

◆ TIMES OF CHANGE ◆
TIMES OF CHALLENGE



*When You
Are Facing
Surgery*



RON DELBENE

with

MARY & HERB MONTGOMERY



*Be strong and of good courage;
be not afraid,
neither be thou dismayed:
for the Lord thy God is with thee.*
—Joshua 1:9 KJV

*May this book
be a comfort and a help
as you face surgery
and during your convalescence.*

*All titles by the authors
in the
Times of Change, Times of Challenge Series*

When You Are Facing Surgery
When You Have A Decision To Make
When You Are Living With An Illness Which Is Not Your Own
When An Aging Loved One Needs Care
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When You Want Your Wishes Known: Wills and Other Final Arrangements
When Your Child Is Baptized
When Your Son or Daughter Divorces

When You Are Facing Surgery



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When You Are Facing Surgery

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Back when I was first ordained, virtually all operations meant a stay in the hospital. For many patients this is still the case. But in recent years there has been a radical change in the way some surgeries are handled. Certain procedures that once required a week's hospitalization are now done in the morning, and the patient is back home the same day. Outpatients often find that when they tell family and friends about their upcoming surgery, they hear dismissing comments such as "You'll be in and out before you know you're there" or "It's a simple procedure—nothing to be concerned about" or "It's silly to be worried."

Whether your surgery is a simple procedure or an extensive operation, it is natural to be anxious. People frequently say, when they tell me about their impending surgery, "I know I shouldn't be worried but . . ."

I respond by saying that what they are facing is something to be concerned about and certainly worth talking about. For those of us who are used to being in control of our lives, the thought of handing that control over to medical personnel is both humbling and frightening. This is true no matter what the surgery involves. My hope is that this book will help you meet the challenge of your surgery and remember that whatever your experience, God is there for you.

Ron DelBene

Editor's Note: The stories in this book are true. Personal names and some details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

If God Were to Ask, “What Do You Want?”

*Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong,
let your heart be bold, put your hope in Yahweh.*

—Psalm 27:14, JB

We long to feel God’s comforting presence during times of stress. But often our thoughts are scattered and it is difficult to concentrate. Such was the case with Roy for whom back surgery would determine whether he could resume living a normal life. “I’ve been trying to pray,” he told me, “but I can’t fix my mind on any one thing for more than a few seconds. And besides, the prayers I’m used to saying aren’t doing the job. They just don’t scratch where it itches, if you get my meaning.”

I looked at him and said, “You know, Roy, there is something other people have found helpful that you might find helpful as well. It’s called the breath prayer.”

Roy is one of a great many people to whom I have introduced the breath prayer. I find this simple way to pray especially effective for people facing surgery because it helps them keep their minds focused and gets at the true desires of their hearts. The breath prayer is something we each discover for ourselves, and saying it becomes as natural as breathing. Because the prayer is so short and can be said so effortlessly, it will enable you to feel God’s comforting presence both before your surgery and during convalescence.

Step One

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and let a feeling of calm come over you. Remind yourself that God loves you and that you are surrounded by God’s loving presence. Recall a favorite passage from scripture that gives you a peaceful frame of mind. Two lines that people often find calming are “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46:10) and “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

Step Two

With your eyes closed, imagine that God is calling you by name. Hear God saying: “(Your name), what do you want?”

Step Three

Answer God with whatever comes honestly from your heart. Your answer might be a single word such as *peace* or *love* or *wellness*. Your answer might instead be a phrase or brief sentence such as *I want to feel your presence* or *I want to understand your love*. Whatever your response, it becomes the heart of your prayer.

Step Four

Choose your favorite name for God. (Choices people commonly make include God, Jesus, Christ, Lord, Spirit, Shepherd, Creator.)

Step Five

Combine your name for God with your answer to the question, What do you want? and you have your prayer. For example:

What I Want	Name I Call God	Possible Prayer
peace	God	Let me know your peace, O God.
wellness	Jesus	Jesus, lead me to wellness.
to feel your presence	Creator	Creator, let me feel your presence.

