

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

My Life as a Doctor of Vision

Daniel Spitzberg, M.D.



Carmel, Indiana

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Daniel Spitzberg

·DEDICATION·

*To the memory of my beloved parents,
Dorothy and Albert E. Spitzberg*



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In the Blink of an Eye

Daniel Spitzberg

“THE WORLD ONLY EXISTS IN YOUR EYES. YOU CAN
MAKE IT AS BIG OR AS SMALL AS YOU WANT.”

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD



*Daniel Spitzberg, age 5, on the steps of his
Fort Wayne, IN family home.*

In the Blink of an Eye

·ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS·

Iwould like to extend my appreciation to the following two people without whose assistance this book could not have been produced:

- My wife, Susanne McAlister.
- My editor and collaborator, Peter Weisz.



I would also like to express my gratitude to the following individuals, who contributed to this book:

- My daughters, Laura Carafiol and Julie Graziano.
- My friend, Michael Maurer.
- My friend, David Brandes.

In the Blink of an Eye

·AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION·

Why I Wrote This Book

Benjamin Franklin once quipped, “There are more old drunkards than doctors.” Despite being the latter, I have somehow managed to reach my eighties in good health and relatively sound mind. But I would not call myself your typical MD—one who practices for forty to fifty years and then retires to a life of chasing little white balls down the fairway. Not for me. In fact, I was thinking of calling this book *How I Flunked Retirement*. Although I am no longer a practicing ophthalmologist, I still enjoy a full-time career that fills my days with productive activity.

Unlike other professionals, we doctors do not prepare for retirement during the course of our careers, and hence, we experience a difficult transition when the time comes. The problem is that most physicians, at the conclusion of their careers, find themselves unmoored and adrift without much purpose in their lives.

It is that quest for meaning that has kept me, at this stage of my life, from falling into the routine of endless days of golf followed by Netflix nights. Not my idea of a meaningful retirement.

I wrote this book for the same reasons that I continue working: to provide my life with meaning, purpose, and direction. As I have observed, those who do so at this stage enjoy longer, healthier, and happier lives. I strongly recommend it.

I've also observed that it's not a good idea to build your retirement life around your kids and grandkids. They have their own lives, and that's the way it should be. I am, however, very devoted to my children and grandkids, as you'll discover in the pages of this book, and it is for their benefit and for the benefit of the generations yet to come that I undertook this project. It's my hope that this book will inspire them to continue to do great things with their lives. It's important for them to understand that bounty comes from hard work fueled by a passion for your career. If you love what you do, success will follow.

This book is also directed to anyone interested in reading about a life filled with opportunity and adventure. By learning about how my life has played out so far—from a small-town upbringing through a rewarding medical career up to my current work with the nation's largest medical insurer—perhaps you, too, will be prompted to look back and examine the way your own life has developed and, who knows, maybe decide to write your own memoir. I have been advised that leaving a literary legacy of my life story is the most valuable asset I may bestow to my heirs.

Daniel Spitzberg

And so, as an ophthalmologist, looking back upon my life in 20/20 hindsight, I find myself both thankful and amazed. I'm grateful for the many opportunities I have enjoyed and for the wealth of friends and loving family members with whom I've traveled along life's journey, and I'm amazed at how quickly it all went by, as they say, "In the blink of an eye."

—Daniel Spitzberg, MD
Carmel, Indiana

In the Blink of an Eye

•FOREWORD•

by Michael Maurer

Biographies and particularly stories of Indiana Hoosiers have always fascinated me. In elementary school, I read *Fifty Famous Americans* by Orville V. Webster III (JBG Publishing, 128 pp.), and I still have that volume in my library. That's why I wrote two biography books, *19 Stars of Indiana: Exceptional Hoosier Men* (IBJ Media, 2010, 232 pp.) and *19 Stars of Indiana: Exceptional Hoosier Women* (Indiana University Press in association with IBJ Media, 2009, 233 pp.). The women's biography book benefited from the contribution of Peter Weisz, the co-author of this entertaining memoir. He wrote the chapters on exceptional women Sharon Rivenbark, Jane Blaffer Owen, and Patricia R. Miller, and his clever storytelling brought these extraordinary women to life.

Daniel Spitzberg could easily have been one of those profiled in the men's biography book. I met Dan in the late 1950s when he would drive his hot yellow convertible down from Fort Wayne to romance our Indianapolis ladies. In the 1970s, when Dan joined the ophthalmology practice of Michael Lashmet, I was privileged to represent them as their corporate attorney.

