My Left Hand
By Jonathan Koch

It wasn't long after his transplant surgery that Jonathan Koch was able to move the fingers on his new left hand.

IT'S A PRETTY COOL HAND. WE WORK WELL TOGETHER. That's what I think when I look at my left hand, when I flex the fingers, hold the hand of my wife Jennifer or work out with my daughter.

It is miraculous, really. Until last October, my left hand had been a blackened, wasted paw — the result of a sudden and mysterious septic infection that nearly killed me. My once-strong hand (along with most of my right hand and both of my feet) had transmuted into something that might have belonged to a mummy. Now, it is soft and warm, with limber fingers that can grasp a tennis racket, throw a ball or hold a glass of water.

I received my new left hand on Jennifer's birthday. This was not the first hand-transplant operation — there have been 80-plus worldwide to date — but the surgery at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center was, in its way, a landmark procedure. Dr. Kool Azari, the surgical director of the UCLA Hand Transplantation Program and a pioneer in the field, had been on the lookout for a patient like me, one with an irredeemably damaged limb that had not yet been amputated. His aim was to remove the hand before there even was a donor, taking measures to preserve the vessels, nerves and tendons. By leaving them long, but tucked neatly away within the stump, he believed that attaching a donor limb would be easier and recovery faster.

Dr. Azari amputated my left hand, as well as all but about an inch of each of the dead fingers on my right hand, on June 23, 2015. I was ready for it to come off. It had caused me so much pain. I didn't even feel that it was mine anymore. And I knew that removing it set the stage for its restoration. Almost two months later, Jennifer and I were married. The next day, UCLA orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Francis Cyran amputated my right leg and the necrotic toes on my left foot. I spent the next months rehabilitating from the loss of my leg and learning to walk with a prosthesis.

The day of my transplant surgery arrived on October 25, 2016. The operation took nearly 18 hours and involved a large team of specialists that Dr. Azari had assembled from a variety of medical centers throughout Southern California. When I was in recovery after the surgery, Jennifer said to me, "I just want one thing for my birthday. I want you to move one of your fingers." I didn't think there was any chance I could do it, but I thought about it, and it moved. First my thumb, and then in a day or two my other fingers. I haven't stopped moving them since. Sensation is returning as the nerves regrow. It is like a humming inside my hand.

Jonathan Koch meets with Dr. Kool Azari (top), the surgeon who performed his hand transplant, during regular rehab at UCLA (bottom).

Photo: Reed Hutchinson
I recognize that there is more to my new hand that goes beyond the physical gift I have been given. When I think about the donor of this hand, I reflect on the enormous responsibility I now have and on the belief that there is a larger purpose to this. I had such a feeling once before in my life, when I was 17 and my best friend Brian was killed. It was so sudden and so devastating, I couldn’t process the grief. We had been best friends my whole life. I decided that I would take the life that he lost into mine, and I would live a more courageous life for the both of us. I feel exactly that way now toward my donor. It makes me feel strong and energized rather than sad and confused that someone’s life had to end for me to receive this gift.

Though I work in entertainment, I always have preferred to remain in the background, happy to fly under the radar. I rarely did any press. Until this happened to me. Now I am compelled to step forward and to talk about my experience in the hope that other people might take from it some inspiration and strength and to recognize what is possible within themselves. I have been doing some meaningful speaking engagements, which is something I never imagined but now love. As long as people are inspired by my story and want to hear what I have to say, I’ll keep talking.

My hero as a boy growing up in central Pennsylvania was Rocky Balboa, I learned so much from Rocky — that the goal is not necessarily to win but to persevere, to put everything you have into something and to get back up when you are knocked down and keep on going no matter what. It was a helpful ethos for me to adopt as a high-school wrestler of middling talent, going through hell to get ready for seven minutes on the mat. So, I learned those lessons early, and they have helped to prepare me for this fight. It has been my toughest Rocky moment.

I can’t undo what happened. It is what it is. All that I can do now is try to find the greatest good in it. Sometimes I am asked if I would rewrite this story if I could. I don’t think that at this point I would. It may sound strange, but I’ve made peace with it. Yes, it has been very painful. But, I won’t be crushed by it, and I won’t go through the rest of my life feeling disappointed and full of regret. I have a life to live — for my wife, for my daughter, for my friends and family, and for others who might draw strength from my experience. There is so much to do, and there is greatness to be found in the face of life’s most painful and difficult challenges.

To view a video about Jonathan Koch and his hand transplant, go to: uclahealth.org/kochhandtransplant

To see more photographs of Jonathan Koch, click on the link to this article at: magazine.uclahealth.org

Left: Since his transplant surgery, Jonathan Koch has given a number of public talks, including a TEDx presentation in March 2017. Above: Jonathan and his wife Jennifer hand-in-hand share a quiet moment together.

Photos: (TEDx) Bianca Schneebichler (Jennifer and Jonathan) Courtesy of Jonathan Koch