What do you do if several ideas occur? It is helpful to write down the various possibilities and then eliminate or combine them until you have focused your prayer. You may want many things, but you can narrow your wants down to a specific need that suits your circumstances and is basic to your spiritual well-being. Thus the question to ask yourself is: *What do I want that will make me feel most whole?*

When you have gotten to the core of your needs, search for words that give it expression. Then work with the words until you have a short prayer of six to eight syllables. The words should flow smoothly whether spoken aloud or expressed silently as heart thoughts.

Your prayer may be most rhythmic when God's name is placed at the beginning, but try it at the end as well. One way will feel better than the other. When your prayer seems right for you, write it down. Then, whenever you think of it, repeat your prayer several times. You can whisper it, say it aloud, or merely think it. In time, saying your breath prayer will become as natural as breathing. Even when you are not consciously praying, the words will play in your heart like the refrain from a familiar song.

My Breath Prayer

United in Prayer

Pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

—James 5:16

Helen, a proud grandmother who was highly regarded for her work as a day-care provider, underwent open heart surgery that required an especially long convalescence. “One of my great comforts,” she told me afterward, “was knowing that so many people were praying for me. On days when I felt like giving up, I would think: But I have to get well. There are so many people pulling for me. I just can’t let them down!”

When people pray for us during a time of crisis, they are saying, “You are special to me, and I care about what happens to you.” The prayers and caring actions of friends, family, and sometimes even strangers keep us mindful of God’s loving concern. Although the breath prayer introduced in the previous section is very personal, many patients share it with friends and family. When those who love and care about you use your prayer, it puts on their lips what is in your heart. It enables them to pray not just *for* you but *with* you.

If you share your breath prayer, suggest that people say it during times that have particular significance for you: when tests are being given, during your surgery, after visiting hours when you are alone. It takes less than a minute to say the prayer five to ten times.

You may also want to set specific times during the day to be in prayer together: mealtimes, bedtime, or even every hour on the hour. For loved ones who live far away, such a supportive prayer effort is a great comfort. Although they cannot visit, they are with you in spirit. Often I see a special bond developing among the network of people who share a patient’s breath prayer.

We have all experienced times when our prayers—and the prayers of others said in our behalf—were not answered the way we hoped they would be. Does that mean the prayers were wasted? that they might as well not have been said?

Because prayer unites us with one another and with God, I do not believe that prayers are ever wasted; good always comes of

them. The knowledge that others are praying for us warms the heart and makes us feel loved. This alone promotes emotional and spiritual wellness, which is so important to physical healing. Even though our particular prayers may not bring the results we hope for, praying helps us find the inner strength necessary to accept the outcome and carry on. When we pray, we become more attentive to being in God's loving care. We no longer face our fears and pain alone; God is present, giving us courage to deal with whatever happens.

It's OK to Be Afraid

*I sought Yahweh who answered me
and freed me from all my fears.*

—Psalm 34:4, *Psalms Anew*

When Harold told me he was going into the hospital for surgery, I assured him that I would be by to see him. “Please don’t come to the hospital,” Harold said. “I wanted you to know about my operation, but I’d rather you didn’t visit. I don’t want to sound ungrateful for your offer, but when it comes to things like this, I’m a very private person. The only visitors I really want are my wife and maybe my best friend from work.”

Trudy is the opposite of Harold. I heard from at least a half dozen of her friends that she was scheduled for a biopsy, so I called Trudy to let her know that the word was getting around. With a laugh, she said, “I even told the preadmissions person that I wanted to have my bed in the waiting room so I could fit all my friends in!”

Although people handle their surgeries differently, I believe the feelings we experience are much the same. No matter what the procedure, there is an element of fear and uncertainty. Will my surgery be successful? What if it is not? What if the biopsy is positive? How will I react?

Sometimes people who faithfully practice their religion are embarrassed to admit their fears. For them, fear indicates a weak faith. They think that if their faith were strong enough, they wouldn’t be afraid. But God created us with feelings, and fear is a powerful one. We cannot decide to be fearless anymore than we can mastermind other strong emotions. What, then, can we do about our fears? How can we find the courage to move ahead?

