

Heart in Hand

Preface

This book is about the nature of life, as I see it. I offer my reflections on a wide variety of subjects: on sex, death, love, God, and the importance of music, and art in general, in our lives.

I am a heart surgeon. For the last 25 years I have lived in Seattle, practicing and teaching heart surgery at the University of Washington and at Swedish Medical Center. Several things happened during these years that led me to write this book.

First there was an untimely death. My sister Nancy died in 1978 when she was 31 years old, from breast cancer. I was 38 years old at the time.

Then, six years later, I was changing out my scrub clothes in the surgeon's locker room after doing a coronary bypass operation on an elderly woman and talking with a surgical colleague, Dr. Alfred Blue, when he happened to notice a mole on my unclothed shoulder. He said, pointing to the mole on my shoulder, "how long have you had that thing?" Dr. Blue is an outspoken, no nonsense plastic surgeon—qualities usually not seen in that breed of physician. I told him that it had been there for awhile and that one of the other surgeons on the staff looked at it a year ago and said that it was nothing to worry about. Dr. Blue said, in his usual blunt fashion, "it oughta come off."

He excised it in his office later that afternoon. Much to my surprise, and his, for that matter, it turned out to be cancer—a malignant melanoma. I went back to his office a few days later and he did a wide excision of the skin, fatty tissue, and lymph nodes around the site under local anesthesia. While he was cutting away a large pizza-sized wedge of skin and subcutaneous tissue from my shoulder, Dr. Blue made a comment that forever after endeared him to me. He said, "I'm glad you're the one whose got this problem and not me!"

The reader might think that this statement is a bit crass, an unfeeling thing for a doctor to say to his patient. But I took comfort in what he said and looked at it this way: one does not often encounter such stark honesty in a physician. To me, his being that honest meant that I could fully trust him, no matter what.

All of a sudden, at the age of 44, I had to confront the prospect of an early death, like my sister Nancy and my grandfather, Louis Hicks Williams, had to do. He was a career Navy surgeon. He died at the age of 41 from viral encephalitis, which he contracted in Haiti when he was stationed at a hospital there with the US Marines in the late 1920s. I was in the prime of life, with a successful practice and my second book on heart surgery just published. I had been appointed to the Board of Directors of the Seattle Symphony and was a member of their six-person search committee formed to select a new conductor for the orchestra. This couldn't happen to *me*. Suddenly, I was faced with the realization that death was not just something that happened to other people, it was also something that was going to happen to me, and perhaps very much sooner than I had ever thought possible.

My sister's breast cancer was diagnosed when she was 26 years old, soon after the birth of her second child. She knew how bad the prognosis was—breast cancer that arises during pregnancy is highly lethal—but she nevertheless fought it valiantly. She lived five more years, several years longer than any of her physicians thought possible with the kind of cancer that she had. Two years before her death she came to Seattle with her husband and two young daughters and we went on a day hike together on Hurricane Ridge in the Olympic Mountains in Washington State, on what turned out to be a beautiful, warm day.

Although I cherished that time with her, I generally treated my sister's death with denial. My basic approach was don't think about it, go on with your life and it won't bother you too much. I was too busy with my University teaching and patient care responsibilities—with saving lives—to go to her funeral in Florida. Now, however, faced with the possibility of a very shortened life span myself, the full force of my sister's struggle with the reality of her impending death hit me like a brick dropped on my head from a five-story building.

I had been interested in religion and questions about God since I was a child. Now having to face the prospect of death head on, I began to look more carefully at other aspects of the living state and to undertake a reordering of life's priorities. Seeking fame as a heart surgeon no longer seemed so important. Cultivating more meaningful relationships did. I married my loving wife, Linda, in 1987. She gave me free rein to work on this project and has provided me with valuable insights along the way.

Fortunately, for me, the cancer cells apparently had not yet spread beyond their site of origin before the malignancy was discovered and excised, thanks to Dr. Blue's timely intervention. The adjacent lymph nodes were clean. The prognosis was good. But melanoma has a way of turning up years later in remote locations. I remember exploring a patient's abdomen for signs and symptoms of intestinal obstruction when I was a surgical resident. His intestines were covered with a bright brown carpet of melanoma. We could do nothing for him. The patient had had a mole removed from his back twenty years before and had remained in good health until he started vomiting the week before his surgery. It is now sixteen years since Dr. Blue removed that mole from my shoulder.

