

Let's Make This Personal

Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.
- Oscar Wilde

Here I share one of the many fascinating experiences on my path for writing this book. Let me start with some background. I have previously expressed my belief that most of us don't make significant changes in our lives, until we get a **MESSAGE** that we can't ignore. A lot of us might know intellectually that we should make important changes, but we just can't seem to get around to them.

Waiting until we get our own personal health **MESSAGE** is not a good strategy. The message can kill us! So we'll hear from other people who survived their own personal health **MESSAGES**, made significant changes in their lifestyle, and are willing to share their stories with us.

I wanted to have a few case studies that would illustrate and reinforce some of the key messages in *Live Long & Prosper!* So, I sent an email to Watson Wyatt associates in the U.S., asking them if they knew of anybody who had made these changes and were willing to share their story. I expected a handful of responses, but was overwhelmed by receiving over 50 emails from around the country in a few days. The people in my company are great!

At first, I didn't know what to do all of these heartwarming responses. I had so many inspirational stories, and I found it very hard to choose which to include. Then I decided it would be more powerful to include them all! So, here I present a number of small vignettes, along with three lengthier case studies.

Let's start with one of the longer case studies. I'll call this...

'Listen to Your Body'

Howie Weizmann managed Watson Wyatt's Washington D.C. office, which is our largest office and our corporate headquarters. Howie was a big shot in our firm. Here's his story.

I had just turned 50, and I thought my health was good. I had always exercised, but my weight had gone from 180 lbs to 230 lbs. I felt fine, although I had recently had significant stresses in my life, with my sister dying recently of cancer. In addition, there was a lot of stress in the office, as we had recently gone through a down-sizing and had to lay off some people. (Steve's note – keep this fact in mind when you read the next case study). It was not a happy time, and Jane, my wife, told me that I really looked stressed a lot of the time.

One day I was playing tennis, and after 5 or 6 minutes, I was breathless and had to sit down. This was very strange. Later, I was traveling in New York and was working out on a treadmill, and again felt breathless. The same happened when I drank coffee, so I stopped drinking it. This didn't do anything.

I thought this wasn't serious, but Jane convinced me to go to a doctor to have it checked out. I went to a GP who conducted a regular stress test. He noticed that something wasn't right, so he sent me to a cardiologist. I took a nuclear stress test – the one where I had to swallow a lot of dye. I went home, and vividly remember the phone call the next day. He said 'you have heart disease. One artery is 90% closed, and the other is 40% closed.' I blanched and sat down involuntarily.

I had an angioplasty, but it didn't take. A few weeks later, I had gone back to work and was experiencing chest pains. Jane said that we needed to take care of this, called me a cab, and took me to the doctor. They gave me another angiogram, and put me in a drowsy sleep. I woke up, and in a haze saw my doctor leaning over me, mouthing the words 'bypass.' I emphatically shook my head 'no,' and he emphatically shook his head 'yes.'

I had a double bypass the next morning. It was 48 hours of hell. I was connected to all kinds of tubes and tethers. I was in the hospital for a week, and the guy next to me was moaning all the time. It was the worst experience of my life, other than relatives dying.

When I recovered, I got religion about exercise and diet. Now I work out 6 days per week – aerobic and strength exercises. At first, I tried a total vegetarian diet – no meat, no milk products, no eggs. I did this for four months, but it was just too hard to do. For the last four to five years, I've used a modified vegetarian diet. I eat fish and soy products for protein, but still no meat. I gave up alcohol, except for an occasional glass of red wine.

I lost 15 to 20 lbs, but I still need to lose more. However, I have very little body fat, and a lot of muscle from my exercise. My blood pressure is 130 over 70, and my heart pulse is in the 60's. I monitor these constantly to make sure they are in the safe range.

I still work, but at a much less intense job than when I was at Watson Wyatt. I never see myself stopping doing some type of work, and making some contribution to society. I'm not afraid to make changes now.

I realized how much other people love me and depend on me. My wife and children have been very supportive. It is more important to stay alive for them, than for me.

