's your genes and age that do the talking. When I asked the doctors if the atherosclerosis was due to something I did or didn't do, I was told: "No. It's your age—and someone in your family left you a gift."

You will feel vulnerable and scared. The bruises from the angioplasty and IVs will fade, but not the fear, or the memory of thinking, *Am I going to die? Will this be the start of my descent into decrepitude? A cascade of other things? What else could go wrong?* (Thankfully, I did not have a heart attack. There was no damage.)

Every twinge now seems ominous. My world has temporarily shrunk down to my body and how it feels at any given moment.

Anxiety makes everything worse. Truly.

Also, brain fog is real.

Pro tip: Before the procedure if at all possible, or asap afterwards, get your estate, living will and healthcare proxy paperwork in order. Make sure that your loved ones know your wishes and how to go forward, just in case the worst happens. It gives you a sense of control *(Hahahahaha)* and the reassurance that your family knows what's expected/desired. I worked out all the details, down to who takes the dog (my son) and who takes the cat (my petsitter). It was oddly comforting to have this resolved.

Expect some unexpected feelings. Is there such a thing as patient guilt? I feel so guilty having my adult son take care of me. (Also proud; he is/was a great advocate.) One moment almost made me cry. He asked the nurse to bring me warm blankets because "my mother is always cold." It makes me sad to see how worried and exhausted he is from the stress I've put him through.

Know that your illness will affect your emotions and overall outlook. My “patient” days are likely limited, but I wonder how people dealing with serious or chronic illness deal with it *vis à vis* their caregivers *every day.* Do they feel as diminished as I do? What does that do to their sense of self? I heard myself asking the same questions over and over or sounding querulous and impatient, and I couldn’t stand it. An inner voice kept saying, *This is not me!*

I don’t like asking for help. I am grateful to my friends who see through these delusions of independence and come through with visits, flowers and offers to walk the dog. I’ve learned that people want to help. Let them.

Prepare to keep track of a slew of medical details, whether you’re ready or not. (It was actually interesting for me.) It takes a spreadsheet and a lot of notes to manage my new routine of meds. Not to mention such fun side effects as lack of appetite, fatigue and palpitations. Oh, and multiple doctor’s visits. All of this has become my new hobby.

I’m following my own advice: Every day, I’m trying to live in the present. I’m taking my meds, I’m thinking positive thoughts, I’m back to exercising every day.

But I am still afraid to close my eyes.