Courage is not a matter of being fearless. Courage has to do with confronting our fears and finding ways to deal with them. As people of faith, we turn to our God and hear Jesus say, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Often God acts through the care and understanding of those around us.

Beth and Jack, a young married couple with a three-year-old

daughter, came to talk to me about Jack's upcoming surgery. It was serious and they were scared. I heard the fear in their voices and saw it in their posture as they sat across from me, huddled into themselves on the couch. After Jack shared all that he knew about his surgery, I asked, "Has anyone in your family ever had this kind of operation, Jack?"

"My dad did when I was twelve," he said. He then talked nonstop and told about overhearing a phone conversation in which his mother cried and said, "I don't know what I'd do if something happened and he didn't come home."

Even though her husband came through just fine and was well these many years later, we had hit upon a tender spot in Jack's memory. "How did your dad react when you told him about your surgery?" I asked.

"I haven't mentioned it," Jack said, "and now I guess I know why."

We don't rid ourselves of fear by denying it, but rather by recognizing it for what it is: our personal reaction to a significant event in our lives. It is useful to discover, as Jack did, where our fear is coming from. The following questions can help you understand and confront your fears.

- What is your family's history of disease?
- How does your family respond to disease and crisis?
- Has anyone in your family—or have any of your friends—had the same surgery you are facing? How did people react to the news of that surgery?
- What stories about hospitals or surgeries do you recall?
- What is your worst fear? What can you do to deal with this fear?
- To whom will you turn for help?

If help is not forthcoming, it is important to ask for what you need. Possibly your greatest need is for someone to talk to. You might turn to the hospital chaplain or another member of the clergy, a professional counselor, a friend, or a family member. Once you talk about your fears, it is easier to see which ones are grounded in reality and which ones disappear when they are brought into the open.

God deals with each of us as beloved individuals. Therefore the help given to each of us will differ. What we can be certain of is that God who says, "Do not fear, I will help you" (Isa. 41:13) will be there for us in the ways that meet our particular needs.

Your Rights as a Patient

Pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace.
—2 Timothy 2:22

On occasions when I was a surgery patient, I felt a total loss of control. Virtually every aspect of my life was in the hands of others. Part of this out-of-control feeling came from the depersonalizing process of hospital admittance. I had to surrender all my personal effects for safekeeping, and I was identified by a plastic band on my wrist. After getting my room assignment, I was known to the staff as Bed 2 in Room 308. The gown I was required to wear fit backward and was identical to everyone else's. No longer did I have a say about the routine of my life. I was told when I would eat, bathe, go to sleep, and have visitors.

Not surprisingly, hospital patients sometimes feel that they have forfeited all their rights. Caught up in an administrative maze, they believe it is useless to speak up because their wishes won't be heeded anyway. Although patients may feel this way, it is not the case. Patients have clearly-defined rights that give them a voice in the care and treatment they receive.

The American Hospital Association recognized that if patients were aware of their rights and if they exercised them, the result would be more effective care and greater satisfaction for the patient, doctor, and hospital staff. Following is a statement of rights that was first approved by the American Hospital Association in 1973. Permission was not granted to reprint this statement edited for inclusive language.

A Patient's Bill of Rights

1. The patient has the right to considerate and respectful care.
2. The patient has the right to obtain from his physician complete current information concerning his diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis in terms the patient can reasonably be expected to understand. When it is not medically advisable to give such information to the patient, the information should be

made available to an appropriate person in his behalf. He has the right to know, by name, the physician responsible for coordinating his care.

3. The patient has the right to receive from his physician information necessary to give informed consent prior to the start of any procedure and/or treatment. Except in emergencies, such information for informed consent should include but not necessarily be limited to the specific procedure and/or treatment, the medically significant risks involved, and the probable duration of incapacitation. Where medically significant alternatives for care or treatment exist, or when the patient requests information concerning medical alternatives, the patient has the right to such information. The patient also has the right to know the name of the person responsible for the procedures and/or treatment.

