

Still Here!

By
Alan Palmieri

Two weeks ago today I suffered a heart attack that lasted twelve hours and had heart surgery that left me with a split sternum and five bypasses. This is the story of my ordeal including some bits and pieces of before that frightful night and what followed immediately after. How far after of course depends on how long since the operation I will continue writing. It is my intention not to add anything after I go back to the doctor, the one who performed the surgery, for my two week check up.

I woke, as usual, around four o'clock in the morning and proceeded to brush my teeth and wash. I started the water for coffee and went downstairs to check my email. Good, nothing new. So I began working on a couple of projects I had going in hopes of bringing them to closure. For more years than I care to think about I have worked for myself as an independent consultant and entrepreneur. I have always worked several business deals at one time. It can be tough; it seems to run feast or famine. I've spent a great amount of my adult life involved in government and politics and served as mayor for five terms. I've lectured and taught at the University of Tennessee, provided services to international as well as domestic companies, and could list a page full of other things I have done, all in all a rather diverse and active individual with a broad range of experience and involvement. This does not even mention the physical aspect of my life which is just as broad and involved.

I went back upstairs, made the coffee, and returned to my computer and what I was doing. I took a short break and reviewed the day's agenda to make certain I had everything down and ready to go. I felt good this morning and was looking forward to the day's workout... legs, squats. I always liked doing squats. One reason is because of the overall impact they have on the body, the other reason was; no one I knew liked them,

too hard. That was inspiration enough for me. I always took an inner satisfaction doing what others disliked doing. That probably tells something about me that only a shrink can understand.

I became active in bodybuilding in the early 60's. Mostly out of necessity more than anything else. I was the real 98 pound weakling. The only thing was, I didn't even weigh 98 pounds, it was more like 80 something pounds. I still have pictures, you can see and count every bone in my body. I was afraid of everyone and everything and that is no exaggeration. Afraid of the dark, I wouldn't even go out on the play ground at recess for fear of being bullied. It was a pathetic life and I have no doubt part of it is responsible for what I am today. After all, we are all a product of our environment.

Over the years I remained faithful to the sport I loved so dearly. For me there is nothing like the feel and sound of the iron. It was good to me. I developed in strength and size leaving behind my insecurities and fears. To this day however, I still clearly remember what it was like to be so afraid of everything, it left its scars. Growth and maturity would not have taken care of it on its own. My participation in bodybuilding was the foundation for overcoming a host of mental and physical problems I carried for so many years.

My wife Rhea was up and out early that morning. She went to our daughters to watch our grandkids, Aaron and Shelby. I have always called them Vito and Charlene so I guess I shouldn't change just for this should I! Rhea loves watching the kids. She is at her most content stage when doing so. She was that way when our kids were growing up. Something happened to her when Michael and Patty grew up and left the house. Keeping Vito and Charlene was like returning her back to when the kids were home.

I felt good early that morning and everything was going just as normal as could be. I guess the one exception was that I was getting more work done than I thought I would. In fact I was way ahead of schedule that morning. By around eight o'clock I was caught up. Might be early but remember I started at four so by eight I had already put in

four good hours of non-interrupted productive work. That's the great thing about getting to it that early in the morning, not many people are going to call or visit and disrupt your thought pattern. You can really spend some quality time working.

I didn't have any new or unusual pressure on me that day and was satisfied things were going to workout just fine on a new project I was working on. I took a short break and went to the Post Office, hit a couple of places in town but returned within an hour or so. Since I was ahead of schedule I thought I would go ahead and do my leg workout then get back to work. I set up the equipment in my garage and prepared myself for a good productive workout. Four or five sets of heavy deep breathing full back squats, three sets of front squats, three sets of leg extensions, four sets of leg curls, and five sets of calf raises. It would normally take me about forty-five minutes to one hour to complete the workout. Heavy weight and little rest was the order of the day. Heavy for me now was not what it use to be. Today my weight for squats would be around 350 to 400 pounds. I remember when I could easily do a great deal more. With age and maturity, I learned how to work the muscles harder with less weight. Besides, at this point in my life I no longer responded that well to weight overloads and I no longer desired to carry a lot of mass.

