

Chapter 10

And the Beat Goes On...

Someone once said that "Affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it." If that's true, then I think we struck it rich!

We originally moved South hoping the warmer temperatures would improve the health of both Jeremy and me, which it did. The warmth of the sun helped us move around with less effort and it really felt good. In fact, Jeremy was out of his wheelchair and walking around on his own only a month after moving here. Everyone seemed to make the adjustment very well. It was a good move for our family.

The only drawback I could see living in a hot place was the additional creepy crawlers that also like to live here. And in fact, one of our new arachnoid neighbors almost took my life!

In the summer of 1991, some friends of ours were having a new home built directly across the street from where we lived. While it was being framed up, I decided one evening that I would take a walk through it and see how it was coming along. I wanted to get an idea of what it would look like when it was finished. (One of my loves is architectural design.)

As I was walking through it and looking around, a spider apparently fell into my hair, or possibly got there when I brushed up against some lumber. At the time, I wasn't aware that I'd picked up the little hitch-hiker, so I went home, tucked my children into bed, and then went to bed myself.

Lee was away from home at the time, so I was all alone as I went to bed that night. Suddenly I was awakened by a sharp stinging in my ear, followed by a burning sensation. I felt my ear but didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. I assumed that the stinging sensation was a result of lying on my ear funny, so I just rolled over and went back to sleep. I didn't wake again until the alarm went off the next morning. It was time to get up and take Jenny to dance lessons. She was about ten years old at the time.

I felt awful as I left the house to take her to dance class. My ear was really starting to hurt. I had only driven a short distance, when I felt as if I was going to

pass out. I felt panic starting to set in. I had no way of contacting anyone, so I decided that the best course of action would be to turn the car around and try to make it back home.

I told Jenny that I wasn't feeling very well and we needed to go home immediately. I told her to sit close to me. I told her that if I did pass out, she was to steer the car over to the side of the road, put on the brakes to stop the car, turn off the engine and wait for help to come along.

As I drove home, my ear really began hurting. I pulled off to the side of the road for a moment and felt my ear. As I reached up and touched it, I noticed that there were fluids running down my ear and onto my neck. I found that a large blister had formed on the top of my ear, so I wiped the fluids from my ear so I could take a closer look at them. I was shocked when I saw a large piece of skin from my ear, lying in my hand.

By this time, I was really beginning to get worried! I knew something serious was happening to me. The nearest phone was at my house, so I told Jenny again what to do if I passed out. She was a real trooper. She kept assuring me that everything would be all right.

We arrived home safely, and I telephoned the doctor I was working for at the time. He was away at the moment, so I told his wife what had happened, and she said she would come right over. By the time she arrived, I was certain I was going to slip into unconsciousness. She called her husband and described to him what was happening. He told her to go into my bedroom and check my bed for spiders. If she found one, she was to bring it in with me to the hospital. "Hurry" he said, "I'll meet you in the emergency room."

We went to my room, moved my pillow, and there on my bed was a dead spider. We put it in a baggie and headed for the hospital.

By the time we arrived at the emergency room, I could no longer walk. My ear was really draining by now, and I was sure it was about to drop right off my head!

They rushed me to a trauma room and tried to make me comfortable while they checked to see what type of spider it was. It was quickly identified as a brown recluse and they administered the appropriate antidote. Within a short period of time, I started to feel better.

The doctor said I was very lucky that the spider bit me on the ear, rather than on my head or neck. Because there's so much cartilage in the ear, it actually kept

the poison from spreading as quickly as it would have if it had bitten me somewhere else. (Funny... I didn't feel all that lucky!)

The doctors told me that this particular spider loves wood... so I don't spend much time these days walking through newly framed buildings. Once was enough for me. After some bed rest and some minor reconstructive surgery to fix my ear, I was back to normal once again.

In February 1997, I was diagnosed with a heart problem that required immediate attention. At the time, I was the office manager in a medical clinic where I'd worked at for a number of years. My boss was Dr. Madsen, a wonderful and well-respected doctor in our community. I was very proud to be a part of this wonderful practice. I wore many hats, and in addition to office manager duties, I also had some nursing duty.