People used to say that doctors checked their business brains at the door of medical school. Based upon my experience representing physicians over a twenty-year career as a practicing attorney, I can attest to that fact—in most cases. Dan was an exception. His commanding intelligence enjoys a broad range. Not only did he understand the business advice he sought from me, but his stimulating insights were often of benefit to me in turn. His strong business savvy, street smarts, and common sense were a welcome interlude in my practice of representing physicians.

Dan is in the midst of his second career. His first was an ophthalmology practice that is ongoing, and the second was as chief medical officer for United Healthcare, Indiana Medicaid division. I would add that he has been engaged in a third career, simultaneously with the two I just listed, personal investing, an activity for which he has demonstrated serious talent and capable skills—particularly for one whose medical education did not allow for electives in accounting, real estate, business, and finance. No doubt, Dan would have been a successful businessman and entrepreneur had he chosen to pursue that career path instead of ophthalmology.

Today, as an octogenarian, Dan demonstrates remarkable energy and a sense of adventure. He's hard to keep up with, even by men half his age. His recent trip to Alaska did not consist of sitting on a deck chair on a large cruise ship, but rising at 6:00 a.m. each morning to board a small plane to a frigid wilderness stream and wading throughout many blustery days of catching salmon and rainbow trout.

Dan has earned a remarkable reputation not only in his field, but as a public servant and philanthropist, demonstrating his embrace of the

Hoosier values that he espouses and lives by. Those values are reflected in his two daughters, Laura Spitzberg Carafiol and Julie Spitzberg Graziano, whose children adore and respect their “Papa.”

It is fortunate for our community and Dan’s vast circle of friends that many years ago he chose to join an ophthalmology practice in central Indiana, rather than opting to remain in his hometown of Fort Wayne, where an easier opportunity to enter ophthalmology awaited him.

Unique is a strong and often misused word. It is an apt description of Dan Spitzberg, however. It is a pleasure to reflect on the life of this extraordinary man, his intelligence, and his *gaudium vitae*. I appreciate his friendship.

I congratulate Dan on his choice of Peter Weisz to assist on *In the Blink of an Eye*. I have read about a dozen Weisz efforts and always look forward to the next Peter Weisz biography. *In the Blink of an Eye* benefits from Weisz’s skillful collaboration. His clever presentations are laced with humor and insight. He digs into the lives of his subjects and produces nuggets to the delight of his readers. It is difficult for biographers to competently describe the achievements of their subjects while not compromising their modesty, which, in Dan’s case, is an essential quality. Weisz has navigated those shoals well.

I understand from the Prologue that this project was created primarily for the benefit of Dan’s progeny. I hope that it will also be read by many others. After reading his highly engaging and entertaining memoir, you will thank Dan for sharing his memories in this meaningful manner. There is indeed much to learn and enjoy here.

—Michael S. Maurer
Carmel, Indiana

In the Blink of an Eye

·PROLOGUE·

“It is the set of the sails, not the direction of the wind that determines which way we will go.”

—*Jim Rohn, motivational speaker & author*



ublished a century ago and considered the seminal work that launched the science of Sociology, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* by Robert and Helen Lynd, examined the daily life of a typical Midwestern small town.

The community they selected to focus upon was, in fact, Muncie, Indiana, the home of Ball State University. There, on the campus of this All-American college in this All-American town, one may today find a modest plaque mounted next to the door of the student radio station. The plaque recognizes one of Ball State’s more illustrious graduates and benefactors, former late-night talk show host David Letterman. It contains a quote that reads: “Dedicated to all C students, before and after me.” Although in my case, I was in middle school and a bit further north up the road in Fort Wayne, Indiana . . . that C student was me.

The fact that I was far from being an academic star at Forest Park Elementary School did not seem to bother my father all that much. Albert Spitzberg was a mechanical engineer who left most of the child-rearing responsibilities to his strong-willed wife, my mother, who bore the same name as Letterman's mom, Dorothy. There was, however, a strong male influence in my life at the time in the persona of my uncle, Harold Leopold. Uncle Harold was my mother's brother and a successful Cleveland pharmacist. We were very close because I felt I could discuss things with him whenever he visited us in Fort Wayne—things that most boys going through puberty were interested in and things that I could not possibly discuss with my parents.

It was Uncle Harold whom I credit with providing me with my earliest sense of direction in life. He was genuinely interested in my future. He understood that the last thing I aspired to in life was to become an engineer like my dad.

