

A very personal and humorous view of one man's experience surviving cancer, life-threatening surgery, and the removal of his esophagus. Chronicles events from detection through surgery and recovery. Tips and checklists for others facing similar situations are also included.

**BALLOON POODLES:** A step-by-step chronological guide to not losing your mind over losing your esophagus and other major surgeries

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not losing your mind  
over losing your esophagus  
and other major surgeries

**Martin L. McMillan**

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## CHAPTER 10

### PRE-OP AND OTHER PREPARATIONS FOR THE EXECUTION

*A reminder once again before starting the next email, it was written in October, 2004.*

Thursday, October 21, 2004

**Subject:** MLM Medical Email (Update #7)

“...and we'll have fun, fun, fun 'till her daddy takes her T-Bird awaaaay...”

Yeowsa boys and girls, guys and gals, and all you very hip top boppers out there, welcome once again to the show!

Went to the pre-op appointment this morning. Fortunately, there was no pain except for the stick the tech made when drawing blood. That was no problem. I was relieved to find I had no burst capillaries, no ripped chest hair, and didn't glow in the dark by the time I left.

The one good thing out of all this was that while waiting to be called to settle the financial details, I had time to play with my two month old cell phone. I haven't had much time to work with it since I procured it, and I had been sold on the thing because of the internet capability. Well, after some torturous work on the key pad, I found I could actually link to the internet and pick up my email (one address at a time, however). Just as I was about to start writing this update on my phone (might as well do something while I grow old in the waiting area), I got called in to start today's adventure.

Of course, the nice lady wanted to see my insurance card. After fiddling with her computer for awhile, (I'm convinced that people who want money from you and have the computer screen positioned so you can't see it, are actually playing Donkey Kong and making up the techno talk they use to get you to dance like a marionette for the security camera before you actually give them the money.) she decided she needed to find out what my deductible was. She left and I reconnected my phone to the internet. I was reading about the latest mud being thrown by Kerry and Bush when she came back and said she didn't know for sure, (This is her job. Shouldn't she know how to get a solid answer?) so could I give her a credit card payment for \$100? She said that would satisfy the bean counters in accounting. Fortunately she is classified as administrative. If she was a nurse, I'd find another hospital.

Back to the waiting room, my phone and the internet.

Sometime later, after a small child was stopped from gnawing (actually more like gumming) my shoe, an elderly woman volunteer who probably needed more medical attention than I, escorted me to an exam room after having me weigh on a high tech scale she really didn't know how to operate.

Since there were no cell phones allowed on in the exam room (a large 2 ft by 2 ft sign announced this fact) I was stuck reading, (you guessed it) a September 2002 copy of Car and Driver. I found the upcoming 2003 models mildly interesting.

I was then greeted by a very nice pre-op nurse who was especially requested by Karen's administrative friend because she's really good at it and has a reputation for thoroughness. I must say, she left no stone unturned. We got all the questions answered in short order. She wanted to hear how I got into this situation and a few other things. She called around to see if she could find my EKG strip from the cardiovascular destroying thallium heart stress test. Unfortunately, once the results are put in the report, the strip disappears. She then ordered a new EKG as a lovely parting gift.

She also took the time to explain that by the time I'm done and hauled into ICU, I'll look like a cross between Frankenstein and Spongebob Squarepants. Tubes and sewn up holes everywhere. Most of the tubes are supposed to be for "just in case" scenarios.

After bidding farewell to my lovely and accommodating hostess, I again resumed reviewing the stats on the new 2003 Corvette (2004 is going to be the last year for this version, I discovered. Better buy now.).

Then the anesthesiologist's assistant arrived. She went through a number of questions and made sure to tell me not to eat or drink anything after midnight before the operation. This was to make sure I didn't stain anyone's shoes during the operation. A Linda Blair projectile vomiting performance is not appreciated by the surgeons, I was told.

After we were done, I went back to checking out the new Hummer for 2003. (Looks just like the one from 2002, 2001, and...you get the picture.)

Then a new tech arrived to take blood and do the EKG. The blood letting wasn't too bad. She used large leeches that sucked blood really fast.

I was then tagged like an elephant in Africa. I now have a lovely blue, waterproof wristband which holds some indecipherable gibberish about my blood which I am supposed to wear until I get to the hospital on Monday. If I lose it, I'll have to get the blood tests run all over again. Stylish it is not. Annoying, it is.

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After being tagged (which made me feel like I really belonged to the herd), I was still worried about the EKG which was coming up next. Sure enough, she (the EKG tech) whips out a sticky sheet with a large number of electrode patches on it to stick all over my chest. No razor in sight. Stick, stick, stick. I counted at least 12. It was all done before I had a chance to move. I dreaded the next part. However, to my surprise there was no pain, no ripping, no anything. They came right off with no problem. I was pleasantly surprised, to say the least. Why the "Badly Shaven Man" lady from last week couldn't use this more humane product, I'll never know. (Possibly because I didn't have my tag on, which identified me as part of the "in" herd?)

