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Opinion Exchange

GRATITUDE

A few thoughts, in limerick, from a Mayo Clinic O.R.

By GARRISON KEILLOR

Editor's note: Longtime radio host and author Garrison Keillor was terminated by Minnesota Public Radio last month for unspecified "inappropriate behavior" with a colleague. The Washington Post discontinued his syndicated column soon thereafter, citing Keillor's failure to disclose his situation before writing a column defending U.S. Sen. Al Franken against accusations of sexual misconduct. On Wednesday, Keillor submitted to the Star Tribune the following column. We thought readers would find it interesting.

Coming to St. Marys Hospital in Rochester, I'm surrounded by men and women in blue who did well in high school math and chemistry, and here I am, who frittered away those years writing limericks and parodies and barely made it to graduation, depending on science for survival. It's an awakening for a gent of 75. I used to look down on science nerds as dull and unimaginative and now I am grateful for their competence.

I'm here for the implantation of a pacemaker, my heart having decided to sometimes hesitate 3.8 seconds between beats. At 5, you faint and

fall down and bang your head on the desk. So I get out of my suit and tie and into a gown and lie on a gurney and am wheeled into Surgical Prep. I have brought paper and pen, thinking to take notes, and my nurse, Kim, who has been fussing with tape and an IV, says, "You're going to be sedated, you know."

"When?"

"As of five minutes ago."

Well, a man needs a challenge. So I write her a limerick. I've been doing this all my life. I can do it sedated or excited, in a moving car or flat on my back.

A cardiac nurse name of Kim

Says, "The chances of failure are slim.

You're not going to die."

And she points to the sky.

"Any questions? Address them to Him."

No patient ever wrote her a limerick before. She is impressed. It isn't that easy to impress young people these days. Meanwhile, she wheels me into the O.R.

It's a beautiful sedative. I'm still cognizant of people around, voices, the clink and beep and hum of hardware, and I appreciate the coordination of the team, and the anesthetist who keeps me informed of what she's putting into me, as if I actually understood.

Meredith who did anesthesia

Said, "It won't lead to amnesia

But this sedation

May cause constipation.

We recommend milk of magnesia."

I wrote this as Dr. Bradley was scoping out the incision site. A very nice man whose parents were doctors, a neurologist and a pathologist. He grew up in southeast Minneapolis. He was a little kid running around on the playground when I was a grad student at the U. I asked what type of pacemaker he'd be installing and he was glad to discuss the merits of Medtronic vs. Boston Scientific vs. another one. I forget the name. So I wrote a few lines for him.

The electrophysiologist Bradley

Said, "This pacemaker I install gladly

In your chest today

Is a new Chevrolet

Nova and it works not that badly."

The device is the size of a wristwatch, minus the band, and a wire extends from it down into the base of your heart where it's anchored by a screw that your heart creates scar tissue around, and there it sits, stimulating a steady 60 beats per minute for the next ten years until the battery needs to be replaced. You carry a plastic ID in your billfold to show TSA so they won't be

alarmed when the scanner beeps. Several uncles of mine pitched over and died who might've been saved by this device. One may or may not feel better as a result, though the device is doing its work. It does not confer immortality.

I feel better. My niece works for Medtronic and a cousin works for Mayo and to me, St. Marys is Minnesota at its best, high competence combined with great kindness and good humor. Back when I had heart surgery here in 2001, Sister Gervase Gervais was still patrolling the halls, the former hotel administrator, retired but not really, a Franciscan nun of the Our Lady of Lourdes congregation, one of the last of that line of valiant women who founded the place in 1889 in collaboration with the clinic of Will and Charles Mayo up the street. She died last year at 97.

The procedures I've watched people work on me were front-page news when I was a boy and now they're more or less routine, but that spirit of kindness and good humor is permanent. Our society today is plagued with the strain of You-Can't-Possibly-Understand-Me-Because-You're-Not-Me but when you come to the hospital, you come back to basics: we're blood and bones and skin, we depend on the goodness of others, and it is here to be found, thanks to people trained to be precisely competent.