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A Strong, Strong Heart

Yes, there is actually a place called North Pole. It is a small town located near Fairbanks in central Alaska. As I often tell people, “Yes, there is a North Pole, and yes, there is a Santa Claus.” The summer temperature can get to 90 degrees, and in the winter it can drop to minus 20 or minus 30. But it is a beautiful place to live. I’m the district chief for North Pole District, and I’ve been chanting for 22 years.

The year 1995 was one of challenge for me. For openers, I have coronary heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. On top of all this, I passed kidney stones, and I had an umbilical hernia that was surgically repaired. This is where my experience begins.

One day in April 1995 I went to see the surgeon who was going to repair my hernia. On the way out of the hospital, I happened to run into my regular doctor. I told him of my pending surgery. He was concerned that I might have problems under anesthesia. He contacted the surgeon, who delayed my operation until some tests relating to my heart were completed.

The encounter with my doctor that day was surely an example of the protective functions of the universe at work. The following week, an ultrasound of my heart showed nothing abnormal. Then I had a cardio-treadmill stress test. The results suggested that something was not right. I was scheduled to see a cardiologist, a doctor who had treated me for heart disease years earlier.

The cardiologist suspected there was a problem with my coronary artery. He asked if I had been experiencing any angina, or chest pain. I told him I had isolated occurrences of chest discomfort after eating and then doing some kind of activity. When I stopped the activity, I told him, it went away. I had thought maybe I had stomach problems relating somehow to the hernia.

I had had an angioplasty performed by this cardiologist back in 1991, and I told him that the discomfort I periodically felt did not seem to be as bad as it was then. The cardiologist set me up with an appointment on June 19 at Providence Hospital in Anchorage for an angiogram, or heart catheter. He wanted to have a look at my heart to determine if there was any evidence of further coronary heart disease.

I asked myself why this should happen to me after my years of daimoku and earnest faith in the Gohonzon. I read guidance from SGI President Ikeda, who said we should not be pulled down or defeated by worries in life. First, I needed to overcome my worries or hardships; I needed to win over myself.

I continued to earnestly chant to the Gohonzon each day with the determination to overcome my health problems and live long and be strong for my family and the members. President Ikeda also said that cowardice is faith’s greatest enemy and that faith means to forge on with the courageous heart of the lion king.

I drove myself to Anchorage (about a five-hour drive) for my appointment. I was confident my visit to the hospital was going to be minor and that I would be returning home in no time. I checked into the hospital and had all of the preliminary tests conducted prior to the actual angiogram. I was chanting daimoku to myself the whole time.

There was no pain or discomfort, and I was awake through the whole procedure. As it progressed, I could hear some concern in the doctor’s voice as he spoke with an aide. I silently chanted daimoku. When the procedure was almost over, I heard the aide ask the doctor if he was going to elect surgery. The doctor left the room without responding.

I knew something was definitely wrong. I was admitted to the ward and put in a private

room. I was anxious, worried and nervous. Then I thought back on the guidance from President Ikeda that I had placed so much trust in. That evening, I chanted daimoku and did gongyo in the hospital room. I anxiously wanted to hear from my doctor but I dreaded what his decision might be.

I knew that I did not want bypass surgery. I promised myself that that was not an option. I chanted daimoku like I had never chanted before. My doctor came to my room at 1:30 the next morning. After reviewing my test results extensively, he concluded that I had a coronary artery that was considerably restricted. He also said that another artery was blocked.

My coronary artery was restricted so badly that the opening was too small to accept the catheter to repair it. My doctor told me that he thought long and hard about doing a coronary bypass.

I was still chanting daimoku to myself this whole time. My doctor also told me about a new procedure that was having excellent results. It involved doing an angioplasty, rotobalading and, through ballooning, inserting stainless steel stents into the restricted area of the coronary artery. When complete, the stents would keep my artery from further closure and would soon be covered with tissue and form a natural part of my coronary artery. With proper diet and exercise, I would be a new man.

I was relieved by my doctor's caring decision, and I sincerely thanked him.

Later that day, I called my wife. She had been chanting daimoku ever since I left home. I found out that groups of members in both Anchorage and Fairbanks had been holding daimoku sessions and praying for my recovery.

The next day, I underwent the angioplasty and had four stents placed in my coronary artery. Once again, I was awake during the entire five-hour procedure. I didn't feel any pain or discomfort (except that the table I was lying on was getting pretty hard and uncomfortable!).

After the procedure, I was again taken to the recovery room and the sheaf was removed. This part was very uncomfortable, because the femoral artery had to be tightly constricted to prevent internal bleeding. I was on blood thinners, so coagulation was slow.

That's when I felt some chest discomfort. Nitroglycerin was put under my tongue. Ten minutes later I had another nitroglycerin pill, and the pain went away. I had suffered a mild heart attack.

How could this happen? My heart had just been repaired, so how could I have a heart attack? I was told that I had suffered a spasm in my coronary artery brought on by the trauma of the angioplasty. I was placed in intensive care. I chanted daimoku throughout the next few days.

On June 25, five days after my heart attack and still being monitored in intensive care, I underwent cardiac arrest. My heart went into a rapid fibrillation with a rate of 186 beats per minute. Someone told me to cough. I did, and that's the last I remember. I passed out from lack of oxygen to the brain. I was out — unofficially dead. I was hit with the paddles from the crash cart.

Gradually, as I came to, I saw shadowy images and heard indistinguishable voices. Then I heard a clear voice calling to me: "Come on, Carl! Come back! You can do it!" I saw Polly, one of my nurses. I reached out and hugged her so hard. I will never forget her.

Some things I cannot change, like my family history of heart disease and diabetes. However, with the power of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I can make a change in my life and overcome health problems that my parents never did. I think about it: Where was I when I went into cardiac arrest? Right there in a hospital in the middle of intensive care! I call that a benefit!

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Two days after this episode I went back to a regular ward at the hospital. Eleven days later I was released. I was still very weak. I had great difficulty even walking the length of a room. My headquarters chief took me to his home in Anchorage, and I rested there for the night. The next day he drove me in my car all the way back to Fairbanks.

When I got home, both my daughter and my wife gave me the biggest hugs and kisses ever. I felt so fortunate to have such family and friends.

Throughout this experience, the choice for me was clear. It was between developing like a gigantic tree into an accomplished person, or finishing my life sadly like a weak, skinny tree. It was all determined by how I handled my obstacles.

Back at home, I took another cardio stress test — this time with successful results. I started back to work on a limited-duty basis. And I began a program called PACE (Pulmonary and Cardiac Enhancement) at a Fairbanks hospital. At this time I weighed 255 pounds. My threshold of endurance in exercise was extremely limited.

While chanting daimoku, I vowed that I would reach full recovery and become stronger than I ever was. During this time, my fellow members in Fairbanks were very supportive. I was really taken at the concern they showed for me and my family.

I continued the PACE program for 12 weeks. By February 1996, I had lost 40 pounds and 5 inches from my waist (and I'm keeping it off!). I am now stronger than I have ever been. My medication has been reduced to a small fraction of what it was. Since my weight loss, my diabetes is under control and my overall health has improved immensely. Because of my results, my cardiologist uses me as an example to many of his patients.

I continue to exercise in the PACE program. I no longer have any restrictions on my activities at work, and I can continue my cardiac rehab training without losing any time from work. This has greatly reduced the stress in my daily life.

I am truly fortunate to have the opportunity to chant daimoku to the Gohonzon and to have many protective forces working all around me. I deeply thank SGI President Ikeda and all the members of Alaska Headquarters from the bottom of my strong, strong heart.

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