

BEFORE THE SCALPEL

THE ART OF TRUE TRANSFORMATION

C. CARSON HUYNH, MD, DMD, FACS

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PRAISES FOR BEFORE THE SCALPEL

As a plastic surgeon who has long advocated ‘rejuvenate before you operate,’ I loved *Before the Scalpel: The Art of True Transformation*. Dr. Carson Huynh nails what I’ve seen for years: the happiest patients do the deep inner work first. True transformation begins with mindset and self-acceptance — the scalpel is simply ‘The Final Brushstroke.’ A must-read for anyone considering aesthetic procedures.

— **Dr. Anthony Youn, MD, FACS**

America’s Holistic Plastic Surgeon

Host of The Doctor Youn Show

Author of *Younger for Life*, *The Age Fix*, and *In Stitches*

Before the Scalpel offers a clear and thoughtful guide for patients seeking inner clarity before pursuing aesthetic change. An essential resource for anyone considering transformative procedures.”

— **Dr. Charles Lee, MD**

Board-Certified Plastic Surgeon

“Dr. 90210” Beverly Hills, California

BEFORE THE SCALPEL

Dr. Huynh gives readers a clear path to align their physical appearance with their authentic identity, making surgery — when chosen — a natural and confident final step rather than a desperate fix. This book is a rare and valuable gift to anyone considering aesthetic surgery.

— **T. William Evans, DDS, MD, FACS**

Associate Professor Emeritus – The Ohio State University, University of Michigan, University of Illinois – Chicago

To my father, Di Van Huynh,
Dr. Steven M. Roser, and Dr. T. William Evans —
the three heroes who shaped my life and career.

To my beloved wife and life partner,
whose unwavering love and support fuel every success.

And to my patients —
whose courage and personal transformations inspired this book
and continue to inspire me every day.

"I have arrived.
I am home."

— Thich Nhat Hanh

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FOREWORD

BY STEVEN M. ROSER, DMD, MD, FACS, FRCSED

Throughout my career as a surgeon and educator, I have always believed that the most successful surgical outcomes begin long before the first incision. It was therefore with great pleasure that I accepted Dr. C. Carson Huynh's invitation to write the foreword for his book, *Before the Scalpel: The Art of True Transformation*.

His book delivers a crucial message: true transformation is an inside job.

Dr. Huynh introduces a clear and practical framework for evaluating and planning treatment for patients seeking consultation regarding facial aesthetic concerns. He refers to this framework as the "Three Mirrors":

The Physical Mirror: How we currently perceive our appearance.

The Memory Mirror: How past experiences shape our self-perception.

The Identity Mirror: Who we believe ourselves to be.

Many patients arrive in our clinic feeling trapped by distortions in these mirrors, hoping a surgical procedure alone will resolve feelings of inadequacy. However, Dr. Huynh underscores that the most sustainable path, and the one that leads to the happiest patients, begins with an inner transformation that aligns these mirrors. When that foundation is firmly in place, surgery becomes what he calls "The Final Brushstroke"

— a confident, intentional act of self-expression rather than a desperate attempt to fix how one feels.

As one of his mentors during his residency training, I watched Dr. Huynh develop into a competent and confident surgeon and one who particularly values the holistic well-being of his patients. The philosophy presented in these pages reflects the very best of what we strive to teach in academic surgery.

Whether or not readers ultimately choose to practice aesthetic surgery, embracing the principles in *Before the Scalpel* will serve them well. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone seeking authentic transformation—both inside and out.

— **Steven M. Roser, DMD, MD, FACS, FRCSEd**

DeLos Hill Chair and Professor of Surgery

Residency Program Director

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Department of Surgery

Emory University School of Medicine

Chief, Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Service

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INTRODUCTION

WHY A SURGEON WROTE THIS BOOK

I have held a scalpel in my hands for more than twenty years.

I have reshaped noses, lifted faces, and corrected misaligned jaws.

I have repaired the damage that time and injury leave on the human form.

The outer transformation is almost never the whole story.

I learned this not in a sterile operating room, but on the open ocean. I was a child, aboard a crowded boat with my father and ninety-six other souls who had left everything behind in Vietnam. We were robbed by pirates. We drifted for a week with almost no food, no water, and no certainty that anyone would find us. In those days at sea, beneath a sky that seemed indifferent to our suffering, something was forged in me — a quietness, a resolve, a way of looking at life that I could not yet name but would eventually come to call the Zen Warrior's way.

