

Finding Courage

In the Face of An Angel

(memoir by Ted Sorgan)

As school let out, I waited on the front steps of Tenafly Junior High School to hear the news.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

A year older and much wiser, my big brother Eddy was an important ally in my life.

Performing as a scout venturing out into the unknown.

This time he was reporting back from a highly anticipated dental appointment.

"A shot," he announced, was required.

A shot, as it was called back in 1962 was a local injection of Novocain.

"What did it feel like? What happened?" I begged to know.

Our eyes met, then Eddy looked down and away, thinking of his experience and avoiding me in the same moment.

I insisted, "The needle, tell me about the needle!"

His words to me were as a reading from a jury delivering a death sentence.

"Teddy," he hesitated. "The needle was really . . . Really long!"

As he forced the words out, I remember holding my breath in empathy and anticipation.

He extended both his forefingers apart, to indicate about three inches of certain panic. His audible description fell as a guillotine.

"And it really . . . Really hurt!"

My brother's alarming encounter with Dr. Greenwald resonated in my mind for the next two weeks. My own visit was forthcoming and it was as unavoidable as 'D' Day.

Accompanied by my mother, I arrived for my scheduled appointment on a pleasant Fall afternoon. There was no fluoridation of our water supply back then to fortify our teeth, therefore, upon examination, 'fillings' were in order.

Dr. Greenwald, I must say, was a most pleasant and brave professional. The entire scene could have been straight out of a Norman Rockwell illustration. The doctor was a round, medium sized grey-haired soul with ample lips that seemed to get in the way of his words. The treatment room was huge with a high tin ceiling, schoolroom sized windows and faded yellow wall paint. The doctor's instruments and odd contraptions spoke for themselves. Unrecognizable and scary, they were mounted helter-skelter about an enormous black leather treatment chair. All seemed more in order for amputations and executions than pediatric dental care.

My time had finally come. Lying in the jaws of the black leather recliner, a lever was pulled and a foot pedal activated. I lost my equilibrium as I was rocked backwards. Cotton wadding was stuffed in my mouth, much to my chagrin as I am a mouth breather.

My mother, who had stood supportively in the far left corner of the treatment room, was now out of sight. All the fears of a 12 year old were upon me. My brother's observation, now my mantra, was running like a continuous loop in my mind. . . . "really, really long!"

Then the needle appeared before me as if suspended mid-air on its own accord. And, it was long, really long, just as my brother had forewarned. Glistening in the light focused upon my face, the needle spoke to me through my brother's words, "and it's really, really going to hurt!"

My whole body lurched upright from the black jaws of the recliner. Arms on my shoulders delivered me back down. I submitted my will to the doctor - terrified.

The needle found its mark and apparently much more, as a sensation of numbness progressed far beyond its intended target - jaw, right face, then raising my hand to feel my temple and forehead - nothing! My voice muffled, "Hey!" I called out. "What's happening?" My conscious world ended in that moment. In my hallucinating mind, a bright pink light beamed upon me from afar. Distinct random guitar-like chords floated by, buoyantly. I perceived a global sensation of weightlessness as if standing or rolling upon my head. Yet, so strangely pleasant in such an alien way. Time stood . . . Suspended.

I was a mind, detached from its body, vacillating in another dimension. Then, a rush. A great struggle to fill my lungs, to breathe as if being born again. Emerging out of blackness, complete panic possessed me. I gasped, sucking in another great breath of air. I was regaining awareness, now conscious of my body and its orientation.

Exhausted and sweating profusely, I felt as if I had just run a marathon. God, it was awful! I struggled to hold onto a sense of myself. Slumped and drooling, I sat scared and confused as the doctor did his work.

Later, as my mother drove me home, a thought came to me. My brother was not to know, nor should he ever need to know how violated I felt.

Thirty-three years later, I was a happily married father of three robust sons. All healthy and stable. I too, except for one dark aspect of my life, was healthy and stable.

I was repeatedly experiencing syncope, losing consciousness, passing out during injections and blood drawings. I had no capacity to resist fainting. Such a benign term for my most feared response. What may have initially been a seizure from an errant injection was now creeping into my consciousness as fear of subjugation to medical intervention.

It was springtime on a most beautiful blossoming Saturday morning, that I found myself at a Health Fair in the local suburban city of Westwood. I was accompanied by my youngest son Danny. He was all of five-years-old and full of personality. Having a rare creative, communicative soul for his age, he projected a light-heartedness and great comedic sense of humor. We were pals out for the day.

Being distracted with Danny and caught up in the moment, I had casually and sensibly submitted to a blood test by a nurse offering a free medical screening. Without realizing, I had completely overlooked my propensity to pass out. Upon recognition of my misstep, I became acutely aware of a father's responsibility to provide safety and leadership. Making things worse, I didn't want to succumb in the face of my son. I couldn't bear to pass along the fear and anxiety I possessed to a trusting child.

As the phlebotomist prepared me for the blood drawing, Danny joyfully hovered by. In fact, he all but climbed on top of me, nose-to-nose, as I had requested to be laid recumbent on a treatment table.

The tourniquet was applied and needle inserted with care into the vein of my right arm. In those following moments of vulnerability, a most precious, liberating realization occurred. Danny smiled lovingly into my eyes and held his gaze cheerfully until the procedure was completed. Surprisingly, he was my strength! So engaging and loving was his smile, I shall never forget the beauty of that moment.

I sat up, smiling, then thanked the nurse for her pleasant support. In advance I had whispered a forewarning to her about my history. This allayed some of my fear and prepared her for any potential surprises during the blood drawing.

Looking back, I was elated and relieved. The nurse was grateful for my honesty and Danny thought the whole experience was a lark.

We walked away, hand-in-hand.

Healing, I discovered, is intuitive and begins on the inside. Love, projected by those who care is an important link to our sense of trust and well-being. To this day, I am resolved of those dark episodes.

We learn just as much from small souls as they do from us. I found courage in the face of an angel.