

There are rare moments in life when we can be so completely aware and totally in awe of how the human spirit is powerful enough to prevail over human frailty.

For my husband Michael, and me, one such defining moment came 14 months and 13 days after his second liver transplant.

The moment would forever stand out in time -- when he crossed the finish line at America's Triathlon in Austin on Memorial Day, 2004. It literally and figuratively marked the culmination of his four-year fight against deathly sickness and his remarkable comeback from 10 major surgeries, including two liver transplants.

Just a little over a year earlier, he had been so weak he couldn't lift himself out of bed. But, here he was on that sultry day in May, swimming a half of a mile, bicycling 16 miles and completing a 3.2 mile run route in 104-degree blazing heat.

As he battled through the course, I cheered him on when he was within earshot with our newly-adopted family motto: "Live Like You Mean It!" And, my pride took shape in tears.

When Michael crossed that finish, arms raised in personal victory, the massive upside-down "Y"-shaped scar on his torso was the only tell-tale sign to outsiders of the war he had waged.

"It was overwhelming emotionally," he said. "I was exhausted, but it was relief in a sense that I had finished when I didn't know at the start if I could."

"I thought back to the (donor) families -- even though I don't know who the second family is -- and I was so very thankful," he said.

That gratitude had helped ebb the pain he suffered from severe leg cramps during the race. "Whether I'm doing a triathlon or anything difficult physically -- I do think of the donors' families often. It gives me a little boost, some get-up-and-go. I can't feel the pain so bad. I pedal harder," he said.

Triathlons, by design, are grueling as they test an athlete's endurance. But, Michael is not new to that concept.

"In a triathlon, you know the pain will be over at some point, but you don't know that when you're lying in a hospital bed hurting and waiting to be put on a transplant list," he said.

At the age of 29, Michael was struck by a rare liver disease, suffered 17 months of sickness and painful treatments before surviving his first transplant on Valentine's Day, 2002. After overcoming a severe episode of rejection, he recovered over the next several months only to have doctors discover another problem with a main artery leading to his liver.

Surgical attempts to fix that "faulty artery" in the early days of 2003 only led to more serious illness and his need for a second transplant.

We received that highly-anticipated call on March 17, 2003 -- St. Patrick's Day.

And, unlike the first transplant when we faced a long drive from our home in Fredericksburg to Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, this time the trip was from across the street. We had been stationed there "on-the-ready" in an apartment complex for patients appropriately named "Twice Blessed".

The transplant operation lasted around six hours -- shorter than the first one -- and Michael not only received a new liver, but also the arterial system with it to replace that which had been failing for months.

Because of his history of infection leading up to transplant, the "team" of doctors insisted on two abdominal wash surgeries, which followed on March 20 and March 22.

In no time at all, the difference the new liver made was clearly evident, with Michael's skin tones getting back to near-normal in color and his appetite returning.

Just six days after his last surgery, on March 28, we surprised our son with the best birthday gift we could ever give him.

Austin was being brought to Dallas for his first post-transplant visit and Michael gained release from the hospital just in time to get to the apartment to open the door upon Austin's arrival. The look on the birthday boy's face was priceless.

Because of not one, but now two donor families who had the presence of mind to be generous even in their times of loss, we had been able to be together as a family to watch Austin turn six *and* seven.

Their gracious gifts were far-reaching and affected more than just the life they helped save -- they gave our family back a father, a husband and a son.

"I was lucky enough to get two transplants when there's such a shortage of organs out there," Michael said, adding that not a week goes by now that he doesn't meet someone who has had a relative or friend die while on a transplant waiting list.

"There's a big, big deficit of organs that are available. I just want people to understand how much organ donation really does affect someone's life," he said.

“Most of the things I’ve cherished seeing since transplant were things that other people did, not necessarily my own,” he added. One memory he holds dearly is that of Austin learning to ride his bicycle. “It meant so much to me to see that – to be a part of that,” Michael said.

He has witnessed many other milestones, too, that at one time he wasn’t so sure he would.

Less than a month after his second transplant in 2003, Michael had gained strength and weight and seemed to be on the mend. We were *finally* on our way.

But then came another disheartening setback. A surgical connection made during the transplant operation failed, resulting in bile leaking into his abdomen. The only way to fix it was surgically and we joked that they should have installed a zipper, because by this time, they couldn’t even close his incisions.

“We definitely always tried to have humor and to spin things as good as we could in an effort to keep up hope. We never dwelled. We weren’t going to give up and say ‘We’re not going to overcome this.’,” he said. “And that should be true for life. When you run into a problem, examine all the solutions. Even if it doesn’t seem like there’s an answer, it’s almost always out there,” he observed.