Here's a spooky story. Another consultant in our New York office heard about my heart problems and had a talk with me. He was very intense and focused with his questions. I was glad to share my story, but thought nothing of it until one month later I heard he had died of a heart attack. Now I dearly wish I had asked about his situation, heard his story, and shared my experiences. Maybe I could have made a difference. (Steve's note – once again there will be a call-back in the next case study).

What are parting words of advice for your readers? Listen to your body. If something doesn't seem right, check it out. Don't minimize it or tough it out. Fortunately, my wife Jane was very insistent that I get things checked out, and she was very supportive in helping me make lifestyle changes. She has made the same changes, and feels a lot better also.

Live every day.

This next story has two call-backs from the first case study. I call this one ...

'I went to the abyss and looked over.'

Chip Paddock was an ambitious, hard-driving IT consultant in our Washington D.C. office. Here's his story.

I was age 45, within 5 to 7 lbs of my ideal weight. I was a runner, going 6 miles, 4 to 5 days per week. I thought I was in great shape. However, there was a history of heart disease on my mother's side of the family, and I never got my cholesterol checked. Bad move!

I got laid off when the Washington D.C. office was going through some tough times. I am a high achiever, and this was a complete shock. I internalized this event, which was not the most healthy way to deal with this. In retrospect, though, the whole event was the best damned thing that happened to me.

Soon after, one day I felt like I had a hole in my esophagus. I couldn't get any air in. I was sweating heavily, felt nauseous. I couldn't move – my body couldn't move beyond a walk. It was really scary, so I went to the hospital. They confirmed that I had had a heart attack.

When I was resting in my hospital room, the guy right next to me also had an attack. They put the paddles on him, trying to revive him. The only thing separating us was a curtain. I listened to the whole thing – he didn't make it.

Seeing my family afterwards was really hard. My wife and daughter were really scared – they both cried when they first saw me. Being there for them has been my biggest single motivation. I wasn't ready to leave them alone.

I went through a very positive rehabilitation program in Fairfax, Virginia. I learned about diet, sleep patterns, stress, and exercise. I learned my cholesterol was sky-high. Some things I had already been working on, such as exercise. But previously, I had paid no attention to diet. I thought that since I exercised frequently, I could eat anything I wanted. For the same reason, I was always racing the engine. I'd work until midnight, drinking 6 pots of coffee.

No longer! Now I pay close attention to my cholesterol levels. Every day, I have the same lunch. Some no-fat yogurt, some fruit, a few sourdough pretzels, some celery or carrot sticks. My diet is 90% fat-free. I've taken a number of steps to manage my stress. I have a job in the suburbs, and no longer have a long commute. This is huge for reducing my stress, as I now have a life. I meditate – spiritual practices and beliefs have become very important. When I come home, I shut off work. I'm also a big advocate of getting enough sleep. Sleep problems can be the first indicator of stress, that things aren't going right. Given my family history, I have to do everything right – diet, exercise, manage stress, get enough sleep, etc.

I openly share my medical history at work. At first, I was a little hesitant, because people might think I can't cut it. But I'm glad I did, because it saved a co-worker's life. One day a buddy, Jim, came to me and asked about my heart attack. I asked him why he was interested, and he started telling me about his symptoms. He felt bloated, had sore arms, and thought he had bad digestion problems. I said 'dude, I'll drive you or you can drive yourself, but get your ass to a doctor.' He had a heart attack, and we're all convinced he would be dead if he hadn't gone immediately to a doctor.

Parting words of advice for your readers? Acknowledge that you have a problem, get it verified by tests. Measure! Find out your cholesterol level, get your blood checked, keep track of the food you eat. Don't make decisions on anecdotal information – get assessed. Make sure you have a support group. I couldn't have done it without my wife. She has been my biggest single supporter with my diet and exercise. She has also changed her lifestyle – what she eats and exercise. She feels better also.

Just keep going, intellectually and spiritually. Don't stop trying stuff. Don't stop living.

Now, let's hear some shorter stories from people around the country.

