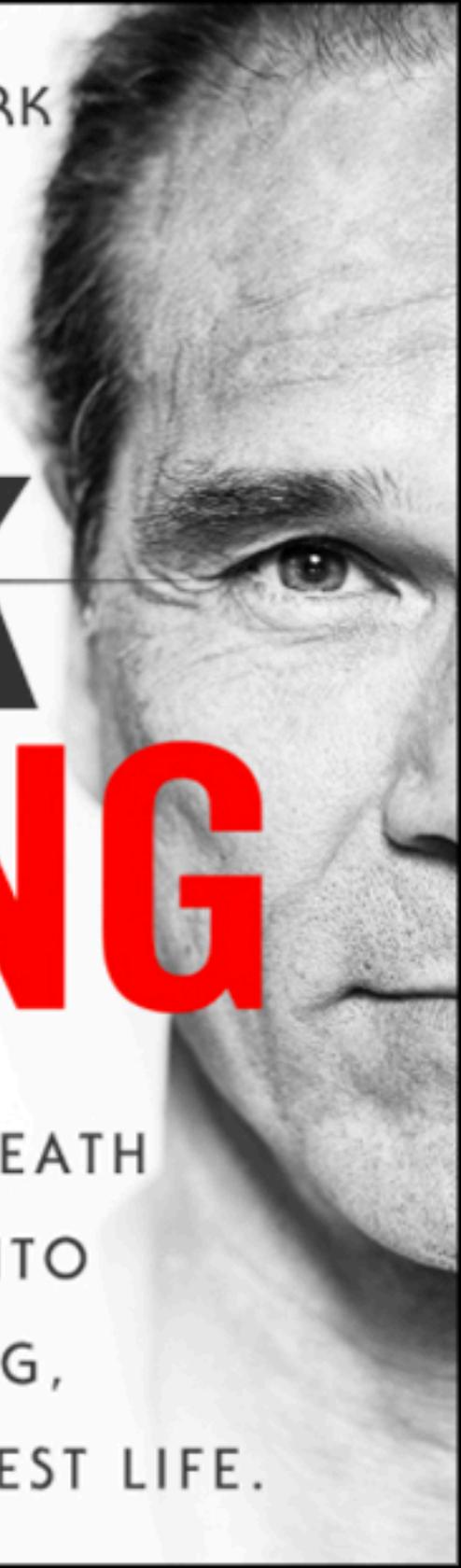


DAN "NITRO" CLARK



F[—]CK
DYING

HOW CHEATING DEATH
KICKED MY ASS INTO
LOVING, LEARNING,
AND LIVING MY BEST LIFE.

Sports taught me about life.
Almost dying taught me how to live.

INTRODUCTION

I want to die.

I never thought I'd say those words.

I've always thought of myself as a positive, "glass half full" type of guy. I had what most people would consider a good life. I was fit, healthy, had a big house, drove a German car.

Then on Wednesday, December 18, 2013 my world changed: I had a heart attack.

In an instant, I went from a world where everything seemed possible to a world where I knew nothing was for certain.

As a life-long athlete, former professional football player, and American Gladiator, I'd always put a tremendous value on health, fitness, and what I could do with my body. The heart attack wasn't only a derailment of my life—it shattered the entire definition of who I was.

I was weak. Fragile. Broken.

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I believed life would never be good for me again, and I thought if I couldn't live life on my terms, then there wasn't any point in going on. The day after the heart attack, lying in my hospital bed, miserable out of my mind, I uttered those four words.

I want to die.

During the course of our lives, many of us will have something tragic happen suddenly. It could be a cancer diagnosis, a sick child, a divorce, a business deal gone badly, or something as heartbreaking as a dream that goes unfulfilled. It's difficult to find strength in the face of adversity.

Yet, we've all hit hard times, we've all struggled, we've all fallen down. The question is: What do we do when these things happen?

For every setback there is a chance to make a comeback and rise again. The human spirit has an amazing capacity to persevere. I've seen it happen time and time again. But for me, it was about more than just coming back; it was about coming back transformed. Coming back as a better man.

The following pages are my journey from "I want to die" to some of the happiest and most profound times of my life. I'll share with you what helped and what didn't. Where I succeeded and, perhaps more importantly, where I failed.

Looking back on my life before the heart attack, I can't believe how much time I wasted on things that didn't matter

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with people who did matter. Most of my happiness came from what I accomplished. I believed the key to happiness was to achieve more, do more, acquire more. I was shocked to learn that my accomplishments didn't create peace of mind and my possessions only brought temporary satisfaction.