I then put my shirt on, turned on my cell phone and left. That was it. I was waiting for the other 10,000 lb. shoe to drop, but it didn't happen. I spoke to Karen's admin friend and assured her everything had gone about as well as could be expected.

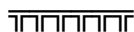
Well, the big show begins Monday. I'm planning to send out at least one more update before then. I'll know the time of the surgery by that time and I will also include a few other things I wanted to say here, but they would make this email comparable to *Ulysses* in length.

Thanks for your support.

Martin



*The next two days were spent getting things in order and doing what little I could to prepare for surgery.*



Saturday, October 23, 2004

**Subject:** MLM Medical Email (Update #8)

If I was into yoga (which I'm not), I'd be in my "Happy Place" right now. If not there, then Australia.

I've had quite a number of wonderful emails from a notable number of you. I would like to give all of you a huge THANK YOU! And a big hug too. (Well, on second thought, I guess a handshake for the guys will do...right guys?) Some of them have been off the wall and some have been a bearing of the writer's soul. They have all been uplifting and appreciated beyond measure. I never knew I had so many friends.

Here are a few of them I'd like to share (without using the author's name, of course). I will ask that those who recognize themselves please cut me some slack for my occasional bending of the story for educational purposes.

*Continuing...*

One refers to the medicinal healing powers of beer. Not just any beer, but a brand I am convinced is a substitute for industrial acid, and he thinks is the nectar of the gods. I think his idea is to drink as much as possible before going in the hospital. The problem is, I'm not too clear on exactly what he will do when he gets there, since I suspect he was following his own advice at the time. I don't think he has any medical procedures coming up though... hummmm...

Another said she would be on the sidelines cheering for me with that great old college cheer "Balloon Poodle! Balloon Poodle!"...okaaaayyyy...

Yet another told me it would be really smart to schmooze with the doctors and not make fun of their new Jag or six week trip to Europe this past summer, and to be reverently impressed when they talk about the recent acquisition of their fourth lake home. (Are you crazy? I knew this already. Do you think I'm going to tick off some guy who might REALLY turn my insides into a balloon poodle if he decides he doesn't like me? I only get one shot at this. All he has to do is pay higher malpractice insurance rates. Who do you think is going to be the real winner in a duel here? Like, duh!) Ahem...I appreciate the advice and will try to follow it.

By the way, the surgery is on Monday, October 25<sup>th</sup> and starts at 9:30 am (Central Daylight Time, for those of you in other time zones). Pre-Op starts at 7:30. Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines.

Another wonderful email was sent to me by a friend whose steady guy has had a really rough go after a serious encounter with an appendectomy. It was very comforting to know someone else was dealing with a serious medical problem and that it was being conquered. She should be (and I think is) proud of standing up for him when he couldn't in some bad situations. Bottom line...he should be released this weekend. Could have been a lot worse.

The last one I'll mention here was from a friend who planned to take some Esophotrax (Remember Esophotrax? The stuff related to poi and tofu? Uh-huh, that stuff. If not, see Update #1,) with chips to a pot luck dinner and claim it was indigenous to some obscure Caribbean island. I hope the pictures she took of the look on people's faces when she told them what it really was turn out. (I've always thought discreetly removing something you didn't like from your mouth in a social situation was a true art form. Blowing



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chunks like a howitzer in front of 150 people just isn't appropriate, at least not without the empirical evidence.)

I'm starting to see the bright light of fun and frivolity dim as we approach Monday morning. (This may be a good thing, since I've been told that if I see a bright light while my eyes are closed, to politely decline any invitation which might be offered to step forward.) Things seem to be getting slightly more serious. I've noticed the change in mood around the house. I think I can hear paint peeling. Even the dog is whiney. However, I really haven't had time to obsess about this particular life chapter. I've been busy taking care of Katherine since Karen has had to coordinate and lead the yearly open enrollment sessions at her place of employment this week. Twice this week, she had to be there at 7:00 in the morning and leave at 8:00 in the evening (and that assumed the network was up.). Not too bad, except she's dealing with about a dozen other things right now and has had little sleep. Not a good thing when driving.

I've also been working to get Karen's new company laptop synced up with our wireless network here at the house. She got the laptop because she may be out for up to two weeks and there is no one at work who can do her job. At least, not on short notice. This way, she can take care of almost everything by email and by accessing the company server in Texas. Yes, technology can be a curse, but with the pending merger of her company, it can also be used as a job preserver.

Katherine is holding up well, I think. She's concerned, but is keeping her routine on track for now. You know, showering a couple of nights a week (remember when you were nine?), leaving clothes and toys in every room to mark her territory, conveniently not remembering if she's done her homework, hugging Dad at every opportunity (even when the opportunity is inopportune), getting up in the morning with the split second precision which allows her to pole vault into the car at 7:23 as Mom is pulling out to head off to school and work...(yawn) the usual.