On my very first warm-up set for squats I felt an uncomfortable feeling in my lower chest, in the solar plexus area. I honestly thought it was due to the previous day's ab workout in which I performed more crunches then I should have. I really worked the abs hard the day before, so hard in fact I caused muscle cramps in my midsection. The discomfort was in the exact region that I contract when I perform crunches and where I had the muscle cramp the day before. I continued on convinced the feeling was nothing more than a muscle cramp. My Type A personality applies to my workouts as well as all other aspects of my life. I have always gotten the most satisfaction in working out to the limit. Even on light days I would push myself as far as I could go; sometimes I went beyond what I should have. It has always been a personal challenge; me against the iron, and I would not let the iron win.

Each set the pain increased in intensity and it was becoming more difficult to breathe. Well, that was not going to stop me. Over the years I have trained with some pretty intense pain and always felt better when I was done, especially knowing that I did not quit when it got rough. A lot of my working out has always been for self gain and improvement. One of my philosophies has been “If it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger.” I applied that mindset to every workout I ever did. Self motivation and inspiration built on bits and pieces of life.

I always enjoyed working out alone as I felt I could do what I wanted and how I wanted to do it. Over the years I have trained with others, in fact some of the best workouts I have had have been with a partner. But still I have always liked the quite individual response I had with the iron when it was just me and it. I never trained for a contest or to be a peacock strutting around. I trained for the self improvement I gained from the training itself. The self confidence it provided. The overall feeling only a bodybuilder would understand in getting a pump from a workout. It had always been a personal individual thing for me. No mirrors or anything fancy, just dead iron, some bars, a bench, and a rack and I was happy. No music and no distractions were always a goal. Over the years I learned to apply full concentration to my workouts, during each set I was unaware of my surroundings as I focused on the muscle and movement I was working.

I admit, over the years there were periods when I was not as faithful and regular in training as I should have been. There have been planned as well as unplanned layoffs but I would always return to the sport I genuinely love. My start in bodybuilding, as well as my involvement, is another story all unto itself. For now the point is that I may not be here today, had it not been for three things, God, the prayers of so many people, and my years of heavy training. I need no one to provide proof God was involved, I believe in the power of prayer, and I know what the doctor said about my years of working out and what he thinks it did for me. According to him; “You can credit your years of intense training for helping save your life”.

As I came to the end of my workout the discomfort I was feeling was getting more and more intense. The discomfort was now becoming a pain. Not a sharp pain but a constant deep pain that would not go away. I called Rhea to see how she was doing and didn't say anything about my pain. She has always been on me about the intensity level I employ in my workouts. "Nuts" is one of her favorite compassionate terms for it. I told her we would go out to eat when she got home and that went over great. Chinese was the food we both decided on.

About five that evening Rhea got home I was still working and still in pain. It had not let up all day, just slowly and constantly increasing with each passing hour. We went to eat and then went to the store to get some things. All the time I kept feeling worse and worse. After returning home I tried to sit, lie, stand, bend, everything to find some relief but couldn't. As the night went on the pain got worse, to the point I finally told Rhea to take me to the hospital. Only a couple of miles from our home, I didn't think I was going to make it. By the time we reached the hospital I was in such pain all I could do was moan. Looking back I am not certain the intensity of pain grew or if my ability to fight it lessened. After all those hours it wore me down physically and emotionally.

Thank God the emergency staff at Jefferson Memorial Hospital recognized the serious pain I was in. They didn't let me wait very long at all before they ushered me back and began working on me. They were great and I am so grateful for the fast service.