We survived. We were spotted by an oil rig worker, brought to a refugee camp in Malaysia, and eventually made our way to Atlanta, Georgia — a city that would become home. I grew up here, went to school here, and eventually earned two doctoral degrees: a DMD from the Medical College of Georgia and an MD from Emory University School of Medicine, where I also completed six years of intensive surgical residency. I was selected for a prestigious fellowship in facial cosmetic surgery from a pool

of more than forty candidates. I have since lectured on facial aesthetics, published academic book chapters, and been recognized as one of the Southeast's leading facial aesthetic surgeons.

But none of those credentials are why I wrote this book.

I wrote this book because of what I see in my consultation room every single day — and what I have learned to ask about it.

Patients come to me from across the country. They sit across the desk, sometimes nervous, sometimes rehearsed, and they tell me what they want changed about their face. And then — if I am doing my job well — I ask them a second question. Not about their nose or their eyes or their jawline. I ask them about their life. What is happening inside. Who they are becoming. What they believe, deep down, about their own worth.

What I have discovered, over twenty years and thousands of surgeries, is that the patients who heal most completely — whose results last, whose satisfaction runs deep, whose lives are genuinely changed by what happens in my operating room — are the ones who arrived already doing the inner work.

The patients who struggle — not physically, but emotionally — are often the ones who arrived hoping that the outer transformation would solve an inner problem. That a rhinoplasty would silence a critic's voice in their head. That a facelift would restore a love that had faded. That a new reflection would produce a new self-regard. It rarely does. Not without the inner work.

This book is for both kinds of patients — and for everyone in between. It is for the person who has been considering a procedure for years and isn't sure what's holding them back. It is for the person who has already had surgery and is wondering why the results feel incomplete. It is for the person who simply wants to understand the relationship between how

they look and how they feel — and whether it is possible to be genuinely, durably, radiantly at peace with both.

I am a surgeon, not a monk. But I have come to believe, with the certainty of a man who has operated on thousands of human faces, that true beauty begins somewhere the scalpel cannot reach. It begins in the mind. In the story you tell yourself about your own worth. In the courage it takes to look in the mirror — not at the surface, but behind it — and decide that the person looking back deserves to be seen, celebrated, and cared for.

That is the inner game this book is asking you to master.

The Zen Warrior is not a passive figure. The Zen Warrior is disciplined, present, compassionate, and relentless. The Zen Warrior does not run from transformation — he or she moves toward it deliberately, with clear eyes and a quiet mind. And in my experience, the Zen Warrior always heals better. Always.

This is the book I wish every patient could read before their first consultation. It is the conversation I try to have in thirty minutes that really deserves hours. It is the philosophy that has guided my practice from its first day and that I believe, with everything I have seen and done and survived, represents the truest path to beauty — inside and out.

Welcome. Let's begin — not with the face, but with the self.

— *Dr. C. Carson Huynh, MD, DMD, FACS*

Atlanta, Georgia

Radiance Surgery & Aesthetic Medicine

PART 1: THE WARRIOR'S ORIGIN

KNOW WHERE YOU COME FROM

CHAPTER 1

BOAT, PIRATES, AND A REFUGEE CAMP

THE MAKING OF A ZEN WARRIOR

*S*outh China Sea. 1986.

The boat was not built for ninety-eight people.

It was built for cargo — low and narrow, the kind of vessel that could navigate the rivers of southern Vietnam without drawing attention. But attention was exactly what my father and I, along with ninety-six other desperate souls, were trying to avoid. We climbed aboard in darkness, moving quietly, carrying almost nothing. We were leaving behind a country that had, in the years since the war's end, become a place where men like my father — educated, ambitious, with a stubborn belief in something better — had no future.

I was a child. I did not fully understand what we were doing. I understood only that we were moving toward something, not away from it. That distinction — small as it seemed then — would become the cornerstone of everything I later built.

WHAT THE OCEAN TEACHES

The pirates came on the second day.

They pulled alongside without warning and boarded without ceremony. My father was the captain of our vessel — the man responsible for

ninety-eight lives — and so it was my father they went to first. I watched them surround him. I watched them shout. I watched them raise their hands against him, threatening and striking him in front of everyone on that deck.

I was a child. And a child watching his father being beaten does not calculate risk. He screams.

I screamed and yelled and threw myself forward in protest — a small boy with no weapon and no power, armed with nothing but the unbearable sight of his father in danger. One of the pirates turned. He grabbed me. Lifted me off the deck. And carried me to the railing.

