

CODE BLUE: A New Beginning

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My story begins on the warm, star-lit night of August 3, 1986—a night destined to stand alone from all the others that preceded it as suddenly it became isolated in time. The night was calm and tranquil, yet it held within it the power to change my life forever.

Prior to this time, during my college years, I had begun a period of my life in which I progressively abandoned everything that had previously served to structure my life and instill it with direction and purpose. I found myself wandering aimlessly through those years as I desperately sought to regain the direction and contentment I had once known. I became more dissatisfied with my life as I drifted from one in-terest to another, draining the excitement and enthusiasm from each before moving on to the next. I exhausted my options one by one as I closed door after door behind me, each taking me one phase farther away from my true self. I felt lost, no longer knowing who I was or where to turn, as I prayed for an answer that would turn my life around and once again structure it with the proper meaning I was then missing.

On the night of August 3, I had just arrived home after withdrawing from the summer-school term at the University of Northern Iowa and was without the use of a car. My father lent me his for the evening: a two-door Toyota sports car which was smaller and lighter than what I was accustomed to driving. My long-time friend John and I, who was just married the previous month, had spent the evening together cooking hamburgers on the grill and watching movies on television. Having reached some decisions about how I planned to turn my life around, we discussed what was to happen over the course of the next few days as I prepared to join the service. I was no longer in school and had completed all preliminary requirements after I had enlisted and had only to have a physical examination the next day, at which time I would be flown away to begin my training. As the evening passed, I began to express some reluctance and uncertainty about my decision to leave school. We decided to continue our conversation while we relaxed in my car and drove in the country.

Shortly before 2:00 a.m. we turned down a large hill behind my house leading us out into the countryside on the River Road, so called because of the way in which it paralleled the Des Moines River which passed through Fort Dodge, where I was raised. It was a road that I knew well (perhaps too well) from the countless miles that I had spent on it training for my hobby and talent, which was running.

As we drove on, still less than one mile from my home, I commented on how peaceful and calm it was overlooking the river below with the stars shining in the sky above and the airport lights glistening in the distance as they broke through the shroud of darkness which blanketed the horizon. The night seemed unusually dark and still as the darkness enveloped the road, encompassing everything within it and smothering all movement and sound. As we continued our descent down the hill into the darkness, which would serve as an ominous reminder of that night, my friend turned to me and acknowledged a strange feeling that came over him and in turn reached across and locked his seat belt into its fastened position. I felt that same feeling as shivers tingled up my back, chilling my body while I reached across and pulled my seat belt toward its fastened position, but then hesitated and released it back to its resting position.

As we continued on, still less than one mile from my house, we approached a curve in the road which had recently been resurfaced after sliding into the river far below during a rainstorm. I braked and slowed as we approached the turn, but suddenly the car was jolted as we crossed a dip in the road which separated the old from the new pavement. The impact caused the car to sway from side to side offsetting our momentum, and the car was forced to the right. It was as though we were sliding on ice as the front wheels of the car hit the shoulder, causing us to fishtail back across the road. The car then veered to a cliff on the left, where a guard rail outlined the edge of the road separating it from the drop to the river below. I was able to avoid striking the guard rail, but was sent skidding back again to the right. Everything became a blur as I saw the guard rail and reflectors go flying by. The headlights illuminated so clearly the many reflectors that outlined the road, each like a conductor's lantern swaying back and forth in the night radiating the most brilliant and distinctive light. The brightness of the car's lights turned the shroud of darkness into the crisp white-ness of day, encompassed in a strange heavenly radiance. The trees sketched within the headlights came to life as they danced grotesquely back and forth ahead of me like puppets on a string. I felt as though I was witnessing the many toys of a toy shop come to life to torment and mesmer [sic] me as they mesmerized me with their play. I became dizzy and fearful as I swelled with nausea, as though I was on some type of sickening and demented carnival ride, but this ride would take me where no carnival ride had before. Was this the "point of no return"? Seconds seemed like minutes as my stomach sickened with nausea and dread. Would we ever stop?

