

I am an introvert.

That may be difficult to believe, but I can tell you that a conversation about my feelings invariably results in me looking awkwardly at my shoes while I struggle to mumble some type of response. As introverts go, we are often reluctant to share personal struggles, as we do not wish to bother others with our issues. With that in mind, I can tell you that writing this column was not easy for me, but I hope that it helps a few others.

So, here goes. Christmas Day 2020 was spent with my wife and kids in our small apartment in Vancouver. It had been many years since just the four of us had spent Christmas Day together, and we spent the day together eating, playing games, and enjoying each other's company. On Boxing Day morning, I awoke early feeling refreshed and prepared to go for a long morning walk while the rest of my family slept. Twenty minutes later, I had a heart attack.

I was only a few blocks from my home when I experienced a strong but dull throbbing in my right shoulder and neck. It seemed unusual, but nothing extreme and I was prepared to keep walking. What really stopped me in my tracks and caused me to reconsider was the intense feeling of anxiety and dread that accompanied the pain. I turned around and walked back home, woke up my wife, took some low dose aspirin (which I didn't realize had expired), and was in the emergency ward at the UBC Hospital within 15 minutes.



@Optimus_Rime

With the COVID-19 protocols in place, my wife could not come into the hospital. I was admitted, tagged, and hooked up to an IV, as well as an EKG to monitor my heart. My initial blood test did not reveal any issues with my heart but, a few hours later, a follow-up blood test revealed that I had experienced a moderate heart attack. My cardiologist would later describe the event as, "...a rather good rodgering" of my heart – you may, or may not, want to look that up. That afternoon, I was transferred to the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit of VGH where I met the medical team that would care for me over the next few days. When initially introduced to my cardiologist, he handed me his business card and ironically informed me that the card was actually for my lawyer. My sense of humour tends to skew to the darker side, and upon receiving the card I immediately thought that my cardiologist and I were going to get along famously. The rest of the story is difficult to put into words, so as a film buff I have chosen to illustrate the sequence as if it were written as a montage in a movie script.

**INT: CARDIAC INTENSIVE CARE
UNIT – MONTAGE OF IMAGES**

The patient KEVIN is seen in multiple images... resting in his hospital bed... lying on the catheter surgical table nervously awaiting his angioplasty surgery... having nurses check his IV... sleeping upright in his bed... looking forlornly into the distance... delicately putting on his street clothes... wearing a mask as he says goodbye to the ICU STAFF with his wife KAREN by his side.

Prior to my little 'wake-up call' I believed that I was already doing many things right. Like most of you, I thought about chronic illness, particularly as I aged, but heart disease was not something that I worried

about. I ate well, was a non-smoker, drank little, and exercised intensely many times per week as a CrossFit enthusiast. And though I was doing most of the right things, I have now begun to do *more* of the right things, particularly when it comes to nutrition and stress. While I have always understood the health benefits of meditation and vegetarianism, I did not think those things were necessarily for me. However, I now meditate regularly, and my diet is largely vegan.

Like many of you, sense-making is important to me, and I have spent the last few months with my medical team searching for the answers regarding my heart event. There is no real history of heart disease in my family, and I led a healthy lifestyle, so what could have been the cause? I have come to the conclusion that my heart event was likely a result of the cumulative effect of decades of work-related stress as a Principal and Vice-Principal. And I am certainly not alone in this. More and more of our members are succumbing to stress-induced illnesses, sometimes with tragic outcomes.

Chapter visits are the best part of being BCPVPA President as they are always inspiring. You learn so much about the leadership context of our members when you visit them and breathe their air. As President a few years ago, I visited a small Chapter. We were a small enough group to occupy a large table at a restaurant where they held their meeting. I informally shared my BCPVPA report, enjoying the intimate setting of the evening, and the Chapter moved on to their regular meeting business. At the end of the business portion of their meeting, and without any prompting, they all raised their glasses to toast one of their colleagues who had passed away from a heart attack. The toast to their beloved colleague caught me by surprise, and the introvert in me struggled to offer any type of meaningful response. I felt my own emotions rise as I realized that this touching tribute was an important Chapter ritual. Each time they gathered, they held the space to remember their colleague and his impact on their lives. I have since learned that this small Chapter has included four members who have had heart attacks, two of them with tragic consequences. The story of their loss has

played out in other Chapters, and the issue is likely to continue alongside the increased complexity and intensity of the work of school leaders.

For my entire school leadership career, I lived, worked, and raised my family with my wife in a small community. Living in a small town is like living in a large family. You are seen and known by many, and when faced with a personal or professional challenge, the community often rallies to offer support. With 2,600 members across the province, if the BCPVPA were a small town we would be about the size of Princeton. And as small communities are often known for taking care of those around them, I want to thank a few members of our BCPVPA small town who have been so helpful and supportive as I continue to recover.

Katie Marren, Vice-Principal in Prince George, who has become a tremendous support and guide. Katie sends me yoga suggestions and her own personally recorded guided meditations which I listen to regularly.

Jack MacNeill of humanworks. Jack is a close personal friend, and I cannot overstate my appreciation for Jack's friendship and skilled support. If you ever wonder if there is a person in this world who has figured out life, it is Jack.

BCPVPA Past-President **David DeRosa**, whose work on compassionate systems leadership gave us all permission to speak openly about our wellbeing. And while I heard David's message many times over the years, I clearly was not listening. *Molte grazi, amico mio.*

For all my adult life, I have been a self-taught advanced beginner/intermediate guitar player. As an introvert, I rarely play in front of others apart from my family who have grown accustomed to listening to my discordant practice as I attempt to learn a new piece. I know very little about music theory, but what I have come to believe is that my outlook on life has been characterized by the upbeat and easy optimism of a musical Major Key. Understandably, my heart event has caused a temporary shift in my outlook that is personified by a more melancholic and somber tone of a Minor Key. I know that this only temporary, and that in time I will come to see the guitar's fretboard as I used to see it. As I continue to move my hands along the fretboard, I will stumble upon the elements of the right scale that will lead me back from a Minor Key to my natural Major Key.

In a way, I am attempting to learn a new piece that requires me to be patient, intentional and forever grateful that I have this opportunity to learn. And when I eventually reclaim that natural Major Key outlook, I will have my small community to thank for it. I know that there have been times when you have had to either rely on your own communities for support, or you have provided the support that others have needed. Be confident that the compassion you show to the people you serve, and the colleagues you work with, does not go unnoticed. In fact, our system thrives because of it.

Shawn Lockhart, Boundary Principal, whose endless optimism and hilarious text messages have confirmed for me that Shawn is the human equivalent of the feel-good movie of the year.

Paul Hembling, Kamloops Principal, who upon learning of my heart attack gave me some great vegan book suggestions, along with his equally appreciated cider recommendations. *(Sorry Paul, but I only have one glass of red wine per week these days)*

BCPVPA President **Darren Danyluk**, Executive Assistant **Sharon North**, and my wife **Karen**, who formed a trio to ensure that I continue to recover. It is interesting to me that their names all rhyme, and this clearly begs for a witty superheroish nickname which, to this point, has escaped me. I am open to suggestions.