

Speed+Skill+Love=Life

It is called the Widow Maker – the out-of-the-blue heart attack that kills the majority of its victims, and it usually damages the smaller percentage that survives – leaving behind a life of heartache. Four days ago I survived such a heart attack – I survived because of Speed and Skill, and I am alive because of my wife’s love and wisdom. The Widow Maker is the term used for the Left Anterior Descending Artery (LAD). This is the left main artery that supplies blood to large areas of the heart. If this artery becomes abruptly and completely blocked (occluded), it causes a massive heart attack that usually leads to sudden death. As far as heart attacks go, this is the “big one.” I am 58 years old and I had (have) no risk factors – no family history of heart disease or diabetes, I’ve never smoked and I drink very little. My blood pressure has been textbook (118/80) my whole life and my cholesterol is normal. I saw my wonderful family care physician just three weeks ago and she saw nothing to indicate there was a storm on the horizon. There were no obvious warning signs. The Widow Maker stalks us in silence.

Sunday morning was a lovely Florida summer day. My wife Deborah and I had a business meeting at our favorite local restaurant – Donna’s “Suntree Café,” meeting with our lead yoga teacher to discuss plans for our fall schedule at our small community yoga studio. After we finished our meeting, we worked on various studio chores. I was up on a ladder pulling wires to relocate our sound system and Wi-Fi service. It was hot above the ceiling tiles and I was sweating profusely. I sat down for a few minutes and drank a full glass of ice water. I just could not cool down. We were in a hurry to finish so while Deborah vacuumed up the detritus that always falls from messing with ceiling tiles; I went back to the utilities closet in the next door building to reconnect the Internet / Wi-Fi cables. As I was working in the closet – it started - terrible indigestion – that intense burning feeling where you can feel stomach acid splashing up and dissolving your esophagus. The pain grew noticeably worse – so I exited the closet and sat down on a nearby sofa hoping the pain would pass. Sitting alone, drenched in sweat, the pain dramatically increased again and an epiphany dawned - it was absolutely stupid to be sitting alone on the sofa – something very, very bad was happening. Slowly walking back to the yoga studio I told Deborah – “Don’t be upset – but there may be something wrong.” The pain was horrible, so I lay down on the floor, closed my eyes and began the foolish internal argument – should we call 911? What if this is just indigestion, won’t I feel stupid for calling the ambulance for just bad heartburn? How much will the ambulance cost? Meanwhile, Deborah realizes this is very serious – my color looked awful – so she runs to Donna’s to find an aspirin - and one of the staff members, Val, has an aspirin in her pocket. Val always carries an aspirin with her. Deborah runs to me with the aspirin and makes me swallow it (we are told later it would have been better to chew it). Deborah is now having her own internal argument about calling 911 – but she does not waste time – she makes up her mind after just a few seconds of internal debate. She had just dialed 911 and the phone answered when I opened my eyes and said we should call 911. I remember hearing Deborah speak with the dispatcher – the cell phone was not reporting a street address, so there was some back and forth about where we were. The dispatcher stayed on the phone with Deborah until we could hear the ambulance sirens from the Satellite Beach Fire station driving north on South Patrick Drive.

The EMTs arrive and within seconds they have my shirt off and are working to get EKG leads attached to my sweaty skin. They were not having much luck getting the things to stick so they

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held the leads in place by hand long enough to get a reading. As the lead EMT looked at the EKG strip he said the word "ischemia." In the single heartbeat that followed you would have thought a starter's pistol had just been fired – the EMT Team's actions became even more acutely focused. I am flat on my back in tremendous pain and I could tell the world had just changed. Ischemia means my heart was getting no oxygen – my LAD was 100% occluded. In full honesty I can say I was never really scared. I do remember being really pissed off. I was furious that I could be making my wife a widow. We are both widows – the Universe brought us together after the death by cancer of our respective spouses. We met seven years ago on Match.com – and fell in love on our first date. Fairy tales really can come true.

It is now a question of time – my fate and Deborah's potential widowhood are in play, and statistically things are not in my favor. The Widow Maker claims 60% of the men it attacks. Deborah kisses me as I am lifted on the gurney and rushed over bumps and through doors into the ambulance. The EMTs are big men – burley firefighters – and they are on their knees in the crowded ambulance. My pain is now off the scale (10 out of 10) – it was if a roadside emergency red flare was sitting upon and burning into my chest. I'm given a handful of baby aspirins to chew and swallow, followed by a Nitro tablet under my tongue – it has a bitter taste of death. I am trying to cooperate but all I want to do is roll on my side – my nausea is intense, and I am choking with pain. I am absolutely pissed off. The first IV from the studio floor has fallen out and the EMTs scramble to get another IV flowing. My sweating is so profuse no EKG lead or bandage will take hold – not even the O2 mask will stay in place on my face. The gentle-giant angels fighting to keep me alive are contorted across me, playing an absurd game of Twister, holding the EKG leads on my skin so they can send signals to Holmes Regional Hospital. Some Heparin (blood thinner) and morphine is pushed through the IV and now the clock is ticking. Tick – Speed, Tock - Skill, Tick - Love, Tock – Life.

