

# Dedication

I dedicate this book to all those who have supported me on my journey with a stroke and continue to do so each day. Your love, encouragement, and belief in my strength have been my guiding light. This dedication is a tribute to the profound impact you've each had on my life. Thank you for standing by me, lifting me up, and being my rock.

A special dedication to my son, Gabriele. I wish you all the best, and I'm committed to being a significant part of your life.

Similarly, this is dedicated to all the medical staff I encountered since my stroke, especially at NMC ProVita, whose expertise helped me regain most of my lost functionalities after the stroke. I am grateful for their ongoing support in helping me get better and alleviating the consequences of this challenging journey. This book is for stroke survivors, and anyone involved with them.

To Lei, Metha, and my mum—your solid belief in my writing abilities fueled me as I embarked on this book journey.

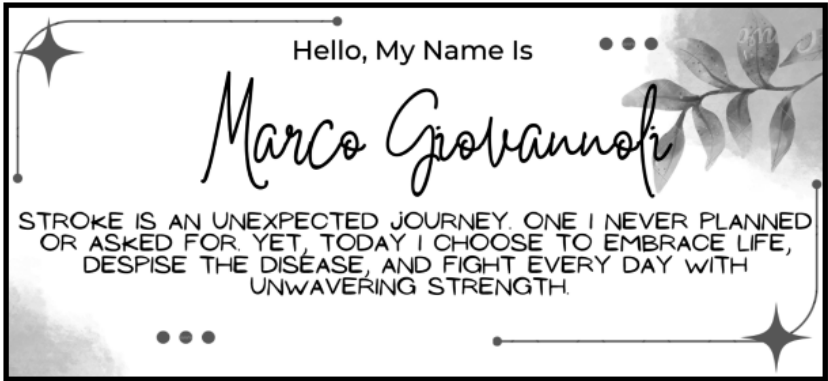
For Lei, the steady presence that holds my hand through the post-stroke journey. With you, I am never alone.

To my incredible team members and colleagues, your solid support and seamless acceptance of my return, as if nothing had happened, have been my driving force. Your willingness to alleviate work stress from my shoulders daily has granted me the space to focus on my journey. This bond is irreplaceable, and I would not trade it for anything else.

I would also like to express my gratitude for my stroke. It brought me challenges, but it also became the catalyst for discovering my new self and purposes in life. It granted me the opportunity to embark on the

remarkable journey of writing this book. I am thankful for the lessons learned and the transformation it sparked within me.

## Premise



# Foreword

Disclaimer: The original message has been reviewed and corrected for grammatical accuracy.

Dear Marco,

The credit solely goes to you.

We have discussed this concept before, and I want to remind you that every condition is approached biologically, psychologically, and sociologically. This comprehensive approach is known as the biopsychosocial model.

In many cases, individuals affected by stroke or other physical disabilities do not experience complete recovery; they might recover biologically (physically) but not psychologically, or they might recover both biologically and psychologically but not sociologically.

You stand out from other patients in this regard. You have achieved recovery in all three dimensions. Your openness, self-perseverance, motivation, and hard work have played a significant role. You grasped the essence of our discussions, understanding the importance of both short-term and long-term goals, the value of self-motivation, and the tremendous support from your family, girlfriend, and co-workers. They have collectively helped you build psychological and sociological resilience.

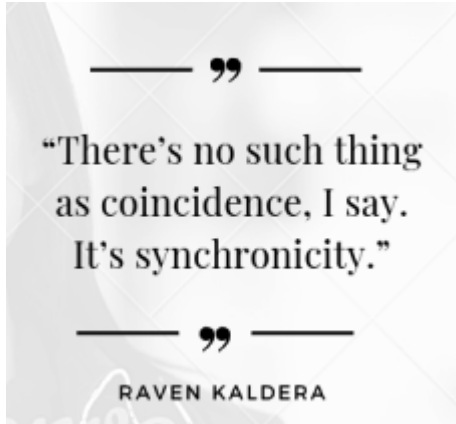
Your willingness to go to the office, engage in outside activities, volunteer to assist other stroke survivors, create motivational TikTok videos, and continue with your regular routines without hesitation demonstrates your unique strength. You are harnessing every potential you possess.

Keep up the fantastic work, Mr. Marco. Stay motivated and keep inspiring others. Remain happy and healthy.

