

On Monday, September 26th, I was packing my bag, preparing to leave for the conference in western New York for New York State Catholic Corrections Chaplains. I felt an odd tickle (literally) on the front of my chin. In retrospect, I might call it a gentle whisper*. *(1 Kings 19:9 – 13 NIV) I had come to believe that if you were having a heart attack (don't ask me why I thought about heart attack) due to over exertion, resting could make the symptoms go away (*WRONG*) – I also knew that one should take an aspirin at the first sign of a heart attack (*RIGHT*), which I did not do (*WRONG*) – I called another chaplain who was on the planning committee for the conference and told her that I would probably be there later but that at this moment I felt that I had a medical issue that I just needed to have someone look at. (*RIGHT*)

After a number of tests at the local Emergency Room, it was determined that I would need my cardiologist to get involved. He arranged for me to undergo an angiogram. The results hit me hard – 5 blockages, one was 99% closed off (he felt this was probably the source of my tickling chin the previous day) probably the result of a plaque 'rupture' within the past few hours or days. The other 4 were closed off to varying degrees of between 45% and 65%. I asked if this all meant I needed stints (small wire mesh tubes that would be inserted to open the artery.) His reply sent me into "Flight or Fight" mode on the spot. "No, there is way too much to consider stints, you will need bypass surgery. 'Probably 5 bypasses but at least 4. 'The surgeon will have to determine that once he is in your heart."

The worst nightmare of my world – danger, pain, serious surgery – hey, I'm the chaplain! I'm supposed to help others to cope, not be the one needing help! How could this be happening? I had lost over 150 pounds and returned to great health after battling obesity for 30 years. I was in great shape. I never was short of breath. I never smoked. Why me, God? I've tried to be faithful. I've tried to live a 'good' life. Why me???

There is an old saying: There are no atheists in foxholes. No matter what you say that you believe, you can't be absolutely sure until tested. Well, here I was facing what could be the end of my life (never mind the 98% success ratio – I was hearing words not ideas) and somehow it seemed to me that God should be doing a better job of protecting and comforting me with happy and peaceful thoughts. I did manage to focus through prayer on the graces and blessings in my life and the lives of my family and friends.

I met the cardio-thoracic surgeon who would be leading the surgery team from Upstate who would be doing the surgery. I felt reassured but back in 'flight or flight' and looking to God for some 'handwriting on the wall' (1 Chron. 28:19 NIV) some sort of direct reassurance from the Boss, so to speak.

After the doctors had left and I had a little time to think, I decided to take a walk around the unit floor. As I came around the corner by the elevators, a priest was getting out of the elevator. I asked him if he was a chaplain or just visiting. He smiled and said that he was just there to visit a patient. I thanked him and began to resume my walking. He called after me and asked: "What can I do for you? How can I help?" I simply replied that I wished to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation. He immediately said: "Are you ready? We can do it now."

We sat down right there in the hallway on a bench by the elevator, I celebrated the sacrament and he gave me absolution and a blessing. I felt much more peaceful and happily introduced myself to him. "Hi, thanks, I'm Deacon John Tomandl. I'm a little nervous and concerned as I have just been told that I need bypass surgery and may require five bypasses for my heart." He responded with a smile and shook my hand. "Deacon, glad to meet you. I'm Father Tom (I never did learn his last name) and I've had 6 bypasses and now have a pace-maker!" I had wanted God to break into my life in an extraordinary way and I believe that God did just that! God wanted me to know that God cared and that everything would be ok.

The remaining time up to the surgery flew by. Friday, from the time I was rolled into the preparation area for surgery until the following morning (Sat., 10/1) at about 5 AM is nowhere in my memory. This was the goal of the Anesthesiologist and she met it perfectly!

On Tuesday, October 4th (St. Francis day! The loving deacon!) I was discharged to the love and care of my family and was home by 1 PM. I was confident that things were wrapping up and I was on the straight road to recovery. 4 weeks later, God again had other plans for me. The leg from which they had taken a vein for one of the grafts, developed an infection. It took the better part of a week for the tests to determine what kind of an infection – it turned out to be MRSA. Once that was determined, proper treatment was begun immediately. I am now home on a two-week regiment of high dose IV antibiotics. But during the week that I was hospitalized, I encountered 4 staff members from the hospital who came into my room seeking counseling, advice or direction from me as a chaplain! Wow, God does at it again and in some very strange ways. I am prayerful that I will return to work around Thanksgiving. I want to thank everyone for your prayers and well wishes!

I also want to remind everyone (including myself) that God does what God wills and use whom God wills to use because (as St. Paul reminds us) God wishes all to be saved! Never give up! Never loss heart! Never doubt!