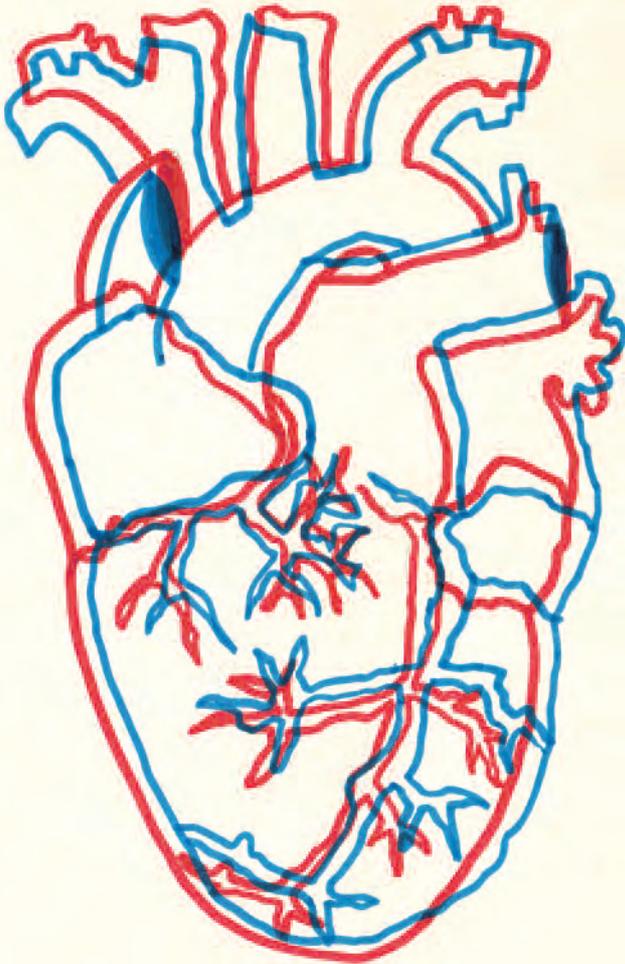


BRIAN DOYLE

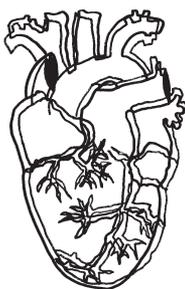


The Wet Engine

Exploring the Mad Wild Miracle of the Heart

The Wet Engine
exploring the mad wild miracle of the heart

by Brian Doyle



Oregon State University Press • Corvallis

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Introduction

My son Liam was born nine years ago. He looked like a cucumber on steroids. He was fat and bald and round. He looked healthy as a horse. He wasn't. He was missing a chamber in his heart, which was a problem, as you need four chambers for smooth conduct through this vale of fears and tears, and he only had three chambers, so pretty soon he had an open-heart surgery, during which doctors cut him open and iced down his heart and shut it down for an hour or so while they worked on repair.

That was when he was about six months old. I don't remember much about that time. It all rushed past like a pain train.

Then when he was about eighteen months old he had another open-heart surgery, during which they did all that again, and what I most remember from that time is his grinning face receding down the hallway as he was carried toward the bone shears by a sweet quiet doctor. I'll always remember that. His face was so round. His face bounced up and down a little on the doctor's thin shoulder. He smiled at me at the very end of the corridor, just before he and the doctor turned the corner, and I thought maybe that was going to be the last time I ever saw that big fat face smiling at me, and that was when I saw pain and death leering at me closer than I ever saw them before. That was a cold moment. I'll always remember that.

*

Well, that wasn't the last time I saw my boy Liam, I am almighty happy to report, and now he's pretty much fine, although he's stubborn as a stone, and a grouch in the morning, and he gets tired more than he admits, and eventually he will have to get a new heart altogether, and he has been told by his genius heart doctor that he shouldn't play football or run marathons, neither of which I think he was thinking of doing anyway, the kid being a basketball nut first and foremost.

Now he is nine years old. He's one of the most interesting and gentle people I ever met, and I am awfully glad that he didn't die.

His surgeries were years ago now, and his next surgery, the big one, when they take out his creaky old heart and pop in a new one, is ten or twenty or thirty years in the future. Don't worry about it, says his genius heart doctor, by then we'll have figured out something waaaay better than transplants.