Immediately I was hooked up for an EKG, blood was drawn, shots were given, and the pain persisted. Finally enough morphine was given and the pain calmed down. I felt rotten but some relief was obtained. "Have you ever had any heart problems", the doctor asked. "None" was my truthful reply. After sometime the doctor returned and stated he saw something that didn't look right on my EKG and wanted to send me to Knoxville. I later discovered my son-in-law, Scott, was responsible for making certain the doctor did not take my situation lightly. The doctor and staff were great. No hospital could have provided better care than I had received.

It seemed like a long ambulance ride down and I don't mind telling you I was scared. The attendant talked to me all the way down and of course I prayed as well. What a great ambulance service we have. Up to this point I don't think anyone anywhere in the country could have had better treatment or care.

Once at St. Mary's emergency room in Knoxville, it all becomes somewhat of a blur. What took place was fast, furious, and direct. Help and a nightmare rolled into one. I do know this; the care and treatment I was provided was second to none. I was scared and wanted nothing more than to go home, let the nightmare end. Wish as I might and pray as hard as I could it was not to be.

First one doctor, then another, another one still; who and why so many I kept thinking. Finally one doctor told me that my blood work confirmed I did have a heart attack. They were going to operate on me immediately to perform a heart catheterization. I was already loaded with heaven knows how much morphine and now was going to be put under to perform this procedure! I remember thinking, that's a lot to go through!

I remember being rolled into the operating room and the doctor talking to me. I also remember coming to afterwards and still being in the operating room. "Is it over", I asked. "Stay still now" I was told. "Where is the doctor, is the operation over, was it successful?" Lie still I was told. "The doctors are consulting right now." Oh man, now I was scared, as if I could get any more frightened. Here I lay in the operating room with doctors consulting. Even half out of my mind with drugs I knew this could not be good.

Finally a doctor came up to me and let me know what had happened. "What was supposed to be a simple procedure has now become a major situation." "We cannot perform the procedure on you," the doctor said. "You have too many blockages and they are too severe. I have contacted a heart surgeon who will have to operate." I was then taken out of the operating room. I was so tired by this time and so full of drugs I could hardly keep awake. I wanted my family around me so bad. I wanted this nightmare to go away.

My daughter Patty, son Michael, and of course my wife were there the entire time. I knew that even though they wouldn't let me see them, I knew they were there and I knew they were praying. I soon discovered my brother Brian, came up. So did my sister Susan, and mom and dad, Adele and Angelo. I knew whatever was going on was bad. Our family has always been close but this was not normal for all of them to be here.

At some point I recall the doctor saying the surgery did not look good for me. I was given a less than 50 -50 chance due to the number and amount of blockages I had. There had to be severe and serious heart damage. To exactly what extent was not yet certain. I was so drugged; it was the most frightening time in my entire life. I wanted and prayed for God to forgive me, "have mercy on me" I kept saying over and over. Not only was I no longer in charge I could hardly even function. It was hard to understand what was going on. "Who was going to take care of me now?" "Who would make certain I was being treated as I should be?" It was all out of my hands now. It was time for God to do whatever He wished and I could only lay there and accept it.

I remember asking them in the operating room not to put me under until they let me know they were going to do so. Well, that didn't happen. They didn't say a word and I was out. Even though they promised they would let me know. Why they didn't tell me I will never understand. It would have given me, perhaps my last second's of conscious time, one last chance to ask for forgiveness and mercy.

"We can't get him to stay awake." "We have to get him to say awake." "Get him awake." Words shouted in an almost panic state were the first words I remember hearing. As I heard them I fought with all my might to wakeup but couldn't. All I remember seeing was a little fuzzy movement in what appeared to be a gray cloudy environment. I was horrified. I fought so hard to get awake and couldn't. The more I fought the more frightened I became. "Was I dead?" "Where was I?" It was strange. I couldn't move or speak no matter how hard I tried.

Finally I recognized Michael and Patty's voice. Patty said "squeeze my hand if you can hear me." I tried but didn't know if I had succeeded or not. Then I heard her say, "He squeezed my hand." Keep him awake someone said. That provided me with some incentive to fight to get awake. I didn't know what had happened or the shape I was in but I did know I was alive. Thank God for that much.