Metha Gowsic V

Physical Therapist at NMC ProVita

# Preface



“It is an amazing idea; I have always dreamt of writing a book!” I answered Lei when she suggested that I author a book about my journey with the stroke.

Metha, my therapist at NMC ProVita, told me one morning while we were walking back to my room, “You should write a book about your journey to inspire others. I see too many patients who just give up on therapy and life. They close themselves off and behave like children.”

Building on Ian Fleming’s: “Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action,” I say, “One occurrence is luck, two occurrences are a coincidence, but three occurrences establish a pattern.”

My third push came when I received a call from my mum just a couple of weeks after I had started drafting this book. During one of our daily conversation, she mentioned an article in the Italian newspaper about a

radio presenter who had suffered a stroke and published a book about her adventure. Thus, she encouraged me to do the same.

While I have learned from doing statistics and data analysis on my job that 'correlation doesn't imply causation,' I do believe that these occurrences were not mere coincidences but rather synchronicities. They were messages to me. Synchronicities hold deeper significance and remind us that there is a greater plan at play in our lives.

The psychotherapist Jung chose the term synchronicity to explain the occurrence of events happening at the same time. It seems to have no obvious cause but holds significant meaning. The word combines "syn," meaning "with," and "chronos," meaning "time."

While some may argue that coincidences are random, upon closer examination of our lives, we come to realize that they are not. Every word we hear, every sound that reaches our ears, and every person we meet are not mere chance encounters. They come into our lives precisely when we need them the most, offering answers to our inner doubts and questions. These seemingly serendipitous moments hold deeper meaning and purpose. They guide us along our journey, providing the support and insights we seek.

Serendipity is when something unexpected and good happens by chance. It is like stumbling upon a hidden treasure or finding a solution to a problem without even trying. Serendipity is all about pleasant surprises that make life more interesting and exciting.

Conversely, synchronicity is the guide when we find ourselves uncertain about which path to choose or what changes to make in our lives. It is as if someone, somewhere above, hears our silent prayers and communicates with us through other individuals, images, or events. In fact, Einstein described coincidences as being "God's way of remaining unknown," highlighting their mysterious and profound nature. These syn-

chronistic experiences offer us insights and messages from the universe. They provide a sense of divine guidance. They remind us that there is something greater at work in our lives. Of course, the list of synchronicities can be endless and subjective as synchronicity is a more complex phenomenon. However, Albert Einstein says, “There is no logical way to the discovery of these elemental laws. There is only the way of intuition, which is helped by a feeling for the order lying behind the appearance.”

It was a crisp sunny morning like many others in Abu Dhabi. I was seated still on my couch, and I was in a good sweat after my stroke rehabilitation routine 45 minutes morning walk although I had already had a refreshing shower and one good Italian coffee to recharge my batteries.

A bright ray of sunlight fell upon me through the living room window, mingling with the cool stream emanating from the centralized air-cooling system. This collision of warm and cold fronts near my skin resembled a pocket-size tornado. Meanwhile, my left hand gracefully danced across the page, breathing life into the story you hold in your hands.

I was pressing my lips together while I cast my mind back to my days in primary school. I found myself reminiscing about the experience of reading my compositions aloud in front of classes as a form of reward for my effort.

Without warning, I was transported back to those days. Reading in front of a class was a daunting task, evoking a wave of anxiety that surged through every fiber of my being.

As I stand before my peers, their expectant eyes fixated on me, a sense of self-consciousness creeps in. The weight of their judgment feels palpable, intensifying the nervousness coursing through my veins. My heart races like a wild stallion. The mere thought of stumbling over words or mispronouncing a passage fills me with dread. The fear of



ridicule and the desire to meet expectations collide. The words on the page blur as anxiety cloud my concentration, making it difficult to even comprehend the sentences before me. With shaky hands, I grip my notebook tightly, my voice trembling as I utter the first words. Each syllable feels like a hurdle to overcome. But with each passing sentence, the anxiety gradually decreases. As the final word escapes my lips, a rush of relief washes over me. I know I have faced my fears and conquered the challenge of reading in front of a class. The memory of sharing my composition, cherished like a treasured keepsake, forever etched in my mind.