Sandy Togstad, Minneapolis. I have had bronchial asthma since I was 7. All through school I never thought that I would be able to participate in any sports because of my asthma. I did begin exercising in 1986, and continued to make that a routine part of my week. After I turned 40 and was 20 lbs. overweight from having kids, I decided to change the way I live. I began running in September 1999 and lost the 20 lbs. within a few months. I made a change to my eating habits to go along with this new exercise regimen by getting a good combination of carbohydrates, protein and fat. I try to stay within the 50%, 30%, and 20% range respectively. Since I started running I have completed one marathon, numerous half marathons and plenty of 10K's and 5K's. I never would have thought I would be a runner! In 2003 I began entering in Triathlons and placed 3rd for my age group (40-44) at one competition. Each year at my yearly asthma check up my doctor says I should be a poster child for people with asthma. I can gladly say that I have over 90% of my lung capacity open. I feel my sons know that having a health problem is not an excuse to pass on an active lifestyle. If you take care of yourself, you can live a healthy active life.

Joleen Leach, San Diego. I injured my lower back several years ago. It seemed the pain came and went depending on how fit I was. When I started my first office (sit down) job the pain just got worse and

worse. After a while my sciatic nerve was so pinched that my leg would fall asleep while walking. Eventually I was crippled with pain and had to take a leave of absence. An MRI confirmed a ruptured disc and they scheduled me for surgery *6 months out*. I had nothing else to do but swim everyday and eventually just got better on my own without needing the surgery. I did see a chiropractor for a few months after my diagnosis but I now believe they are more of a short term fix than a long term solution. They can put your bones back in place and get you out of pain temporarily, but really it's exercise and strengthening your muscles on a regular basis that will hold things in place.

D. Veldhuis, New York. My father, who has diabetes, went in for stress test and then 'elective' heart surgery (based on the fact that his identical twin brother had gone in for a single bypass surgery). My dad required a triple bypass though there were no earlier signs of a heart attack. Long story short: he had four open heart surgeries in four weeks - with the last surgery being the most critical (he had a 50/50 chance of making it through). Thankfully he made it through and now is back at work living a 'normal' life through dedication to cardiac rehab (exercise) and a strict diet (high protein to promote the healing, which is difficult since he is a strict vegetarian).

The attached story is something I submitted to the American Diabetes Association for a written competition last year -- I was blessed to have won first place for the NY metro area. I think it might help give you further information on my dad's story.

Dear American Diabetes Association,

It all started because we were trying to be proactive – putting the word ‘preventive’ into practice. My dad’s twin-brother (my uncle) suffered from a heart attack in late 2001 and therefore was required to have single-bypass surgery. As my uncle and father are *identical* twins, we encouraged my father to go in for an angiogram... only to discover that he had a triple blockage and was due to undergo triple-bypass surgery. All of the reasons for this made sense, particularly as it was elective surgery (his heart was relatively stronger given no signs of an earlier heart attack) and because he suffers from diabetes.

His initial bypass surgery took place in February 2002 and a week later he was discharged. We were so proud of his strength during the surgery and were thrilled to have him back home. However, nothing would prepare us for what was to come just one week later. He became really ill and developed a high temperature. We took him back to the hospital to discover that his wound incision was infected – something that is fairly common amongst diabetics. After some testing (cat-scan) we learned that the infection was extremely deep, but that he had also suffered from kidney failure due to an ‘allergic reaction’ to the cat-scan dye. We were told that the kidneys are also greatly affected by diabetes and that renal improvement was possible, though there were no guarantees.

The second surgery, to assist the healing of his wound incision, was delayed due to the kidney failure. After several dialyses, his renal functions improved and he was strong enough to go in for the second open heart surgery (this time for a 'flap procedure', which involves moving the pectoral muscle to assist with healing). One day he seemed to be stronger, other days were more difficult... and then again horror – he had swelling in the chest area and they needed to go in for a third time to 'repair the flap' and the leaking in the chest area. Another 'flap procedure later', we were thankful to have him alive and would not give up, as he continued to fight.