The stars in the sky above blurred through the windshield as they spun round and round like a swarm of fireflies swirling around their nest. Everything seemed to stand still as that small fragment of time became so vivid and suspended. The song playing on the radio faded away as I became lost in the stars as they danced through the windshield intriguing me with their enchanting serenade, as if calling me to come

dance with them. No longer did they seem so distant in the sky as they swirled around me seemingly within my grasp. The speedometer, which was violently thrashing back and forth within its confinement, struggling to free itself, was then frozen as if captured within a picture. The fluorescence of the dashboard lights became three-dimensional as they flared with radiance but suddenly subsided, like a bonfire when doused with gasoline. The landscape was still as if frozen and no longer seemed real.

I could no longer feel my hands against the steering wheel as my body seemed to go numb. I could no longer feel the seat and I felt separate from my body. I felt airy and lightheaded as I rose out of my seat and looked down upon my hands which were frozen with terror as they clutched at the steering wheel, causing the tendons to protrude with tension. I felt as though I had disappeared as the stars carried me away to their heavenly playground far above and left my body frozen with strain and terror within the car. It seemed so peaceful as I floated away and became lost within the stars.

That was the last I was to remember of that night for quite some time. I didn't remember the car being thrown from the road into the ditch and against an embankment. I didn't remember the car nosing into a culvert as it buckled the car. I didn't remember the sound of glass breaking and metal being torn as the car slammed into a tree during mid-roll. I didn't remember my ear being ripped away as my head collided with the windshield. Nor did I remember the sound of my neck as it snapped under the weight of the car like that of a twig under foot.

The car came to rest on its top, pinned between two trees, with John and I trapped and unconscious beneath its weight. Approximately forty minutes lapsed before John became conscious and oriented. Trapped beneath the twisted wreckage, he panicked to free himself but was unable to open the door which was pinned shut by a tree. Eventually, despite the limited space due to the flattened and smashed roof, he was able to crawl through a shattered window. He was still very disoriented, but managed to reach a nearby farmhouse and get help.

Having difficulty locating the car as it lay hidden within the woods, the authorities began their search for me upon arrival. Soon after they began their search, John became more oriented and remembered the location of the car.

Help appeared beyond use for me as the Webster County Sheriff found the car at 3:15 with me unconscious inside. Upon arrival, the sheriff reached his hand inside the car, but was unable to register my pulse. Apparently absent of vital signs, the proper medical authorities were notified of my fatality and called to the scene. The paramedics and Fort Dodge fire department soon arrived, followed by the Webster

County Coroner, but were unable to reach me in the car. As they began their struggle to reach me and resuscitate me, the Jaws of Life were used to force open several parts of the car to allow the paramedics and coroner to crawl inside and help me. At that time my vital signs were still absent, but after several resuscitation attempts my pulse was registered. I was left within the car until my condition warranted safe extraction. After my pulse stabilized and my injuries were protected and my neck secured, I was removed from the car and taken to a nearby hospital where the staff struggled to keep me alive.

Both John and I were taken to Trinity Regional Hospital in Fort Dodge and our parents were notified. Mine, however, received different news than did John's. John was being treated and held for numerous body lacerations, a concussion, facial and head lacerations, and several cracked ribs. It was evident, however, that my needs could not be met there. The main interest at that time was to perform life-sustaining measures. The hospital staff then faced a critical decision. Could they risk transporting me to the care I was in need of?

Iowa Methodist Medical Center (IMMC) in Des Moines received notification of my condition and dispatched the Life Flight helicopter en route to Trinity Regional Hospital where I awaited its arrival. My survival then became a test of time. Would I survive long enough for the arrival of the helicopter? Would I survive the trip to Des Moines? I was still within the "golden hour," those first minutes that would determine whether I would live.

By the time my parents had arrived at the hospital, I had already begun my journey to IMMC in Des Moines where emergency and trauma room staff were put on standby awaiting my arrival. It was crucial to my survival that I make it to Des Moines before such processes as spinal shock (trauma and shock to my spinal cord due to spinal cord damage) and brain trauma (trauma and shock to my brain due to a closed head injury) began to set in. These processes cause swelling and can cause life-sustaining functions to cease working. The Life Flight crew, qualified as they were, were not prepared and set up to handle such things as this. They would be in need of more qualified equipment than was found on the helicopter.

As my parents continued their long and agonizing travel to Des Moines, still not knowing much of what to expect, I completed my life-determining journey as my conditioned yet worsened. By the time they arrived in Des Moines, spinal shock and head trauma had set in. My spinal cord and brain began to swell, which caused my respiratory system to shut down. At that time, I was put on a life support respirator system which did my breathing for me, and thus maintained my vital signs—my life was being sustained by mechanical and artificial means of respiration.