A few years later, when I was around 18 or 19 years old, I found myself lying in my bed at my parents' house, lost in a daydream. In that moment, I envisioned myself crafting a book, but I had no notion of its subject matter. Little did I know that 30 years down the road, a stroke would unlock the sleeping writer within me, held hostages for all those years, setting me free to explore the skill of storytelling.

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**And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.**

Sylvia Plath

In the wake of my stroke, I have come to realize that every aspect of life holds a story waiting to be written. I have found courage within my-

self to put those thoughts and experiences into words. The stroke may have affected my physical abilities, but it has not taken away my imagination. In fact, it has pushed me to improvise and find new ways to express myself through writing. The true obstacle I face is the self-doubt that lingers in the corners of my mind. It tries to discourage me from sharing my stories, but I am determined not to let it stifle my creativity.

In life, there is always something to write about if you dare to do it and let your imagination flow freely. Doubting yourself hinders creativity, so I will push beyond those barriers. Life's experiences, both big and small, are worth putting into words, and I am ready to explore and express them with courage and imagination. There is a world of stories waiting to be told, and I will not let self-doubt stand in the way of sharing my voice with the world.

Drafting a book in a dreamscape indicates a desire to be creative. Perhaps I was in need to explore a new hobby to stretch my creative muscles, or 30 years later, I was looking for a new purpose and meaning in life after my stroke, or it was indicating a need of communication between me and someone else or me and my subconscious. Hence, I shelved that dream at the back of my mind and moved on with my life, because I thought I did not have what it takes to be a writer.

Still to this day, while I am drafting this book, I am not convinced that anything I am writing is good enough (see also: imposter syndrome). According to Robert H. Schuller, "The only place where your dream becomes impossible is in your own thinking."

"Do you know what makes life confusing? It is when you cannot determine if things are signs for you to give up or simply a test to see if you can hold on longer" (Unknown). As much as I never really believed in signs, I do believe that events can be used to validate our thoughts and decisions (see also confirmation bias), like writing a book. Perhaps, it is the benevolent universe trying to speak to us. Ultimately, even if

the universe does send us signs, how we interpret them is purely subjective and our subjectivity makes the difference on how we translate our thoughts in actions. Dr. Srikumar Rao states that the “Universe is benevolent, and it is on our side,” and we should “learn to see the good in whatever comes to us.”

It was 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, a normal working day, when my friend and one of the best, or undoubtedly the best physiotherapist I have ever met, Metha Gowsic Velayutham, sent me the following message in the middle of a discussion we were having about my stroke rehabilitation, “And u r really doing very good Marco. U r really an inspiration. You should write a book about your experience.” This was not the first time Metha suggested that I had to write a book about my experience with stroke.

In addition, on the same day, my friend, Cristiano, from Sao Paolo (Brazil) told me, “We just need to listen to him (God), see the signs!” after I had told him, “I believe there is something good waiting for me.” Mehta’s and Cristiano’s messages were the final signs I was looking for that unequivocally made it clear to me that my new purpose in life was to write this book about my recovery from a stroke to help others in my same situation.

However, the initial idea to write a book was born from Lei. I was still an in-patient at the rehabilitation center when she suggested that I write a book about my recovery.

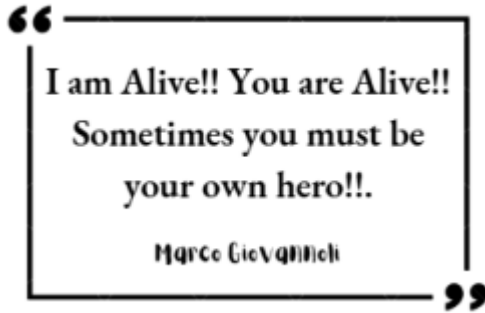
It was a Saturday at NMC ProVita International Medical Centre Abu Dhabi (UAE’s largest provider of post-acute care and rehabilitation services). A Saturday like any other for three months. The day started the way it should have. Early morning wakeup call by the birds resting outside my window. Generally, they started chirping in chorus as the sun rises, as they do, they begin to sing their different songs. All together,

they sound like a boisterous cacophony, but soon you hear their individual sounds, which becomes a symphony of beauty and awe.

I had a light breakfast followed by a one-hour stationary bike workout. Subsequently, while playing chess (I was trying to learn and play chess to train my cognitive skills like memory, planning, and problem-solving), Lei articulated, “You should write a book to share your story with everyone that there is hope for recovery after a stroke if you believe it.”

