



## A change of heart

BY CHRISTOPHER WHITE

**O**n a Friday morning last May, I woke with what felt like a pulled muscle. I drove my daughter to York University, where she was registering for her music degree. By 11:30 a.m. when she finished, the tug in my chest had evolved into major chest pains. I couldn't even walk across campus. "Liz, dial 911, there is something very wrong," I told her.

The ambulance arrived. I was put on a stretcher and then, with sirens blaring, rushed to hospital. As the pain intensified, two doctors and three nurses worked on getting me stable in the emergency room. The afternoon progressed, and they ran test after test. I wondered if this was the day I was going to die.

It turned out not to be a heart attack but influenza A that had morphed overnight into double pneumonia with the complication of viral pericarditis — extra fluid around the heart that has the consistency of engine oil that hasn't been changed in a very long time.

I was weak when I was discharged. A week later, I collapsed at the bottom of my basement stairs with what turned out to be severe dehydration and wound up back in hospital for three more days. I was off work for three months. It took nearly six months before I was fully myself again.

"What has this done to your relationship to God?" someone inquired. An interesting question. When I was in my darkest place of pain on that first day, I simply had no energy to pray. But that was all right, for there are times when we can't pray, when we have no voice to speak. Those I love prayed for me; they were my voice to God. I wasn't angry at God. I didn't blame God, nor did I feel that God was testing me or sending me a message through this illness. No, the fault lay not on God, but on me.

I had worked myself into this place, figuring I could fix all the financial challenges my church was facing. I had felt that if I had been a better minister, then the crisis wouldn't have happened. I felt that I had failed everyone including God. As if I were personally responsible for the global financial meltdown and the near bankruptcy of General Motors that hurt our community.

As the summer progressed, I slowly got better. I felt blessed; I was alive. I said simple prayers of thanks. But I did not believe I was spared to fulfil some great purpose. Rather I had been given the simple-yet-elegant gift of living and the opportunity to do things differently, because I was never going back to that place if I could possibly help it.

The other gift I experienced was the gift of my church. For years, I had preached on the importance of community and now I was on the receiving end. Cards, food and small gifts appeared. Meals arrived, my lawn was cut and I was surrounded by the love of my church. It was overwhelming but deeply appreciated. Calls and messages of concern came to all of us. We were not alone.

When I returned to work, at first on a graduated basis, people were watching me very carefully. Was I really all right, would I relapse, would I go back to my old habits, could I actually change? The answer is yes, I changed. In fact, I made big changes.

I realized that I could only do so much and what I didn't get done would be picked up by someone else — or not. I developed a working pattern that, to my great surprise, had me working fewer hours but helped me become more effective. I smiled, I laughed, things stopped bothering me. People from the church told me that I was myself again. "Last year you looked sad all the time," I was told. "You would never have laughed at that last year" were words I heard on more than one occasion.

As for our church's financial crisis? It resolved itself.

Today, I am blessed. I survived, and more importantly, I learned a lesson. I am not alone. Life is a gift to cherish, and it is God, not me, who is truly in charge.

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