I do not know what the South China Sea looks like from the railing of a boat when you are a child being held over it. I know only what I felt: the absence of deck beneath my feet, the wind, the indifferent water far below. And then — my father's voice.

I cannot tell you what he said. I cannot tell you what a father finds inside himself in the moment his child is about to be thrown into the ocean — what words he summons, what stillness he manufactures from pure terror, what human thing he reached across to touch in a man who had already shown he was capable of great cruelty. I know only that he spoke. Calmly, from everything I could see. Purposefully. And by some grace that I have never been able to fully explain — a grace I have spent my entire adult life trying to be worthy of — the pirate set me down.

My feet found the deck. My father's eyes found mine. And in that look — steady, composed, holding something back that I would not understand until I was a grown man with children of my own — I received the first and most important lesson of my life: that the most powerful thing a human being can do in the face of chaos is refuse to become it.

It was not until many years later — my father an older man, his hair white, his hands finally still — that he told me what had actually been moving through his mind in that moment. I had always imagined something primal. A father's rage held barely in check. The animal calculus of survival.

It was none of those things.

He told me that in the instant that pirate lifted me off the deck, his mind went not to me, and not to himself — but to the ninety-six other people on that boat. He understood, with a captain's terrible clarity, that if he had responded with violence — if he had lunged, if he had fought, if he had let rage make the decision — he would not have saved me. He would have condemned us all. Every man, woman, and child aboard would most likely have met the same fate. The pirates had the weapons. They had the numbers. A single act of defiance would have turned a robbery into a massacre.

So he chose stillness. He chose his words over his fists. He chose the lives of ninety-six strangers alongside the life of his own child — and somehow, in that breathtaking act of selfless calculation, saved everyone.

I have thought about that story in the operating room more times than I can count. Because what my father did on that boat deck is, at its core, exactly what I try to do every time I pick up a scalpel. I do not operate on a face. I operate on a person — a person whose fear and hope and history I am holding in my hands alongside the instrument. And the only way to serve that person well is to set aside everything that is reactive, everything that is ego, everything that is noise — and act from the stillest, clearest, most considered place available to me.

That is what my father taught me. Not in a classroom, not in a lecture, not in any of the ways that formal education transmits knowledge — but on the deck of a boat, in the South China Sea, with his child's life hanging

over the water and ninety-six souls watching to see what kind of man he was.

He showed them. He showed me. And I have spent my entire life trying to be worthy of what he showed.

What we did not know until they were gone was that they had also wrecked the engine. Deliberately. They had not just robbed us — they had sentenced us. Ninety-eight people on a disabled boat in the middle of the South China Sea, left to drift and die under an open sky.

For seven days, we drifted. The sun was merciless. The water supply dwindled to almost nothing. People prayed. People wept. Some fell into a silence that was its own kind of prayer. I watched my father during those days — watched his face carefully the way children watch the faces of the adults they love, searching for the signal that tells them how frightened to be.

What I saw surprised me. He was frightened, yes. But beneath the fear, something else held steady. A quietness. A refusal to become the situation. He did not pretend the danger was not real. But he also did not let the danger be the only real thing.

I did not have words for what I was witnessing. I was a child on a broken boat in the middle of the South China Sea. But I was watching the Zen Warrior in practice, though neither of us would have called it that.

The Zen Warrior is not the person who feels no fear. The Zen Warrior is the person who refuses to let fear make all the decisions.

On the seventh day, an oil rig worker spotted us. Help was called. We were brought aboard. We were alive — barely, but completely.

We were taken to a refugee camp in Malaysia. We had nothing. We were strangers in a country that did not want us, waiting to be accepted

by a country that did not yet know us. We slept in tents. We ate what was given. We waited.

And in the waiting, something remarkable happened. My father began to plan.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF RESILIENCE

I have spent a great deal of time over the years thinking about what my father was doing in that refugee camp — why he was able to plan when others were paralyzed, why he could hold hope steady when the evidence for despair was overwhelming on every side.

I have come to believe it was not personality. It was not genetics. It was a practiced orientation toward life — a habit of mind, cultivated over years, that refused to collapse the present moment into a permanent verdict about the future.

In other words: he had done his inner work. Long before the boat, long before the pirates, long before the drifting, something in him had been trained to remain steady in the face of chaos. And that steadiness — not the absence of suffering, but the refusal to be consumed by it — is the first and most essential quality of the Zen Warrior.

