

Oil of Myrrh



Experiencing God's Grace and Peace

Sandra Kovacs Stein

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To my amazing daughter, Joanne, who sacrificed so much of her time and energy to be by my side every step of the way.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Gift

And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.
(Matthew 2:11 NASB)

As we entered the room to our ladies prayer group, a friend handed me a gift intended to delight—a small vial of anointing prayer oil. Dark clouds of foreboding soon overshadowed my joy, however, when I realized it was oil of myrrh. Why myrrh? Wasn't myrrh used to embalm dead bodies? Didn't it symbolize suffering and death?

A few days later I started having trouble breathing when going up the stairs. It felt as though my hiatal hernia was pushing against my diaphragm, cutting off the airflow. It had happened before, but never so consistently. The timing was bad. It was almost Christmas, and I didn't want to put a damper on the celebration.



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Preparations were underway for our family potluck on Christmas Day, as well as the much anticipated arrival of New Jersey relatives the day following. Meanwhile, my breathing was getting worse, and fear set in as I realized it was no longer triggered just by climbing stairs.

On December 28th, as soon as my son and family were on their way home, I called a friend and asked him to take me to the Emergency Room.

CHAPTER TWO

Hovering Between Life and Death

Some men took a man who was not able to move his body to Jesus. He was carried on a bed. . . . They could not find a way to take him in because of so many people. They made a hole in the roof over where Jesus stood. Then they let the bed with the sick man on it down before Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." . . . "I say to you, get up. Take your bed and go to your home." At once the sick man got up in front of them. He took his bed and went to his home thanking God.
(Luke 5: 18-26 NLV)

I don't remember calling my friend, why I chose to call him, or the conversation we had on the way to the hospital. All I have is a vague memory of signing myself in, and being whisked off in a wheelchair for the first of several tests.

Nothing after that. Not even the numerous texts I sent my daughter telling her where I was, that my hernia was not the problem, that I had congestive heart failure and had been put on Lasix, that I could go home after they finished running the rest of the tests, and not to worry about picking me up if it snowed because I could find someone local to give me a ride.

I did not go home as planned. Two days later, instead of being discharged, I was intubated, hooked up to a ventilator, and moved to the Intensive Care Unit. Fluid around my heart caused by the severely regurgitating mitral valve had backed up into my lungs, creating intense respiratory distress. Putting off surgery to repair the valve was no longer an option.

They transferred me to Inova Heart and Vascular Institute in Fairfax, where more sophisticated testing could be done, and where the region's top cardiac surgeons were located. I arrived at their Coronary Care Unit on New Year's Eve, heavily sedated with Propofol and Fentanyl, as well as with a case of staph pneumonia that had not been present when I was first admitted. Things were not looking good, and there was some speculation as to whether or not I would pull through, or even have the will to fight.

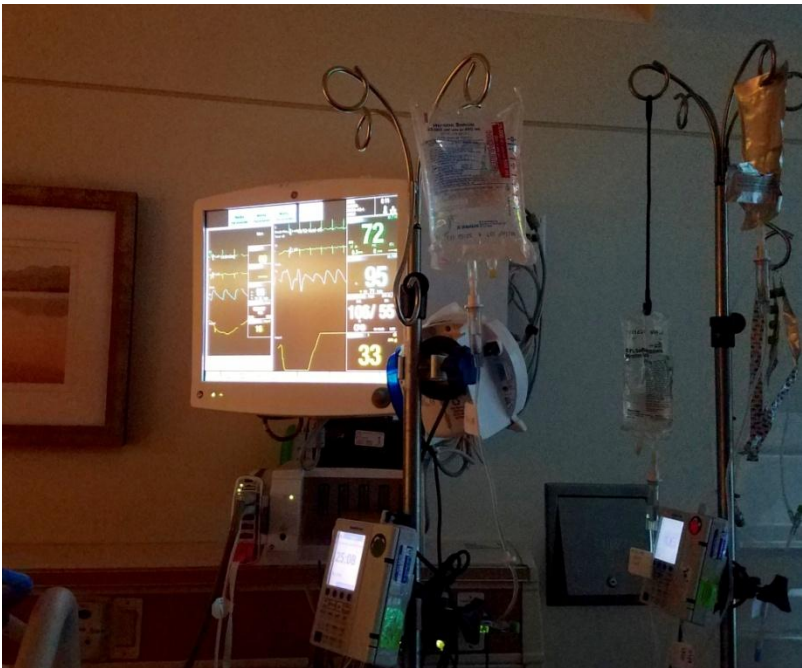
Surgery to repair my mitral valve was scheduled, then cancelled when preliminary testing revealed calcification. It would have to be replaced. However, I was deemed too ill to undergo the more invasive open heart surgery at this time. The only option would be a transcatheter MitraClip

procedure, which was not a fix, but would help reduce the amount of regurgitation. That too was scheduled and then cancelled when a new challenge presented itself—severe cardiac arrhythmia.