My condition was such that any surgery to relieve the pressure upon my spinal cord was not possible, but was necessary. I was far from being stable enough to undergo any such surgery. The doctors then had to wait for my condition to improve.

Then, breathing with aid of the respirator, other minor injuries sustained in the accident became the major focus. While being thrown within the car, my head collided with the broken windshield which buckled inward when the roof was flattened. I sustained a severe laceration on the right side of my head, beginning at my temple continuing back and down through my ear. This left a great deal of glass embedded in my skull and my ear almost totally severed and avulsed (torn and ripped off). Plastic and reconstructive surgery were later performed on both as well as other various cuts to my forehead. During the impact of my chest with the steering wheel, my lungs sustained slight damage (contusions and crushing). Such things as broken toes, sprained fingers, and various stresses placed on my joints were left alone. Until I could undergo further testing such as X-rays and CAT scans, much of these would go undetected.

Soon following, I underwent the CAT scans and X-rays which revealed that I had sustained a fracture and dislocation of my third and fourth cervical vertebrae (C3-4 FxD), and a closed head injury (CHI) type of brain damage along with various types of lung and soft tissue damage. Until I grew stable enough to undergo surgery, there was no way to know exactly to what extent my spinal cord had been injured. The doctors did know, however, that I was "incomplete" (meaning the spinal cord was not totally severed) because with my level of injury, which was very high and very compound, had I been "complete" (spinal cord totally severed) I would have been dead instantly. Yet, there was no way of knowing what the extent of the brain damage and paralysis would be.

I was placed in an intensive care unit (ICU) under close supervision and put in cervical traction. I was still dependent upon artificial respiration. Holes were drilled on either side of my head just behind and below both temples. These holes were to accommodate the "Angel Tongs" which were then screwed into both holes. These tongs resembled ice-tong calipers and were attached to the bed by a spring-cable device with twelve pounds of traction weights. They resisted any movement and pulled my head away from my body in order to align and secure my damaged neck. I was placed on a kinetic bed which molded around my body much like a ginger-bread man cookie cutout. I lay within this cutout while the kinetic bed rotated from side to side. This bed completed one turn every five minutes and could be stopped for caring needs. The reason for the rotation was to aid circulation and prevent decubitus ulcers (bed sores) on my pressure points. Nasogastric (NG) tubes were inserted into my

stomach through my nose from which I would receive liquid nourishment. Endotracheal (ET) tubes were inserted into my lungs through my nose and throat so that I could be ventilated and my lungs, which were then filling with fluids and phlegm, could be suctioned out. Intravenous (IV) tubes were inserted into my arms to help keep me hydrated and to maintain a fluid balance as well as to allow administration of medication.

As the hours passed and I continued my struggle to hold on, my condition continued to worsen and I went into a deep comatose state. At that time, the neurologists advised my ever confused and agonized parents that if I survived I would be quadriplegic, and it was quite likely that I would be restricted to bed and be respirator dependent for the rest of my life.

While to the world I was initially in a coma, I can find no words to sufficiently express the beauty and magnificence of what I was to experience during the next weeks. Any attempt to capture or convey the experience in words serve only to fall short. What I was to experience was something beyond this world and cannot adequately be described in worldly terms. I was to encounter the most mysterious yet peaceful occurrence of feelings and sensations which continue to overwhelm me and influence my life with contentment, love, and joy.

Having no remembrance of the night of the accident and the events which were to follow, I awoke within myself seemingly suspended in the midst of a dark void to encounter the most shocking combination of pain and confusion. I felt lost within a nightmare as I struggled to awaken and free myself from the grasp of this horrifying dream. I felt as though my eyelids had been sewn shut as I struggled to open my eyes but could not. I was aware of the radiant glow of the lights external to my body as they passed though my eyelids far above me, like that of the sun as it pierces the eyelids of sunbathers on a beach. I looked above from down within myself and saw the holes where my eyes were; they seemed like keyholes in a door as the light radiated through them like a movie projector with its stream of light piercing the darkness of a theater.