Oh how good to see Rhea, Patty, Michael, and my brother Brian. He stayed on after taking Mom and Dad back home. My sister Susan had to go back also. That must have meant I was going to be okay I remember thinking. They would not have left if something was still wrong.

So, finally coming around, what had happened? Well, I did have a heart attack that lasted for about twelve hours. They had to perform a five bypass heart surgery on me. Oh man, the chills I get thinking about all of what I went through. Rhea said the doctor said everything went fine and I would be okay. What about all the damage and less than 50 – 50 chance they told us about? Rhea said the doctor told her I did just fine and that I had virtually no heart damage at all. What? That's what she said.

The next day the doctor who performed the surgery on me came to my room and I was finally able to talk and understand what was going on. "What happened doc" I asked. The discussion centered on my physical condition and how I had spent a lifetime working out with weights. "You're conditioning and years of training with weights saved your life," he said. I noticed as soon as we had to cut into you how heavily muscled you were and thought we might have to have some help. All the tests indicated a serious heart problem and with the number, location, and severity of blockages you had it was a given you were going to also have some very serious heart damage. The doctor went on to say. "Your heart is as good as new." "You have virtually no heart damage at all." "The fact you were in such good condition and the years you dedicated to intense workouts really paid off." No one could believe what had taken place and the fact I had no damage. Credit and thanks go to all the doctors, staff, medical personnel, and working out all those years; but the real credit I give to God. For some reason he wanted me around for a little

longer. Why, I don't know. It just was not my time. I later discovered a lot of people were praying for me and I do believe God listens to prayers.

As I try to regain my strength and fight off the soreness that I have all over my body, I am learning something new once again. The healing process is not only physical it is also mental, emotional, and spiritual. I was in the deep valley and death kissed me on the lips... I didn't kiss back. I know that sounds silly but I visualize it like that. It was a terrifying journey and one that I definitely do not want to take again. I know people have heart attacks and heart surgeries are performed every day. What I went through was not special to anyone except me. Now I want to try and figure out what I am supposed to do with this second chance God has given me. What am I to do?

I have fears. Fear of what was done to me, fear of how successful the procedure was. How long will it last? Fear of dying and fear of living. Sound contradictory, I guess it does but its how I feel.

I think often how I felt great before that frightful day. No pains or aches to speak of. How it hit me all of a sudden and without warning. Heck, if my heart was that bad shouldn't I have had at least some signs of warning? Was the doctor right about my physical condition and history of working out so intensely? Did it really make that much of a difference? Was it all a Divine Plan of God's for some unknown reason? The paths the mind follows at times like these! You really think a great deal about the shortness of life and what a gift it is. How and why do we waste it!

If it doesn't kill you it makes you stronger... What new gained strength will emerge from this experience? One can only venture to guess. I know there are many new challenges ahead of me. Many new and uncharted paths I must travel. How I travel those paths are just as important as the actual journey itself.

My two week check up was today and it appears I am on the road to recovery. A group of different doctors each with a specific specialty will be following my progress. I

have already been informed I must be confined to restricted activity for the next six months even though I am progressing well. One day at a time and one step at a time. That's the way it is with anything big or major in life. It all starts small.

I tire easy right now and the doctor told me that would be normal due to the severity of my heart attack and the bypasses. Time will increase my energy level and also my ability to do more. It will be a slow process especially for someone like me, who has little in the way of patience. The doctor did state he was confident I would recover strong enough to do whatever I wanted.

I am deeply grateful and want to say Thank You to all those that have offered prayers for me during this terrible experience. I am thankful for all that have shown a sincere interest in my well being and offered to help. I am deeply thankful for my family. Above all I Praise God, no matter what happens next and there will be a next, I am confident He will remain on His Throne watching. Those that may object to my comments related to God may never have faced a situation in which only He could control the outcome. I just did and I offer no apologies.

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