

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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2. The Triumph of Piddling Persistence

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The loss of control, the crimping of one's freedom, is, in essence, a kind of imprisonment. The stroke was my jailer, locking me inside a body that was no longer the one to which I'd been accustomed so long. The rules of the prison were random and capricious, and the fractional improvement I'd made one day was yanked away the next. It was as though my body had also lost its muscle memory. I had to begin over while having no surety that I would retain the range of movement the next day or even the next hour. Trying the classic neuromotor test of closing one's eyes and, with arm extended, trying to touch the tip of one's nose with the index finger, I succeeded only in poking myself in the eye, adding injury to the insult of the stroke. But I was not, after all, at war with my body; I was only trying to regain the control over it I had once enjoyed without giving it a thought. Now I had to be conscious of everything, and even this intense effort of will did not guarantee the movement would actually be made. Most often the commands remained floating somewhere in my head.

These spastic efforts to regain some strength and coordination in my left arm, hand, leg, and foot reminded me of the first time I tried to use a computer mouse. Surely it was an impossible task that no one could master, designed only to make one look foolish. I might have thought the same about the movements of my arm and leg except that I had had mastery over their movements—quite sophisticated and fluid motions—for more than sixty years. In time I mastered the random and quirky movements of the mouse. I had no pre-existing skills in this regard but one: I could be doggedly persistent. By repeated misses, I got closer to the target, in this case the object on the screen on which I was trying to click. Now the only difference was that I was trying to control the grosser movements of my limbs.

There is no athlete, chess player, musician, or artist who has not learned the value of nearly mindless repetition. It is the triumph of piddling persistence. And the only defeat is the surrender to despair, giving in to the belief that mastery will always prove elusive.