I began to suspect that my heart wasn't working the way it should. At first I didn't think too much of it, but when I began to have fainting spells, I decided that it might actually be serious. As a nurse, I had a very good working knowledge of how to run the diagnostic equipment we had on site, so one day, when things were slow at work, I decided to run a tape on my heart to see what was going on.

I slipped into a vacant room and hooked myself up to a heart monitor machine to print out my heart's vital signs.

When the process was complete, I took the tape and slipped it into my pocket.

At the end of the day, after all the patients had gone home, I went into Dr. Madsen's office to go over the paperwork and reports with him. I did this every day, to make sure he'd seen all his patients, gotten all the information he required, and was ready for his patients the next day.

After discussing all the usual things, I asked him if he'd mind looking at one more heart tape. He said he'd be happy to do so. When he saw the tape, he asked, "'Whose tape is this? You should never have let this person leave the office!'"

I just looked at him, smiled, and said, "This person hasn't left the office. This tape is mine."

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. My heart rhythm was off the charts. It was beating at 328 beats per minute! I should have been dead. Human hearts are not meant to beat that fast. Immediately he sat me down in a wheelchair, wheeled me across the street and admitted me into the Hospital.

The heart specialists there knew right away that they didn't have the ability to help me at their facility. They told me that I'd have to go to the City to a Larger Hospital, and, hopefully, their team of surgeons could correct the problem.

They rushed me off by ambulance for the 4-hour trip, believing that if they flew me there, the change in altitude would probably kill me. Lee followed behind in our car, but he couldn't keep up. He arrived about an hour and a half after I did... I was already being prepped for surgery.

The surgery was not a success. The doctors told us that they didn't have the expertise or the technology to fix my kind of problem. They told me that I should go home, get my affairs in order, and prepare myself and my family for my death. They believed it would be a relatively short wait.

I went home and was very discouraged... but we'd faced discouragement before, and Lee did his best to keep me and the family as upbeat and positive as possible.

Dr. Smith, the lead surgeon who operated on me, felt just awful that he couldn't fix my problem. In fact, the operation just made things worse, and he couldn't stop thinking of me as his operational failure. As he thought about my particular problem, he remembered that a colleague from medical school had mentioned to him that he was doing a lot of research and testing in the area that I was having problems with.

Dr. Smith contacted his friend, a great doctor by the name of Dr. Thompson, in Oklahoma City, and asked if he wouldn't mind reviewing my files, X-rays, and EKG's. He agreed, and the hospital sent the information off to Oklahoma.

A couple of weeks later, I received a call from Oklahoma City.

"Hello... is this Mrs. Llewellyn?" I told him it was. "This is Dr. Thompson, back here in Oklahoma City. Listen, I've reviewed your situation, your files and the reports from Dr. Smith, and I believe that I can help you. I've scheduled a time for your operation, and I'd like to know if you can be here for that."

I was so excited! "Of course, I'll be there!" I said. I thought that at the very least, this may give me a chance for survival. There was just one problem... money. We had none. I called our insurance company, and their response was... "This procedure is experimental, it doesn't have FDA approval, and we're very sorry, but we won't be able to help you out at this time." It was so disheartening. One minute a faint glimmer of hope, only to be snuffed out moments later by our insurance company.

Our Church Leader James Snyder, heard of our plight, and told us not to worry. He believed that the good people of our church, along with the wonderful people of the community, would pitch in and find a way to help us out.

James was so helpful to us. The local newspaper ran an article telling of our situation, and they set up a special bank account to take donations. People were very kind and donated a lot of money. Before long, we had more than enough money to pay for the trip to Oklahoma City, but nothing for the operation itself. We would cross that bridge when we came to it.

James asked us for the date and time the operation was scheduled to take place. I told him, and he told me not to worry... "We will be holding a special fast for you that day, and the whole church will be praying for you. You'll be just fine!"

