

# TECH TALK

## THIS I BELIEVE ...

Four life lessons from one guitar.

BY TIM A. SAYED, MD, MBA, FACS

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Like many plastic surgeons, I was attracted to medicine at a young age as a calling to a life serving others, and this was partly informed by aptitude for science and art. Coming from a family of engineers, schooled in math and the physical sciences, I was transfixed when I saw the artificial heart prototypes and animal models at the University of Utah, thinking how interesting it was to apply technology to solving problems of the human condition. Exposure to surgical specialties and the relative satisfaction among plastic surgeons when compared to, say, their cardiac surgical colleagues, coupled with the melding of left- and right-brain skills that plastic surgery cultivates, helped seal my decision to become a cosmetic and reconstructive plastic surgeon. Along the way, I envisioned a career that could blend clinical work, creative endeavors, entrepreneurship, and variety, all the while believing this could never spread me too thin nor threaten my financial security. A quest for self-actualization has kept me in a constant state of restlessness, the burden faced by those who are unaccustomed to failure, perhaps, yet who ironically may never fully believe they have achieved success. This may be because our profession is so highly competitive or because its very nature confers access to a diversity of patient experiences, practice environments, social contacts, sideline businesses, and public media exposure not necessarily available to other physician specialties.

Rather than write an article riddled with “humblebragging” (a favorite social media pastime of so many of our colleagues, to which none of us is entirely immune) about professional accomplishments or delving deep into the reasons for a mid-career partial pivot into healthcare software development and innovation consulting, which I have covered in a prior piece, I prefer to relay how making music with one guitar taught me some valuable life lessons.

A few years ago in business school I was asked to write an essay inspired by a site called [thisibelieve.org](http://thisibelieve.org) (“This I Believe”). The site is dedicated to sharing journeys of “belief” about things that give the writer conviction. In my case, I wrote that I believe one guitar can save a life. In a time of great personal difficulty, I found myself needing validation that I had the skills, talents, discipline, and opportunities still ahead of me when I felt much was being taken away by outside forces. Temporarily bereft of some prized musi-

cal instruments and other possessions, I bought a guitar which became a trusted companion. That guitar, in our moments of solitude, grief, anger, stress, and frustration together, taught me some important lessons:

### BEING PRESENT IN THE MOMENT MATTERS

There are real risks that come with distraction, lack of focus, and constantly delaying the gratification that comes from spending quality time with people you care about, just as lack of focus or distraction are dangerous in the operating room. The intimacy of playing just one guitar keeps me in the moment with each strum or fingerpick.

### DISCIPLINE EMPOWERS

Whether building and marketing your practice, managing a marriage or other relationships, performing procedures with predictable results, playing music, or launching new ventures, you need to continue to train yourself with reproducible processes so you optimize your chance to succeed. Malcolm Gladwell in his bestseller *Outliers* talks about the importance of 10,000 hours of practice in a sphere of learning before expertise is achieved. We may not become experts in everything we try (there are only so many hours a day) but we can apply the lesson of discipline beyond our surgical careers. (The other lesson of *Outliers* is the impact of luck, accidents of birth and circumstance over which we have no control). I can practice and curate my skills with discipline on just one guitar.

### QUALITY TRUMPS (WHY AM I SUDDENLY AVERSE TO USING THAT WORD?) QUANTITY

While we can become dispossessed of material belongings, it is much harder to be stripped of our natural and diligently acquired capabilities if we choose to stay engaged, and you don't need much to maintain those things. One can only hold one guitar in hand at a time, for the most part (Jimmy Page had a double-necked Gibson SG, but he is an *Outlier* too.)

### IT DOESN'T TAKE A LOT TO LEAVE A LASTING IMPRESSION

I can entertain myself and leave recordings for posterity to others with just one guitar.

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Tim A. Sayed, MD, MBA, FACS has more than a decade of experience practicing plastic surgery in Southern California and South Florida. He also serves as Vice President of Physician Engagement at Interpreta, Inc., a health software startup in San Diego. Dr. Sayed is double board-certified by

the American Board of Plastic Surgery and the American Board of Surgery. He has been named one of America's Top Plastic Surgeons and is an active member of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Dr. Sayed received his medical schooling and training at Massachusetts General Hospital (Harvard Medical School) in Boston and the University of California at San Francisco. He has a degree in electrical engineering and computer science from the University of California at Berkeley and completed the Executive MBA Program at The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Chicago. An expert on the interface of healthcare and technology, he serves as an advisor and investor in numerous digital health and medical device companies and has developed software products for plastic surgery and other medical specialties.

There are more lessons I learned from that instrument, but the most important is that if you focus on enhancing your faculties, believe in yourself, and keep perspective on who and what matters most, you will become truly successful. One guitar helped me remember that no matter what challenges I face, I can not just survive, but thrive, endure, and prevail. If you have three minutes to spare, listen to that one guitar here: [soundcloud.com/acousticneuroma/blackbird-9-25-13](https://soundcloud.com/acousticneuroma/blackbird-9-25-13).

One guitar saved my life. This I believe. ■