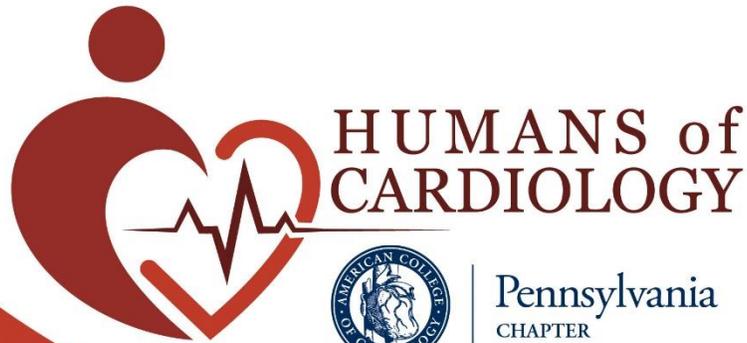


## OPEN FORUM INITIATIVE



### *The Gift*



I've seen her in clinic for fifteen years. She does everything she can to stay healthy, and she needs to do everything she can, given the cards she was dealt. She was born with a bicuspid aortic valve that over time stenosed severely, and her weakened aorta dilated dangerously. So ten years ago a surgeon replaced her valve and root.

Periodic sonograms of her artificial valve show that it is working as well as an artificial valve can work. She is not limited by any heart problems—although neck and back pain are always present, sometimes at excruciating levels, which she tries to deemphasize to me.

I see her again today. I look at my old notes before I see a patient, and I note that this is the anniversary of her operation. I walk in the room and congratulate her on how well she had done for the last ten years. Her husband is sitting in the chair next to the examining table. Before I can examine her, he pulls a white paper bag out of his pocket, the kind used to hold bottles of pills purchased at a pharmacy. Is there some question about a medication? Both patient and husband always knew exactly what medications she takes and are aware of any possible side effects.

But there is no question about a drug today. He pulls a little box out of the bag, and before I have time to speculate about what might be inside, he drops to his knees, opens the tiny box and shows her what is inside: a ring inlaid with a pristine golden heart. "A symbol of my love for you," he says, "a marker of ten wonderful years."

I page her surgeon, and he comes to clinic. The nurses all rush in. There are hugs all around.

An aide knocks on the door. "Do you know you're half an hour behind?" I stay another 10. Efficiency be damned.

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*Joseph Gascho MD is Professor of Medicine and Humanities at Penn State University College of Medicine.*