I chased gratification but rarely felt grateful or fulfilled. I was constantly stressed, struggling to find balance and hardly ever felt at peace. I thought about what I wanted while rarely appreciating what I had. If I did allow myself to feel good it was only for a brief moment, because I was afraid that if I felt happy for too long I'd lose my edge.

No matter what I did, I couldn't figure out a way to create *sustained* happiness. I assumed this was just the way life was, even though deep down I longed for a better way to live.

Then I got the gift of *not dying*.

Facing your mortality shines a light on what you love in life, your reason to live, and how you want to live.

I realized one of the scariest things in life is to do what we actually want to do. We put off following the dreams deep in our hearts and get lost in the busyness of life. We run around checking things off our "to-do" list but rarely feel like we've spent enough time on what's important. We work harder than we ever have, yet it feels like we never have enough. And, at the end of the day we collapse in our beds exhausted, wondering where all the time went.

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We live in a time where we have more than we've ever had yet we feel less and less happy. We feel isolated, empty and alone. We crave authenticity, community and connection.

Most of us have two lives. The life we live and the *unlived life* within us. This book is my attempt to share what I believe makes a life worth living.

I first shared what I learned from the experience with my friends. They told me my stories had a remarkable effect on their lives, and how it not only improved their perspective on life, but also made them happier.

I spoke about my experience more and more, not only with my friends but many others. I spoke about gratitude, cultivating happiness, pursuing the dreams deep in your heart, and how time isn't guaranteed. I also spoke at different public venues and conferences. Nearly everyone I spoke to felt inspired, motivated, moved, and told me how much what I shared meant to them.

Even with all of this positive feedback, it was still hard to decide to write this book.

Truth be told, I was afraid what people might think. I'm a former professional athlete, I'm known for being a tough guy; it's fine to write about health and fitness, kicking life's ass, taking no prisoners. But this stuff?

I then shared my fears with my uncle Steven Farmer, who also happens to be a doctor of psychology and author of ten books. He told me, "You have to share this. It's more

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important than ‘Here’s how to get ripped abs’ or anything else you could write. This story will change lives.”

That’s when I realized sometimes the hardest things to do are the most important—and that’s how we ended up here.

This book is about what I’ve learned in the past four years since the heart attack. It’s meant to be a companion, a guide, and a spark that ignites a fire in you, to live better, be happier and appreciate every moment of your life.

As you turn the page, I want you to remember a time when you felt anything was possible.

That
Time
Is
NOW.

Oh yeah, one more thing...

F*ck Dying.

Here’s to really living.

Chapter 1: A Moment of Clarity

Why can't I breathe?

I try to pull in a breath but only gasp.

What the hell is going on? Here I am, one of the more fit people in my cardioflex class, and I'm falling behind. I've been a professional athlete and now make my living from fitness. This doesn't make sense.

But I feel so short of breath I have to stop. I hunch over, hands on my knees to try and catch my breath. I look around as everyone else continues on.

Ten seconds pass. Fifteen seconds. Twenty.

I suck in a deep breath and push myself back into the workout. After about a minute, I'm gasping again. It feels like I'm running up a hill even though I'm barely moving.

It's a strange sensation. My mind rifles through the reasons. Again, I take a glance at the other participants in class—they are cruising along.

A Moment of Clarity

Something's not right.

Pressure hits my chest followed by a sharp stabbing pain there.

It feels like I'm climbing Mount Everest and breathing thinner air with each step.

Step, inhale.

Step, exhale.

I drop to a knee to catch my breath. No one seems to notice.

I sit longer this time, assessing what I feel. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds. A minute. My mind shuffles through a handful of possibilities: pulled muscle, something I ate, a cold or virus, didn't get enough sleep, a supplement I took, heartburn...that one seems to stick.

I get back to my feet and start to work out again. I've trained myself to push through pain. I've always felt that the difference between me and a lot of other people is that I've been able to push through pain that would make others quit.

That's my competitive advantage, that and being willing to do the work to get what I wanted when others weren't.

But this is something different. I can intuitively tell something isn't right. Yet, I can't wrap my mind around what.

Looking back it's odd, but I didn't consider the idea that it could be a heart attack. I've trained my entire life to be healthy, fit and strong. I eat really well. I take all the right supplements. I believed a heart attack could happen to anyone but me.

A Moment of Clarity

It just didn't occur to me then.

The more I push forward and exercise, the more I feel the stabbing pain in my heart.

I dig my fingers into my chest to try and relieve the pain.

I struggle to breathe. Still can't seem to get full breaths into my lungs.

