

My Husband's Medical Team Was Failing Him. Then A Stranger Stepped In And Said 6 Words That Saved His Life.

Nancy Jorgensen

Ten minutes after my husband arrived in his hospital room, the space throbbed with doctors, nurses, therapists and technicians. Warnings beeped on machines. White coats huddled and whispered. And then Joel was rushed back out the door, gurney wheels spinning, propelled by a fleet of scrubs in sprint mode.

We had just returned from the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Our next trip would be from Wisconsin to Portland, Oregon, to welcome our first grandchild. But first, Joel elected to have a hip replacement. He counted on it to improve his quality of life.

Instead, a nick from the retractor caused a life-threatening bleed that set off a cascade of catastrophes. Within a few hours, he went from a healthy, active, 63-year-old to an unconscious, life-support-dependent ICU patient. Kidney failure followed, plus an obstructed colon and compartment syndrome — all complications of what should have been a routine procedure.

To make matters worse, the doctor who fucked up his hip replacement was in charge of fixing the mistake.

I had trusted too much — the doctors, the hospital, the statistics proclaiming hip replacement common and safe.

Why hadn't I asked more questions? I thought, berating myself. *Why hadn't I educated myself about the risks?* *Why hadn't I asked for the procedure to be done at a larger, regional facility?*

Prepared for a one- to three-day hospital stay, with a return to normal in six weeks, Joel instead embarked on a monthslong hospitalization with no guaranteed survival. And since he was drugged into incoherence, I made decisions for him. With no medical knowledge and little experience in trauma, surgeries or hospitals, I once again trusted too much.

The staff invited me to daily briefings, but their terminology confused me, and I missed information because they talked so fast. I wanted to go back in time. I hoped it was all a dream. Still, I tried to memorize their words and repeat each message to our daughters.

The community hospital's small cadre of ICU nurses monitored Joel around the clock, checking his breathing tube, supervising dialysis and scheduling multiple surgeries per week. Nurses handed me consent forms with little explanation, assuring me each surgery was essential to remove dead tissue from Joel's leg. I signed the forms until 90% of his lower leg muscle was gone.





The author (background left), her husband Joel (foreground left), her daughter, Elizabeth, and her partner, Josh, celebrating a birthday in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

Courtesy of Nancy Jorgensen

I had so many questions: *Why was the doctor who botched the hip replacement now in charge of Joel's recovery? Why did the lead surgeon disregard the colon specialist's recommendation to have Joel evaluated elsewhere? Why was there a rotating staff instead of one director in charge of intensive care? And why were two of Joel's doctors arguing at the central ICU desk?*

That's when a rabbi came to see me.

"You know what they're arguing about, don't you?" she said.

She never asked if we were Jewish (we're not) or if I needed spiritual guidance.

Just minutes before, a nurse had told me one doctor advocated amputating Joel's leg; the other disagreed. The argument continued.

Why only two doctors instead of a larger team? I wondered. *Why did they not ask my opinion? Who would make the ultimate decision?*

"You can request a different hospital," she told me calmly, as though she had been reading my thoughts. "You could have your husband transferred."

Those six words seemed so obvious.

Twenty minutes to the east was a prominent medical facility affiliated with a medical college and staffed with hundreds of doctors, research teams, and state-of-the-art equipment. But in the fuzz of shock and stress, I hadn't considered this alternative.

"Maybe discuss it with your daughters," the rabbi said.

For the first time in two weeks, I sensed someone on my side. She had assessed the situation and proposed I abandon the place that employed her. She suggested there was a better place than the one she represented. But more than that, she gave me agency. She assumed I had power even as I felt powerless. She assumed I was fierce even as I felt impotent.

Her suggestion seemed impossible. Doctors, not wives, made decisions.

Would anyone listen to me? I wondered. *How would I move a critically ill man who needed minute-by-minute monitoring?*

Still, I knew if I didn't act quickly, my husband's leg could be gone. He could even lose his life.





Joel playing with grandchildren Stanley and George in Sardinia, Italy. "Joel and I joined our daughter, Gwen, there to help with childcare while she trained for and raced a triathlon," the author wrote.

Courtesy of Nancy Jorgensen

I went home, and I made phone calls to that regional hospital. I discovered a team of limb salvage specialists who saved legs instead of amputating them, and I found a doctor to supervise my husband's case.

At 7 a.m. the next day, intimidated and fearful, I approached the authority figures I had been taught to trust — the medical professionals who towered from their self-constructed pedestals. I told them I had initiated a transfer and my husband would be leaving their facility.

All day, I endured delays, waiting for a bed, waiting for approval, waiting for coordination — waiting, waiting, waiting.

At 10 p.m., Joel was transferred in an ambulance to the larger hospital, where he would spend the next 2 1/2 months.

He still required surgeries, feeding tubes and dialysis. But now, he had a team of doctors dedicated to saving both limb and life, with resources beyond those in the local hospital. And he had a wife with a voice.

Would I have found my voice without that rabbi? I'm not convinced I would have. But once I initiated change, I intended to do it again.

Not all my requests were heeded. But sometimes, when I pointed out a symptom or insisted on a test, my inquiry led to a new treatment. My husband experienced medical errors in this new hospital too, but he survived. And aside from the leg brace he now wears, the blue handicapped sign on our car and the scar from his temporary colostomy, he is whole.

Compared to the dying man who laid unconscious and immobile, Joel is changed. I'm changed too. Shortly after Joel returned home, I consulted a law firm about a malpractice suit. After almost a year of meetings and investigations, they advised us to abandon the case. Wisconsin had a cap on damages, and the burden was too great to prove negligence.

Despite that disappointment, I still speak up. Now, before every doctor appointment, I compose a list of questions,

complaints and possible treatments. When a doctor pooh-poohs a test, I challenge their opinion. When a nurse minimizes a symptom, I repeat my concern. When a result goes unnoticed, I call attention to it. And my advocacy goes beyond medicine. When I appeared in court on a probate issue, I wrote a script for my lawyer with points to make to the judge.



The author (left), Joel (second from left), her daughter, Gwen (right), and her husband, Patrick (second from right), and the author's grandsons, Stanley and George.

Courtesy of Kenny Withrow

Although drugs, surgeries, therapies and hard work saved and rehabilitated my husband, it was a complete stranger who precipitated his move to the proper facility — and very well may have saved his life. Though life often seems impersonal, with virtual meetings instead of face-to-face interactions, texts instead of phone calls and blood tests instead of bedside manner, she made me feel connected to and cared for.

At a time when the universe had robbed me — of my husband’s health and companionship, of security, contentment and peace of mind — she offered me a gift. Expecting nothing in return, she stood by my side and held me up. She gave me confidence and hope. Her compassion healed and transformed as much as any test or treatment and left me looking for ways to pay her kindness forward.

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