

What It's Like to Disappear

Category: Stories

written by Joseph Hageman | November 27, 2020



A doctor
performs a
vanishing act...

One morning seven years ago, I disappeared.

I started the day by swimming laps in the pool at the Northwestern University sports and recreation center in Evanston, IL, as I've done for at least fifteen years.

I have long suffered chronic muscle spasms and pain in my neck, hands and feet, and my daily swims, pain medications and mindfulness meditation make up part of a very helpful therapeutic regimen.

At around 9:00 am, having finished my laps, I felt some very mild tightness in my chest. This had been happening lately during my swims—but my pulse, whenever I checked, was strong and regular, so I had concluded that the tightness was just rib-cartilage inflammation.

The mild tightness continued as I went into the locker room and stepped into the showers.

Then I just disappeared.

When I awoke, I was lying in a hospital bed, a breathing tube down my throat and intravenous lines running into my groin and my neck. I vaguely remember hearing voices; but looking back, it's hard to know how much I actually remember and how much I've pieced together based on later conversations with my wife, Sally, and my family.

Soon after waking, I was extubated. A figure came into view—Joanie, a nurse I

had worked with for thirty years in this hospital. Seeing her, I felt an almost surreal sense that I'd been plunged back into my former life; it felt like a relief to be here.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You had a heart attack!" she exclaimed, looking relieved and happy to hear me speak.

I reportedly responded, "Wow! That's weird!"

I was amazed at how many people were in the room—and how glad they all seemed to be that I was alive.

Another nurse, Kay, with whom I'd also worked for decades, told me: "When people in Evanston Hospital heard that you'd come into the ER in cardiac arrest, you would not believe the amount of praying that went on for your recovery!"

I learned that my heart had gone into life-threatening ventricular fibrillation ("Vfib") and had only returned to normal when the ER doctors used shock treatment.

Before retiring from clinical care, in 2007, I had been the attending physician in charge of caring for critically ill infants and children in this very ICU. It felt mind-boggling to find myself a patient here, being cared for by my former colleagues.

My cardiovascular surgeon had once been one of my medical students. Often, he'd seen me work for two days straight at the bedside of a critically ill infant, trying to help save the child's life; now he'd been instrumental in saving mine.

It was a strange experience, disappearing for a day and a half! I have no memories of my time "away." I saw no bright lights, nor do I remember seeing or talking with anyone.

A day or two later, when I woke up more completely, Sally was there, holding my hand.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. "The house has been a lonely place without you."

Whenever one of my family, friends or colleagues came to visit, I felt all over again how lucky I was to be alive.

I felt especially grateful to have survived my heart attack with my mental and physical abilities intact. Thinking back to my days as a practicing clinician, I remembered how ambivalent I'd sometimes feel while resuscitating a patient whose heart had stopped at the end of a long, complicated and incurable illness.

If they do survive, I'd wonder, will they be coming back to a wretched

quality of life? I sometimes had mixed feelings about giving the patient another reviving dose of epinephrine.

Recalling this, I felt good that my colleagues were glad I'd survived.

My recovery went smoothly, and I soon resumed my normal activities, including morning yoga and stretching, mindfulness meditation and some guided imagery. Walking replaced swimming in my daily regimen, and I now work to get 8,000 to 10,000 steps per day.

Within four weeks of my disappearance, I returned to Comer Children's Hospital at the University of Chicago, ready to start teaching again.

When I stepped into the resident conference, there was a pause—and then, to my surprise, delight and gratitude, everyone broke into applause.