

Chapter Three:

A Third Opinion

Feeling confused, I set up a third consultation — this time on Thanksgiving Eve, with the head of Cardiology at UCLA. He reviewed my results carefully and walked me through exactly how he would approach the surgery. In the end, his recommendation mirrored Dr. Paulsen’s almost exactly.

I took it as an early Thanksgiving gift. It freed me to move forward with Dr. Paulsen and the open-heart procedure. There was real comfort, too, in knowing I’d be operated on at a world-class hospital five minutes from home, close to family and community who could support me through recovery. As it turned out, that closeness would matter more than I could have imagined.

A Premonition

The last item on my to-do list seemed like the easiest one: pick a date. Since it wasn’t an emergency, I had some flexibility — I could have pushed it as late as mid-December, since the studio was closing for three weeks and I’d miss less work.

Then I got a call from Frank, my partner on the ClickZero project. “Tony, I don’t want to stick my nose into your personal business,” he said, “but I had a premonition last night. You need to get into surgery as soon as possible. I don’t feel good about you pushing it out another two weeks.”

I thanked Frank and decided, without hesitation, to take him seriously. The next morning, I scheduled the surgery for December 2nd.

The Night Before Surgery

I’ve been a member of the Santa Barbara Men’s Circle for six years — a group that has been meeting on Tuesday nights, in various locations, for thirty years. It’s a listening circle with a revolving moderator. The power of spending two-plus hours a week with a group of men who truly listen to each other, in timed portions, is hard to describe. Being part of the circle helped me over the years, and I’d really missed being a regular part of the group while I was working in Burbank on Tuesdays.

One of the men knew about the surgery coming up on Tuesday, December 2nd, and suggested we hold a circle at my house the night before. Lo and behold, eight members of the men’s circle gathered that Monday night, holding sacred space in our living room, with my oldest son, Bailey, and my youngest son, Rowan, joining. My second son, Eli —

the preemie — adamantly decided not to join, telling me plainly, “After all, Dad, you’re not dying.” He said it with such conviction that, in retrospect, I’m grateful he stayed away. It seemed his own way of being supportive of my survival.

The net effect of bringing the circle into my life at such a pivotal moment was a deep sense of calm going into surgery. I’ll be forever grateful for their grace.

