



Who is God When Life Stinks?

Autumn and OWLS

When I saw Bob again, my focus was distracted away from his face to the large patch of “clear contact paper” plastered on his chest, over the bandages. Long, thin tubing was poking out as several places.

“WHAT IS THAT?” I queried.

Bob had already asked the nurses about this, so he was eager to explain to me, in his own words, the mechanics of these new contraptions.

“When the surgeon removed the wires,” he began, “there was also a lot of tissue removed. My chest now has a very deep and wide open space.” (I’m thinking of the motions to a children’s song, “Deep and Wide”, but this is not the time to break out singing!)

I pay close attention as Bob continues. “They cannot bandage the wound because it is so open and deep. So... they cut one big piece of foam to fill the chest cavity. Then, they cut a denser, longer piece that is **stuffed** into the long, open tunnel near my heart and lungs.”

My mouth was hanging open in stunned surprise.

“Foam?!?” I exclaimed. “Stuffed?” “And what is that whirring sound?”

“Oh”, continued Bob. “My chest is hooked up to a vacuum that sucks out body juices.” (These are his words. I think the medical terms would be blood and serous fluid.)

“The wound VAC (short for vacuum assisted closure) move the fluids across the wound area to encourage new tissue growth. The fluids then are pulled into the VAC container, emptying the wound of any bad stuff.” (a.k.a. “infection”)

The nurses further explained to us that a deep wound must heal from the INSIDE first. Stitches may close the wound, but infection would fester in the large open cavity under the skin. I did not know this.

Amazed by this medical technology, and continually in awe at God’s creation of our intricately designed body systems, I just shook my head in wonder.

I wonder... will this foam and wound VAC work to rid my husband's body of any remaining infection?

I wonder... how can we ever express our thanks to God enough for providing such great medical care for Bob?

I wonder... and I admire the courage of my mighty, warrior husband – as he readies himself for another fierce battle, this time against infection, vacuums and foam!

It was autumn outside and the Florida air was finally turning a bit cooler. School life now was very busy, and I needed to be at work almost every day. God loves my husband, so he provided tender, compassionate O.W.L. nurses to help him with these new challenges.

O.W.L stands for “Ostomy Wound Liaison”. These nurses had special training on the delicate care of large surgical openings (ostomies). Bob's vacuum needed to be constantly monitored, draining off lots of serous fluid and blood that was being drawn through the wound. But the most critical aspect of his care involved changing out the FOAM in my husband's chest. Yes, these pieces of foam looked a lot like the large sheets of foam that I bought at the upholstery supply store to replace a chair cushion! Of course, they were sterile, and a LOT more expensive.

Three nurses would hover over Bob's bed for each two hour procedure. Thankfully, I was usually at work for this gruesome endeavor! The nurses were covered with sterile gowns, masks, and multiple layers of gloves. Bob was required to wear a mask too, to prevent his own germs from entering the wound. First, Bob received an injection to relax him, and then three large morphine needles were prepared. These would be used throughout the long ordeal. Normally, that would completely knock out the patient, but my big man just relaxed and became chatty!

Bob watched each step of the procedure closely – he was interested in what they did, plus he had a close-up view. Looking down at his own chest, he watched as his nurses slowly pulled off the large sticky sheet which held down all the foam. His chest had previously been shaved, but tearing glue-off-of-skin hurt badly. His kind-hearted nurses applied a sol-

vent to loosen some of the glue, much to Bob's appreciation.

Even more painful, though, was the ripping-out-the-foam process. Serous fluid had been working in Bob's chest cavity to create new tissue. But some of that new tissue had attached itself to the thick foam pieces. The foam acted almost like a pseudo-scab over the wound. Any slight tug on it was like ripping off a raw scab, pulling at the new tissue in his chest wall. Bob didn't scream. He didn't even fuss, as they ripped away skin and foam. But I learned the meaning of "toe-curling pain".

One day I was watching from outside his room, and all I could see was the bottom of his bed. I heard Bob joking with his nurses as they started the long procedure. (Bob's coping mechanism often is his humor.) Suddenly, Bob stopped mid-sentence. His legs straightened... then his feet started shaking as his toes bent tightly and curled up toward him. A deep "owwww" was all I heard from my brave man, but I knew this was tortuous pain.

Thank goodness for morphine! Bob was not eager to endure this painful procedure every two days, but he actually was very intrigued with the process.

"I looked down to watch them", he eagerly explained to me, "and I saw white bone. I was looking straight into my chest and saw my own sternum bone!"

His excitement got me interested, so I tenaciously asked to stay in the room one time. Bob's nurses were enjoying his friendly banter as they began working on him. Soon they called me over.

"Come close", they invited. "Look in here."

Laying open in front of me was a four-inch-wide by ten-inch- long cavern into my husband's chest. It went probably four inches deep – I certainly wasn't about to poke in and check! But along the walls of the cavity, I could clearly see layers of red and beige and blue- skin, muscle, tissues and so much more!

"Oh, wow." I don't watch medical shows on television, because my stomach churns at

the graphic sights. This was so much more real, and it was my own flesh and blood husband!

“WOW”, I repeated, as I left the room!

**So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.**

Isaiah 41:10

Date: October 21, 2007
From: Ruth Bell
Subject: (delayed) Update from Ruth Bell

Bob is resting in Shands hospital today (Saturday) after coming out of surgery Friday evening. Cultures were taken from the infected tissue, and with the latest news headlines, we are eager to find results of what type of infection this is (results not available until Monday at the earliest).

As his chest is once again cut wide open, with the resulting pain from Friday's exploratory surgery to remove the infected tissue, Bob vividly remembers the previous surgeries and his many days and weeks in the hospital - the IVs in his arms, the restrictions, the hospital food (he even remembers that chocolate cake is offered only on the weekend!), and the difficulty of waiting for others to care for him.

Yes, this set-back can be discouraging and difficult, but I am sooo proud of how Bob is deliberate about REMEMBERING....

When I left him last night he was quite alert after the surgery and was counting off all the ways WE ARE GRATEFUL - God has chosen LIFE for him for now, and has blessed him with so many MIRACLES in his early recoveries.

When any medical person passes him (or even me in the hallway), they are surprised to see us and quick to give hugs and stop in to visit. WE ARE GRATEFUL for the reputation God has given Bob there, as he has been kind and courteous through all his pain and trauma. (The nurses "pulled strings" and moved him into a private room, which allows him to sleep much better.)

As once again we face the upcoming week of separation and Ruth's difficulty of travelling the miles to come visit while still working, WE ARE GRATEFUL for the

friends and family who have gone out of their way to visit or call or offer help and keep Bob's spirits up. (He told the nurse today to hold off on the pain meds for a little longer because his visitors were "pain distractions":)

As the bills are still rolling in, and a new set will rev up with another week of hospital room & board and doctor services, WE ARE GRATEFUL for insurance and for the way God has provided through the generosity of many precious friends!

As we purpose in our hearts to step away from discouragement, and recognize EACH DAY as part of a journey designed for us by God, WE ARE GRATEFUL for all the PRAYERS that have consistently kept pushing us along the trail. We have found God FAITHFUL, by putting one foot forward and finding many marvelous answers to prayer along the way.

THANK YOU for being one of our co-travelers and pray-ers.

We love you each,
Ruth & Bob

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