I know something is wrong. I stop training and walk over and sit on the couch in the back of the gym. I catalogue the symptoms in my mind.

Shortness of breath.

Chest pain.

I rub my forehead. My hand comes away soaking wet. In fact, I'm dripping wet. I'm not working out hard enough to sweat like that—*it's a cold sweat.*

That's when I look down at my left arm and notice I've been subconsciously shaking it to alleviate the pain radiating down it.

I go over the symptoms again.

Shortness of breath.

Chest pain.

Cold sweat.

Numbness down my left arm.

A Moment of Clarity

Panic starts to set in. I know these are the classic symptoms of a heart attack, but I still don't believe it could be one. There has to be some other explanation.

I'm too healthy.

Too young.

Too strong.

My friend Ben walks by. I call him over and ask him to grab my cell phone in the cubby 10 feet away. I don't tell him that I'm afraid to move. Fearful that if I do, the hand grabbing my heart will squeeze and I'll die.

Ben hands me my cell phone. I secretly text my girlfriend. I don't want to draw attention to myself. I don't want to seem weak.

911. Call me.

I wait. Seconds tick by. Ben sees the look on my face and asks if I'm okay. I start to go over the symptoms with him.

Chest pain. Shortness of breath. Numbness down the left arm. Cold sweat.

We both know these are the symptoms of heart attack, but neither of us mention it because heart attacks don't happen to people as healthy as we are. When someone has a heart attack, they clutch their chest, collapse to the ground and writhe in pain.

I've seen it on the movies. I've read about it in the papers.

This wasn't that.

A Moment of Clarity

Ben thinks maybe I pulled a muscle in my back or shoulder. I shake my head, no. Tell him it's something different, that I know my body pretty well but can't explain what this is.

I still don't want to admit that it could be a heart attack.

Ben suggests I go to Urgent Care to get it checked out. I nod in agreement and ask him if he can drive. It's always been hard for me to ask for help. It's hard even now. Ben agrees and we quietly walk to the car. I don't want any attention on me. I don't want anyone to be alarmed. I still believe whatever this is, it will pass.

I slide into the car and adjust the seat so I can lie back. The pain starts to intensify. It now feels like someone is stepping on my chest. My left elbow is bent and my forearm rests on my stomach as if my arm is in a sling. My right hand massages my chest, trying to release some of the pressure.

The pain starts to radiate up my neck into my jaw as a wave of nausea passes over me. I'm still afraid to move, still fearing that whatever is grabbing my chest will squeeze and I'll die.

It's rush hour in L.A., the worst time to get anywhere. The seconds drip by. The urgent care is only three miles away but it takes us 20 minutes to get there. I hurry inside, moving as quickly as I can in my current state.

A young woman, about 25, is behind the desk. I approach her hunched over in my workout clothes, covered in sweat. I grumble, "Chest pain... left arm..."

She hands me a stack of paperwork and tells me to fill it out.

I roar back at her, "I'm having chest pain! Shortness of breath!"

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She recoils. A doctor rushes out from the back. He hurries me into a room where he starts applying EKG electrodes across my body as I lie back on the examining table.

The EKG whirs and clicks to life. Moments later the results spit out.

The doctor looks at me and says, "Mr. Clark, you're having a heart attack."

The words hang in the air. I look at him in disbelief. This can't be happening to me. They've got the diagnosis wrong. I'm too young. I'm too healthy. A heart attack could happen to anyone BUT me.

I take a deep breath and try to digest the doctor's words. They just rattle in my brain and get stuck there like a ball bouncing off of a wall.

Mr. Clark, you're having a heart attack.

In an instant I go from a world where everything makes sense to a world where I know nothing for certain. I sit with my head slumped. My body slack. My mouth is dry. For a moment, I panic and forget to breathe.

I feel waves of emotion roll deep within me. I feel vulnerable. I feel weak.

I've spent my whole life trying to be strong. Whenever weakness would creep through the gates and rise to the surface, I'd grab it by the throat and choke the very life out of it. Now, here I am.

I'm having a heart attack.

I am weak, fragile and pathetic.

A Moment of Clarity

I am *broken*.

The room is covered in a thick haze. I look at the doctor. He's a blur in white. I see his lips moving. It takes a long moment to absorb and understand what he is saying.

"Mr. Clark? Mr. Clark, are you okay?"

I try to speak but I cannot.

"Mr. Clark, we need to call an ambulance and get you to the hospital immediately."

It takes everything I have to focus on the doctor.

"No ambulance," I mumble. "My buddy Ben can drive me to the hospital."

The doctor cuts his eyes at me and shakes his head, no. "I think it's better if we call an ambulance."