After being extubated, I began experiencing irregular tachycardia and atrial fibrillation. My heartbeat was running wild—sometimes alarmingly fast, sometimes alarmingly slow. At one point, paddles were used in an attempt to shock it back to a normal sinus rhythm, and I was given Amiodarone, a drug with potentially serious side effects, to try and stabilize it.

Meanwhile, an army of prayer warriors was being assembled as word spread about my condition. My pastors and church family who were starting the year with 21 days of prayer and fasting, added me to their petitions. Prayer groups, friends and loved ones, even people I did not know who had seen prayer requests for me on Facebook, also covered me in prayer. Together, they battled the forces of darkness surrounding me, and bombarded the Heavens on my behalf. I am convinced that I would not be here today, had it not been for their strong, unwavering faith as they fought the fight for me.

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Fighting the fight

CHAPTER THREE

The Tide Starts to Turn

*After this, Jesus, knowing that all things
had already been accomplished, to fulfill
the Scripture, said, "I am thirsty."
(John 19:28 NASB)*

I was very weak, and unable to talk, but the crisis was over. Prayer had prevailed. The tide was turning.

Though my body no longer hovered between life and death, my mind drifted in and out of a dream-like realm where reality and illusion seemed to merge. A realm where a letter with the hospital address on the back of it could instantly transport me to my room from wherever I was, and could do the same for anyone else. A realm where I could hear the voices and laughter of people visiting me, but thought they were outside; or where I would catch a glimpse of someone walking around a lobby, who was actually in my room, and feel frustrated that I could see them, but they could not see me.

Perhaps the most bizarre hallucination of all, was being told to write up a document of things the nurses had said that were lies, e-mail it to my daughter, and whenever I needed her to remember, just whisper “remember the lies,” and she would. This illusion was so real, that after I finally had my MitraClip procedure, I came out of anesthesia repeating, “Joanne, remember the lies; Joanne, remember the lies,” and of course she couldn’t.



Prayer had prevailed

The only thing that was completely real was the terrible thirst. My parchedness was no illusion. Because I was having trouble getting liquids down the right pipe, and there was danger they

might be aspirated, I was not allowed to drink. Having my lips swabbed with water to moisten them provided little relief.

The day they gave me an ice chip to suck on was euphoric. That feeling of elation did not last long, however. No matter my pleas, those chips were few and far between until the swallow tests determined that I was able to safely handle them. Then pureed foods were introduced, but still no water. Not even a tiny sip. Permission for that did not come until quite a bit later, and by then I had lost 15 pounds.

CHAPTER FOUR

Night of a Thousand Needles

*Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him.
And the soldiers twisted together a crown
of thorns and put it on His head...*
(John 19:1-2a NASB)

A thousand needles is, of course, a gross exaggeration, but that's what it felt like that night. One of my greatest fears had turned into my worst nightmare come true.

As far back as I can remember, I've had needle phobia so severe that I almost didn't get married because of the premarital blood test requirement. When I had my babies (back in the day before IVs became routine), I opted to have natural childbirth because the thought of being given a needle was more daunting than the thought of what any labor pain might possibly feel like. And now, here, lying in my hospital bed, I had been jabbed not once, not twice, but such an infinite number of times that most of my veins were either collapsed or unable to yield the required amount of blood.



My worst nightmare come true

I found myself pondering, in a way I never had before, the crown of thorns, the scourging, the nails piercing hands and feet, the unfathomable physical agony Jesus must have endured so we could have the hope-filled promise of eternal life. He had options, yet He voluntarily went to the cross to atone for our sins. I don't think I'd ever truly grasped the depths of that love.

There are people, unlike me, who have grasped it, and are so full of the love of the Lord that it overflows. Like rays of sunshine, they radiate joy no matter their circumstances, and are an inspiration and encouragement to the people around them. When afflicted, they become mighty prayer warriors, focused on the needs of others rather than on their own

suffering or limitations. I, on the other hand, become totally self-absorbed.