Somewhere in this process the Cardio / Catheter lab team on 30 minute standby is activated. Whoever made the decision to have such a team on standby, ready to go, saved my life. Thank-you – your willingness to spend the money necessary to have such a team on call saved me. I can almost hear the board room arguments - saying it is too expensive to keep such a team on constant standby. I'm sure many of the team's families hate having their fathers/mothers/spouses called away in the middle of family events. Because they so serve, I am alive. The ambulance siren is wailing, and the horn is honking at those drivers not bright enough to get out of the way. Next time you hear a siren – get off the damn road – someone's life could be in the balance. We cross the Eau Galle Causeway and through the back door windows I can see sail boats out on the water. My pain is a little better.

We arrive at the Holmes Regional Hospital Emergency Room. It feels like a wild gurney ride into the ER. No one can believe how wet my clothes are – it was like I had been swimming. My pants, underwear and marginal remaining dignity are now removed and nothing will stick to my wet skin. The treatment room is crowded, there is fussing about getting another IV running – but then the Cavalry (Cardio / Catheter team) arrives. I've not been in the ER more than five minutes before my gurney is literally being run down the hall to the elevator. The bells ring and I fuzz out, with brief moments of clarity when I vaguely remember seeing heart looking pictures

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on screens in the operating room (catheter lab). I wake up in Cardiac Intensive Care Unit, on the second floor of Holmes Regional Hospital. Deborah is in my room when I arrive – who says there are no angels in this world. My son Travis arrives from Orlando and I kiss him. I've never been in Holmes – even though I drive past it every day to and from work at Northrop Grumman Aerospace. The CICU room is nice – more like a hotel room than any ICU I have ever visited to see very ill family or friends. The time is 4:45pm. My first pain started at 2:00pm. Deborah called 911 at 2:11pm. My last memory of the day around 10pm was telling Deborah and Travis to go home and get some sleep – I am doing fine. During Doctor's rounds early Monday morning I'm told I have a single LAD stent and all of my other arteries are clean - I have no coronary artery disease – none. There are no signs of permanent heart damage. Unbelievably, I'm told I will be going home soon. I am moved to next-level-down care late Monday morning. I am discharged and leave the hospital Tuesday at 1220pm. We are quiet as Deborah drives us home – did this all really happen? I'm home in my own bed by 1pm. 47 hours.

Speed+Skill+Love = Life. The Speed of response saved my life and my life to be. My wife found an aspirin and made me take it in less than two minutes after I told her this may be serious. I purposely laid myself down on the floor instead of falling down. Deborah called 911 quickly. The 911 dispatcher moved with urgent speed. The EMT's moved in a ballet of skill and speed. The decision made long before to spend the money to have a Cardio / Catheter team on 30 minute stand-by saved my life. My highly skilled Doctor and the Catheter team that installed the stent saved me. My Nurses saved me. My wife – her Love, is what really saved me. I will NOT make her a widow again – at least for 20 or more years from now. It was a very close call.

Right now, before you the reader of this story do anything else, go find an aspirin and put it in your pocket / wallet / purse. Next time you are at the drug store, buy one of those small pill containers that fit on your key chain. Put chewable aspirin in the container and never be without an aspirin nearby. Don't hesitate to call 911 – don't argue with yourself – if you think you need an ambulance, you probably do. It is better to be embarrassed than dead.

Epilog: Blood thinners, Aspirin, ACE Inhibitors, Beta Blockers and statins are prescribed to prevent future attacks. These drugs are important but they wipe me out. I was in bed for two weeks until my skilled Family Care Physician made artful adjustments to balance my medication regime. After four weeks I started to feel like my old self again and now continue the journey. I visited Mayo Clinic five weeks after my heart attack and they confirmed I have no heart damage. I am told to lose 20 lbs. and exercise an hour every day. I shared my story with many of the Mayo staff and they universally expressed wonder at my outcome. One practitioner assures me with “church lady” certainty that there was an angel looking after me – and I respond, “Of course – you can see her out in the waiting room.” Six weeks and two days after the Event - today – I was warmly greeted by my friends as I returned to work. I'm tired, but happy to be focused on defending freedom again.

I am profoundly grateful to many people for being alive to write this story. My fervent wish is that someone else may be saved by some future combination of Speed + Skill + Love = Life.
Stephen Long