I'm still piecing everything together and trying to digest what's happening to me. I stammer and stutter. "I just let my insurance policy lapse at the beginning of December so I could get a new plan in January. I don't want to pay \$5000 for a 15-minute ambulance ride when my friend Ben can take me."

His voice is strong and determined. "Mr. Clark, I have to strongly advise against your friend taking you to the hospital."

"Why?"

"Because, if you die on the way to the hospital, it shouldn't be up to your friend to revive you."

A Moment of Clarity

It hits me. This is real. It's happening. I'm having a heart attack and I could... *die*.

This is the moment when I let go of everything and surrender to what was happening to me.

To the sound of the sirens.

To the paramedics entering and wheeling me away.

To having a heart attack.

To dying.

It's a weird thing to surrender control and let go. I hadn't realized until this moment how much I felt in control of every aspect of my life. Life is all about control. We control what we say, what we do, what we feel. We try and control everything.

I quickly realize that now it isn't up to me. I had to give up complete control and allow the paramedics and the doctors to tend to my failing body. I had to accept the reality that nothing I could do in that moment would make a difference.

When I give up control I find a peacefulness in the surrender. It is a deeply satisfying, personal peace. As strange as it sounds, I am on the verge of death, and yet I'm feeling more peaceful than I have in a long time.

It takes four men to lift me into the ambulance. Strapped to the gurney, oxygen mask over my mouth, I bounce around in the back of the ambulance as we rush to the hospital. The ride becomes a cacophony of sounds with the blaring sirens and rattling of loose

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equipment. I hear the voices of the paramedics, each speaking in urgent, short bursts.

I get lost in the chaos and the noise until one thought rises over the fervor.

Let go. Surrender.

The paramedics shuttle me in through the ambulance entrance to the emergency room. I get the sensation that I am floating above my body watching the scene unfold far below me. I am in a great golden light and I experience myself as a transparent, radiant energy.

I can see all eyes on me as I pass by the waiting room lobby.

They steal quick glances.

I've been in the waiting room before when the paramedics have brought a person in on a gurney. I've always thought that person must be in really bad shape. They had to be. They brought them in an ambulance.

This time—I am that person.

I watch as I'm wheeled into a room. A host of nurses and doctors move around me. They work in a clear and concerted effort: sticking electrodes on me, poking me with needles, clipping things to my fingers, taking my blood pressure, performing an ultrasound.

The cardiologist starts to pepper me with questions. In that instant, I come back into my body.

"How long have you had the chest pain?" he asks.

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It takes a second to orientate and answer.

“Since about 5 p.m.”

He looks at his watch. “It’s 7:45 now,” he states. “So you have had the pain for almost three hours?”

I nod, yes. Instinctively, I know this isn’t good.

“What were you doing at the time you first felt the pain?”

“I was working out in the gym. Nothing strenuous. Just doing cardio.”

The questions keep coming at rapid pace.

Where is the pain mainly? What other symptoms did you have? Have you taken any drugs? Cocaine? Viagra? Do you have a family history of heart disease?

I answer the questions as quickly as the cardiologist asks them. While we talk, people are shoving the results of the tests in front of him.

I’m not sure how much time passes before the cardiologist looks at me and confirms that I am having a heart attack. He doesn’t know how bad the damage is. Tells me he wants to get me to the operating room immediately to have surgery.

My girlfriend stands at the side of my bed. I can see the tears welling in her eyes.

The doctor continues, “Time is of the essence. Each second your heart doesn’t get blood it damages the heart and the heart starts

to die. Once you damage your heart tissue, it can't be replaced or fixed."

I look at the doctor. I need to know. "Am I going to die?"

He adjusts his glasses, chews on this for a second and says, "I don't think so. But I need to get you to surgery right away to see what's going on."

I don't think so?

Not the answer I want to hear. I feel myself tense up. I remind myself to let go and surrender again. Nothing I can do will make a difference as to whether or not I will survive, or how much heart damage I have.

As soon as I surrender, and I mean completely surrender, I feel the incredible sense of peace return.

As they hustle me off to the operating room, I feel no fear. I am good with whatever happens. I realize that tomorrow will come and go no matter what happens to me.

I'm not saying goodbye. I am surrendering to an outcome I can't control.

Before the heart attack I'd always seen surrendering as a sign of weakness or defeat.

Now, I know it is a paradox. Sometimes we need to surrender to win.

When I truly surrendered, there was a peace that passed all my understanding.

A Moment of Clarity

My last thought as I entered surgery was to let go and surrender.

Chapter 2: Why Me?

