

Near-death brought

no afterlife revelations

BY RAY FRAGER
(SUN REPORTER)

MAYBE MY EPIPHANY IS IN THE MAIL. All I know is that it still hasn't arrived. I've gotten lots of other mail related to my hospitalization, including a neat little Medic Alert tag.

But that epiphany? Nowhere to be seen.

I figure I'm supposed to have one. Doesn't that come along with almost dying?

One day in August, my heart stopped four times. Each time, I got a jumpstart to get it beating again.

Two questions I'll answer right away:

- No, I don't know if somebody yelled, "Clear!" — as they do on television — when they stuck the paddles on my chest. I was passed out at the time.

- Sorry, but I don't recall heading to a bright light.

Since returning to work in September, I have recounted my life-threatening experience several times. No matter how often I tell it, the memories still have a surreal quality.

One moment I was lying on a hospital bed, a couple of days after having been admitted to treat pneumonia, antsy about going home. Doctors had noted an irregular heartbeat.

Next thing I knew, I was being wheeled somewhere, and all these people were hovering over me. I think I heard something about my heart having stopped. I wasn't in any pain. When I got done being confused, I was scared in a way I'd never been before.

A nurse with an extremely calm manner was telling me again what happened. Her calm helped calm me. My wife arrived, and next thing I knew, I was

opened the second time. After I came to, she was right there. Even now, I can't believe how composed she seemed. But even now, she can't talk about what she was feeling.

We decided I would transfer to Johns Hopkins Hospital. While in the ambulance, about 10 minutes from Hopkins, it happened one last time. So, yes, I suppose I could say that drive literally was a heart-stopping trip.

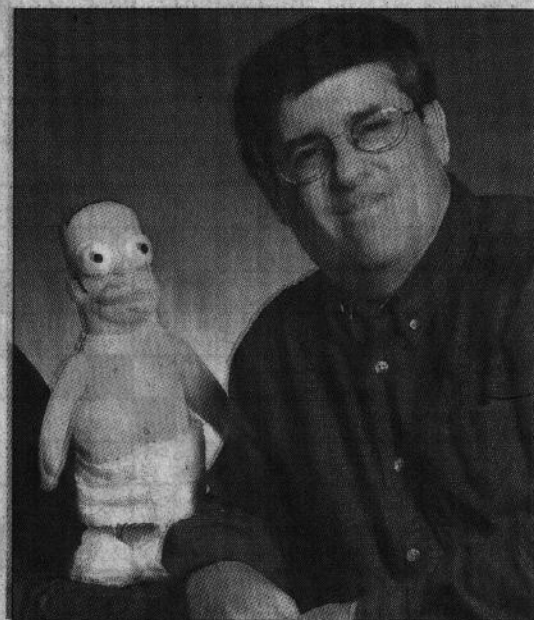
Once I was at Hopkins' cardiac intensive care unit, time kind of condensed for me, because the next part seemed to happen so fast.

My wife arrived. Soon after, my daughter and son were in the room, accompanied by their mother (my ex-wife) and her boyfriend. My wife's demeanor betrayed no panic. My kids were visibly shaken. My daughter, 23, was dabbling at tears. My son, 18, maintained his usual stoic countenance, but I could see that, behind his eyes, he was struggling to contain his emotions.

Then a doctor appeared to deliver the news. My heart had a reaction to a couple of the antibiotics I was given for pneumonia. "This isn't going to kill you," the cardiologist said. "Something else is going to kill you, but not this."

I spent the next nine days at Hopkins, undergoing three surgical procedures, seeing a parade of white-coated doctors and doctors-in-training, getting prodded by various technicians and being attended to by a diverse group of nurses who seemed to have little in common other than their decency and unfailing good humor.

I left Hopkins with a defibrillator implanted in my chest, advice on eating healthy, the suggestion I drop some weight and the good word that I could re-



Ray Frager draws strength from Homer Simpson.
GENE SWEENEY JR. [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

suming regular activities as soon as I felt up to it. That means a return to pickup basketball, but I won't be playing defense, rebounding or passing. Of course, that's how I've always played.

Then — I'm not sure if it was a half-hour, hour or two hours later — my heart stopped again. Actually, twice, as I subsequently found out.

My wife was right next to the bed when it hap-

NEXT THING I KNEW, I WAS BEING WHEELED SOMEWHERE, AND ALL THESE PEOPLE WERE HOVERING OVER ME.

So no change in playing basketball and no real change in me. It didn't happen when I turned 50 earlier this year, and so far this experience hasn't done it either.

For family, friends, colleagues, the good news is that I survived. The bad news might be that I'm not a better Ray. Which — among other things — means I don't get a whole lot more introspective than this.

A turning point in my stay at Hopkins was the arrival of a little yellow man. My wife brought him from the hospital gift shop. Homer Simpson showed up with get-well balloons tied to his arm, ready to sing "Macho Man" at the squeeze of his hand. Not the sort of thing you bring to a dying man. Homer has come to work with me, standing on my desk and occasionally — to the consternation of everyone within earshot — breaking into song.

And who knows? Maybe someday, when I look back into his bug eyes, I'll find my epiphany

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