Before I shut this down, I'd also like to acknowledge the many phone calls, cards and letters I've also received. Again, they may seem like small things, but they really are huge to me. Thank you.

This will probably be the last update I will be able to send before Monday. Although you've been such a lovely audience (I'll give all this writing I've done an 87, but I still can't dance to it.), I do have a couple of things to do with the family such as: pack my meager belongings, feed the dog, toss the trash, have the serious talk with Katherine (No, not THAT serious talk...the one dealing with the immediate problem.), gas up the cars, finish off my

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mother's Brown Mountain cake, get important documents notarized, make sure Karen has the bills paid up for awhile (she won't let me do that anymore for some reason.), etcetala, etcetala, etcetala (as Yul Brenner's King of Siam would say.).

Although I've been responding to every email received so far (At least I think I have. If I missed you, my eternal apologies.), I don't think I'll be able to continue the practice for awhile. I ask for your patience and understanding. Be assured you are not being ignored (I'm telling you this in case any of you are still stuck in the self-absorbed 90's. If you are, get over it.). Please continue to send them if you would like. We appreciate every one.

Karen will try to update you about the surgery and all the other falderal sometime next week. I should be out of ICU by Wednesday.

Hang in there, it will all be over soon and I'll bet you won't even remember anything hurting. As for me, I'm afraid I won't be able to say the same. I'm already scheduled to have an epidural with a hand pump installed before things get started. Not a good sign. Especially since I'm sure I'm not pregnant. (Wait... where IS that EPT stick?).

In bidding farewell for now, I leave you with two of my favorite quotes:

"It's not writing, it's typing". – *Truman Capote, 1959*

and

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning" – *Winston Churchill, November 10, 1942*

See y'all on the other side.

Good night my little Roseanne Roseannadanna,

Martin

TTTTTTTT

At this point, I had no real idea what I was getting into. The surgeon had given me the technical information about how the surgery worked and how he was going to make sure I wasn't going to die. This was reassuring, but no one tells you what the hospital stay or recovery is going to be like. This is because none of them have actually *had* the surgery.

TTTTTTTT

On the home front...that Saturday afternoon, we entertained some very good friends from Oklahoma City. Steve and Mary, along with their son Gary dropped by to wish me a safe journey. For some reason I still can't fathom,

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they had made me Gary's Godfather when he was a baby (He was 12 at this gathering.). I was sure both of them had made a mistake at the time. However, they insist to this day that they were, in fact, sober when they made that decision.

The OKC crew also showered us with "Survival Kit" bags. These would prove to be extremely useful during the stay. These are bags filled with things like paperback books, candy and other munchies, coloring books for Katherine and other items of a similar nature. It was a wonderful gesture and greatly appreciated.

After several hours of talking politics, comparing schools and other things people like us talk about, it was time for them to depart. I was sad to see them go, but Gary was due back to participate in some activity he really couldn't miss. Knowing both the drivers, I was sure they'd make the 100 mile trip in record time.



I was also grateful for the invitation to Karen and me from our wonderful friends Frank and his wife Donna to go to dinner on that Saturday night. We had a lovely time and the food was great. I had my first glass of wine in two years, since it really didn't matter anymore. My esophagus would be gone in two days anyway. No point in trying to protect it now. (I had been avoiding alcohol since the Barrett's was diagnosed, in an effort to try to help the damage heal.)

It seemed a bit like a condemned prisoner's last meal, but if it was, I couldn't have asked for better people to share it with. Besides, Frank picked up the check. I told him that in 6 months, I expected to return the favor. I would recommend this ritual to anyone facing this or any other life threatening surgery if possible. It was a real motivator for me to have to keep a promise like that.



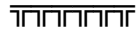
My folks took my family and my brother's family to brunch that Sunday. It was a nice affair with good food and a laughably annoying lounge singer for entertainment. We generally reminisced and appreciated each other.

I was glad to have had this time together. I was also thankful (retrospectively) to have done this at a restaurant. It afforded any and all in

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attendance the ability to discreetly leave if their emotions got the best of them. As we parted, it was reassuring to know the family was behind me.

I think it helped the family members in attendance also. They saw I was ready to get things underway and was not hesitant or remorseful about my decision.



On Sunday night before the surgery, we spent a quiet evening watching a movie and just doing the “family thing”. We were all reasonably upbeat, but quietly concerned.

I remember sleeping well that night before the surgery. I was almost excited about getting on with it. We had done so much research and preparation I felt we were about as ready as we were going to get. I was satisfied we were in good hands all the way around. No, I wasn’t happy about being cut open (who is?), but I really had decided there was no realistic alternative.

I was at peace with the universe on the subject.

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