

One man's story...

Here is a remarkable account of tragedy and recovery, and an endorsement of the importance of research in understanding stroke and promoting recovery....

Awakening

I awakened, slowly remembering bits and pieces of a dream, much as if I were reconstructing my life. Indeed, that is what I was doing. My life was quite different from what it had been. For thirty-eight years I had been a rural family physician, many years as the only physician in the region. I had planned to spend another five years in my practice. In May of 2006 I would be seventy years old, time enough to retire.

I suffered a subdural hematoma in January 2001. Nothing dramatic. I didn't get thrown from a horse. I didn't fall on the slopes of Aspen. Nor in any of the exciting, contemporary manners in which one's head might be injured. I slipped on the ice in my driveway, hitting my head on the concrete. I discovered that the concrete was less yielding than my head. After two days I was willing to consult a physician other than myself. A CT scan revealed a subdural and I was flown to Denver in a blizzard. There the hematoma was evacuated. The neurosurgeon told Carol, my wife, that after two or three days in the hospital she could take me home and I could return to work in a week or two.

Plans often go awry. My plans for practice and retirement and the surgeon's plans for my recovery all were blown away in the wind. I had a hemorrhage (actually three) in my brain, a brain of which I had been inordinately proud. I spent a month in an ICU, the next six months in a rehabilitation hospital. There is where I was awakening, finding how extraordinarily my life had been changed.

I remember nothing of the first few months of my new life, much as an infant remembers little. Carol tells me I had an endotracheal tube and was on a respirator. I was fed through a gastrostomy tube. I had a catheter. Someone bathed me and, when I could swallow, fed me. They dressed me. Not as an adult but with a diaper, a tee shirt and socks. I couldn't walk. I couldn't talk. And, if I could think, I have no recollection of those thoughts. Probably that is just as well.

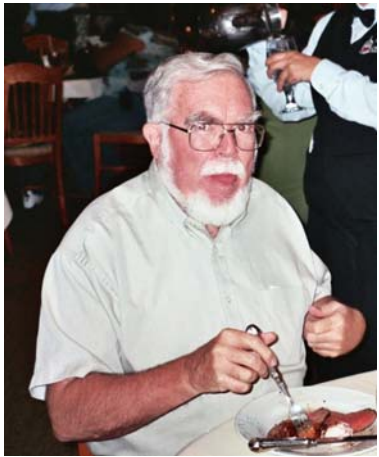
Susan, my daughter, had delivered an infant son three months before my accident. I'm sure Susan and Carol thought they might well have two infants on their hands; but at least they could look forward to Susan's infant maturing. I might be in a perpetual infantile state.

Imperceptibly I improved. Carol was thrilled when I wiggled a toe. Then I smiled. Soon I could use a word or two, although it was months before I could speak. The physical therapists managed to sit me up in a chair, then onto my feet. The speech therapists taught a child's words to me — comb, pen, stethoscope. Strangely, I could learn familiar medical words more readily than I could learn to use a child's articles. The occupational therapists taught me to dress myself, brush my teeth, tie my shoes. Little of this do I remember.



I remember sitting in a wheelchair and fiddling with anything within reach, much as a one-year old. Much as I watched Alzheimer's patients fiddle in their rooms when I was a physician. I remember trying to walk in the gym between parallel bars, up and down a four step stairs, and walk slalom style between small pylons. I was shown individual words, then I was to arrange them into a sentence. I was asked to match two objects, two colors or two shapes. Sometimes I did. Sometimes I didn't. Usually I improved. Occasionally I slipped back a bit. But I slowly was recovering. Then I lost a lot of ground. The neurologist thought I had developed hydrocephalus. The surgeon placed a shunt in me to drain spinal fluid from my brain to my peritoneum. Unexpectedly I got much worse after the placement; then I again improved.

Six months after my accident the speech therapist helped me learn the names of my grandchildren. They were to be here for Fathers' Day and we were going out for dinner. I hazily remember that. I remember a storm when they moved all of us into the hall, away from windows. Carol, an entertainer, sang to us, trying to calm some of the patients. I thought Carol and I were on a ship in a storm, Carol singing to calm the passengers, much as on the Titanic. On July 4th, always one of my favorite holidays, I watched some fireworks then wanted to go to bed. Just as my young grandchildren when they were tired.



Carol took me home to an apartment in Denver, still in a wheelchair, minimally verbal and virtually an invalid. She drove me to the rehab hospital as an outpatient three days a week. One

morning, as we were preparing to leave for the hospital, the radio announced that an airplane had crashed into the World Trade Center. It was September 11. Still attempting to orient my new life, I had to face another, larger reality. A world that had changed immensely while I was absent. My memories of that tragedy are my first vivid memories.



I was promoted to the Social Reintegration Services in October. This was a four week course helping us fit back into the real world. I think I remember most of this. Much as an infant, but much more rapidly, I grew up. There were six or eight of us in the course, all brain injured. We were taught to read, then discuss the articles in the newspaper. We were taught to use a map. We had to design a schedule, when and where to go and how to fit in time to move from one to the other. We had to learn to add and subtract, then how to balance a checkbook. As an outing we were taken to a large store where we were to find a few objects and list their costs. Then we were taken to another store and to compare the costs. Wednesday we planned a lunch menu, Thursday we purchased the items needed and Friday we prepared lunch. And I learned to clean up.

After four weeks I graduated, I no longer needed to return to the hospital. I didn't want to leave the therapists. They were my parents. But as any parent, they knew I had to move on; I had to learn to care for myself. With Carol's love, pushing, pulling and

sometimes whipping me to continue my improvement, I have persisted in my recovery. But my life is not the same. I have not been able to resume my practice. Carol and I spend half of the year in Houston where our son's family lives, the other half in Northwest Kansas. We avoid ice and snow if possible.

Carol and I were both undergraduate students when wed, soon to become parents. Medical school was a full time job. Then I was in practice, another full time job. Since my accident I have had time to spend alone with Carol, a time for the two of us to talk,



watch a movie or work on a project. We rarely had that opportunity.

I have much more time to spend with our grandchildren. John, my grandson now four, is learning to write his name, how to manipulate numerals and how to solve jigsaw puzzles. As I watch him I recall many of the steps I have retraced in the past four years. I am fortunate to have had a second chance; a life quite different but very pleasant.

As above, I had a second chance. I have no idea why I was given that chance, why another patient might have remained bed-ridden, unable to communicate and needing continual care. It is only through research that physicians and therapists learn how to help more of us get that second chance. The staff of the Landon Center on Aging, at the University of Kansas Medical School, is striving to discover more knowledge in how to prevent strokes and, following a stroke, how to help a damaged brain heal. I am certain a brain is a magnificent organ. But a damaged brain needs all the help it can receive if it is to return as nearly as possible to its undamaged state. That is their task. They need volunteers to participate in their studies. I am willing. Are you?

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