Feeling trapped beneath a blanket of ice with the current carrying me helplessly downstream, I panicked to reach the surface but could not oppose the current's powerful but gentle flow. I feared that surely I would suffocate if I did not reach the surface to breathe. I continued to be pulled away into this nightmare by the steady stream beneath the ice, like an astronaut severed from the life-sustaining ship, floating eternally into the nothingness of space. Filled with terror, I struggled to resist as I waited for someone to awaken me before I had drifted too far away to return. I was filled with horror as I could not awaken from this dream. As I panicked to free my-

self, I thought of my family. How simple it would be for them to awaken me, but I could not call to them through this nightmare which isolated me from them.

Soon the pain overcame my horror and confusion as it continued to grow more agonizing and unbearable. I sought desperately to awaken and free myself from its excruciating sting, but could not. As the pain continued to grow and overcome my confusion and I realized the futility of my struggle to awaken, I sought to escape the pain by seeking shelter deep within my body. No longer did I resist the pull of the current as I ceased my struggle and allowed the current to carry me away deep within my body to safety.

As I sought to shelter from the pain and drifted deeper within my body to escape, I felt as though my physical mind and body knew instinctively what to do while they pushed my inner "self" to safety and endured the pain and confusion for me. Like an electrical fuse box, my body released its protective circuit breaker when overwhelmed by the pain too powerful to endure safely. When my body was confronted with the painful overload caused by my injuries, its protective circuit breaker prevented further damage to the inner "self," the core of my "being." My physical body was the autopilot as my inner self bailed out to safety, avoiding the pain which was too overwhelming to endure. Like a bomber pilot jumping to safety with a parachute just before the maimed airplane came crashing to the ground, I jumped to safety as well. As a person who seeks shelter within the security of a fruit cellar beneath a basement floor during a storm, so did I seek shelter far down within my body. Once there, I closed the door behind me and sat huddled within its safety in darkness and silence waiting for the storm to pass. My empty body around me became a hollow shell from which I hung suspended in weightlessness in the middle, like a large abandoned airplane hanger: hollow and dark.

Then safe within the security of the current, my journey downward within my body became a series of shelters where I rested and sought refuge within its safety. There I waited and gathered strength, until the pain lingering ominously behind which I had crawled deep within my body to escape, caught up with me and penetrated the walls of my shelter, forcing me to go deeper within my body seeking the next shelter. There again, I waited and gathered strength until the pain caught up with me forcing me to go deeper yet to elude it. This journey downward was like that of a soldier in a war, retreating from the chaos of the front lines to avoid the torrents of bombshells raining down upon him, threatening his life, and seeking shelter within one foxhole and another, hesitating within one before moving on to the next, progressively getting farther from danger and closer to safety. This journey was like a pedestrian running from one doorway to another during a rainstorm, getting closer and closer to the warmth of home.

Then, passive, I felt a gentle current overcome me with its flow, as it carried me away within its security. No longer did I resist its pull, and I wondered to where I was drifting. No longer did I feel the urgency to breathe, and I realized that it was not necessary. No longer did I feel the panic to awaken or struggle or resist the flow. No longer did I experience the pain and uncontrollable nightmares and feelings that came with them. No longer did I sense the movement of my physical body around me or the uncontrollable gagging, and the choking noises I had previously identified as being my own had ceased. The degree to which I had previously struggled to resist, I then desired to go on in search of an answer to my questions of what was happening to me. I looked far above to the surface, and I saw the light which passed through my eyelids slowly fade away. I felt the security of a young child cradled in its mother's arms as the warmth of the current encompassed me within its safety.

Still safe within the pull of the current as it carried me to safety deep within my body, I attempted to rationalize what was happening to me. I did not know where I was, how I had gotten there, or where I was going, but somehow found great safety and security. I could not explain the unbearable pain I had previously felt and struggled to escape, or the gentle isolation of the blackness which surrounded me. I could not comprehend why it was not necessary for me to breathe and why I did not suffocate as earlier I had feared. I soon thought that I was home in bed and deep asleep, but I had no remembrance of this and I could not explain how I could be "awake" and talking and thinking and yet asleep at the same time. Was this a dream? If so, why was I unable to awaken from the grasp of this nightmare? When would I awaken? I found no justifiable answer to my questions and soon came to the worst of all possible explanations. Was I dead? If so, why was I talking to myself and why could I feel pain? I thought of my family and friends and of their sadness. I had left without saying good-bye. I felt sorrow for the many things I had not yet done while alive. The pain that I had gone deep inside myself to escape caught up with me and again I was forced to go deeper yet within myself to escape it.