I woke up in my hospital room. I'd been dealing with this new shocking reality for a few days now. My eyes scanned the austere room cloaked in shadows, across the hospital bed, the monitor displaying my vitals, the partial remains of my dinner, the IV stuck in my arm.

This wasn't somewhere I ever expected to find myself.

To say I was depressed would have been too pretty a description. I felt like everything I valued and worked for in life had been taken away from me.

As a kid, whose older brother died in his arms when he was 12 and I was ten, I had empty spaces that loomed large inside me that sports filled. Sports were the first way I knew how to feel good about myself. It was the one area people complimented me on, from Pop Warner football, to high school ball to college football through the NFL to the *American Gladiators*, martial arts, and as a Crossfit competitor.

Being an athlete wasn't just something I did—it was my identity. The heart attack wasn't only a derailment of my life—it stole the entire definition of who I was.

Why Me?

When I was younger and had a setback, it was easy to bounce back with youthful optimism—because I knew not only did I have time, but there had to be a place in the world for me.

Now, the best times in life suddenly seemed so distant and unreachable. It was as if time had tapped me on the shoulder and in an instant life had passed me by.

I wondered if life would ever be good for me again.

I began to feel sorry for myself and started asking, “Why me?”

I’d done everything right. I exercised like a beast. I ate all the right foods. I took all the right supplements. My entire life was dedicated to health and fitness.

Of all people, I was not supposed to be the one who had a heart attack.

I felt an overwhelming assault of emotion surge through me. I felt weak and pathetic. I fought to push back the emotions and the tears. I wouldn’t cry for myself. I wouldn’t allow that to happen. I refused to be that pitiful grown man in the hospital crying and feeling sorry for himself.

But then something cracked, some fissure opened behind the hard façade. A rogue bud of moisture escaped, and spilled down my cheek. But just as quickly I wiped away the tear. Then I remembered...

Let go. Surrender.

The tears came in little waves until they became deep sobs. I buried my hands in my face and wept openly.

Why Me?

I was tired. Tired like I've never been before. My body hurt and ached. I was miserable, out of my mind. And I couldn't stop crying and feeling sorry for myself.

Why me? Why me? Why did this happen to me?

I was done with it. I was exhausted. I didn't care if my life was over. I began to wonder, *What am I alive?*

A thought floated to the surface of my consciousness. In moments of desperation we will receive answers. We only need to listen.

I was alive to *feel*.

It's what every atom of our body is built for.

Without emotion, without love, without sorrow, life is just a clock ticking off the seconds until death.

I told myself it was okay to be sad. It was okay to weep. There is beauty in the fragility. To feel is to be human. Tears flowed and I cried until I had no more tears.

Tears of sorrow.

Tears of regret.

Tears of loss.

Then in the calm a new thought came to me.

Instead of thinking *Why me?* I started to think, *What could I be?*

The simple shift in thinking saved me. I kept repeating the question.

Why Me?

What could I be? What could I be? What could I be?

Once I focused my mind in the right direction, a light shone on me and the possibilities came thundering in.

I could be the guy who still stood tall after he had his identity stripped from him.

I could be an exemplary example of how great life can be after a heart attack.

I could take a setback and turn it into a gift of inspiration for others.

I could be the change-maker. I could create new possibilities of what was possible after suffering a heart attack.

As these thoughts swirled in my head, I started to see the hopes and dreams and possibilities that were still before me.

A light flooded into my brain. I had an acute realization. Through all of this, one thought became clear:

A broken heart doesn't mean a broken man.

That epiphany led me to another thought.

I have always been more than my body.

My body was simply an external manifestation of my spirit. My spirit was what helped me shine and overcome obstacles in the past.

My spirit was what helped me survive and flourish after watching my older brother die.

Why Me?

My spirit was what helped me find happiness again after my father died from an overdose.

My spirit was what helped me pick up the pieces and find love again after my divorce.

My spirit was what helped me keep my family together and help my son thrive after he suffered a life-threatening illness.

My spirit gave me the will and volition to go from a fat kid who was always picked last to playing in the NFL.

My spirit was what helped me accomplish everything and anything I'd done in my life.

My body was simply the armor, the shell that carried my spirit.

My heart might be broken, my physical abilities might be compromised, but inside I was still the same person. Inside of me there was still a light that burns bright.

This light was my spirit, and as long as I have a heartbeat I vowed to shine and burn bright or destroy myself trying. There was no middle ground.

In my hospital bed, in the darkness, with a world outside that would continue whether I lived or died, I set out to burn bright.

This vow became my anchor, the one true thing, as I faced what my life would be after a heart attack.