

Heart To Heart #89

Different Strokes...



William J. Schwartz, M.D.

I was looking forward to last Tuesday night. This was the night of the party for the players and coaches of the Horace Mann baseball team. My son Ethan is a pitcher. I made a point of going to almost all the games because I love to watch him play baseball. It was not a great season by the record, only two wins, but from my point of view, it was a terrific season, I was able to be with Ethan. As Priscilla would say, Ethan and I had “bonding” time and we became closer. (Hard to do when your son is 17 1/2 years old.)

The party was an opportunity to talk to the other parents, thank the players, honor the seniors and coaches. I stepped up to toast them all. The party ended at 8:30 p.m. After all it was still a “school” night.

As Ethan and I walked to the car, life seemed full and filled with future. Priscilla was in a plane returning from Washington, D.C. Zoe was finishing her senior year at Carleton College back in Minnesota again and graduation was three weeks away. Ethan would be playing summer baseball with the Bayside Yankees and I would have at least 50 games to see and enjoy.

After driving about half a block, I felt a sudden POP in my head. Simultaneously my vision changed. I felt as if a bag with a small hole or holes was thrown over my head, I could barely see the street. I looked outside, inside, one eye, two eyes trying to figure out what was happening and to maintain control of the car. I did not want Ethan to know what was happening. Very slowly I drove, 77th Street, Madison Avenue, Central Park, 86th Street, looking left, right and center.

Once home, things were not much better. I put the television on, it was primary night, Kentucky and Oregon but I couldn't focus. I noticed some wavy lines and I felt a headache beginning. Could this be a migraine? I'd had migraines before but never starting with a pop in the head and with such patchy darkness.

Priscilla returned home a short time later. I turned off the lights, threw a blanket over my head and said “don't talk to me”. I did not want to hear her tell me to go to the emergency room. (If I never have mentioned it before, I don't like doctors, or ER's, like many of my patients.)

So, with some anxiety as to what was happening to me, but hoping it to be just “another migraine”, I went to bed; after all it seemed like a dream anyway.

Wednesday morning, normally I teach the fellows at the hospital and then go to the Steinway office. This Wednesday, I opened my eyes, I could see and had no headache. However, when I looked at the *New York Times* the letters were hard to see, sometimes disappearing behind each other. Definitely not a migraine, but I decided to stick to my routine, I went to the hospital and then the office, around noon, I finally realized I was a “patient”. I called Dr. Peter Kratka at Advanced Radiology and in one hour I was in the MRI room, my head inside a small cage, my ears plugged and with headphones my body rolling inside the scanner.

Suddenly, pop, pop, pop, bang, bang, this time not inside my head but outside, the sound of the MRI. The sounds are loud but rhythmic, I closed my eyes and drifted into thought. I was asking myself what's inside my head, aneurysm, cancer, bleeding, stroke; I was asking how is my life going to change, I was asking myself about dying. I thought about life without me, not that I would miss something, but what would life for Zoe, Ethan and Priscilla be without me? What if the news was bad? One scan was followed by another. Things were not that clear, so what else was new? But by 5 p.m. there were answers. Dr. Schwartz, “You had a stroke.” The scans showed a fresh infarction in the occipital lobe of the brain (the part of the brain responsible for vision).

But that's not all of it. Why did I have a stroke? I don't have diabetes or hypertension. I don't smoke. My brain arteries were not diseased (the MRI scan showed that). This is one of those “cryptogenic” strokes.

On Thursday morning, escorted by Priscilla, I went for a transesophageal echocardiogram (TEE). A probe was placed in my esophagus to look at the heart from the “inside”. The sedation was wonderful. I have no recollection of the procedure or speaking to the cardiologist who performed the TEE.

Priscilla told me that the TEE revealed a small hole in my heart between the right and left atriums called a PFO (patent foramen ovale).

There is an association between a PFO and a stroke, as well as a PFO and a migraine. Meanwhile blood tests are pending to make sure my blood is not too “sticky” as sticky blood can cause strokes..

My vision has returned to normal. (I still use my glasses). I have missed no more work and I am taking a baby aspirin. I have to decide if a stronger blood thinner (coumadin) is better than aspirin and then I will have to decide if I should close the hole in the heart. There are no definite answers here, not even for a doctor, but for sure life is not the same, each minute a little fear that it may be the last as I know it.

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