

My Quirky List of Useful Books

My quirky reading list is haphazard, reflecting serendipity (books from friends or noticed on a waiting room table) as much as my needs at various times, whether for information, companionship, solace, expansion, or distraction. These books may be useful to anyone coping with a major life change of any kind, not just the vicissitudes of cardiovascular disease. My list is by no means a review of cardiac literature or the literature of medicine. And I certainly intend no slight to worthy books not included here. Some I may have read long ago, their impact deep within my subconscious. Or they may still be in my pile of books to read!

Anatomy of the Spirit (also called ***Energy Anatomy*** on CD) by Carolyn Myss, PhD. This book and CD were recommended to me by my friend Toni, a gifted massage therapist. Read this treasure to explore the mystical connection of body, mind, and spirit. Most immediately useful to me was Myss's suggestion to think of the body as a bank from which we withdraw energy—human energy, which is finite. This image is with me always, helping me to halt drains on the vital energy that my precious new heart needs. (Then again, sometimes I fail!)

Being Mortal by Atul Gawande, MD, a practicing surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Atul Gawande is one of my personal heroes for his fearless exploration of the struggles and contradictions of his own profession. In ***Being Mortal***, Gawande exhorts clinicians, patients, and families to consider one overarching question in any decision about the mortally ill and elderly: "How does this enhance the quality of a patient's *life*?" Please read this engaging book if you are taking care of someone ill or dying, or if you anticipate this responsibility. Please read it if you are ill or getting on in years. Please read it if you are thriving and recognize that you, too, are mortal. ***Being Mortal*** is an important book by a great humanist.

The Change Before the Change: Everything You Need to Know to Stay Healthy in the Decade Before Menopause by Laura E Corio, MD with Linda G. Kahn. A friend gave me this book years ago, marketed as ***The Essential Book for Every Woman Over 35***. It certainly was for me at the time, helping me to sort out cardiac symptoms from what was just a woman's body going through its change. This book has an excellent chapter on heart disease.

A Change of Heart by Claire Sylvia with William Novak. A vegetarian ballet dancer, Claire Sylvia received a heart and lung transplant and soon afterwards began to crave beer, chicken nuggets, and cigarettes. Then she bought a motorcycle. After tracking down her donor's family, Sylvia learned that he had died in a motor cycle accident, and she had apparently inherited his likes and dislikes along with his organs. Sylvia's experience was unusual, but it is not unheard of. Many doctors are not comfortable discussing this occasional phenomenon and may even deny it. This book made me wonder not just about the power of spirit, as the authors intended, but about the power of cellular memory. Claire Sylvia died in 2009, 21 years after her transplants.

The Climb of My Life by Kelly Perkins and *Sick Girl* by Amy Silverstein are spirited and engaging memoirs about facing, receiving, and living with a heart transplant. Though we three were young women when afflicted with heart disease, we have very different medical histories and are very different people: a California athlete who climbs mountains, an intense lawyer living in New York City, and a former academic and business woman, now living quietly, season by season, in western Maine. Our stories express our individual ways of coping physically, psychologically, and spiritually. These authors, my fellow survivors, have my deepest respect.

Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese, MD. I read this brilliant novel purely for its literary merit and was deeply moved by the story of orphaned twin brothers who come of age in Ethiopia as it hovers on the brink of revolution. The children of an English surgeon and an Indian nun, the brothers are bound by both a preternatural connection and their shared fascination with medicine. The life of the brother who becomes a doctor in the United States was especially fascinating to me as my own world expanded in the United Nations that is MGH. So, while this book is above all a high literary achievement, it also deepened my appreciation of the lives of doctors. It reminded me that they put their own complex stories on hold every day to care for others. Verghese, an internationally respected physician and professor of medicine at the School of Medicine at Stanford University, is a true humanist and one of my personal heroes.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby is one of my all-time favorite books, a memoir written with the haunting precision of poetry. (My favorite scene involves the smell of French fries.) In 1995, when he was the editor of French *Elle* magazine, Bauby suffered a massive stroke that left him completely and permanently paralyzed, a victim of “locked-in syndrome.” Once renowned for his gregariousness and wit, he found himself imprisoned in an inert body—able to communicate only by blinking his left eye in code for each letter of the alphabet. Blink by blink, letter by letter, Bauby dictated this beautiful small book to his secretary before he died in 1996. A heroic demonstration of the life force within each of us, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is now a magical movie, directed by artist Julian Schnabel. But promise me you will read the book first.

