

WEEK 1 THE HEART OF THE MATTER: A MATTER OF THE HEART
IN DIALOGUE ABOUT THE HEART


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So to Johan, as a cardiac surgeon, the heart is a mechanical pump that needs to be replaced when it fails. And medical care is centred around this dramatic event, with all the challenges that that represents for high-tech surgery in a middle income country that's struggling to meet the health needs of the whole population.

But to Peter, as he so eloquently displayed from a literary perspective, the heart is the centre of our being, at the middle of concentric circles of life. To Stan, as a transplant recipient, his new heart is both the biological means that keeps him alive as well as the source of motivation and inspiration to make a difference in society through his work at the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation and his other leadership roles.

So what is your source of life, of energy, of inspiration? Peter spoke of magic, mystery, and miracle. I put some further questions to our presenters to try to tease out some of the more interdisciplinary understandings or perspectives of this issue.

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What makes a heart transplantation so special?

It's a very special operation for a surgeon because it's one of the rare operations we do, rare because of the shortage of donor organs. But the most important thing is that it's one of those where one takes an irrevocable step. When one removes the recipient heart, which was still keeping that patient alive, or be it a not very healthy or good life-- once that heart is out, there's no going back. You have an empty chest cavity, and you've really crossed the Rubicon.

One never has a guarantee that the new heart is going to function completely normally, or even keep the patient alive. So one has that tense time between removing the old heart and putting in the new one and for that new heart to take over the function. That makes heart transplantation so very special, and a very tense time.

This is very well described in Chris Barnard's book or in many of his writings where he talks about this sort of time of no going back, of seeing an empty chest cavity for the first time that he's ever witnessed it, and knowing that he'd now taken an irrevocable step with no going back.

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What is your response to Stan's narrative of "my strong heart, weak heart and new heart" and the new life that he has chosen for himself?

I think Stan's remarkable phrasing of his experience is enchanting. It enchants me, at any rate. The idea that you can move from a strong heart to a weak heart to a new heart, and that a whole life can be altered around the understandably extraordinary occasion of a transplant.

I'm enchanted by it not only because I think Stan is an uncommonly worthy recipient of a new heart and exemplifies everything that one would hope of the occasion, but perhaps particularly because it ties in with so much of what I've been saying about the deep, deep metaphoric implications of the experience of a heart transplant-- the way in which a heart transplant is not simply, as Barnard said, the removal and re-situation of the bloody pump, but rather something mysterious and mystical, whose implications reach out into the far wider ambit of life and what life means, and what life is, and the spirit and the anima and the soul and so on.

So it delights me that the comments of Stan should abut so obviously upon what I was suggesting, that the new heart is not simply a mechanical replacement or anything like that, but an alteration that has something of a far, far more purpotive project-like function in the life of a person, who is not a whole new person. Doesn't have a different person's heart, doesn't have different soul, but is nonetheless occasioned by this massive transformation to consider entirely anew what life might be or mean.

I don't mean by any means that the only worthy recipient of a heart should be someone as gracious as Stan evidently is, but I do mean by this that it's evidence, I think, of the extent to which the extraordinariness of the project alters something about human nature, not just the human nature of the recipient, but of our very idea about human nature.

And perhaps, when we consider the extraordinary transformation in natures, one heart is placed in another heart, we should be occasioned also to remember that human nature is about the human, and that one human doesn't become another human, but might become for themselves more human in the occasion.

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What is the relationship, for you, between the biological heart and a metaphorical sense of the heart?

I would have to say that you cannot go through a profound experience such as a heart transplant and not be affected by it. And so I personally have had to think again about the kind of contribution that I am making to my society. So I work for an organisation called the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. It's an organisation that started out of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And it was felt that the process of Reconciliation was started by the TRC, but it needed so much more work.

And so I work in a programme called Building an Inclusive Society. And that's pretty much like my heart that I moved from brave heart to faint heart to new heart. And so this new heart has given me a whole new perspective not just of the physical, but also meaning, in terms of how I can serve the world.

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If being alive is more than just the technical and biological event of having a beating heart or breathing and thinking, what is that other component of being human for you? What does your heart mean to you?



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