

A Review of

A Change of Heart

A Memoir

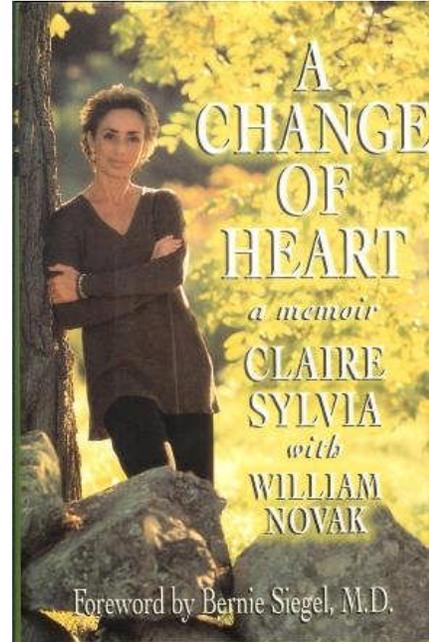
Author: Claire Sylvia with William Novak

Reviewed by Jim Gleason, heart recipient

This was the very first transplant related book I ever read way back when it was first published in 1997 and I have to admit even today, in 2008, it still has a very special place in my own transplanted heart. I was surprised to discover I had not included this in my reviews up to this date. Let me try to explain.

Early on after my own transplant, I had come across a passing reference to Claire's amazing experience in a book by noted author, Deepak Chopra, M.D. In it he mentioned something about Claire's having had a heart lung transplant and subsequent dream memories from her donor. A few years later a friend returned from attending a kaleidoscope convention where she ran across a writer who was putting together a memoir of Claire Sylvia's transplant story and was looking for other heart transplant patients who might support his research into that topic. Coincidentally, when this friend encountered William Novak, that author, in a store, they got to talking and she mentioned knowing me, promising to ask if I would be willing when she returned home and saw me. Naturally I was fascinated and willing, leading to my becoming his "research assistant" on the subject given my heart transplant experience and, with my IT profession, being familiar with the new Internet as a resource. Through Bill I came to make personal contact with Claire, being very curious to see for myself if she was "for real" with this amazing story. I invited her to be our guest via phone for a local transplant support group as part of a book discussion on this very interesting topic, later referred to as "cellular memory." We watched my collection of her personal appearances on a few national TV talk shows promoting her book and story and then enjoyed her story telling in person via phone followed by an open Q&A session. The overall reaction was that she was credible in her story, not trying to sell it, but neither she nor we could explain how any of it was possible. Later, the book was made into a TV movie and would be the subject of an extensive failed search to find a copy when I was building my transplant movie collection. Bill didn't have a copy (nor could he even recall the movie's title). Through him I was able to get in e-mail contact with Claire again, now living retired from her classical dancing career in Florida. She had a copy but was not about to chance losing it in the mails to me to make a copy for our Transplant Movie Night events, and that's where it remains today, still under negotiation in trying to get a copy and have her again as a guest for our events these 10 years later.

Ok, so much for disclosure. Now for the book review itself. This story is a telling of Claire Sylvia's experience following her 1988 heart/lung transplant at Yale in New



Haven, CN, of a change in personality that she eventually finds and confirms as similar to that of her 18 year old deceased male donor. We read of her dreams in which she learns things about her donor that leads her to make contact with his family, eventually meeting with them and finding details of his life preferences in certain foods which parallel her new post transplant tastes and insights that came in those dreams of him. These new tastes are a direct opposite of her very disciplined eating regimen required of her career as a classical dancer, and unique enough to raise serious questions as to their source. The personal recollections of the life leading up to transplant and the transplant experience itself make for good reading, but add to that the mystery of such taste changes and dream insights that prove to be true, raise this to a very different level of interesting reading. While I confess to having been fascinated by the reading itself, let me also admit to both using it as a springboard into other amateur research into that whole topic of traits passed along to the recipient from a donor in organ transplant and as a topic of engaging conversation at any event where the subject comes up. And it does come up often as many people ask me, "So, do you have any special changes that you feel came along with your heart, Jim?" While I haven't myself, this book is often part of my replies to such questions and I have an attentive audience for as long as I can talk, a very different "life of the party" and ambassador for people becoming organ donors.

Despite its being over ten years old, I highly recommend this book for the controversial content and real-life post transplant experience it offers. Some day I hope to also be able to offer insights into how you can see that TV movie of her book, but for now, spend that penny (see book availability below) and see for yourself.

PS: Doctors will tell you there is no scientific evidence supporting claims of "cellular memory" or other such experiences, citing the medicines they prescribe post transplant as the root of any changes in taste by the recipient. I had to add that despite the many stories I have read and heard that indicate otherwise.

I was pleasantly surprised to find this book still available in both hardcover and paperback versions used for as little as 1 cent (plus S&H) at Amazon.com

Brief bio:

Jim Gleason, receiving his own heart transplant Oct. '94, retired after 37 years with Unisys Corporation in 2005, is a volunteer with The Gift of Life Donor Program in Philadelphia, additionally serving both NKF and UNOS, as well as being a nationally recognized speaker and author. His own book, **A Gift from the Heart**, is offered free in thanks to his donor family and can be obtained by contacting him at GLEASONJIM@AOL.COM.