When I reached my last and final shelter, I felt as though I could go no deeper as I locked the door behind me and waited within the security of my refuge. Somehow I "knew" that there I would remain and had reached the end of my journey. This last refuge became a fortress different than those before it. It seemed more calm and tranquil there than that of my previous shelters. The pain which I had desperately sought to elude was never able to penetrate the walls of this refuge as it had been able to before. I left all contacts with my physical body far behind and above me where they would remain. There I left all physical ties behind, leaving only my inner "self," the core of my "being," then separated from the external world far above and outside the new world of my "self." Before I entered this refuge, which was a fortress stronger

than those before it, I shed all contacts with my physical body, leaving only my inner "self" to pass through the walls of this fortress. My pain remained tied to my physical body, which was unable to pass through the walls of this fortress. The pain remained like a fierce dog leashed to a tree outside my fortress, unable to deliver its bite. I shed my pain before entering this fortress like a workman removing his soiled boots on the doorstep before entering the cleanliness of home. This refuge was a barrier protecting me from the pain which lingered outside its walls. Somehow, I "knew" that there I would be safe and would remain to ride out the storm. My previous feelings of fear, confusion, and pain dissipated into feelings of peace, tranquility, and safety like I had never known before. Moreover, despite the absolute silence of this refuge I was able to "hear" the sounds to be heard, yet I could "hear" the many feelings that emanated within my refuge. I became "aware" of the absolute darkness yet was never blinded by it nor did it hinder my vision. There was nothing to see, yet I could "see" like never before. There I remained "alive" and was never lonely as something, someone, somehow instilled me with safety and well-being. I grew content with the feelings of peace and tranquility that surrounded me. "Warmth" radiated within my refuge and there I had no answers to my questions, but yet I had no questions either. While there, I lost touch with all constructs of time and order. I did not grow tired or hungry. All physical needs and drives were left behind, leaving the mental "self" separated from the world far above and outside the new world of my "self." I had no rationalization of where I was nor how I got there, but somehow found a great deal of security and safety. What I was experiencing was like a dream but without mental illusion: everything seemed real and conscious but nothing like I had ever experienced. I did not know where I was or what was happening to me, but I no longer cared as all my questions disappeared. I did know, however, that I was safe and there I would ride out the storm.

As I waited there and gathered strength, the storm began to pass and soon I had the feeling it was time to go. Something, someone, somewhere, who had instilled me with a sense of well-being, stood behind me reassuring me of my safety. As I left my dark corner towards the hatch-door securing my refuge, I stopped to gather the courage to open the door. As I did so, I looked far ahead of me toward the front lines from which I had previously escaped.

The first few steps were very awakening and shocking as I felt the sting of the pain which I had previously eluded. Leaving my refuge was like a school boy's first few steps out of a warm house in the morning during a cold snowstorm, beginning his walk to school. However, like a mother bird pushing the young birds out of the nest to learn to fly while she overlooks with a watchful and protective eye, so too was I pushed out with a gentle hand. The reassurance and security that I had learned to feel within my refuge went with me, and although I did not know what was awaiting me, I

knew from this that I could face it.

My journey to consciousness was like that of a coal miner's journey from deep within the mine, getting closer and closer to the surface. As I climbed closer to consciousness, I was able to sense the fresh air, like that of a refreshing summer breeze on the coal miner's face when he reached the surface and gathered in the warm sunshine of the day.

My refuge was gone, but the feelings stayed within me. These feelings of safety allowed me to begin the road to recovery.

I opened my eyes on Wednesday, nearly five days after the accident. At that time it appeared I was going to live, although I still had difficulty maintaining consciousness. At that time, I still required the aid of a respirator and was yet unable to undergo surgery.