Drinking the Rain by Alix Kates Shulman. Drop everything and read this book. We cannot all leave our busy, pressured lives, move to an island off the coast of Maine, and live alone without plumbing, power, or a telephone. But with Shulman as our gentle, honest guide, we can go there in our imaginations and grow from the vicarious experience. Shulman has written a magical book about turning 50 and reassessing everything while foraging for wild greens and shellfish. People like Shulman, who can take themselves out of the rat-race for awhile—without being forced out by a heart attack, as I was—are the truly wise ones. Anyone else out there think that a little sabbatical is a good idea for adults in mid-life?

Forgive for Good by Fred Luskin, PhD, Director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University. This little has book played a surprisingly essential role in my recovery and long-range cardiac health management. As I came to understand, healing all of you—body, mind, and spirit—following any cardiac event often requires learning new skills for decreasing anger, hurt, depression, and stress. Luskin’s research proves that the skill of forgiveness should be part of that mix. It turns out that learning to forgive for good leads to increased physical vitality, hope, and optimism—all very good for heart health. His approach has been applied to the conflicts in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone, as well as with family members of people killed in the World Trade Center attack of 9/11. Everyone should read this book, or any of Luskin’s other books, which contain essential love lessons.

Healing from the Heart: A Leading Heart Surgeon Explores the Power of Complementary Medicine by Mehmet Oz, MD. Before he became the famous TV personality, “Dr. Oz” excelled as a cardiovascular surgeon at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. Published just after my first heart attack and given to me by a friend, this book was a gift in all senses of the word. Precisely because of Oz’s reputation as a high-tech surgeon, his discussion of complementary medicine’s place in his cardiac surgery practice gave me the courage I needed to explore my own sensible integration of allopathic and complementary medicine in my recovery.

Heart: A Personal Journey Through Its Myths and Meanings by Gail Godwin. I absolutely loved this book, a thoughtful, meandering walk through the many meanings of “heart”: historical, literary, and personal. It’s a meditation.

Heartsounds is journalist Martha Weinman Lear’s memoir of her first-husband’s demise—as much from heart disease as from failures in the very medical system to which he belonged as a New York City urologist. This 1970s groundbreaker clearly helped nudge the system forward for all of us. Though long on personal medical detail, *Heartsounds* is still a relevant read today. While much has changed technically since Dr. Lear’s death, we still struggle with clinician-patient relationships, as his wife movingly describes. This book also offers transplant patients historical perspective on how far we have come since 1978, when 50-year-old Dr. Lear was considered too old for a heart transplant. Thirty years later in her 2014 book, ***Echoes of Heartsounds***, the author is now the cardiac patient and married to another good man—who takes care of her.

How to Live: A Life of Montaigne by Sarah Bakewell. After reading this book, I fell in love with Montaigne, as the author clearly has. Yes, I read his essays during college, but it is enriching to have a guide like Bakewell. She brings Montaigne and his times to life, putting into sharp perspective our own efforts to live well in the midst of turmoil and strife. Read a chapter; then take a break and think about it for awhile. My reading lasted a year.

In the Country of Hearts: Journeys in the Art of Medicine by John Stone, MD. Prepare to be deeply moved and inspired by this cardiologist-poet's soulful observations about medicine and a doctor's relationship with his patients. Stone adds much needed dimension to our understanding of a doctor's inner life and suffering.

Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life by Philip Simmons. A must read, especially for assistance in coming to terms with devastating change. Simmons was in the prime of his life, a young husband and a father, when he developed ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. This book is a series of essays that track Simmons' search for understanding and peace. His relationship with everyday life deepens as his time runs out.

Life with Sudden Death by Michael Dowling. An author and teacher of writing at Tufts University, Dowling suffers from ventricular tachycardia, a deadly cardiac arrhythmia that surfaced during the prime of his life. I enjoyed this book as much for its hilariously tender portrait of a boy growing up gay in a large Boston Irish-Catholic family as for the author's companionship during the nine years when I, too, lived with ventricular tachycardia and an ICD sewn into my chest.