The heart condition I had was very rare, and the operation would be delicate and tricky. Some of the doctors later confessed that they weren't sure I would even survive the trip to Oklahoma.

They told me I couldn't drive there, because it would be too far between hospitals out there on the interstate. Yet, they were frightened that if I flew, the change in altitude alone would probably kill me. I had to get there somehow! They decided my best chance for survival was to fly. So, our good friends Allen and Beverly Terry drove us to the Las Vegas Airport. They were a great comfort to us on the drive and we will be eternally grateful to them for the help they provided our children while we were away.

When we arrived, Dr. Thompson ran some more tests on me. Those test results, coupled with the information sent from the previous heart team, didn't make him or his team very optimistic about my prognosis. They were considering foregoing the operation.

I was devastated and pretended to scold them. "Dr. Thompson told me that he could fix me!" I said... "I came all this way, so that I could have this operation and get better. Besides, there's an awful lot of people back home fasting and praying for me to get better. So, I am not leaving here until you fix me!"

Dr. Thompson sat us down and told us that he wanted very much to operate on me. He said that he had great faith in this "probe" that they had developed, and said, "I want to do this procedure as bad as you want me to do it. If I can fix your heart with all the multiple sites that are malfunctioning in it, I know I can get this probe approved by the FDA. But your heart is really bad."

This new "probe" had already proven to be ninety-nine point some odd percent successful in dealing with single sites in the heart that were malfunctioning, but my heart had multiple sites that were firing off very erratically, putting me into straight ventricular tachycardia, which is the most dangerous kind of rhythm a heart can have.

I pleaded with Dr. Thompson to do this operation. "You're my last and only hope. If you don't do this for me, then surely I will die."

He talked it over with his team again, and they decided that, due to the complexity of the case, they would assemble two heart teams to do the surgery. One team to take over when the first team got too tired, anticipating that it would take about twenty-two hours to complete the operation. He told Lee and me that since they already had the operating room set up and reserved for me, that they would go ahead with the operation.

What they had to do was go up through an artery in my thigh, and position probes all along my artery up and into my heart, with the final probe having a camera on the end of it to show them what they were doing. Then they would make a small incision in my chest, go in with a laser and bum in little half-inch laser incisions. This would create scar tissue that would essentially make a circuit board out of my heart which theoretically would direct the electrical impulses of my heart in an orderly and predictable manner.

A normal heart fires off from top to bottom, top to bottom, creating a normal rhythm, but my heart would fire off in all different directions, creating bizarre rhythms and beats that the doctors just couldn't believe.

I was in the hospital about Halloween time, and outside on my door, they hung a big cardboard witch, you know the kind with the arms and legs that pivot. They stretched out her arms and had her holding my EKG chart showing my heart at 328 beats per minute in straight V-tack. It was pretty funny. The hospital was a learning hospital, and the intern and young doctors would come by my room and look in just to see the lady with the bizarre heart rhythms. They couldn't believe anyone could survive with that kind of heart problem. When they'd look in my room, I'd sit up, wave and say hi!

"No, no... don't move, don't even talk!" They'd say. They didn't want me to smile or talk or do anything, fearing that any little movement might make me die of heart failure, and then they'd feel responsible for it.

They must have thought I was crazy, because I'd get up early in the morning, sit on my bed and put on my makeup. I wanted to look good for the doctors. This hospital was wonderful. The people there were absolutely the best. When Lee and I first arrived there, we told them we'd go get a room at a local Hotel, and they said they wouldn't hear of it. They put us up in one of their "special suites" in the cardiovascular wing of the hospital. We had beautiful leather wing back chairs, and a nice bed for me to sleep in while we were there. They even brought in a nice bed to put next to mine for Lee to sleep in. Everyone was so kind to us.

One of my biggest fears about being in Oklahoma City was leaving Lee alone while I was in being operated on. I worried what might happen to him if I did die. Who would he turn to for comfort so far from home and loved ones? It sounds awful to think about I know, but it was a very real concern for me.