As the days passed, I slipped in and out of consciousness more readily, but when awake was extremely disoriented and confused, both from the trauma of the accident and from the brain damage which at that time was quite evident. I spent the next few weeks drifting between my unconscious refuge of tranquility and the waking state of confusion and pain. As I struggled to come to terms with what was awaiting me in my waking state, I found myself seeking the safety I had previously felt while in my refuge from within myself. I was able to withdraw from my waking state as I slipped back into my hidden world of peace. With each transition between waking and my refuge I progressively started my journey upward from deep within myself. Each transition brought me one step closer to the surface. Although very frightened and confused, I was able to summon the courage and contentment which I had felt while in my refuge, which remained within me. While in my shelter far below, I learned to foster great feelings of warmth and peace, which I was able to bring to the surface with me. Although I was no longer within the safety of my refuge, the feelings of security, peace, and contentment remained with me as I began my journey toward the surface. I was not certain of what awaited me as I approached my waking state, but I knew that I could face it with the feelings of security and well-being that I fostered while in my refuge. As I approached what then seemed inevitable, I felt great contentment that I had never experienced before except in my refuge.

Upon each awakening, the doctors told me over and over that I was in a car accident and was paralyzed. They told me I was a quadriplegic and that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life—hopefully, an electric wheelchair if I had use of a hand to operate it. I would require assistance in all activities of daily living (ADL). After a few days, I was transferred to a recovery floor for spinal cord damaged and

head trauma patients when my condition warranted that I was no longer dependent upon a respirator.

After undergoing further CAT scans and X-rays, the doctors decided to perform a cervical fusion on my neck to give me added stability when being moved and when sitting upright in a wheelchair. When my respiratory system began to function and clear, the doctors received authorization to perform the operation.

My neck consisted of seven cervical vertebrae and in an injury such as mine, the higher the injury the worse the damage and subsequent paralysis. Consequently, the more vertebrae damaged the more severe the extent of spinal cord damage. I sustained a fracture-dislocation of my third and fourth cervical vertebrae, requiring that my second through fifth vertebrae be fused together as one. Several bones were cut from my hip and fused into my neck with wires and pins. The added bones acted as a bridge for new bone to grow across and become permanent. The surgery took seven hours to complete and four of the seven vertebrae were fused. After the surgery was completed, I was transferred back to the intensive care unit for recovery for two days.

At that time, the neurologists advised my parents that I would never have use of my arms or legs; I would be a quadriplegic for the remainder of my life. Further-more, they said the next two weeks would be crucial in determining if I would get any movement whatsoever.

The safety and contentment of my refuge remained within me in my waking state and allowed me to put the fear, pain, and confusion aside as I focused on the external world around me. I did not know what the future would hold for me, but I did know that I was safe and whatever awaited me I could accept and overcome.

As I began the physical demands of therapy, I often seemed "absent" as I clicked back into my new "awareness" which I then experienced while conscious. My refuge acted as a well of "warmth" which supplied my body with the necessary nutrients for life—a well which continued to grow and overflow within me, drain-ing off to other areas of my body as I directed its flow. Each night, as I began my struggle to repair my damaged body from within myself, I focused upon a different area of my body. I concentrated upon the warmth deep within me and became one with it. Then deep within the warmth at that point of very focusing, I concentrated upon bypassing the damaged circuitry of my spinal cord. As I flowed with the warmth throughout my body, I concentrated upon the circuit. My every extremity drew upon the warmth flowing deep within my body as it was filled with the life of the warmth that supported it. I was filled with a great feeling of "aliveness," as I continually expressed to those around me the true joy of life that I then felt. Insistent as I was, doctors,

nurses, and friends were skeptical to believe the genuineness of my feelings, as they labeled me as "confused," "experiencing denial," and having "unrealistic optimism for being alive." As they waited for my spirit to subside and for me to "come to grips" with my problem, my spirit grew all the more stronger as my spirit ordered. They could not understand how I could feel "alive" and yet be without the use of my body. Feeling "alive" is not a state of body, but of "self" and this they could not grasp. How tied to the material they were!

I was able to find joy and contentment in my present situation. I did not know how I knew what I did. I simply "knew," and trusted that feeling within me. Two weeks after the surgery which aligned my vertebral column and consequently re-lieved the pressure on my spinal cord, while conducting my personal care needs, the attending nurse noticed the toe moving on my right foot. Thinking it was a muscle spasm, she ignored it. Another nurse came into the room and then called for the doctor who was astonished when I started moving the toe on command.

On December 12, nearly five months of prayers and hard work later, I walked into my new life as I left Iowa Methodist Medical Center with the use of a cane.