As things seemed to improve, we were gaining strength and courage from dad. Again, one week later, we learned that the doctors had tried to remove some minor swelling in his chest and 'by accident' punctured the right ventricle of his heart. By now, it was March and we were numb to surgeries, hospitals and any human emotions. They took dad in for a fourth open heart surgery to repair the puncture... we waited for hours to then be told that he has a 50% chance of making it through. This was by far the most critical phase that dad had ever been in. Empowered by family strength and prayers, we waited...

While everyone was surprised that dad would even come out of the surgery, he, once again, proved his determination. He was brought up to the intensive care unit and was sedated for five days (as any movement or excitement could have taken his life). Over these five days, we continued to gain strength and inspiration from dad, as he was once again in the hospital bed waiting... He woke up almost one week later, and we prepared ourselves for a long mental and physical challenge ahead. Dad went through intensive cardiac rehabilitation and was finally discharged in April 2002.

Since then, he continues to gain physical strength through a well-balanced diet and regular exercise. His mental stamina comes from his strong spiritual belief, his love for family and friends as well as dedication to life itself.

For the family, he has challenged our mental strength and spiritual belief more than we could have ever imagined. For me, he has always (particularly as a small child) been my hero because he is my dad. Today, he is still my hero, but also my inspiration...

At work, I speak on his behalf and serve as an advocate for educating my coworkers about diabetes and cardio-vascular disease. During my day-to-day interactions with friends and acquaintances, I draw courage from my dad. He has provided me with a new perspective on life – I accept what I have, appreciate what I am given, and look forward to what lies ahead. On a very personal front, my dad has helped me become more knowledgeable about my own body and our family genetics, through constant encouragement (even if it is simply to exercise regularly--if he can go to the gym regularly, I have no excuse).

I am not sure that all the words in the world (let alone the words above) could truly express how he has inspired me. In some ways, I believe that perhaps actions are stronger than words. On October 20, I will be participating in the Walk for Diabetes (NYC)...*along side my dad*. Once again, he will be leading the way for me. To see him (eight months after his initial surgery) participating in the walk and crossing that finish-line, is truly an inspiration for a lifetime!

Sincerely,

D. Veldhuis

Age 28

Erin Zuercher, Cleveland. I want to tell you about my grandmother, who has certainly managed to avoid high medical bills in her later years. Currently she is 91, lives by herself on an 88-acre farm here in Ohio and is in excellent mental and physical health. Unlike many of her peers, she takes no medication regularly, drives herself to wherever she needs to go, works outside in her garden when she has the time and even mows the yard! It seems that she has managed to maintain her health by eating well, taking lots of vitamins and generally staying active.

I just wanted to share this story with you since I think she is amazing.

Kim Olson, Chicago. My mother might be a good example. She just turned 65. She works out at the gym every morning during the work week. Every two years, she goes to Mayo Clinic (mainly because she feels it is the best and it is nearby my hometown) for a thorough physical. Around 10 years ago, the doctor told her that she would be in a wheelchair in five years because of her back. She left and said "like hell I will." The next day, she signed up at the local gym and hired a trainer to learn about the machines and start a program.

Then two years ago, when she was back at Mayo, they found a growth on her liver. The doctor prescribed some medication, and she told him that she couldn't afford it (my siblings and I would have paid for it, but she didn't want to ask). She asked if there was something else she could do. He put her on a strict diet for three months and was told to return after that period. After the three months of eating the equivalent of rabbit food, she returned and the growth had disappeared. She continues with her exercise regime (mainly 5 miles of walking or other types of machine workouts plus weight training) and has turned into an inspiration at her local gym. In addition to the physical exercise, she has learned how to play contract bridge and has become quite competitive around the Midwest. She feels this is important for mental stimulation.

She is visiting my sister who lives in Italy until the end of next month.

Alan Shenefield, Los Angeles. Thoughts about my heart attack five years ago...

My heart attack brought about many lasting changes in my life. After the physical trauma of the event and the shock of learning just how serious it was—my attack caused permanent heart damage—I went through several phases of growth, awareness and learning.

The first phase I'll call "acceptance" because I learned to accept my fate and understand my desire to die gracefully with strength...if that's what it was going to come down to.

