

Helpless in a hospital chair, she gained strength by trusting others and letting go

By Flocy Joseph

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Patients naturally remember the lead surgeon, says the writer whose husband was undergoing major surgery, but from her chair beside his hospital bed, she saw how many hands a single recovery requires. The healing, she adds, belonged to a whole community of people. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

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When a woman who likes control suddenly found herself leaning on the kindness of strangers, the outcome was surprisingly uplifting.

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For more than two decades, my work has revolved around helping leaders navigate uncertainty. I spend my days planning, deciding, solving problems and helping organisations move forward. I am the sort of person who carries a list, anticipates the next challenge and quietly believes that, with enough effort, I can hold everything together. This year, I learnt what happens when you cannot. The lesson did not come from a book, a boardroom or a carefully prepared plan. It came from a chair – the one beside a hospital bed, close enough to hold my husband’s hand as he went through major surgery at Singapore’s National University Hospital. From that chair, everything I thought I understood about strength, dependance and the kindness of strangers looked very different.

DEPENDING ENTIRELY ON OTHERS

Like many people accustomed to being capable, I entered the hospital believing I could manage everything on my own. I would ask the right questions, understand the answers and stay a step ahead. Instead, I found myself utterly dependent – on surgeons whose skill I could not evaluate, on nurses whose names I was only beginning to learn, on a system whose rhythms I did not know. For someone accustomed to being the one others relied on, there was something humbling, even frightening, about having to trust so completely. What surprised me was how gently that dependance was received. I carried pages of questions into every consultation. Some were clinical. Many were simply the anxious questions of a wife who was afraid. Never once did the surgeon, the doctors or the nurses make me feel that I was asking too much, repeating myself or taking up too much of their time. Every question was answered patiently. Every concern was acknowledged. And I came to understand that being allowed to

voice your fears without judgment is itself a form of care. MY FRIEND, AI Hospitals speak a language that is unfamiliar to most of us. Numbers flashed across monitors. Blood test results appeared on the patient portal. There were medical abbreviations that meant nothing to me. More than once, I found myself asking artificial intelligence to explain a laboratory reading or a clinical term. It would patiently translate complex medical language into something I could understand and, just as importantly, reassure me when the values were within normal limits. It never replaced the doctors. It simply helped me become a calmer, better-informed caregiver while waiting for the next medical review. Later, it quietly helped me manage another invisible burden – keeping track of who I had updated, who was still waiting to hear from me, and helping me find the words when I was emotionally exhausted. In the long, quiet hours beside the bed – when the ward was asleep and there was no one to ask – that quiet reassurance mattered more than I expected. THE NAMES I NEVER LEARNT Patients naturally remember the lead surgeon. Yet, from my chair, I saw how many hands a single recovery requires. Over 48 hours in the intensive care unit, I watched anaesthetists, ICU specialists, junior doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, pharmacists and dietitians move around my husband with a precision that looked almost choreographed. Handovers were seamless. Everyone seemed to know exactly what to do, and to trust that the person beside them did too. The operation carried one surgeon’s name. But the healing belonged to a whole community of people, most of whom I would never be able to thank by name. I have thought about them often since – the quiet ones, doing essential work no dashboard will ever capture, whose care a frightened family member will remember for the rest of her life.

THOSE SMALL GESTURES

If there is one thing I did not expect, it is how much the smallest gestures would come to mean. My husband’s surgery fell on his birthday. The nurses, noticing this, arranged a small celebration for him – a modest, tender gesture in the middle of a frightening week. They allowed me to visit him and spend some time with him. They found little ways to make a clinical space feel briefly human. The kindness extended to me as well. Ward staff noticed when exhaustion was beginning to overwhelm me. Even the catering staff gently guided me through the meal options, quietly making sure that I, too, was eating properly during those difficult days – a small thing that, in that moment, felt like being looked after. None of these gestures changed the clinical outcome. Not one of them would appear in a medical record. And yet every one of them changed our experience of those days. That is the part I keep returning to. We may forget the exact procedures, the forms and the schedules. But we rarely forget

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how people made us feel when we were afraid, tired and uncertain. LEARNING THAT I WAS NOT INDISPENSABLE I have always been someone who likes control. I enjoy solving problems, influencing outcomes and ensuring that things move forward. I quietly believed that if I stepped away unexpectedly, work would inevitably suffer. When my husband underwent surgery, I had no choice but to leave work immediately. And something remarkable happened... Nothing fell apart. Programmes continued. Contracts were signed. Meetings went ahead. My colleagues stepped in, supported one another and gave me the space I needed without once making me feel guilty for being absent. Behind that was my boss’ unwavering assurance that my only responsibility was to be with my husband. A few days later, my colleagues sent a care package. My immediate reaction was, “But he isn’t even an SMU employee.” That thought lasted only a moment. The package was never about employment. It was about my department telling me that caring for the family is also caring for the colleague. That experience taught me a humbling truth. It’s not about being indispensable and everything depending on you... It is about building systems, processes and people strong enough to continue flourishing even when you are not there. THE GIFT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS Our son became our 24-hour hotline from the United Kingdom, checking in despite the time difference, waiting anxiously for every update after each medical review. Parents, siblings, relatives and friends reached out from different parts of the world. Prayers travelled across continents long before messages did. My husband had made one request even before the surgery: He did not want visitors in the hospital or during his recovery at home. He wanted the space to heal quietly. It was not an easy

request to honour. Friends wanted to visit, colleagues wanted to help and family members wanted reassurance. There were moments when the emotional weight felt heavier than the physical exhaustion – repeating the same updates, responding to the same questions and trying to reassure others when I was seeking reassurance myself. Before the surgery, my husband had gently reminded me to be patient with people. He knows that under stress I can become abrupt, sometimes saying things I later regret. His words stayed with me. During those weeks, I found myself choosing grace over impatience. I reminded myself that every message, every phone call and every inquiry came from one place alone – love. Looking back now, I realise that concern is one of the purest expressions of friendship. People often feel helpless in the face of illness. They cannot take away the pain or shorten the recovery. What they can offer is their presence, their prayers and the quiet assurance that you are not walking the journey alone. GRATITUDE, WHEN YOU FINALLY SIT STILL In the hospital those days, there was suddenly nothing to do but sit, wait, hope and pray. And in that stillness, an unexpected feeling took root: gratitude. Gratitude for the hospital staff who carried us through uncertainty with skill and compassion. For colleagues who quietly took on more so that I could be absent. For prayers offered in churches, temples and mosques by people who love us. Gratitude, too, for living in a country where we could place our trust in a healthcare system that cared not only for the patient, but also for those waiting anxiously beside the bed. Looking back, I realise how many things had to go right for us to arrive safely on the other side. They did. Back in the comfort of our home now, I still find myself thinking about that chair. The one beside the bed, close enough to hold my husband’s hand, far enough from the rest of my family and the busy life I had left behind. From that chair, I could not fix anything, or take charge. I could only be present, and trust, and hope and pray – and pray I did. For most of my life, I believed strength meant being the one in control. This year, from a hospital chair, I learnt that sometimes strength is trusting others. Sometimes it is accepting help. Sometimes it is simply sitting beside the person you love, holding his hand, and believing that tomorrow will be kinder than today. Sometimes it means letting go. The writer is head of Commercial with the office of Executive Development at the Singapore Management University.