This realization made me feel selfish and ashamed, and I wish I could say remorse led to instant transformation. It did not. However, there were brief moments when I was able to emerge from my cocoon of discomfort and become aware enough of what was happening outside of me to utter a short prayer.

“Lord, that nurse seems tired. Give her the strength to make it through her long shift.”

“Lord, touch that man groaning in the room across the hall. Ease his pain and help him get a restful night’s sleep.”

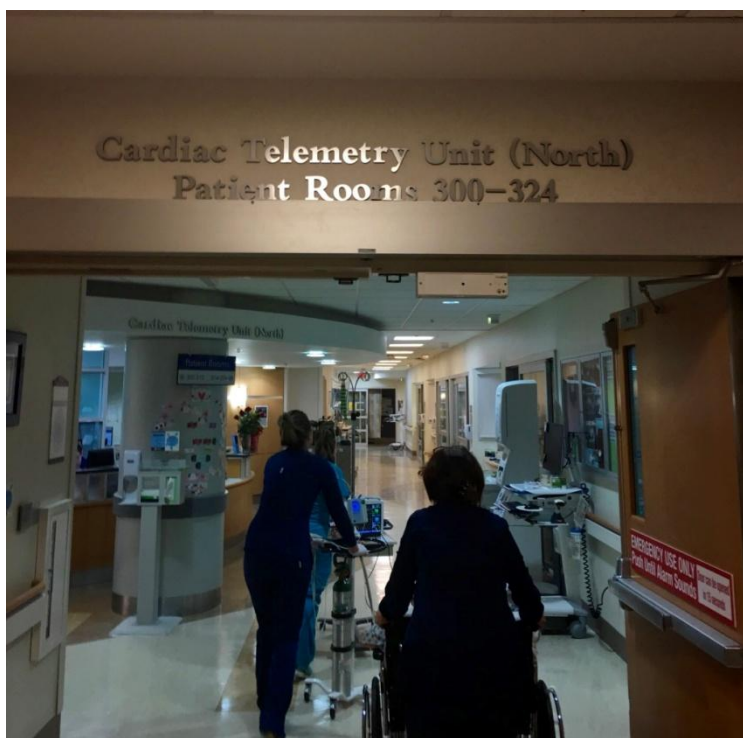
CHAPTER FIVE

Perspective

*Being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself by becoming
obedient to the point of death, even
death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)*

There is no room for modesty in a CCU. Being dependent on techs to take care of my most personal needs made me feel embarrassed and exposed, especially when the person washing me or wiping my behind was a male, but these people were trying to help me—not cause shame.

Jesus, on the other hand, was naked for all to see. He was not wearing a loincloth when they nailed Him to the tree. Insults were hurled at Him, indignities were heaped upon Him, He was abused and reviled, yet He did not retaliate. Though He could have called on His Father who would have instantly dispatched over twelve legions of angels to deliver Him from His tormentors, He chose to remain silent and endure the public humiliation and shame (1 Peter 2:23-24; Matthew 26:53). That was not a choice I could fathom.



Being moved out of CCU

Most of the people assigned to my care were kind, concerned, and compassionate, but there was one mean-spirited nurse who purposely took her time to respond to my call button, who taunted me when I was unable to speak above a whisper or when my writing was illegible because my hand was too weak to firmly grasp the pen, and who told doctors (loudly enough for me to hear) that I was delusional, and probably had dementia. If my voice had been strong enough to capture anyone's attention, I definitely would have retaliated, and over what? How small a matter in the big scheme of things.

Fragments of a song played in my mind.

“This is something I can do, as a gift of love to you ... Oh Lord, I lift my life to you ... This is something I can give; more than praises from my lips ... I give my everything, my hopes and dreams to you ... This is my offering.”¹

It became my silent prayer.

¹ *This Is My offering*, lyrics by Tim Sheppard, sung by Matthew Ward.

CHAPTER SIX

The Mended Chair

*but those who hope in the LORD will
renew their strength. They will soar
on wings like eagles; they will run
and not grow weary, they will walk
and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31 NIV)*

I hadn't wanted visitors, and couldn't talk on the phone, so my friends kept me encouraged through texts and e-mails. They flooded my in-box with uplifting verses, messages, images, and songs, as well as short prayers they were praying for me. A couple of them even shared dreams and visions they felt pointed to my complete recovery. The one that encouraged me the most was the story about the mended chair.