4. The patient has the right to refuse treatment to the extent permitted by law and to be informed of the medical consequences of his action.

5. The patient has the right to every consideration of his privacy concerning his own medical care program. Case discussion, consultation, examination, and treatment are confidential and should be conducted discreetly. Those not involved in his care must have the permission of the patient to be present.

6. The patient has the right to expect that all communications and records pertaining to his care should be treated as confidential.

7. The patient has the right to expect that within its capacity a hospital must make reasonable response to the request of a patient for services. The hospital must provide evaluation, service, and/or referral as indicated by the urgency of the case. When medically permissible, a patient may be transferred to another facility only after he has received complete information and explanation concerning the needs for and alternatives to such a transfer. The institution to which the patient is to be transferred must first have accepted the patient for transfer.

8. The patient has the right to obtain information as to any relationship of his hospital to other health care and educa-

tional institutions insofar as his care is concerned. The patient has the right to obtain information as to the existence of any professional relationships among individuals, by name, who are treating him.

9. The patient has the right to be advised if the hospital proposes to engage in or perform human experimentation affecting his care and treatment. The patient has the right to refuse to participate in such research projects.

10. The patient has the right to expect reasonable continuity of care. He has the right to know in advance what appointment times and physicians are available and where. The patient has the right to expect that the hospital will provide a mechanism whereby he is informed by his physician or a delegate of the physician of the patient's continuing health care requirements following discharge.

11. The patient has the right to examine and receive an explanation of his bill regardless of the source of payment.

12. The patient has the right to know what hospital rules and regulations apply to his conduct as a patient.

You Are Not Alone

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another. . . .
Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with whatever gift
each of you has received.*
—1 Peter 4:8-10

“As the orderly pushed me down the long corridors toward the operating rooms, my husband and son walked beside the gurney,” Marguerite said, “but then we came to double doors marked VISITORS NOT ADMITTED. Jack and my son Eric had to go to the waiting room, and I felt utterly alone—as though I were the only person in the world going through this experience.

“But when I got into the anteroom leading to the operating rooms, I was surprised to see so many patients on gurneys. Until then, I had been totally self-absorbed, but now I thought about those other patients facing surgery. Maybe they hadn’t had all the prayers and loving support I’d had. Right then I began asking God to bless and protect each of them.”

Marguerite discovered on her own what I often encourage surgery patients to do: to unite their pain with others. The apostle Paul tells us that if we die with Jesus, we share in his resurrection. Jesus had his pain, we have ours, and other people have theirs. Being aware of others who are hurting is a way of finding meaning and purpose in our experience of pain.

The uniting of our pain with the pain of others is a type of cosmic prayer. This type of prayer is most meaningful when we pray for someone specific. But if no one comes to mind, I suggest that people pray for victims of war, famine, or disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. Thinking of other hurting persons reminds us that pain and misfortune are universal and that we are not alone in our suffering.

Thoughts to Ponder

If I keep a green bough in my heart,
the singing bird will come.

—Chinese Proverb

In the midst of winter, I finally learned
that there was in me an invincible summer.

—Albert Camus

God does not take away trials
or carry us over them,
but strengthens us through them.

—E. B. Pusey

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you can.

—John Wesley

It is not circumstances in which we are placed, but the spirit in
which we meet them, that constitutes our comfort.

—Elizabeth T. King

God never shuts one door but that another opens.

—Irish Proverb

It is impossible to have the feeling of peace and serenity
without being at rest with God.

—Dorothy H. Pentecost

Ways to Help Yourself

I can do all things through [God] who strengthens me.
—Philippians 4:13

- **Observe hospital safety regulations and policies** that have been established for your protection.

- **Inform yourself of hospital services available to you** and make use of them as needed and desired: hospital chaplain, social services, and volunteers who are dedicated to making your stay comfortable.

- **Live by the Golden Rule.** If you have a roommate, extend to that person the same courtesies you expect: respect your roommate's privacy; limit the number of visitors you have at a time; use the television, radio, telephone, and lights in a way that will not be disturbing.