The Lonely Patient: How We Experience Illness by Michael Stein, MD. An experienced physician and professor of medicine at Brown University, Stein crossed a border during the illness and death of his beloved brother-in-law. The depth of his feeling for his friend yanked the physician's clinical reserve away and forced him to consider the personal narrative of the patient—in all its loneliness. I wept through the book. I felt heard.

Love and Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy. In this book, one among his many, Dean Ornish, MD addresses how love and joy can actually help strengthen the heart muscle. I loved this book; it gave me courage. Read anything by Ornish and these other visionaries in the fields of prevention, the mind/body connection, and integrative medicine:

- **Herbert Benson, MD**
- **Larry Dossey, MD**
- **Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD**
- **Andrew Weil, MD.**

A Man After His Own Heart by Charles Siebert. I had intended to read this book as part of my heart transplant preparation, but misplaced it. Reading well after my operation and adjustment had more meaning. In search of answers to his family's genetic predisposition to heart disease and his own emotional turmoil about it, Siebert decided to write a book about the heart. A respected journalist, he secured a rare civilian invitation into the OR to observe the "harvest" of a donor's heart and ended up observing the heart transplant process, too. This book moved me, both for Siebert's affecting witness as well as for his exploration of the historical, medical, metaphorical, and spiritual meanings of "heart." One leading researcher, though wary about the impact of emotions on heart health, allowed that "It's the communication between the heart and the brain that we still don't fully understand. That's what needs to be spoken about."

A Match to the Heart: One Woman's Story of Being Struck by Lightning by Gretel Ehrlich. Ehrlich's cardiovascular electrical system was virtually fried when she was struck by lightning on her Montana ranch. In this memoir by the acclaimed nature/travel writer, the wild landscapes she loves are both metaphor and setting for her recovery. Ehrlich often balked at restrictions that her illness imposed and took risks I never would have taken, triggering an important discussion within myself about the difference between caution and fear. Beautifully written.

The Mediterranean Diet Cookbook—and any other cookbook by Nancy Harmon Jenkins. Many people in cardiac rehab are baffled by how to begin eating healthfully. If you invest in just one guide, this is my choice. *The Mediterranean Diet Cookbook* is not a “diet” cookbook but an encyclopedia of Mediterranean dishes, which just happen to be good for you. Cooking with this book gently seduces your taste buds into craving sunny, fresh flavors instead of foods loaded with salt, sugar, chemicals, and corn syrup. What's not to like about taking an extended tour of the Mediterranean while standing in your own kitchen? Confession: Nancy is also my dear friend, but I began as an unabashed fan.

My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey by Jill Bolte Taylor, PhD. At 37, Taylor experienced a massive stroke in the left hemisphere of her brain. A Harvard-trained neuroanatomist, she recognized immediately and observed exactly what was happening as her mind deteriorated over a couple of hours. Alone in her apartment, she raced against the sequential shutdown of her higher faculties of cognition to orchestrate her own rescue. This book is a must-read for anyone who has experienced a stroke or has helped someone through recovery. For all readers, *My Stroke of Insight* is a fascinating book about the origins of peace and well-being—qualities that may already reside within our own minds, as Taylor discovered.

My Year Off: Recovering Life After a Stroke by Robert McCrum. One morning in 1995, Robert McCrum—age 42, at the top of his profession as one of Britain's most admired editors, newly married to a *New York Times* reporter, and in what he thought was the full bloom of health—awoke to find himself totally paralyzed on the left side, the victim of a stroke brought on by a massive cerebral hemorrhage. This masterfully written story of his year of recovery (with excerpts from the diary of his wife, Sarah Lyall) includes lively cameos by literary lions like Salman Rushdie.

A Natural History of the Senses by Diane Ackerman. Want to feel truly alive? Read this book. It will awaken all your senses after hospitalizations have shut them down. I still read sections every so often, just for the sensation of heightened attentiveness that her lush writing inspires.

Both ***On Being Ill*** by Virginia Woolf and ***Illness as Metaphor*** by Susan Sontag are literary as well as medical classics. I reach for both time and again for raw truth brilliantly expressed. They are always on my bedside table.

Plenty by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi—and any other cookbook by these taste changers—is a must-have. *Plenty* is the first book I bought. Now I have all of them. The pictures alone will revive and transport any wilting patient. Startling flavors and simple preparations.