I have a favorite chair I sit in when I'm in the prayer room at church. It has become known as "Sandy's chair." One day, shortly after my admission to the hospital, my prayer partner found it lying on its side with a broken leg. Someone had put it in a corner so it could be discarded with the trash. Before

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that happened, however, it was rescued and restored by our church facilities coordinator who made it look good as new. My prayer partner strongly believed it was symbolic of my total restoration as well.



The mended chair

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unspeakable Joy

*The thief comes only to steal
and kill and destroy; I came
that they may have life, and
have it abundantly.*

(John 10:10 NASB)

What started out as an ordinary day, turned extraordinary when the veil that had blinded me for so long was unexpectedly lifted, revealing truth and exposing lies.

Much of the pain in my life has revolved around feeling invisible, left out, slighted, passed by. Pain of my own making, created by faulty thinking. How easy it had been for the enemy of my soul to deceive me into taking things personally that weren't so intended, to jump to wrong conclusions, and to second guess other people's thoughts and motives, when only God knows what's in a heart.

The reality was that many people genuinely cared about me. I felt overwhelmed by the great outpouring of love and support

that came even from unexpected sources—people who I thought disliked me, disregarded me, or had traded me in for new friends.



I felt overwhelmed by the great outpouring of love and support

Some things there are no words to describe. The closest I can come is to compare it to wave after wave of pure love washing over me, cleansing, healing, and restoring with its ebb and flow. As each wave engulfed me, I saw the face of a person who I'd felt wronged by, but the wrong no longer seemed like a wrong. There was only a sense of wonderment that it had wounded me at all. My heart overflowed with unspeakable joy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Room With a View

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.
(Hebrews 12:1 NLT)

Twenty-seven days after my admission to the hospital, I was released to a rehabilitation center where, for the next three weeks, a team of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists worked diligently to help me overcome the after effects of my hospital stay. Muscles needed to be strengthened, simple tasks of daily living relearned, and damage to my vocal cords reversed.

Progress was slow, and at times discouraging, but I had a large cheering section of friends and loved ones urging me to hang in there and not quit. When I experienced a major milestone such as being able to step up on a curb with my

walker, or climb the last step of the stairwell that had no banister extension I could pull myself up by, they cheered as well.



My bed had the view

The center was close to home, so my church family stepped in to give my daughter a much needed break. They provided rides to follow-up appointments, took my car to be inspected, picked up books from the library, and did whatever else they could to help. Not only was I touched by their genuine acts of caring, but my family was as well.

When my three weeks at the center were up, I had three more weeks of rehab at home, during which I learned much about

patience, perseverance, and putting things in their proper perspective. My church family continued to minister to me, providing meals and rides, helping with chores, and even coming over to pray.

As I write this final chapter, I am driving again, cooking my own meals, crawling under the credenza in my bedroom to turn the power strip off and on, and walking up and down the stairs without eventuality—even while carrying several bags of groceries or trash. My voice is not yet back to normal, but I have been assured that it will be with time.

My cardiologist has recommended that I have surgery to replace the mitral valve while my heart is still strong. The MitraClip is diffusing the flow of regurgitation, but it has not actually reduced it. That's not what everyone had hoped for, but I've learned to trust God enough to surrender all. I know that wherever He leads, He will have my back and be with me every step of the way.

MYRRH

Myrrh is an exotic, sweet smelling gum resin with a bitter taste that is obtained by slashing the bark of commiphora trees growing in the Middle East, Africa, and India. Throughout history, it has been used in medicines, holy ointments, incense, perfumery, and for embalming the dead. Merchants considered it a highly valued commodity for commerce along ancient spice routes.

The Bible tells us that myrrh was a crucial ingredient in the recipe God gave Moses for making sacred oil to consecrate articles of Temple worship, as well as to anoint the high priests and kings of Israel (Exodus 30:22-30). It was also used as part of Queen Esther's purification and beautification ritual before she was presented to the king (Esther 2:12), and there are several references throughout the Old Testament to its use as perfume (Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17; Song of Solomon 5:5). Yet for many people, like myself, the word myrrh is more likely to conjure up thoughts of suffering and death. Perhaps because of its association with Christ crucified?