So I don't worry about it, much. Sometimes I do worry about it a lot but I don't tell my wife because I know she worries too and I have learned there are some things, a lot of things, with which you shouldn't worry a wife.

But the days pass in their swirl and whirl and swing and song, and every day he doesn't die again, and that knocks me out.

*

So everything seems fairly normal these days. Liam runs around like an insane dorky gawky goofy heron and rides his bike and shoots hoop and skateboards and swings and punches out his brother and snarls at his sister and refuses to make his bed but he does actually set the table every night and help cook dinner sometimes and he does his homework pretty carefully when he doesn't leave his backpack at school and he eats more yogurt and grapes and blueberries than anyone I

Introduction

ever saw and his hair won't stay combed no matter what and he's a really good artist and he makes perfect pancakes and he is almost all the time a cheerful entertaining kind-hearted mammal whose company I really enjoy.

He gets sick and he gets well and his knees are knobby and he just got a perfect score on his spelling test yesterday and the days and nights pass in their magic music, each more beautiful than the last, each one so filled with joy and pain and shouting and sadness and mud and angst and dishes and milk and jam and bills and newspapers and underwear and coffee filters and insurance payments and flat tires and rain and crows that I want to weep with helpless happiness sometimes for no reason that I can understand one bit at all.

*

But not a day goes by, not one, that I do not think of my son tiny and round and naked and torn open and heart-chilled and swimming somewhere between death and life; and every day I think of the young grinning intense mysterious heart doctor who saved his life; and for years now I have wanted to try to write that most unwriteable man down, to tell a handful of the thousands of stories that whirl around him like brilliant birds, to report a tiny percentage of the people he has saved and salved, and so thank him in some way I don't fully understand, and also thank the Music that made him and me and my son and all of us; and somehow it seems to me that the writing down of a handful of those stories will *matter* in the world, be a sort of crucial chant or connective tissue between writer and readers, all of us huddled singing under the falling bombs and stars; and more and more over the years I have become absorbed and amazed at the heart itself, the wet engine of us all, and how it works and doesn't work, and what it means, and how we use it so easily and

casually as a metaphor for the extraordinary loves and agonies that course through us like muscular raging rivers; so finally I sit my raggedy self down and write this lean book, as a sort of prayer of thanks that my son is alive and stubborn as a stone, that there are such complicated and graceful people as Doctor Dave, that there are such mysterious and incalculably holy things as hammering hearts, and that they power such mysterious and holy and wild things as us.

*

Look, I don't know much, but I know these things uncontrovertibly and inarguably:

One: stories matter waaaaay more than we know.

Two: all stories are, in some form, prayers.

Three: love is the story and the prayer that matters the most.

So: here are some stories and prayers, and they are all about love, and I hope they matter to you too.

Brian Doyle

“This wonderful book has two heroes: a small boy with a damaged heart, and a surgeon who knows how to repair the damaged hearts of small boys. Such heroes deserve a gifted poet to sing their songs. Brian Doyle is that poet.” —**Chet Raymo**, author of *Honey from Stone: A Naturalist’s Search for God*

“Brian Doyle’s spirit is catching: it will catch you up, and soon you will have caught on to everything he feels and ruminates over and marvels at, and you will comprehend what poetry is and does. And you will know from the throb of *The Wet Engine*, this unique and beautiful book written in celestial prose, that Brian Doyle is as glorious a poet as he is a father; and vice versa.” —**Cynthia Ozick**, author of *The Shawl*



In this poignant and startlingly original book, Brian Doyle examines the heart as a physical organ—how it is supposed to work, how surgeons try to fix it when it doesn’t—and as a metaphor: the seat of the soul, the powerhouse of the body, the essence of spirituality. In a series of profoundly moving ruminations, Doyle considers the scientific, emotional, literary, philosophical, and spiritual understandings of the heart—from cardiology to courage, from love letters and pop songs to botany and Jesus. Weaving these strands together is the torment of his infant son’s heart surgery and the inspiring story of the young heart doctor who saved Liam’s life.

The Wet Engine will change how you feel and think about the mysterious, fragile human heart. This new paperback edition includes a foreword by Dr. Marla Salmon, dean of the University of Washington School of Nursing.

Brian Doyle is the author of twelve books, including the novel *Mink River* and *The Grail*, his account of a year in a vineyard in Oregon. He edits *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland.

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