The second phase I went through was all about "survival". For me this forced me into making the changes that were necessary to change the statistical odds of my risk factors. I learned about exercise and diet and I changed my habits in these two areas dramatically. I was a smoker and I gave that up. I did very little exercise and that changed. I was overweight and went on a strict diet. Early in this phase, I made some radical changes that were not always for the better. For example, I completely gave up fat and oils, but part of my survival phase was also learning—really learning—what is right for me and I made many adjustments during this phase.

I think the survival phase also gave me confidence because I really found out what I was made of. I learned about myself and what environmental and external factors affect me.

This led to a third phase I'll call "renewal and reawakening". I became more in touch with my feelings than at any time before the heart attack. I have a different outlook on feelings now—I place more emphasis on them—and I am so much more sensitive to how I feel and how others feel.

The phase I am currently in I'll call my "balance" phase. I'm learning to adjust what I need with what other people around me want. I'm trying to balance my survival needs with the needs of my wife, friends, and colleagues. It's a real challenge, but I can't wait for the next phase.

What I learned is: some things are changeable like additional risk factors, speed of progression, and obtaining intervention care. What I now know is: that we all die, some die before others, but how fast we want to get there is sometimes in our hands.

Alan Glickstein, Boston. In early 1996, life was real good. Family great, working hard and doing well, feeling great. Sure I was somewhat overweight, but working out every day in the gym and being energetic and healthy left me unconcerned. As a bonus, I started losing weight steadily, without any impetus. Clothes were falling off my body, and I was looking slimmer than I had in years. After a few months of this, though, me and the people around me became concerned.

While I cleverly denied anything was amiss for many months, I was finally talked into visiting a doctor for a somewhat overdue check-up. He described me as the healthiest guy he had ever seen who had been losing a significant amount of weight for no reason. He took some blood tests 'as a precautionary measure,' and told me he'd call me in the next few days if there were any problems. Before I even reached home, they had the blood test back, called my wife, and said to get his ass to a hospital, his numbers are off the charts. That was fun! Wasn't anywhere on my top 100 ideas for likely next steps. Within 24 hours, I was in the ER, diagnosed with diabetes and running a very high blood sugar reading.

Over the following few days, I had a number of shocks to the system. Injecting insulin. Ruling out real scary things like pancreatic cancer. Learning lots about diabetes (it's permanent, not real well understood, progressive and has some real heavy long-term complications). Met a guy who was in the hospital for months because he stepped on something, and with the poor circulation that can come with diabetes, was at risk of amputation.

Within a week or two of getting discharged I had worked with my doctor to switch to oral medication. I established a diet and exercise regimen. While not fully vegetarian, I eat pretty low on the food chain - colleagues refer to it as "twigs" and "bark". Diet is fairly regimented, experience has told me it has to be - even a piece of bread that I don't know the content of (even whole grain) can send levels out of whack. I graze, eating about six times a day. Lots of fresh fruit and vegetables. Some skim milk. Lots of beans, tofu, peanut butter, some poultry and seafood and egg whites for the protein component. Breads are all whole-grain, spelt and the like. Nuts and seeds (flax, walnut) are a good source of healthy fats.

Nothing too special, but a fairly mainstream mix, maybe 60% carb, 20% protein, 20% fat. Dietary labels are an incredible help, took a while to be able to venture out for a meal, have learned how to manage portions (by measuring at first) and ingredients. Business travel is a challenge, especially timing of meals and inaccessibility of some items on the road.

Exercise is three pieces - cardio, strength and flexibility. A good 40+ minute stair/bike/rower workout weekdays, long walks on weekends is typical. Lots of recreational hiking, etc. as a supplement. Full body weight training 4-5 days week, mostly muscle tone and endurance, I'm not blessed with lots of muscle tissue. Yoga practice (flexibility as well as meditative aspects) a few times a week. Generally a personal practice, have done some classes and tapes.

Within a year I had weaned the oral medication down to zero, maintaining "normal" blood sugar levels with diet and exercise alone. I've been at my college fighting weight for over seven years now and the various progressions and complications have held off. Counter-intuitively, I have felt fine throughout most of this episode, the one obvious exception being immediately after being diagnosed and treated in a short period, there were eyesight, nerve (burning feet, etc.) and other unpleasant and frightening changes, evidently a side effect of rapidly lowering the(long-term) dangerous blood sugar level to something more normal.