“There’s always somebody hurting or in worse shape than you think you are,” Michael said. “I always tried to keep that in perspective. I had hope, where some people lose that.”

Michael underwent repair surgery on April 11 and then had two more abdominal wash-out surgeries on April 15 and April 17. That brought the number of major surgeries to nine in four month’s time. But, that would be the last.

Two days later, on April 19, I would get the best birthday present I could ever receive, too, since we heard word that it would be Michael’s last overnight stay in the hospital.

My mother-in-law, Joyce, who was so supportive during all the trials and tribulations of her youngest son’s journey, stayed true to her nurturing instincts and made a birthday feast – with cake -- and catered it in the room on the 14th floor. She, my mother Dora Treiber, Austin, Michael and myself all shared it with the nurses and staff we had come to know so well.

When the meal was done, Austin and Michael surprised the workers even more when they set up a make-shift “laboratory” on the hospital pull-out tray so that they could dye eggs. The next day was Easter and we felt the Easter Bunny might need a little help if he was to find us in our “home away from home”.

The next day, Michael was released and allowed to continue his daily tests and monitoring as an outpatient. We lived in the apartment until we were finally allowed to move home just before school let out for summer – almost exactly five months from when we first left home on what we thought would be a simple overnight visit for testing.

Now, a little over a year later, there is still not a day that goes by that Michael doesn’t realize how lucky he is to have made it this far. He has a different outlook now. He sees blessings in even the smallest things and takes the important ones to heart.

He does his best to live a productive life, having come back to his self-run computer business. And, he feels fortunate to have been received by a community with open, welcoming arms.

“I want people to know that everything they did while I was sick – the prayers, cards, letters, flowers, food, well-wishes – was so important to us,” he said. “And, they always seemed to show up at just the right time, when we had gotten some bad news. It always picked us up!”

Now that he is a picture of health, there are times that it is easy for others to accept the triathlete with the big smile and joking manner and forget the reality of him being a recent two-time transplant patient.

Still, there are moments that no one sees, but us. They are filled with excruciating migraines and other maladies, as well as with worry brought on by out-of-sorts lab tests.

“Training has allowed me to get to the point where I can physically do more than I could. But, I do wake up sometimes and am sick in the morning, or sick at night, or sick in the middle of the day. Still, I push myself because I know that in the long run it will make me feel better,” he said.

We know we can never escape from living life “by the numbers”, but that’s okay. We have accepted what is a “normal” life for us. The numbers remind us of where we’ve been and how far we’ve come together.

And, more importantly, remembering our story refreshes our understanding of how an undying spirit can outlast nearly anything.

“I see what I would have considered ‘normal’ differently now. I don’t want to live a normal life. I don’t want to be caught up in material things. I want a simple life – to be able to enjoy the time I have with my family,” he said.

“They don’t have any numbers yet to tell how long a second transplanted person will live. It may be two years, it may be 20. But, if it is only two years, then I want to be here for my family -- to be a good example for my son and to love my family as much as I can,” he said.

“Every day I think about what is most important and what is not. I make sure I go through that day without regrets because, with me, I never know what’s going to happen the next day,” he added.

None of us can be sure what lies ahead in our own futures, but what we can be certain of is that there is the capacity in each of us, while we are here, to be an inspiration – if not on a wide scale, then to at least our family and friends.

We can persevere through seemingly insurmountable circumstances with a little luck and a lot of willpower.

We can also know, after all we’ve been through, that without a doubt miracles happen all around us everyday – some much less conspicuous than others. The true accomplishment is in recognizing them for what they are.

Michael was fortunate in that he was able to become relatively healthy again. But, even those with permanent disabilities know it is their attitudes and how they treat others that defines them.

“Physically, the hardest part of it all was relying and depending upon someone else. Losing your independence is really difficult, even if for a short time,” Michael said. But, he took care to avoid the trap of self-pity and always tried to make those who were caring for him feel at ease. “I’d always rather it had been me than someone else in my family,” he said.

“To try to stay healthy is a primary objective now. I was on the path to doing the triathlon before I got sick,” he said. After transplant, “I thought, I’m going to prove to myself I can get back to where I want to be, physically.”

And so, he pushes himself with a zealous workout schedule. “Exercise helps me to feel more normal in the physical sense. I’m doing things that healthy people could do, but most don’t. It makes me feel better about myself,” Michael said. “Plus, if another situation comes along, (fitness) may be the thing that ‘puts me over the top’ like it did before.”

“And, really, I want Austin to see that even with his diabetes, you can’t let one thing stop you from doing the things you want to do,” he said.

“I think the most important thing from all this is to live a good life. To *live* every day,” he said. Adversity is merely a challenge to our grace.