I want to be careful here, because I am a surgeon, not a self-help guru, and I have a surgeon's instinctive suspicion of language that floats free of reality. When I say "Zen Warrior," I do not mean someone who meditates on a mountain and has transcended the need for grocery lists. I mean something practical, something I see evidence of every day in my consultation room.

I mean the person who walks into my office having already sat with the hard questions. Who they are. What they want. Why they want it. Whether the change they're seeking comes from a place of genuine self-care or from a wound that surgery cannot touch. The person who has done that work — who has sat quietly with themselves and looked

honestly at what they found — is the Zen Warrior. And they are a remarkable patient, because they are already half-healed before the procedure begins.

ATLANTA, AND THE SECOND BEGINNING

We made it to America. We settled in Atlanta, which in the early 1980s was a city still writing its own story of transformation — still becoming what it would be. In that way, it was a perfect place for us.

I went to school. I worked hard — the kind of hard that doesn't feel like sacrifice because the alternative is never seriously considered. I earned my undergraduate degree, then my DMD from the Medical College of Georgia, then my MD from Emory University School of Medicine. I completed a year of general surgery residency, then six years of maxillofacial surgery residency at Emory, where I was awarded the Robert A. Bays Achievement Award for the highest exam scores in my program.

Then I was selected for a fellowship in facial cosmetic surgery under Dr. T. William Evans — chosen from more than forty candidates — and I trained in New York and Beverly Hills before returning to Atlanta to open Radiance Surgery & Aesthetic Medicine.

That is the résumé version of the story. Clean, sequential, comprehensible. But the real story — the one that actually made me the surgeon and the person I am — is the one that begins on that boat. With the pirates. With my father's face. With seven days on the open water learning that the most important things a person carries cannot be stolen.

THE INNER FORMATION

The surgical training took fifteen years. The inner work took longer — and it was, in many ways, the harder education.

I want to tell you about three rooms I entered as an adult that changed me as profoundly as any operating theater, any residency, any fellowship. Not medical rooms. Rooms of a different kind — the kind where you

are asked to look at yourself without the protection of a professional identity, without the credentials that usually tell you who you are in a room, with nothing between you and the honest question of what you are actually made of.

The first was the practice of Zen.

I did not come to Zen through a teacher or a temple. I came to it the way many people come to it — through a growing recognition that the stillness I had witnessed in my father on that boat deck was not a personality trait. It was a practice. A cultivated orientation toward life that could be understood, studied, and developed deliberately. Zen does not ask you to transcend the world or float above its difficulties. It asks you to be fully present within them — to meet each moment with clear eyes and an uncluttered mind, to act from stillness rather than react from noise. I began to understand that what my father had demonstrated on that boat was not extraordinary composure under extreme pressure. It was the natural result of a practiced relationship with the present moment. And I wanted to build that relationship for myself.

What Zen gave me was not peace in the absence of difficulty. It gave me a quality of attention — a way of being present in a consultation room, in an operating room, in a conversation with a patient at the most vulnerable moment of their relationship with their own appearance — that I do not believe any amount of surgical training alone could have produced. The scalpel requires steady hands. The kind of surgery this book is really about requires a steady mind. Zen taught me how to cultivate one.

The second room was the Landmark Forum.

Landmark is a personal development program built on a simple and radical premise: that most of us move through our lives governed not by what actually happened to us, but by the story we constructed around

what happened — and that those two things, the occurrence and the narrative, are not the same. The occurrence is a fact. The narrative is an interpretation. And the interpretation, once installed, runs so automatically and so invisibly that we mistake it for reality itself.

I sat in that room and recognized immediately what I was being shown. I had spent years watching it happen in my consultation room — patients who were not responding to a feature they disliked but to a story about that feature, a story written in childhood by a careless comment and consolidated over decades into something that felt indistinguishable from truth. Landmark gave me the language for what I had been witnessing. More than that, it gave me the language for what I had been living — the stories from the boat, from the refugee camp, from the immigrant's hunger to prove that the crossing had been worth it. I looked at those stories honestly for perhaps the first time. I kept what was useful and I put the rest where it belonged: in the past, where it could inform me without governing me.

What Landmark gave me was accountability — not as a burden but as a liberation. The recognition that the life I was living was not happening to me. I was authoring it. That distinction — between a life that happens to you and a life you are responsible for creating — is the difference between a patient who heals and one who doesn't. It is the difference between a person who looks in the mirror and waits for a verdict and one who looks in the mirror and makes a decision. I did not understand that distinction as fully as I do now until I sat in that room.

