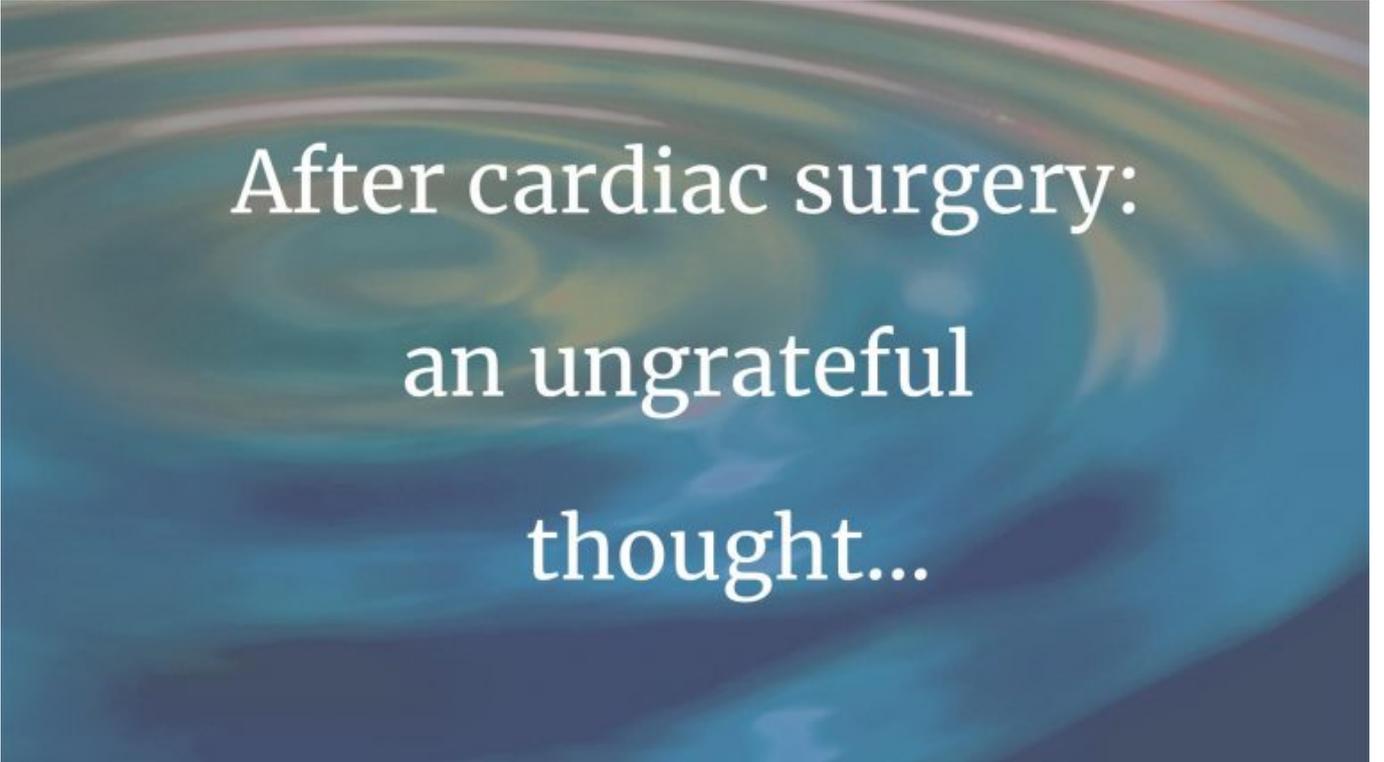


# [This Isn't Worth It](#)

Category: Stories

written by Jeffrey L. Sternlieb | September 17, 2021



After cardiac surgery:  
an ungrateful  
thought...

While sitting on the exam room table in my cardiologist's office, I began thinking about the many years we've had these semiannual appointments. I've had not one but *two* emergency open-heart surgeries.

*In a few months, it will be exactly nineteen years since my first surgery, I thought. That means I'll be starting my twentieth bonus year of life!*

Then I thought, *Don't go there! Don't get ahead of yourself. Live and enjoy each additional day.*

Even so, I couldn't help but wonder about all that I've been through. I still have difficulty making sense of it all. In particular, I struggle with my feelings of gratitude: How could I possibly express enough appreciation for having my life saved—twice?