Simple Abundance by Sarah Ban Breathnach. A very brainy friend gave me this book during my first recovery; otherwise, I never would have read it. I mean, really—did I need to be coaxed into gratitude? I was alive and overflowing with gratitude! And then I began to realize what recovery meant and how difficult it was. Soon this gem worked its magic. It is worth reading for the daily quotes alone. Prescription: Keep it in that basket we all have by the toilet and read one bit every day. Be patient.

The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating by Elisabeth Tova Bailey. This astounding little book describes what it is really like to lie alone in your bed, coming to terms with life after catastrophic illness hits. And yet, Bailey hardly mentions her illness at all. A snail arrives in a terrarium made by a friend and becomes the author’s main companion as she languishes, barely able to move, for months on end. The title alone is a metaphor for the shift I certainly have experienced in order to survive within the stillness of chronic, debilitating illness. This delightful, moving read is life-altering. Now I find myself discovering snails everywhere.

Still Alice by Lisa Genova. After reading this novel about a professor slowly losing her mind to Alzheimer’s, I believed it was a true story even though I knew it was fiction. This book is as true and affecting as any I have ever read. I remain stunned by the author’s ability to climb into the head of a person struggling with losing who she has always been, an experience not the exclusive territory of Alzheimer’s patients. A beautiful book.

Strange Harvest: Organ Transplants, Denatured Bodies, and the Transformed Self by Lesley A. Sharp. This important book is a rich study of transplantation—or as the author corrects us, the “organ transfer” process. Sharp’s research includes those most deeply involved: organ recipients, families of organ donors, and clinical specialists. Though a more academic book in tone and content—and perhaps not for everyone—*Strange Harvest* has been essential to my understanding of the complex entirety of my heart transplant. I particularly appreciated Sharp’s attentiveness to donors’ last hours and to the experiences of donors’ families.

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche. Among the many excellent books on Buddhism out there, this one really hit home. Read it slowly. Read it for years. It’s like rich, dark chocolate, its intensity suggesting small bites at a time. This book saved my life by provoking me into accepting my own mortality. Once I finally accepted that I would indeed die, I began to live again, just as Buddha said.

Tiny Beautiful Things by Cheryl Strayed—author of *Wild*, the memoir that is now a movie. My childhood friend Cyndi gave me this book in 2015, setting a precedent for my updating this list every now and again when I find a particularly helpful book. Because I am already a person who weeps at the beauty of a rain drop, I did not feel any need to read about *Tiny Beautiful Things*.

But I did because Cyndi was the girl I switched outfits with in our junior high school bathroom, so I trust her taste completely. “Sugar” was the author’s pseudonym while working as an on-line advice columnist—engaging what she called “radical compassion” in her replies to people with troubles ranging from the mundane to the horrific. Described as “a balm for everything life throws our way,” this compendium of letters to “Dear Sugar” and Strayed’s responses is profound. Read this book, as I did, in small bits now and again, because Strayed’s insights and compassion are astounding and worth meditating on for awhile. She practices the highest level of what I call strength through vulnerability. Thank you, Cheryl Strayed, for your scrappy wisdom and out-there, out-sized love.

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom. Now legend, this book is the tender chronicle of a young man talking to his former teacher and mentor, an older man who is dying. Just read it.

When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times by Pema Chodron, a beloved Buddhist nun and teacher. Acclaimed novelist Alice Walker said it best: “As one of Pema Chodron’s grateful students, I have been learning the most pressing and necessary lesson of all: how to keep opening wider my own heart.” This book is a quiet, wisdom-filled guide to living fully even when you don’t want to. *When Things Fall Apart* is another book I keep by my bed.

The Writer in the Garden edited by Jane Garmey. Writing by gardeners is always entertaining and illuminating for me, reminding me that like fallen trees and garden detritus, we, too, are compost. This amusing book was especially important following my operations, when I stared in disbelief at the wreck of my body—again and again. It reminded me that like my peonies, I, too, might just revive with enough tender care. It made me laugh. Consider journalist Charles Kuralt: “I didn’t know what narcissism was until I beheld my own narcissus.” And author Vita Sackville-West: “It isn’t that I don’t like sweet disorder, but it has to be judiciously arranged.”