- **Notify your doctor or nurse immediately if you do not understand instructions** or cannot follow them.

- **Be assertive regarding visitors.** In the hospital, you can request a "No Visitors" sign, and you can ask that phone callers be told you are not receiving calls. If you are recuperating at home, ask that visitors call first. When you do not feel up to having visitors, explain this and suggest another time. If you get tired or are in too much pain to visit, thank your visitors for coming and ask that they come back later. (A young man recovering from surgery once told me, "When my friends stay too long and I can't get rid of them, I just close my eyes and let them think I've fallen asleep.")

- **When you are in bed or sitting in a chair and visitors are standing, ask that they sit so you can be at eye level.** It is difficult to communicate with someone looming over you.

- **When someone says, "What can I do for you?" assume that the person really wants to help.** Have specific tasks in mind: shopping, babysitting the children, mowing the lawn, getting books or tapes from the library.

A Time to Reflect

*When you search for me, you will find me;
if you seek me with all your heart.*

—Jeremiah 29:13

A near-fatal car accident required John to have multiple surgeries. In recalling the incident, this 42-year-old dentist with a wife and teenage twins said his first reaction was shock. Later came feelings of bewilderment and helplessness along with anger and self-pity. The inactivity of lying in a hospital bed was unbearable for John, a workaholic accustomed to being busy and in control. Nothing helped him adjust to his situation until the hospital chaplain got John to realize that his impatience was hampering his recovery. Gradually John began to accept his immobility as a necessary part of healing and found that time spent recuperating was not all negative. The imposed rest gave him the opportunity to reflect on his life. He used the time to think about where he had been and to consider where he wanted to go.

During a period of convalescence, we can close the door to the outside world for a while and draw apart from the hurry of life. To be alone is not a bad thing unless we make it so. Jesus went off to be alone and to pray. The woman of Samaria came alone to the well where her encounter with Jesus led to a spiritual awakening. In a time of quietness, we have a chance to know and be known by God in ways we may never have experienced before.

Being sidelined helps us develop an appreciation for the gift of health and empathy for others who are ill. It also lets us know that no matter how important we think we are, the world keeps functioning without us. That knowledge gives us a healthy sense of humility as well as an appreciation of how dependent we are on others.

A significant event such as surgery prompts us to ask, What can I learn from this experience? What is life trying to teach me? John told me that his hospitalization helped him refocus his priorities. "Instead of speeding through life, I made a conscious decision to slow down," he said. "Because I almost

lost my life, I now get a lot more pleasure from the small joys I once took for granted. I realize what a blessing it is to be able to drive a car or to swing a golf club or to go for a walk with my wife. And instead of just promising to take my kids camping, I've actually done it!"

A period of recuperation provides an opportunity to think about those things that are most important to us. When we discover what they are, we can decide to live in a way that gives them priority.

Finding Life's Balance

*To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven.*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1, KJV

Take time to laugh

It is the music of the soul.

Take time to think

It is the source of power.

Take time to play

It is the source of perpetual youth.

Take time to read

It is the fountain of wisdom.

Take time to pray

It is the greatest power on earth.

Take time to love and be loved

It is a God-given privilege.

Take time to be friendly

It is the road to happiness.

Take time to give

It is too short a day to be selfish.

Take time to work

It is the price of success.

—Author Unknown

5. **Pray.** It isn't a sign of weakness; it is your strength.
6. **Learn to live with your illness instead of considering yourself dying from it.** We are all dying in some manner.
7. **Put your friends and relatives at ease yourself.** If you don't want pity, don't ask for it.
8. **Make all practical arrangements for funerals, wills, etc.** and make certain your family understands them.
9. **Set new goals; realize your limitations.** Sometimes the simple things of life become the most enjoyable.
10. **Discuss your problems with your family as they occur.** Include the children if possible. After all, your problem is not an individual one.