James had apparently called a local church leader in the area Where the hospital was located, and many of the local members came to visit Lee, bringing him homemade goodies and treats. They even made sure that someone would be there to sit with him while I was being operated on, just in case something bad happened.

It's amazing to me, that wherever you go, there are wonderful people just waiting to help out with whatever your needs might be. We were so appreciative of these great people, total strangers, who helped us out at this very stressful time of our lives.

They prepped me for surgery and took me down the hallways and elevators to the operating room. They allowed Lee to accompany me most of the way, and then they informed him that he had to leave and wait in the waiting room. I remember holding his hand and looking up into his face. I could see that he was worried... so was I.

I wondered if this was the last time I'd get to see him here on Earth. What would happen to him, and what would happen to my children who also had such special needs? What would become of them?

Nobody understood their needs and the things they had to deal with like I did. I just couldn't go... please God, not yet. These and a hundred other thoughts raced through my mind, as I said goodbye to Lee. He stood there motionless and watched as they wheeled me into the operating room.

When I entered the operating room, I began to shake... it was so cold, laying there on that hard table. The room had all kinds of computers and electronics that

were necessary to pinpoint the exact locations of the arrhythmia and the areas where they would do the laser cutting.

The anesthesiologist spent a lot of time with me and Lee prior to the operation, helping us to feel confident and secure about what was about to take place. She came into the room and saw how badly I was shaking and said, "It looks like you're really nervous." I replied, "Ya know, I don't think I am. I'm just cold." I had come to the decision in my mind that whatever happened to me, would be God's will. I felt at peace with that. Still, all the stress and anxiety I had been experiencing, coupled with the memory of the look I saw in Lees eyes just moments before, was a bit overwhelming for me.

The anesthesiologist said she thought it would be a good idea to administer a little bit of medication to me to "make me more comfortable" and get my mind off the situation. As she began to administer the medication, I remember that I became very frightened. Then, almost immediately, I heard the words, "Don't fear... don't fear... I'm here... I'll be holding your hand, you don't need to worry."

At that very moment, I felt an incredible surge of calmness come over my entire body. I suppose there are some who will say that that calm feeling was just the result of the anesthesia, but I know it was something more.

The surgery was supposed to last more than twenty-two hours. It would be very tricky, and very delicate. Two hours into the operation the doctors identified what they thought was one of the more critical areas that would require a laser incision. It was deep inside my heart, located between the two main chambers. They were nervous, because if they cut too deep it would cut through the thin chamber wall, and I would die.

They decided to operate on this site first while they were still mentally fresh, and because this was probably the most dangerous place to cut. As they cut into this first site, my heart stopped beating. Immediately they grabbed the paddles and gave me a good shock. My heart responded and began beating once again.

I know I was unconscious at the time, and this may sound strange, but it felt like someone was squeezing my hand on several occasions during the time I was "out." Each time I felt my hand being squeezed, I'd feel reassured that everything was going to be all right.

After my heart started beating again, the doctors were able to ablate that site successfully. Then they began to map out the other sites that would need attention. They did just one more site, and my heart started to beat normal again.

In order for them to map out all the sites, they needed my heart to continue acting up. But with only two sites completed, my heart started beating normally. They couldn't figure it out... they administered straight adrenaline shots to my heart to try and stress it so they could continue mapping the sites. But they couldn't get my heart to respond to the adrenaline.

It had only been about six hours since they began the operation, and Dr. Thompson was at a loss as to what he should do. He decided to go out and "consult" with Lee. They paged Lee and told him he was needed on the main surgery floor to speak with Dr. Thompson. Lee later told me, that when they called for him to come down and speak with the doctor, he immediately imagined the worst. He was certain I had died. He said the walk from the waiting room to the surgical floor was the longest walk he'd ever taken in his life.

When he arrived, Dr. Thompson said, "Lee... I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean?" asked Lee.

"We fixed the first site. Her heart stopped beating, but don't worry, we got it started again. She's all right. We fixed the second sight, but then her heart quit acting up, and we can't get it to act up any more. Without it acting up, we don't know where to go next. We've been stressing her heart, trying to make it respond now for four hours. We don't know what to do. We can't just send her home and tell her to come back next week and we'll fix the other sites, but I can't identify them. It's like they're just gone. Her heart's beating perfectly normal and we don't know what to do."