As I began to think more carefully about the realities of life, I found myself becoming increasingly drawn to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). The first volume of his central work, *The World as Will and Representation*, was published in 1818. As things go, this philosopher is not very popular today, but in the 19th century the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy considered Schopenhauer to be "the most brilliant man who ever lived," and Sigmund Freud counted him as one of the half-dozen or so greatest men in history. In philosophy, Fredric Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein viewed themselves as Schopenhauer's successors. And such notable artists as Richard Wagner, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Hardy all acknowledge that they were greatly influenced by Schopenhauer's insights into the human condition and the nature of the world.

Schopenhauer was the first philosopher to carry out an in-depth study of sex. He was also the first philosopher to study, like a social psychologist, how humans experience compassion, and to show how it determines morally right and wrong conduct. He was

the first Western philosopher to study extensively Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Indeed, he arrived at insights, from a Western philosophical perspective, that he was surprised to find were essentially the same, when he eventually studied them, as those taught by these two principal Eastern religions. His insights foreshadowed the discoveries that have been made in this century in psychology, evolutionary biology, and nuclear physics. The Austrian-born British philosopher of science Karl Popper once said that there are more good ideas in Schopenhauer than in any other philosopher except Plato.

Schopenhauer is generally viewed as the philosopher of pessimism. Pessimistic he may have been about some of the conditions of life, but his philosophy is grounded in compassion. I prefer to view Schopenhauer as the philosopher of compassion rather than, more conventionally, as the philosopher of pessimism.

Another experience that led me to write this book was my meeting a 101-year-old man named George Crosby. He was languishing in the intensive care unit of Swedish Medical Center in severe congestive heart failure, requiring oxygen and continuous intravenous medications when I first met him. He had coronary disease and a stiff, scarred aortic valve that would not open properly. He had otherwise always been very active and in good health, and he looked much younger than his actual age of 101. He had a small farm on the Olympic Peninsula, near Port Townsend. I did heart surgery on him, an aortic valve replacement and a single coronary bypass graft (this was in 1983). This fellow came through the surgery very well and was discharged home with his wife ten days later. His wife was 93 years old, and they had recently celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. He was soon able to resume all of his daily chores on the farm.

The thing that most struck me about this person was that he was filled with compassion, which is the subject of the third chapter of this book. The more I read Schopenhauer and the more I thought about the philosophical, medical, and moral significance of compassion after my own brush with mortality, the more I began thinking about George Crosby. After several years had passed, I began to realize that my experience with this remarkable person had deeply touched me. Deciding whether or not to take on this project, I pulled out a photograph of him working on his farm six months after his surgery, which was in his office record. His wife had sent it to me to show how

well he was doing after his surgery, as a heartfelt thank you for my being willing to take a man of his age on and do open heart surgery on him. After he died my wife Linda and I visited his widow at their home, an hour-and-a-half's ferry ride and drive from Seattle, in 1986. The memory of George Crosby helped inspire me to write this book.

I have been a Woody Allen fan since 1969 when his first film made with his own screenplay, acting, and direction, *Take the Money and Run*, came out. But it wasn't until 1984 that I really began to take him seriously. What did it was *Broadway Danny Rose*, which was released that year. Not only did he film a scene in this movie at Roosevelt Hospital where I had trained, but it showed a side of Allen that I had not fully appreciated, although *Interiors*, his first "serious" film, released in 1978, gave a strong hint of what was to come. It was not lost on me that *Danny Rose* has the attributes of a 20th century Parsifal—that of a guileless fool. I soon realized, although no writers that I am aware of have approached *Broadway Danny Rose* from this perspective, that this film is in essence a study of compassion, the very subject that was so occupying my attention at the time. *Broadway Danny Rose* strips away the riot of self-directed concerns for possessions, sensual pleasures, control over others, and fame; and the film shows, in its subtle way, what the true values of life are—forgiveness, acceptance, and love. In a word, compassion. I studied Allen's work more carefully, including all of his prose works along with his published screenplays and films. I found that one of his essays, "Mr. Big," has considerable religious significance. It is an excellent parable for the human search for God. I came to realize that Allen's work offers important insights on life which, from a 20th century perspective, complement those of Schopenhauer. Along with Schopenhauer, Woody Allen also figures importantly in this book.