God doesn't keep life from happening but instead gives us the strength to live it minute by minute and day by day. Scripture assures us, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (John 14:18, *KJV*). With God's help, we can conquer misfortune. With God's sustaining love, we can face whatever today and tomorrow bring.

*From "Until Tomorrow Comes," *Guideposts*, April 1976.

Rx for Recovery

*Do you not know that you are God's temple
and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*

—1 Corinthians 3:16

Medical personnel agree that a patient's cooperation and mental attitude have a great deal to do with recovery. These are some ways you can help the healing process.

- **Think of your doctor as a partner, not someone who has the entire responsibility for making you well.** Your physical well-being is greatly affected by your emotional, mental, and spiritual health, which you control. "Patients who say 'I can' or 'I'll try' recover more quickly than those who say 'I can't,'" says a doctor friend. "And it has been my observation that those who seek God's help seem to enter more fully into the healing process than those who have no spiritual resources to call upon."

- **Accept your medical condition for what it is—a biological fact and not a sign of weakness or a punishment.**

- **Let your wishes be known.** Making people guess at what you want leads to a breakdown in relationships. I recall feeling a strain between myself and a parishioner with whom I had been on friendly terms. When I asked if something was troubling him, Harry said, "You didn't come to see me when I was in the hospital last month." Never mind that Harry hadn't told me about his surgery, which happened to be in a hospital that does not give out names by church affiliations when our office calls. Holding a grudge over a slight—whether real or imagined—is not conducive to recovery.

- **Accept that each person heals at a different pace.** Once as I waited for surgery of my own, I discovered that the son of a friend was having the same procedure. Our operations were in the morning, and that evening the young man walked

to my room. The next morning I decided to repay the visit. Gingerly getting out of bed, I started down the hall only to discover that his room was much farther than I had thought. Halfway there I was overcome with tiredness and turned around, grateful to make it back to my own bed. That afternoon my friend came to pick up his son and stopped by to see me. When I told him about my attempted visit, he sang, "What a difference a day makes—let alone twenty years!"

- **Share your feelings.** That is not to suggest that you indiscriminately dump on family and friends, but share to the extent that you satisfy your need to talk about your concerns.

- **Substitute positive for negative thoughts.** Visualize yourself as someone who is well and happy. Often we become who we see ourselves to be.

- **Set goals for yourself.** Making plans is a way to banish negative feelings and to overcome the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies recuperation.

- **Count your blessings.** You will be surprised at how many there are.

- **Cultivate a sense of humor.** But please, no jokes until after the incision heals!

- **Plan how you can most productively and happily get on with your life.**

Prayers

Let your requests be made known to God.
—Philippians 4:6

Often the prayers of others serve as a mirror, reflecting our own needs and deepest yearnings. Here are some prayers through which you may find spiritual kinship with others. Sometimes they speak of gratitude. Sometimes they offer words of thanks, and often they remind us to ask God to be our source of strength. When I read these prayers, I find my own thoughts expressed in new ways. I hope you will as well.

God of life, there are days when the burdens
we carry chafe our shoulders and wear us down;
when the road seems dreary and endless, the
skies grey and threatening; when our lives
have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely,
and our souls have lost their courage.
Flood the path with light, we beseech Thee;
turn our eyes to where the skies are
full of promise. . . .

—Augustine (354–430)

Holy Spirit,
All creation praises you.
Creation has life because of you.
You are precious salve for broken bones,
for festering wounds.
You transform them to precious gems.
Now gather us together in your praise.
Lead us on the proper path.

—Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

God be in my head
and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes
and in my looking;
God be in my mouth
and in my speaking;
God be in my heart
and in my thinking;
God be at my end
and at my departing.

—From an English primer, 1514

O Lord, explore down
to the deepest springs
of my spirit,
where the Spirit
makes intercession for us,
and read the prayers
I cannot utter.

—Oswald Chambers (1874–1917)

God grant me the serenity to accept
the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can and
the wisdom to know the difference. . . .

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

*I have cared for you
from the time you were born.
I am your God and will take
care of you until you are old.*

—Isaiah 46:3-4, TEV

About the Authors



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