

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

6. Tingling and Numbness

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On the day of my stroke I spent the morning as I did many others in summer. I dressed in Levi's, a long-sleeved work shirt, and rubber boots, jeans tucked inside, because I would be working in the creek. I ate a bowl of oatmeal, checked my e-mail, and responded to those couple that seemed more urgent than the rest. I went for walk down the gravel town road and surveyed the area where I would be working.

The week before, a storm brought down the oldest and largest maple tree on my property, one that was gnarled, slightly twisted, and, I guessed, at least 150 years old. I'd spent the two previous days cutting apart the wreckage of this stately maple with a chainsaw and hauling away the largest branches and sections of trunk and logs. This was to be the easy day: raking the leaves, twigs, and small branches from the creek into which it had crashed before they impeded the flow of water.

After working about two hours without a break, I decided to head back to the house for lunch, only about an eighth-mile up a gentle rise. I judged it to be noon or shortly thereafter. I chose to work just a little longer, around the next bend in the creek, up to the next stile in the stone wall I'd been restoring when there was no other work to do.

I noticed my left leg, particularly at the hip, growing numb. Perhaps I'd spent too long bending over or maybe I'd cinched my belt a hole or two too tight. I kept raking the debris out of the creek, standing as straight as I could. But the tingly feeling in my leg did not improve. I found it easier then to kneel at the edge of the creek, disregarding the cold stream of water and the cold mud. At last I felt it was time for a break. Discovering I could barely stand—as though drunk only in my left leg—I turned to go back up the hill to the house. My left leg became unwieldy, turning and twisting precariously in every direction except the one in which I was directing it to go with increasing frustration. The thought bubbled up that I might be having a stroke.

Employing the sturdy garden rake as a staff, I stumbled and tottered toward the house. My determination seemed to require every ounce of strength and willpower to take a single lurching step. My left leg became more jellified. I knew that if I fell I would probably never reach the house or be able to call for help. I judge the time it took me to stagger those 350 yards to the deck at a half-hour. I did not know that I could make it, only that I must.

Upon reaching the deck, I leaned forward over the railing to support myself. The strange tingling and numbness had begun in my left arm and shoulder. I had no doubt by then that I was

undergoing a stroke. Yet, stupidly, my first concern was to take off my muddy boots and jeans. I did not want to get the house or anyone's car or the white sheets of an ambulance stretcher dirty, even though I knew people saturated them with their blood all the time. I wasted another quarter-hour struggling to get undressed on the deck. When at last I was ready to go into the house to the telephone, I fell, toppling onto a chair I had overturned while struggling to yank off the tight boots. I crawled on all fours like an infant to get inside.

When I reached the desk where the phone was, I tried to lift myself up by grabbing the back of the wooden chair, but succeeded only in tipping it over and falling to the floor. Again I was unhurt, but this time my reaching the phone and calling for help seemed more urgent than at any other time during the entire episode. Still, I had not been afraid. I trusted that I would reach the phone and help would arrive. It had not occurred to me what a dangerous game I had been playing because I did not want to inconvenience anybody with my muddy clothes.

I called Father Hunt, the pastor of the Episcopal church I had not attended in several years. We'd remained friends and often had supper at each other's house. Father Hunt got me into a terrycloth bathrobe and moccasins and drove me to the local hospital in Delhi. He drove his Jeep through an opening in the stone wall and across the lawn so I would not have to crawl or stagger precariously to reach it.

There were so many things that might have kept me from getting help that I believe I could have more easily died than have survived. The experience taught me I am brave, strong, and resourceful, qualities in which I felt I was deficient. And, on the obverse, I learned how obstinately thick-headed I can be.