The two books I wrote on heart surgery provided the groundwork for writing this book. My first book on heart surgery, *The Practice of Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery*, was published in 1978 by Plenum Press. It received very good reviews, one in particular by Dr. John Kirklin, one of the pioneers of heart surgery, in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. As a result, an editor at MacMillan approached me to write an atlas of heart surgery in the style of their *Zollinger Atlas of General Surgical Operations*. This book was then in its fifth edition, employing an 11 by 14-inch format, with illustrations on the

right-hand page and text on the left. I was particularly interested in taking on this project because I had an excellent illustrator in mind, a senior heart surgeon on the University of Washington faculty, Dr. David Dillard. The text for our *Atlas*, titled *Atlas of Cardiac Surgery* had to be limited, like the *Zollinger Atlas*, to no more than 1800 words—the maximum number that could fit—on each page opposite a plate of illustrations. One plate might show the technique of aortic valve replacement, another a diagram of a heart-lung machine, and I would summarize on the opposite page subjects like these that have had entire books written about them. Our *Atlas of Cardiac Surgery* was published in 1983. This project provided me with very good training and discipline for this current undertaking, where I attempt to present the religious significance of the Beat Generation in a convincing fashion, for example, in less than three pages. Summarizing broad areas of knowledge in cardiac surgery in the *Atlas* has helped me here to offer a broad, interwoven view of the nature of life, which addresses philosophy, science, medicine, religion and culture in a relatively short book.

My interest in music, a very important facet of life, as I see it, began at an early age. I grew up in a musical family, the oldest of four children. My mother was a church choir soloist and part-time opera singer, and my father helped put himself through medical school in the 1930s playing the alto saxophone in a swing band. My sister Mary studied ballet and teaches piano. I happened to find my father's saxophone stashed away in the attic of our house when I was eight years old and by the age of twelve I was playing the baritone saxophone in a student jazz band.

I did my post-graduate surgical training in New York City, most of it at a hospital two blocks south of Lincoln Center—Roosevelt Hospital. While there, from 1965 to 1970, I served as one of the house doctors at Lincoln Center—at the State Theater, home of the New York City Ballet and NY City Opera; Avery Fisher Hall, NY Philharmonic; and sometimes also at the Metropolitan Opera House. We had a sign-up sheet for this activity in the resident's lounge in the hospital, and my name was always on it. In return for two tickets in the back row of the orchestra the house doctor was obliged to deal with any emergencies that might arise during the performance. During the first five years of my surgical training I thus had the remarkable opportunity to attend, on my off-duty

nights, without having to buy a ticket, many outstanding opera, ballet, and symphonic performances at Lincoln Center.

My longstanding interest in philosophy began in college, fueled initially by a desire to study the philosophy of religion. When I was there, in 1958-1961, the philosophy department at Dartmouth College was a fairly small department. The professors were great. They shared an infectious enthusiasm for their calling and had a warm camaraderie with the students. One thing about those years that I will always remember is the day one of the professors, who I particularly liked, a husky, sandy-haired, shy man who was partial to the philosophy of Spinoza, drove to work in a newly purchased flaming red Corvette.

My interest in science, particularly molecular biology, was greatly stimulated by a summer I spent in 1962, between my first and second year of medical school, at the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. I spent the summer there doing electrophysiological research on heart muscle cells of king crabs and tunicates. Tunicates are sea squirts, a primitive marine chordate that is an evolutionary link between invertebrates and vertebrates. The Nobel Prize laureates Albert Szent-Györgyi, who discovered and isolated Vitamin C, and James Watson, who along with Francis Crick described the structure of the DNA molecule as a double helix, were in residence there that summer. It was a thrilling experience for an eager, young medical student to meet such leaders of the human quest for scientific truth and attend their lectures.

I moved to Seattle in 1974 after completing my heart surgery training at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York. Seattle has a highly regarded Medical School at the University of Washington and the top class Swedish Medical Center, both very appealing from a professional standpoint, but when I moved here in 1974 I wasn't sure, coming from New York, what it would be like culturally.

The distinguished British conductor Sir Thomas Beecham conducted the Seattle Symphony from 1941 to 1943. At a banquet at the Washington Athletic Club in Seattle on November 14, 1941 he said, "if I were a member of this community, really I should get weary of being looked on as a sort of aesthetic dustbin." He viewed Seattle as "young, fresh, with something of the spring of life in your blood," and he offered, with

the benefit of his musical experience, to help change things. The arts in Seattle have assumed increasing importance over the ensuing decades. This city now has a new concert hall for a new century, a glorious one indeed—Benaroya Hall. Its acoustics are in the same league with the revered concert halls in Boston, Amsterdam, and Vienna. Gerard Schwarz, Music Director and Principal Conductor of the Seattle Symphony since 1985, was instrumental in making this hall become a reality.