“Danny-boy,” I recall him advising me, “you should think about going to pharmacy school. That way, when you get out, you could come to work for me.” I found the idea appealing and carried it with me as I entered high school.

It was a few years later that Uncle Harold again helped me to navigate the course of my career when he suggested that I should first attempt to enroll in medical school.

“Medical school is harder to get into,” he advised, “so if you don't make it, you can go to pharmacy school and then come to work for me.” Harold had, by this time, relocated to Miami, where he was developing a

chain of drug stores. He explained that he could use a bright young man like me in his budding business. But when I discussed this course with my high school guidance counselor, her response was cool, to say the least.

“Listen, Daniel,” she told me confidentially, “you can go into whatever field you choose and be successful . . . except for medicine. We just don’t think you’re qualified to be a doctor.” I was infuriated. How dare she tell me such a thing! Her words landed on me heavily, and I took them to be a challenge, a challenge to which I knew I could rise. My first step was a redoubling of my academic energies. I made up my mind that I would no longer be Letterman’s C student, and I’m pleased to state that with one exception, I became a straight-A scholar. That exception was English Composition, a subject that no matter how hard I tried over three semesters, I was unable to earn higher than a C. That literary deficiency partially explains why I sought out assistance when it came to writing this book.

Another powerful motivating force in my life during those years was none other than my own mother, Dorothy. Should I ever bring home an A-minus grade, her reaction was always the same: “Couldn’t you have tried a bit harder and gotten an A?”

I remember clearly the day I came home from high school and was greeted by my mother with these startling words: “Tomorrow, don’t come home when you’re done with school.”

“Hunh?” I said. “Why not?”

“Because you need to report for work at Rogers Market,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I got you a job as a carry-out boy at eighty-two cents an hour. Here’s your apron.”

“Uh . . . well, I’m not sure if I want to do that,” I mumbled.

“I wasn’t asking what you wanted to do,” she retorted. “You don’t have any say in this. You’re going to work and that’s it.” And that’s what I did for the next two years.

And then one evening during my senior year when I returned home after work, my mother greeted me with these words: “You’re no longer working at Rogers Market. I got you a new job at the Mary Jane shoe store downtown. You’re going to work as a salesman and make one dollar an hour. You start Saturday. Here’s your shoehorn.”

Once again, there was no discussion, and the following Saturday, after turning in my apron, there I was helping ladies try on their patent-leather pointed pumps for eight dollars a day.

My mother’s demeanor at such moments was never mean-spirited nor confrontational. She believed that she was simply doing her job as a responsible parent by instilling within me what used to be known as the *Protestant work ethic*—even though we were not Protestants. My mother had married at age eighteen, and the couple had very little in the way of money. My twenty-year-old father was taking night school classes in order to qualify as an engineer, while my mother took menial jobs to supplement their income. Their hardscrabble success was due entirely to the sweat of their own labors. In hindsight, I am deeply grateful to her for instilling these key values into me. I know that I owe whatever success I

may have achieved in life to her interventions, recognizing that they came from a place of love.

In addition to my mother, a misguided guidance counselor, and my wonderful Uncle Harold, there was one individual who perhaps had an even more profound influence on the course of my life—my eighth-grade homeroom teacher, Mr. Schultz.

Fred Schultz was the Forest Park teacher that nobody wanted. He was known to be very tough. This was driven home to me on the day he dismissed our class after the final period with these words: “Class dismissed. You’re all released to go home except for you, Mr. Spitzberg. You stay where you are.” Gulp!

“I need to have a word with you,” Mr. Schultz said, approaching my desk. “I know that you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, Dan, but your grades stink. I want to know why.”

He explained that I was to remain after school and complete all my homework there in the classroom. He would then review my work and make sure that it had all been done properly. We did this often, and soon my grades began to improve. Since he lived near our home and we would finish up when it was time for him to leave, he often walked me home from school. Our chats during those walks were always focused on my future in high school, college, and beyond.

Looking back, I have to say that Mr. Schultz taking an interest in me was the singular turnaround moment of my youth. It launched me on a path that eventually delivered me to a wonderful professional career and, in a certain way, enabled me to enjoy all the blessings of a loving family. It’s odd to consider that such important inflection points in a person’s life

happen so quickly. It takes years of retrospection to appreciate their significance. You might say they happen “in the blink of an eye.”

NOTE: I don’t know if this book will ever end up on the shelves of the Forest Park Elementary school library, but if so, I would like it somehow noted (à la Letterman) that it is “Dedicated to all the students, before me and after me, who went from being a C to an A student.”