Thenceforth, we talked about writing this book many times to define the theme and its plot. We tried to identify the most notable events to cover in the book. She has always believed I could draft this book. Lei is my first fan and supporter on this journey. She made me accountable for typing a minimum of five hundred words per day to complete this book in a reasonable period.

# Introduction



In the hot desert, a stroke struck, and darkness loomed. But a miracle happened! I started a journey to find myself. Even though it was hard, life's challenges shaped me and showed my bravery. Get ready for an amazing story of strength and discovery in the desert! This is my personal hero journey. A transformative adventure filled with challenges and growth. It reflects my own experiences, where I faced obstacles, found allies, and discovered inner strength.

Living every day with a stroke is undeniably the most challenging experience I have ever faced. The difficulties, the frustrations, and the constant adjustments are a part of my new reality that I am learning to navigate. People would often ask me how I am coping with the deficiencies that came after the stroke. They genuinely care, but finding the right words to explain the emotional and physical toll is never easy. "It's hard, It's so fuck@ing hard living every day with a stroke!!" I would reply, my voice tinged with the weight of the struggle.

Facing each day with physical limitations is an uphill battle. Tasks that were once effortless now demand tremendous effort and patience. The simplest of movements had become obstacles in themselves. There are

days when I feel defeated, questioning whether I would ever regain some sense of normalcy. Staying positive is a constant challenge. The emotional rollercoaster feels never-ending. I have my moments of frustration and sadness, and I must remind myself that it is okay to feel that way. But amidst it all, I try to find glimmers of hope and small victories. Those are the sparks that keep me moving forward.

Adapting to my new reality means not just adjusting physically but also emotionally. It is essential to acknowledge my feelings and confront the emotional toll the stroke takes on me. Seeking support from friends, family, and sometimes professionals helped me navigate this unfamiliar territory. The road to healing is slow, but I am willing to give myself the time and space I need. Living with a stroke means embracing a new version of myself. It is an ongoing process of self-discovery and acceptance. Though the road is filled with obstacles, I know that with time and patience, I can find ways to overcome them.

Stroke is a leading cause of mortality and disability worldwide (Katan and Luft, 2018). The most common forms of stroke are ischemic and hemorrhagic, which account for 11.8% of deaths worldwide (Feigin et al., 2014).

My name is Marco Giovannoli. I had a stroke in September 2022. I am not going to lie to you every day, this stroke takes such a heavy toll on me, in all aspects.

Spoiler Alert: This book springs forth from my left hand alone. Once right-handed, this stroke altered my path.

It continues to try to drag me down. But I keep fighting back, pouring my energy into overcoming the obstacles that I face. I have come to accept that recovery will be an ongoing journey throughout my life. After a less-than-a-year-long recovery, I am coping quite well with my deficiencies. I am managing the challenges of fatigue, as well as muscle stiff-

ness and tightness. There is still weakness in my right upper and lower limbs, and I experience sensory processing issues.

During moments of self-doubt and uncertainty, I find solace in repeating a mantra to myself: "I am Alive!"! You are Alive!! Sometimes you shall be your own hero!!" These words serve as a powerful reminder that I possess an inner strength and resilience that can guide me through any challenge. When faced with adversity, I draw upon the courage within me, embracing the idea that I can be my own hero. This mantra is a constant reminder to me of my inherent vitality and the endless possibilities that lie ahead.

Every time I look in the mirror and see myself, I see a living, breathing thing staring at me. That reflection is a strong reminder of the fact that I am alive.

I am grateful for being alive. I am a true miracle, a "Miracle in the Desert." Despite all odds and all medical predictions, I survived the acute ischemic stroke I had in early September 2022. Lei, my current life companion, gave me this epithet, which also became the title of this book. The idea that I had a second chance, I would say a second life, to achieve something new and bigger gives me the strength and motivation to sit and write down my personal story as a stroke survivor. I will explain the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of stroke on me. I want to encourage others in similar conditions to embrace resilience and hope in the face of adversity.

In life, our beliefs hold the power to shape our reality. "We are what we believe we are." This profound truth reminds us that our self-perception and convictions create the foundation of our existence. Embracing positive and empowering beliefs about ourselves can lead to newfound confidence and limitless possibilities. Conversely, if we harbor self-doubt or limiting beliefs, they can hinder our growth and potential. By recognizing the influence of our beliefs, we can harness their

transformative force and embark on a journey of self-discovery, allowing us to unveil the boundless potential within us.