The third room was the Sterling Men's Weekend.

I came to Sterling at a point in my life when the outer formation — the degrees, the fellowship, the practice — was largely complete, and I was beginning to understand that something else needed attention. The question of what it meant to be a man. Not in the cultural sense — I had

plenty of cultural models, none of which fully fit — but in the personal sense. What kind of man was I choosing to be? What did I stand for when no one was watching? What was the quality of my presence in the lives of the people I loved?

Sterling brought me into a room with other men who were asking the same questions. What I found there — beneath the intensity and the structured challenge that characterizes the weekend — was a practice of radical honesty. Of being seen, fully, without performance. Of understanding that genuine strength does not require armor. That the most powerful men in any room are not the ones who reveal nothing of themselves. They are the ones who have looked honestly at everything they are — the courage and the fear, the capability and the wound — and have chosen, with full awareness, who they intend to be.

I did not take everything from any of these rooms. Discernment is part of the practice. I took what resonated with the deepest things I already knew — what my father had shown me on that boat, what the ocean had taught in those seven days of drifting, what I had been building toward without fully knowing it — and I left the rest. That is, I have come to believe, exactly what the Zen Warrior does with every experience. Not wholesale adoption. Not wholesale rejection. Honest engagement, clear eyes, and the willingness to take what serves the person you are becoming.

These three rooms, alongside the boat and the refugee camp and the operating theater, are the real curriculum of this book. The surgical techniques I have spent twenty years refining are not in these pages. But the inner formation that makes those techniques mean something — that is here, in every chapter, in every patient story, in every question I ask and every silence I hold and every time I put down my pen and look at someone across a desk and ask: tell me who you are becoming.

That question did not come from medical school. It came from these rooms. And from the man I watched, as a child, refuse to become the chaos around him.

Both of those teachers taught the same thing. It just took me a while to understand they were teaching the same lesson.

I want you to hold that in your mind as you read the rest of this book. Not because my story is exceptional — it is, and I know that — but because the principle inside it is universal. The outer circumstances of your life, including your appearance, are profoundly important. They affect how the world receives you, how you move through rooms, how you experience your own reflection. I believe this completely. I have dedicated my life to it.

But they are not the whole story. They are never the whole story.

The most beautiful people I have ever seen — in twenty years and thousands of procedures — were beautiful not because of symmetry or proportion or the absence of aging but because of a quality of presence. A quality of being fully, unapologetically, recognizably themselves.

THE QUESTION I ALWAYS ASK

Here is something I do in every consultation that my staff has come to recognize and, I think, respect.

After a patient has told me what they want changed — their nose, their eyes, their jawline, the softness that has crept into their neck over the years — I put down my pen. I look at them directly. And I ask: "Tell me who you are becoming."

Sometimes they laugh, thinking I am joking. I am not.

Sometimes they cry, because no one has asked them that in a long time. Sometimes they go quiet, and I can see them reaching for something true,

something underneath the procedure they came in to discuss, something that was waiting for this exact question.

Because that is the question the Zen Warrior always asks. Not "what do I want to look like?" but "who am I in the process of becoming — and how can every choice I make, including this one, serve that person?"

The answer to that question is the beginning of true beauty. Not the surgeon's answer. Yours.

YOUR STORY IS YOUR STRENGTH

I want to close this first chapter with something I have never said in a consultation room, because the context was never quite right. I am going to say it here.

You do not need to have survived pirates to be a Zen Warrior. You do not need a refugee camp or an oil rig rescue or an immigrant's hunger. You need only this: the willingness to be honest with yourself about where you have been, what it cost you, and what it made you.

Every person who walks into my practice carries a story. I have learned to listen for it — not just the story of the face, but the story behind the face. The girl who was told she was too much. The man who built a career and then looked up one day and didn't recognize himself. The woman who watched herself disappear in the mirror, year by year, and finally decided she wanted to come back. The young person who was born in the wrong body and is moving, with extraordinary courage, toward the right one.

These are Zen Warriors, every one of them. Not because their stories are dramatic — though some are — but because they have chosen to act. To move toward the life they want, rather than away from the life they fear. That distinction, which I first learned to see in my father's face on the open ocean, is the one that changes everything.

It is where this book begins.

And it is where your transformation — whatever form it takes — must begin as well.

In Chapter Two, we turn to the mirror — and what it cannot show you about who you really are.