



PAUL STELZER, M.D.

PIONEERING CARDIOTHORACIC SURGEON

Dr. Stelzer moved from the Midwest to New York City in 1968 to study medicine at what is now the Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. He served in the U.S. Air Force as a surgeon for two years, and has spent most of the rest of his career in various New York hospitals. He has been practicing cardiac surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital since 2007, with a specialty in aortic valve and root surgery.

In 1988, he was the first to report doing an aortic valve replacement with the patient's own pulmonary valve as a full aortic root replacement. It is a challenging surgery, so few cardiothoracic surgeons do it routinely and most have never tried it at all. Having done just under 800 such operations, Dr. Stelzer has more experience with them than almost anyone in the world.

After all these years, he still never tires of seeing the amazing beauty and strength of the human heart. Its ability to pump so much blood around the clock for a lifetime is far better than any pump that man could make. With all its yet undiscovered mysteries, it inspires him to believe there is a power beyond us that can create such a thing, and that can give him the ability to make "miracles" happen when a heart needs help.

In his spare time, Dr. Stelzer enjoys jigsaw puzzles (including three with 18,000 pieces) and singing in a barber shop quartet (for 25 years). He and his wife enjoy traveling (especially to Italy), and spending time with their two children and three grandchildren.

Why Do People Know Both Good and Bad?

PAUL STELZER, M.D.

Is everything we experience simply a random effect of chance or is there a thread of purpose and deeper meaning in and around us? It seems that even a “big bang” origin story leaves us with the question of where it came from. The concept of God solves that problem, and the amazingly orderly structure of the natural world suggests that this God cares about order. We see it around our little planet as an enormous universe and inside us in our own DNA, which multiplies its simple components into an enormous complexity that gives each person unique traits and abilities. Furthermore, there is not just order, but beauty. Flowers with colors of all kinds, majestic mountains, sunrises, sunsets, music from birdsong to symphonies, art, languages, and literature. Little wonder that ancient cultures from widely separated parts of the world developed traditions and detailed descriptions of supernatural beings that could have an influence on everything from the weather to individual human lives.

There are some very counter-intuitive aspects of human beings that also point to the existence of God. One of the most striking is our sense of right and wrong. It is not simply a matter of pragmatic instincts for the survival of the species but conscious choices that include placing value on an individual human life with the concepts of kindness, altruism, generosity, empathy, sacrifice, compassion, and forgiveness. But we also have the capacity to be selfish, jealous, angry, hateful, brutal, and destructive – things we recognize as wrong, bad, or evil even when we don’t get caught. Could it be that the God who made these extremes possible did so like parents who hope that their children will opt for the good, but know that they are made with the freedom to choose otherwise? The good choice would bring little joy if that were the only choice we have. Would there be real happiness without God?

A host of traditions and behaviors from different cultures around the world, from ancient to modern, portray a yearning to be part of something beyond that which we can see and beyond our own lifespan, whether a Pharaoh in Egypt building his tomb or a grieving mother seeking hope for her child whose sibling was killed in a grade school mass shooting. There seems to be an unquenchable belief that things can be better, and we celebrate those among us who make a difference that nudges the world toward a brighter future. We mourn with the families of people lost in natural disasters but even more so, decry the atrocities of mass destruction of people by other people. Why are we made this way? Why do we care? Why do we experience guilt? Why do we get excited when the “little guy” wins? Why is gratitude so rare but so appreciated when it is sincere? Why do we love to win and hate to lose? What is love really all about? Could the best things in life really be possible without God in it?