“You will need to accept that some limitations will be with you in the future,” was the advice from my friend, Masoud, during one of our talks at the rehabilitation center. I know his intentions were good. More than a friend, he has always been a brother to me. He was trying to protect me from possible distresses and frustration if I would not get back where I wanted to be. However, it would take time for me to understand that.

For a long time, I held to the belief—or it was only a dream of mine—that things would go back to how they once were. I just needed to be discharged from the hospital and start my rehabilitation program. This conviction gave me something to focus on that felt real during a time of disruption and uncertainty. Unfortunately, reality would prove to be different to my dream.

As much as I wanted things to be like they once were, my life was taking a different path. I had to accept that *my life would never be the same*. Like a coin with two sides, I now had an observe side—my life before the stroke. The opposite side, now representing me after the stroke.

This acceptance was important for me to set reasonable expectations about my recovery. Patience, practice, and positivity besides acceptance, are all important aspects when working on a reliable post-stroke rehabilitation program. To avoid unpleasant surprises during your recovery, set reasonable goals. When setting realistic goals, you will need to think about the required actions to take with them. This can help you set the pace while keeping you responsible for your actions.

Do not set unachievable or arbitrary recovery goals!! You are throwing a monkey wrench into your rehab. I learned the hard way that this approach does not help to fast-track a post-stroke recovery. Within two



weeks of having my stroke, I decided that I would be able to control my right hand. But after almost a year, I am still experiencing extensive muscle weakness in my right limbs. There is stiffness and tightness, known as spasticity, and loss of fine motor control in my right hand.

I have realized that physical, spiritual, and emotional health are all linked. One supporting the other. Taking care of all aspects will increase the likelihood that I will feel better in this life-long voyage.

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On the morning of May 06, 2023, as part of my routine post-stroke rehabilitation program, I was walking along the saltwater canals close to my apartment. I always loved these morning walks where I would either listen to a podcast about self-growth and positive mindset or I would be fully absorbed in my thoughts by slowing down my brain waves to tune down the volume of the negativity and nuisance going on in my life and in my head.

I would try to contact my feelings and evaluate what is going on inside and around me to try to reach a state of peace within myself. That day, because my phone podcast application kept buffering for several minutes, I decided to drop the headset, and instead, I chose to use that two-hour walk to reflect on this same book you are reading.

I have always experienced an inner peace when walking along those canals; although my attention and the sequence of thoughts would be disturbed by the noise coming from the endless construction sites along the canals from time to time.

While walking, I recalled reading an online article about people experiencing the benefits of the water whether they are near the ocean, a lake, river, swimming pool, or even listening to the soothing sound of a fountain. Wallace Nichols, a marine biologist, and author of the 2014

book, *Blue Mind*, specifies, “Most communities are built near bodies of water not just for practical reasons, but because as humans, we’re naturally drawn to blue space...but even if you aren’t in an area where there is easy access to water, you can still experience [its] emotional benefits.”

Walking beside the tranquil canals has become a soul-nourishing ritual, offering me a myriad of emotional benefits. As I stroll along the water’s edge, the gentle lapping of the waves creates a calming rhythm that soothes my mind, washing away the stresses of daily life. The scenic beauty of the surrounding landscape immerses me in a sense of serenity, filling my heart with gratitude for nature’s wonders. The unhurried pace of the canal’s flow mirrors my own, allowing me to find a peaceful rhythm within. Each step offers a moment for introspection, as I find solace in solitude, fostering a deeper connection with my thoughts and emotions.

I was staring at the free-floating weed gently pulled along by the continuous flow of water and at the fish gasping for air on the surface; the canals’ oxygen levels always dip to dangerously low levels when the air and water temperature upsurge during summer “and/or” because of high ammonia and nitrite/nitrate levels found in the saltwater in the part of the world that I am currently living in.

“Physical impairments are not limitations, but stimulus to find new paths and a better self in life.” These words were born in my subconscious mind, like the creation of an artesian spring when the pressure for the groundwater becomes greater than the pressure from the atmosphere and the water is pushed straight up out of the ground. In this case, words were pushed from my deep inner realm up to my conscious mind and I pondered Heraclitus’ words: “Everything flows, and nothing abides; everything gives way, and nothing stays fixed.” These words made me appreciate that we are like water; we always change, we evolve at every step and turn in our life. Now and here, we are the product of

our beliefs, thoughts, and ultimately, actions. Every step shall be a step forward towards new experiences and possibly a more fulfilled life.