The arts in Seattle came into full bloom when Speight Jenkins was recruited from New York in 1983 to become the General Director of Seattle Opera. The productions he has mounted in Seattle are comparable with those presented by the Big Three American opera companies in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. He has done wonderful things for this community and the world of art by putting together internationally recognized and deeply insightful productions of great opera. People from 45 states and 14 countries, including music critics from the leading newspapers in Europe and the United States, came to Seattle in the summer of 1998 to see and hear his acclaimed new production of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The eminent Dallas critic John Ardoin wrote, "So what does Seattle know that the rest of the opera world doesn't?" Sir Thomas would be very pleased, if he were still alive, to see how far this vibrant city in the northwest corner of the continental United States has progressed in the arts since he conducted the orchestra there in the early 1940s. This city has provided fertile ground for nurturing my interests in philosophy and the arts.

My views on life are shaped from spending a lot of time on a day-to-day basis over the years in an open heart surgery operating room. Outside of the operating room my views on life have been shaped from a number of other interests—from time spent in movie theaters, opera houses, and concert halls; from reading books on a wide range of subjects; listening critically to classical music and jazz; and raising a family. Another thing that has also helped to enrich my appreciation of the realities of life are hiking and climbing the mountains of Washington State and taking multiple week-long hikes through the Grand Canyon.

I spent two nights on Mount St. Helens in 1979 with three other climbers, not far from the summit, one year before it erupted. We stayed on a part of the mountain that

jutting out on its northeast side called the Dog's Head. We cut blocks of packed snow with ice saws, placed them on top of each other just the right way, as instructed by the one member of our group who knew how to do it, and made two igloos, each one large enough for two persons. For me, not being much of a handy man, sawing those ice blocks more than eight thousand feet above sea level proved to be very hard, exhausting work. But once done, the inside of that igloo was still and serene and surprisingly warm, with the heat of the backpack stove glazing the snow walls to ice. In an explosion in 1980 that was heard 200 miles away, that part of the mountain where we had slept secure in our igloos was broken up into fine dust particles and spewed across the wide expanse of the states of Washington and Montana.

In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker presents a post-Freudian synthesis of psychology and religion that focuses on the work of Otto Rank and Søren Kierkegaard. I have followed a similar course in this book, but here I have chosen to weave the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the films and writings of Woody Allen within the context of the narrative—although I will also be turning to Otto Rank in the first chapter of this book.

I have written this book for a broad audience, for theologians, psychoanalysts, cultural historians, attorneys, professional musicians, oncologists, molecular biologists, philosophers, and housewives in New Jersey. For such a diverse group of readers, I explain various terms and concepts as they are introduced. A molecular biologist certainly does not need to be told what a eukaryotic cell is, but it might be helpful to a theologian or a musician to explain it—and a “cell” in general, for that matter, as the term is used in biology. On the other hand, a theologian does not need to be told what the characteristics of a mystical experience are, but it needs to be explained to other people. And musicians certainly do not need to have the elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm explained to them. I explain them in order to explore more clearly the philosophical significance of this art form. For those who are already quite knowledgeable about various subjects that I discuss here, please bear with me.

My dear friend Jim McDonald spent a lot of time carefully editing this manuscript. He provided me with many good suggestions to improve it. Shortly after

finishing the last chapter he had to confront his own death when he found out that he had incurable lung cancer. I am very sorry that he did not live to see this book published. Doug McClennan also provided invaluable help to me in the preparation of this book. His merciless critique of the manuscript from a postmodern perspective was very helpful. He has helped to make it a better book than it would have been without his input. He also came up with the title *Heart in Hand*. Nicholas Kurte critiqued an earlier version of this manuscript, and Richard Broz and Elaine Monsen gave me needed support and encouragement. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my wife, Linda, for her insights and her patience, and to my two younger children, Michael and Daniel, for graciously letting me spend the time required on the computer to write this book while they were growing up.

Our society very much needs to have a more integrated view of life, a post post-modern *reconstructionist* view of life if you will, one that incorporates the great insights of our philosophers, artists, and scientists of the past as well as those active today. I hope my approach can be useful.