My first surgery, at age fifty-four, was one surprise after the other—the rush to the ER, the imaging tests, the speed with which they undressed me and inserted an intravenous line. I remember being told, “A helicopter will take you to U Penn.” I remember landing on the hospital rooftop, being transferred to a gurney and rolled into the OR, and waking up in a recovery room hours later.

The second surgery, almost fifteen years later, held few surprises: It seemed almost routine and predictable. At some level, I knew I was in trouble; yet I was able to lie back and put myself into the hands of the medical professionals.

The surprise this time came during my post-surgery experience. I woke up a day-and-a-half after the procedure. Opening my eyes and struggling to focus without my glasses, I almost immediately realized that I had no control over my body. I simply couldn't move.

I had no idea what to think, or how long I would lie motionless. The only body part I could move was my eyes. Through what seemed like floor-to-ceiling glass doors or windows, I saw people walking back and forth on the other side. I yearned for one of them to notice that I was awake and come to my bedside, but unfortunately no one did. I watched them teasingly walk by, unable to bring them closer.

It's hard to describe how deeply disconcerting it was to be awake but immobile, not knowing when I would be noticed. The feeling gave rise to an uncomfortable thought:

*This is not worth it.*

Eventually, to my great relief, my wife appeared—having briefly stepped away from the vigil she'd been keeping at my bedside.

"He opened his eyes!" she excitedly told the nurses at the ICU station. Soon after, my surgeon arrived.

"I have to pee," I told him through parched lips, wondering how I could possibly be transported to a bathroom.

"So pee," he said.

This was startling: I had no idea that I was catheterized—only that I felt an urgent need to relieve myself.

Soon my wife was joined by my two daughters, and the three of them took turns providing me with ice chips. The relief to my lips and throat was incredible, and I savored each chip, grateful that I had only to nod my head to receive more.

My first recovery, fifteen years earlier, had been smooth, gradual and uneventful. It left me feeling grateful but also vulnerable: I knew that the porcine bio-root sewed into my aorta had a limited lifespan.

Post-surgery, I had lived my life in a fatalistic spirit: *When my time is up, it's up.* (Of course, I was also acutely aware of any chest discomfort.)

Having lived with that mindset for fifteen years, I felt distressed to find myself thinking, *This is not worth it.* I'd seen myself as someone who valued life more than that.

In retrospect, I believe that this thought reflected just how unpleasant and disorienting I found it to be alone, immobile and disconnected from others and myself. Such a lonely, despairing existence did not feel worth it.

Hearing me describe this disturbing thought, a trusted colleague asked

astutely, "What got you out of it?"

I can't be sure, but I believe that it was the presence of my wife and two daughters. Human contact alone seemed to break the spell. My wife and daughters took turns staying with me for the rest of my time in the hospital, and the thought never recurred.

In the ensuing weeks and months, as I recovered my strength and gradually resumed my former activities, the memory of that fleeting thought remained with me—a challenge to value all that life is.

I've also reflected on other aspects of my surgeries that, in retrospect, seem striking.

I marvel at the joking mindset that came over me as I headed into my first surgery. I asked the helicopter pilot if I could have a souvenir Medevac patch like the one on his uniform. And when the anesthesiologist asked, "Are you comfortable?" as I was transferred to a gurney, I answered: "I make a good living." I feel amazed at how dissociation, a psychological defense, arose unbidden to protect me from the uncertainty of the moment.

I continue to live on bonus time. It's like the time added at the end of a soccer game—except that, unlike the soccer players, I don't know how much is left. I struggle to accept restrictions (such as no snow shoveling) that make me feel older than I like. And I try to make the most of the time I've been given. Each new survival milestone is reason to celebrate, especially with and for my family and close friends, who have been so supportive.

Amid the celebration, I try to remember that not every cardiac patient fares as well as I have. And, as I said before, despite my sincere gratitude for my bonus years, being grateful somehow never seems sufficient.

When I left the hospital, I carried with me a red heart-shaped pillow with get-well wishes written on it. I keep it in my car as a reminder never to go through a day without feeling grateful. Every day is a gift.