Myrrh was one of the three gifts wise men from the East brought to Jesus when they came to worship Him (Matthew 2:11). It was offered to him, mingled with wine, as He hung on the cross (Mark 15:23), and a combination of myrrh and aloes

was used by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea to wrap Jesus' body before placing Him in the tomb (John 19:39).

GLOSSARY

Amiodarone – A medication used to treat certain types of irregular heartbeat.

Atrial fibrillation – An irregular, rapid heartbeat that can lead to blood clots, stroke, heart failure, and other heart related complications.

Cardiac arrhythmia – An abnormal heart rhythm that causes the heart to beat too fast, too slow, or erratically.

Coronary Care Unit (CCU) – A hospital department that provides special care and monitoring for patients with heart disease.

Congestive heart failure – Inability of the heart to pump efficiently, which leads to fluid buildup in the lungs and surrounding body tissues.

Delusional – Having false or irrational beliefs or opinions. Typically a symptom of mental disorder.

Dementia – A decline in mental ability marked by memory loss, personality changes, and impaired reasoning.

Diaphragm – A large muscle that separates the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity.

Extubated – Removal of the tube connecting patient's airway to the ventilaor.

Fentanyl – A powerful synthetic opioid analgesic similar to morphine, but 50 to 100 times more potent.

Hallucination – An experience involving the apparent perception of something not present.

Hiatal hernia – A structural abnormality that allows part of the stomach to slide up through the esophageal opening into the chest cavity.

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) – Department of a hospital that is dedicated to the care of seriously ill patients.

Illusion – Something that is wrongly perceived or interpreted by the senses.

Intubated – Having a tube inserted through the mouth and into the airway so patients can be placed on a ventilator to help them breathe.

Inova (Infirmary of Northern Virginia) – A non-profit health organization based in Falls Church, Virginia, composed of a network of hospitals, outpatient services, assisted living and long-term care facilities, and health care centers.

IV – A device (syringe) used to administer fluids intravenously.

Lasix – A diuretic drug used to treat hypertension and edema.

MitraClip – A medical device used to treat mitral valve regurgitation in individuals who are not candidates for mitral valve surgery.

Mitral valve – The valve between the left atrium and left ventricle of the heart, which permits blood to flow from the atrium to the ventricle, but not in the reverse direction.

Paddles – A device used to deliver a brief electric shock to the heart to enable its natural pacemaker to regain control and restore a normal heart rate and rhythm.

Propofol – A quick acting, intravenously administered anesthetic/sedative drug that results in a decreased level of consciousness and a lack of memory for events.

Regurgitation – A leakage of blood backward through the mitral valve each time the left ventricle contracts.

Sinus rhythm –The normal regular rhythm of the heart set by its natural pacemaker, the sinoatrial (sinus) node.

Staph pneumonia – Bacterial pneumonia caused by a staphylococcus infection.

Tachycardia – An abnormally rapid heart rate.

Transcatheter MitraClip procedure – A minimally invasive catheter-based procedure performed through a vein, using real-time imaging (echocardiography and fluoroscopy), and avoiding the need for cardiopulmonary bypass.

Ventilator – A machine that mechanically helps a patient breathe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SANDRA KOVACS STEIN was born in Calcutta, India, grew up in the Dominican Republic, and went to school in Canada, where she planned to settle. However, she fell in love with an American, and moved to Queens, New York after they married. Sadly, the marriage ended 13 years later with her husband's untimely death. They had two children.

STEIN has experienced many unexpected twists and turns in her life, which have taught her to be adaptable and open to trying new things. She has enjoyed a variety of work experiences, including transcriptionist, speech pathologist, audiologist, and computer programmer. As a single mom, she started a home-based typing/editing/word processing service

so she could be there for her young children when they came home from school.

STEIN now lives in Purcellville, VA, close to her daughter, four of her seven grandchildren, and her four great-grands. She works part-time from home at a virtual data entry job, and with the advent of digital photography, has become an avid photographer. When a pair of ravens built a nest near the top of a water tower across from her balcony in the spring of 2013, she took many photos of the babies learning how to fly. These became the inspiration for her first children's book, *The Water Tower Ravens*, which launched her on an exciting new career as a writer of children's picture books.

In addition to her children's books, STEIN has published a memoir—*Sincerely Wrong*—which is a testimony of the improbable journey that led her from the occult to Christianity at a time in her life when she was convinced she had all the answers, and was no longer seeking.

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