

## **Chapter 4 – Andrew: Opening the door to a new life**

Andrew was lying on the stretcher outside the operating room, overcome with a profound and inexplicable sense of peace and an inner feeling that everything was going to be fine. It made no sense. At 58, his life as a successful business consultant, newspaper columnist, husband and father had been completely shattered.

Just two weeks previous. Velma, his loving wife of thirty years, woke up to a violent shaking in the bed.

Andrew was trapped in a grand mal seizure; he was shaking uncontrollably, his eyes staring deep into nowhere. Velma called the paramedics. The seizure continued in the ambulance, into the emergency room, Forty-five minutes later he was sedated. His CAT scan showed a tumor the size of a tangerine in the front of his brain but the doctors couldn't be sure what it was. Surgery would follow in two weeks.

Dr. Bernstein, a renowned neurosurgeon, was about to drill out a large piece of bone, cut through the normal brain tissue, and carefully dissect out as much of this tumor as possible—all while Andrew was awake.

Even with this awake-craniotomy Andrew and Velma had been told that he may come out of surgery with his emotions flattened or he could “wake up like a vegetable.”

Regardless Andrew relaxed into the table, enveloped in a peace that passed all previous understanding.

Andrew's thoughts were drawn to his 96-year-old mother-in-law. A decade earlier, when Andrew's sense of humor had exceeded her tolerance, she suggested that he should have his brain examined. Lying on the stretcher, Andrew mused that “with an elementary school education she knew the diagnosis long before the ‘doctor-guy’ with the long list of letters behind his name and a dozen years of medical training.”

Andrew also contemplated his mother-in-law's initial reaction to hearing about his brain tumor. “Andrew, you have not been listening to God.” He later wrote,

“Perhaps it was a blinding glimpse of the obvious to her; however, to me, that insightful chord struck deep. It was one that I listened to attentively and that still lingers in my mind—often during my daily meditations.” Instead of being angry at his mother-in-law for a thoughtless comment, he thought about what he could learn from her way of thinking.

Andrews is reflecting as he’s on the operating table. - The surgeon started his saw. It made a terrible grinding sound like a powerful coffee blender. It took Andrew over a year before he was able to go into a starbuck’s coffee shop for fear of this terrible grinding sound.

He quips that the operation was a sure way to open up your mind and that his wife and sons must have offered the surgeon a \$20 bonus if he would cut a few of the brain cells going to his ‘sense of humor’ part of his brain.

With his fingers deep in Andrew’s brain, the neurosurgeon asked Andrew if he was seeing anything unusual, trying to assess whether Andrew’s brain was being irritated by the manipulation.

Suddenly, Andrew was pulled upwards and inwards all at once. He saw a beautiful purple/violet flame.

He was no longer just in the 21st century; he stretched himself back in time more than two thousand years. The songs of wisdom passed down for generations echoed in his head: “Ezekiel saw a fire a-burning, way in the middle of the air ... a fire within a fire a burning...”

These visions of a spiritual light reminded Andrew of his father-in-law Arthur.

As a young man, Arthur emigrated from Britain, farmed in Northern Ontario, and then served in World War II. Called to the ministry on his return, he brought his wife and three young daughters to Montreal, where he attended McGill University’s School of Divinity.

He and his family were dirt poor but happy and thriving until Arthur suddenly contracted meningitis and fell into a deep coma. People prayed to God to save this inspirational young man. Dr. Wilder Penfield, the pioneering neurosurgeon who first performed awake craniotomies, the same procedure that Andrew was

undergoing, was called in to try to save Arthur's life. Penfield watched as Arthur's body shriveled, and two weeks later suggested that the family gather to say their last goodbyes.

Meanwhile, Arthur felt angels pulling him to heaven. He felt himself going through a tunnel with a brilliant array of colors that are not seen in this physical world. He felt such a profound sense of peace he was sorry he wasn't allowed to go to heaven and had to return to this world. But his time had not come and his work was not done.

The next morning Arthur was sitting up at his bedside eating breakfast. Dr. Penfield was dumfounded and called it a miracle. Arthur went on to serve others in the ministry for 47 years and had an enormous impact on many people. He had a deep love of nature, the earth, the planets, and the stars.

Andrew believes he thought about his father-in-law on the operating table because he was expecting a miracle as had happened to Arthur. His belief that his brain tumor happened for a purpose. But the wait for the results and his experience over the next few months clouded over his faith.

The diagnosis: anaplastic oligodendroglioma, a rare but aggressive tumor affecting about 1 in 10,000 people with a cancer diagnosis. The main concern was that Dr. Bernstein was not able to remove all the cancer.

Andrew was completely beside himself when told that without further treatment he had perhaps a year to live.

Fortunately, another test showed that the tumor had a special genetic change (1p19q) that meant Andrew could be offered a new chemotherapy.

Meanwhile, Andrew felt overwhelmed by multiple stressors in his life including sorting out all the issues in his house, the fear of the unknown, his anger, dealing with death, making medical decision.

Andrew reflects back on this dark period and says, "Sure I was fine. I slept like a baby. I'd wake up every few hours and cry." He can laugh now, but he also acknowledges that it took time to heal from the profound grief.

Andrew felt like he was being tossed in waves of emotional turbulence, but at the same time had an overwhelming sense that something much bigger than himself was buoying him up.

He is both proactive and willing to surrender. His personal mantra throughout his journey has been “Pray as if it is up to God, but act as if it’s up to me.”

So while receiving the best that modern Western medicine can deliver, he did everything else he could to maximize his chances of recovery. He attended many counselling sessions, something he would never have considered a year before.

He changed his diet, exercised more, lost weight, allowed himself more sleep, began a daily meditation practice, became a Reiki Master, practised Tai Chi—whatever made sense and felt right. In some sense he was going with the flow or listening to God as his mother-in-law had suggested.

The Healing Journey program introduced Andrew to the concept that cancer cells grow in a ‘soup’ created by the molecules in the bloodstream and that he could change the composition of the soup through his thoughts and actions.

The cancer diagnosis cracked his emotional shell wide open. A caring comment from a friend will actually catch him. “As I peer deeply into their eyes and heart, my emotional lability freely brings tears to my eyes.”

Attitude of gratitude. He believes to his core that, as the poet Anthony Mizzi said, “Every problem offers new possibilities for something wonderful to happen.”

Or to paraphrase Helen Keller - He is too busy looking at the door opening in front of him instead of the one that has been shut behind.

Andrew is committed to serve others for whatever time he has left. He does not believe it is his time to die yet. How long he will remain on this earth is no longer a concern though. “There’s a surrender, an acceptance. It’s not my choice of when I will die. I may have some input but who knows. I can do all I can while I’m here. There was a great relief when I started to accept that.”

Andrew later wrote in his daily journal, “As long as the human spirit rises to the challenge of each new day and each new epoch, as long as we pursue worthwhile goals, as long as we strive, suffer, wrestle with our difficulties and endure, and as

long as we find wonder in the world, we are living our dying with love.” Now more than two years after his original diagnosis, there appears to be no indication that his tumor will recur. Andrew may live his dying with love for years to come.