This might have been avoided or picked up earlier if I had overcome the male aversion to visiting doctors. A few simple blood tests can reveal a lot in otherwise seemingly healthy people. Ironically, most of my friends are docs and I was reasonably educated in general about health issues, but not about diabetes, no family history, etc. Only risk factor was being overweight – I'm generally not in the typical age or ethnic zone for this. It's a daily challenge, but much easier than others have to deal with, and over time has propelled me to higher levels of health and balance than ever before in my life. I've worked my diet and exercise routine into my life – it's simply part of who I am now.

I told Alan that if he keeps this up, he'll probably live to 90 or 100!

At this point, I'd like to say that I saved the best for last, but that's not quite right. They are all great. However, this one is really moving. It comes from Susan Tom in San Francisco. She calls it ...

One potato chip.

One potato chip, two potato chip, three.....mmm, so yummy! I can't believe I just about ate the entire bag. Oh what the heck, might as well finish it. I'll do better tomorrow. Uh oh. What's this strange feeling? Sort of like gas going up my throat and up the sides of my neck. Maybe heartburn. Too many greasy chips I guess.

Wow, I've only been on the treadmill 5 minutes and I'm getting that heartburn feeling again like yesterday. More of the same gassy feeling going up my throat and up the sides of my neck. This couldn't be any sign of heart problems, could it? Nah, I'm too young, only 55. My left arm isn't numb and I don't feel any pain in my chest. I guess I'll just get off the treadmill and go home and take some Tums.

My acupuncturist is treating me for the heartburn. She thinks I'm too stressed. I made an appointment with my regular doctor for Friday. Today is Wednesday. I may cancel if I feel better tomorrow.

Boy, is it hot today – 85-90 degrees! I'm at Bentley School taking a tour around the campus. Just went down 50 steps to the lower parking lot. Oh no, I'm now half way back up and I'm dizzy. I better sit on the ground in case I really do pass out. What's wrong with me? That heartburn feeling is back again. I'm sweating up a storm but that's probably because the weather is so hot. After a 5-10 minutes rest, I should be okay to climb all the way back up. Uh oh, not feeling good again. Better rest some more. Think I can drive home but I better go straight to bed. I'm not feeling quite right.

My doctor asks why I'm there to see him. It's not a regular visit. I had been diagnosed with borderline diabetes 8 months ago. So immediately I started to exercise about 3 times a week, about ½ an hour each time, and I had been trying to watch what I eat. I wouldn't have 2 servings of lunch and a bag of chips. I would just have 1 serving of lunch and a bag of chips. I wouldn't have 3 pieces of fried chicken, just 2.

So, I had been losing a little weight. My cholesterol levels weren't great but there was some improvement. I had even lost 20 pounds in the 8 months. He is now perplexed with my heartburn symptoms and insists on an immediate EKG. The EKG shows 3 separate abnormalities. He wanted me to see a cardiologist the following Monday. I can't. My summer program is starting and I'm the director. Just give me some pills and I'll be fine.

He won't give me any miracle pills. He now insists I check into Summit Hospital immediately. I ask for an hour to go home and make preparations. No. Hospital now! Luckily my girlfriend, Linda, is with me. She didn't trust me driving to the doctor's myself after what happened yesterday. So she's with me to check into the hospital. It is so strange for a perfectly fine strong woman to walk into a hospital and say my doctor wants me here. We'll show him that this is just heartburn (I hope).

I'm wheeled up to the cardiac unit. I discover later that the real dire cases are next to the nurse's station and I'm far down the hall. But then, I probably shouldn't be on this ward anyway. I'm gowned, put into bed, and a little portable heart monitor is hooked onto me.

I make my calls home. I'm feeling fine, nothing wrong so far. The cardiologist, called in by my doctor, comes in later in the afternoon. "Well, Mrs. Tom, it looks like you had 3 insignificant heart attacks." Insignificant heart attacks? Oh God.....How's that possible? I didn't have any chest pains.