Heraclitus went on to add that "The only constant in life is change." That concept presents us with limitless new initiations, whether we are kicking off a new year, recovering from a loss/illness/accident, starting a new job, or jumping into a new relationship. Every day the sun rises is a new beginning, and that is a reason to be excited!

As humans, we cannot help but lean toward getting meaning and purpose in our lives. We hunt for it in the pages we read (hopefully, this book will be helpful to you in this quest), scroll endless internet pages, and browse for it in the aisles of stores. We look for them at work and pursue them in our relationships. We are always trying to make sense of our experiences.

Accepting my current physical limitations, the emotional distress, and the consequent life challenges that the stroke gifted me, allowed me to start looking at my life from a unique perspective. Slowly—slowly—I learnt how to shift my viewpoint and develop a cheerful outlook to build a meaningful life by finding new meaning and purposes. I reframed the way I think. I forced myself to stay in the moment and live with the present as a daily gift we receive every day. The future is unknown to us and discovering it now will kill the mystery.

I have started appreciating all the small 1% gains (the principle of 'aggregate marginal gains') and progress in life along with all the nice and beautiful things life brings to my attention every day. I discovered new passions and repressed ones have risen again. This book is the outcome of my life evolution after the stroke.

Changing for the better is not an easy task. It requires patience, perseverance, dedication, and commitment toward us and the people we love and care for. We may be required to ditch old habits, to look at

our life and its events in diverse ways, to embrace changes in our mind, heart, and soul. We may decide to embrace new faiths from scratch, stay centered in our current ones, or reclaim old ones.

Luckily enough, I am not the first and not the last to speak about this concept. English philosopher James Allen wrote: “As a man thinks, so he is; as he continues to think, so he remains.” Stoic and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote: “A man’s life is what his thoughts make of it.” Poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “A man is what he thinks about all day long.” Author Earl Nightingale said: “We become what we think about,” and Mark Twain wrote: “Life consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever flowing through one’s head.”

“Never feel guilty for starting again but feel at fault for the inertia stain,” I told myself while drafting this page.

This book provides a detailed chronology of the events as they have happened from the morning I suffered the stroke, and my subsequent rehabilitation journey up to now as I am typing these same words.

It is also the account of my emotional struggles of accepting my new conditions. The continuous inner work to fight negativity and the search for new purposes in my life.

At this point, you will realize that this book is not really about stroke, but more about what this stroke has taught me about myself and life in general. It covers my emotional and mental struggles trying to escape depression, which is always lurking in the shadows, waiting for the right opportunity to grab me.

The accounts I share in this book are about the love from my family and friends. How they were so important and how they are still helping me every day with my emotional and physical recovery.

This book also covers my personal experience with the medical support I received in the United Arab Emirates, which has played—and still does play—a pivotal role in my recovery. I crossed and interacted with many amazing professionals. From the Emergency Responders to the medical Teams at Sheikh Shakhbout Medical City (SSMC) and especially at NMC ProVita, who helped me physically and emotionally. I am currently here writing this book also because of them.

In writing this book, I used Hemingway's writing style, embracing the art of brevity. I employed short and simple sentences. I tried to evoke his essence, creating a narrative that resonates with succinctness and clarity. I tried to capture the power of every word. Clarity helps you to understand exactly what I am saying. Brevity keeps your attention. Both clarity and brevity are about keeping things simple and short. They are crucial in today's world filled with overwhelming amounts of information.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your writer and aircraft pilot speaking. Welcome aboard this exciting journey as we prepare to take flight into the world of my book. Please fasten your seatbelts. Be ready to immerse yourselves in the pages ahead. Just like a thrilling flight, this book promises to take you on an adventure through captivating stories and heartfelt moments. Relax, and get ready to soar through the skies of imagination as we embark on this incredible reading journey together. Thank you for joining me. I hope you enjoy the ride! More than anything, I am grateful to be alive and celebrative of the time I have here in this world. Lastly, I am excited that these words will be spread out into the world where they might do good.