Lee looked at him and said, "Then just stop! Quit trying to stress her heart, and just leave it alone."

Dr. Thompson thought for a moment then turned and walked away. As he did, Lee heard him say, "All right... I guess that's all we can do."

They removed the probes and closed me up. Then they wheeled me into the recovery room. Lee told me afterwards, that the doctor came in and spoke with me as I was coming out of the anesthesia. I didn't remember any of that.

The next morning, I felt great! I was raring to go, but I had to wait for the doctor. They'd placed sandbags all over me, to keep me still, and keep me from clotting. That was very uncomfortable, and I wanted them off.

When they'd paddled me, they'd ripped a main artery which caused a lot of internal bleeding. It looked like I had a bruise from my ankle clear up to my neck. I

also had bruises on my chest. Other than that, I felt wonderful. I hadn't felt this much energy in a long time, and it was exciting!

Dr. Thompson finally came in and said, "We need to take you down and run an EKG and a few other tests, so we can see how your heart's doing today."

So, he took me away to a room where there were several other doctors. They'd heard the story of what happened, and they wanted to see me for themselves. After they'd done their tests and made their observations, Dr. Thompson asked the other doctors to please leave the room. He wanted to speak with me alone.

When everyone was gone, he turned to me and asked, "Lin, do you remember what you said to me yesterday in the recovery room?"

I wondered if I should be embarrassed at this point. I had no idea what I said.

"No, I'm sorry I don't. Did I say anything wrong or embarrassing?" I asked. "I'm sorry if I did."

He laughed and then looked at me and said, "No... no, no, don't worry, you didn't say anything wrong. But I didn't think you'd remember. I haven't slept all night, thinking about what you said. I felt I needed to tell you what you told me.

"I'm not a religious man," he began. "For the past five years, my life has been totally consumed with the development of this probe... but being a physician, I think you have to believe in God, or some kind of "higher being," simply because of the things you constantly see and experience that are unexplainable.

"When I spoke with you in the recovery room, I said to you, 'Well, I fixed you,' and you looked up at me with real conviction and said, 'You don't think you did that by yourself do you?'"

"That took me aback. I couldn't get that thought out of my head, and it kept me up all night. I know that when I was in that operating room, someone, or something other than myself led me directly to where I needed to go and showed me what to do. For the past five years, there has been this wonderful girl in my life, my fianc'e, who has patiently waited and put her life on hold while I tried to perfect this procedure and get my work on this probe completed. I can't believe that five years of valuable time has passed that we could have spent together. But this experience has made me see things differently. I believe I need to be more involved in the lives of the people I love, especially my fianc'e."

He told me that he wanted to pursue life more seriously and try to understand life's real purpose. He said that this experience had touched him in a very personal way, and he believed that his life would be changed forever.

Well, they placed a large cardboard heart up on the wall in the hospital with my name on it. They told me later that because of my heart surgery, and how successful it had been, that it helped them get this procedure approved by the FDA. There is now a one year waiting list of patient's waiting to have this procedure done on them.

I believe I was supposed to go back there and have this operation done on me, not just for me, but for the many other people that will eventually be helped by it. And I believe that I was able to help several people there come to a better understanding of life and what's most important.

Two days after my surgery, I felt so good that I asked to go home. They told me I needed to stay for further observations and tests. Three days after the operation, Lee took me to the Oklahoma City Zoo, and I walked around all day long. I felt wonderful! Lee kept asking me if I felt tired or needed to rest or something. I assured him that I didn't, and that I felt great.

One week after my operation, they allowed me to go home. I know that the reason I was able to have this miracle take place in my life, is because of all the people who were pulling for me... my friends and my family. I know that their prayers, and the love of my Heavenly Father, were what kept me around when it looked so much like my life should have been over. I will be forever grateful for this wonderful experience in my life.