Women suffer heart attacks different than men. We do not necessarily have chest pains. We can have heartburn symptoms. We can even have a heart attack that feels like a hot flash. Hot flash? All my friends are having hot flashes now. So how do we know?

My family and friends are visiting me continually Friday evening and throughout the weekend. We're all saying how lucky I am that nothing major happened and that I am feeling fine. The cardiologist comes in again in the evening after I had a series of tests. He wants an angioplasty done Monday evening. This will show the extent of how all the fried goodies and potato chips have blocked my arteries.

It hits me early Sunday morning before anyone on my ward is awake. Of course I'm in the right ward now. I'm still lucky I didn't have to be moved near the nurse's station. I'll be okay. I'm glad the doctor insisted I come in immediately. Who knows? I could have had a stroke and died. Dying isn't so bad... Everyone will miss me for a while then life goes on. My children can make it without me. They still have a wonderful dad but...he'll miss me and I know very deeply. What will life be for him without me? Wait, I didn't die so we're okay. But what if I did have a stroke and was paralyzed? I can't let that happen. Oh God, I'm bawling and sobbing. In the loneliness of my dark room, I can't stop crying... Why me? I had been trying to be good the last few months. Dieting (sort of) and exercising (sort of) and I did lose 20 pounds. I have always maintained that even though I'm overweight, I am strong enough physically to carry my own weight. Why is this happening?

The angioplasty is the most amazing procedure. I get to see my own arteries on a TV monitor. Whoops...why is that nice clear artery all of a sudden pinched? What? That's a 95% blockage? 95% blockage – doesn't that mean I could have keeled over? The doctor wants to put a stent in the artery to open it up. He asks if that's that okay? By all means, stent it and fast, please.

All this happened the last week of June. It is now March. In that time, I have lost a total of 45 pounds along with a lot of muscle gain. My cholesterol level went from 270 to 143. My LDL is 80 and HDL is 55. My glucose level is normal. How? I am exercising 4-5 times a week. I use the treadmill, stationary bicycle, and the elliptical at the gym. With these machines, I run a total of 5-8 miles a day and I work out with weights. I also take a kickboxing class once a week. I didn't go on anyone's diet (no Atkins, Pritikins, Weight Watchers, etc) but my own.

I have cut out all sugars, enriched flours and a lot of red meat. I eat a low carb diet, mostly soy products, fish, fruits and lots of vegetables. Initially it took a bit of time to adjust my cooking habits. I try to substitute for oils, butters, and salt. I don't crave anything because I refuse to say I can't have this or that. The mind plays tricks when you say I can't, so I say I prefer not to. I can walk by a bag of potato chips without flinching but I can also put a chip in my mouth, chew it, savor the taste then spit the whole thing out. I look at fried chicken and I know that even if I ate it, it's not the weight gain that bothers me because I can always lose weight but I won't be able to do anything about that plague that will block up another artery.

I can move around faster, never realizing before that I was slow. I had to buy a lot of new clothes, from a size 18 to 12. I now have a very short hairstyle that I couldn't have before because my face was too chubby. People tell me I look great, and I know I do, especially when I can tuck in a shirt and put on a belt (which I hadn't been able to for the past 18 years), and with a flat, well somewhat, flat stomach.

I feel I am one of the lucky ones. The divine intervention was made to wake me up. I am taking up that opportunity to stay alive and healthy for me and for those who want me to, but it's ultimately all about me, and I'm worth it.

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These stories have truly motivated and inspired me, and have given me the encouragement and strength to make significant changes in my lifestyle.

Watch my diet. Exercise. Get enough sleep. Have a meditative practice. Develop a healthy work/life balance. Get the appropriate diagnostics. Take vitamins. Learn about alternative treatments. Sound familiar? I collected these stories after I wrote Chapter 7, Take Care, in *Live Long & Prosper!* It was very gratifying to see real-life verification of these healthy practices.

I get their **MESSAGES!** I'm not going to wait to get my own **MESSAGE.** I hope these stories do the same for you!