

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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7. Running on Pure Adrenalin

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The fact that I wasted time after the onset of the stroke because of a misplaced concern about my muddy boots and jeans getting someone's car dirty was only one indication that my thinking was a little fuzzy. Another involved the following. At one point surgery was suggested to physically remove the blood clot from the artery within my uppermost neck vertebra where it had lodged, thereby causing the narrowing of the artery (stenosis) and restricting blood flow to the brain. I said to the doctors I would much prefer the surgery since it would entail far less work on my part. All I would have to do is lie there. The alternative was a demanding regimen of physical and occupational therapy.

When the doctors presented me with the odds of the surgical and the drastic pharmaceutical approaches, a bit of sense returned and I, with their encouragement, actually chose the option of slow neural and muscular re-education. I knew it would be a slow slog, but therapy would not make my condition of left-sided paralysis any worse. I could only get better.

I was airlifted by helicopter from Delhi to Albany Medical Center. It had been twenty hours since my stroke: not even a full day. My stretcher was positioned next to the pilot whose name was Nick. Pilots always have only one-syllable names. Two nurses, who sat behind us, propped my head up on pillows so I could see out. One of them put enormous sound-deadening earmuffs over my ears that also served as earphones carrying conversations among the crew and, on occasion, me.

This was as close to actual flying as I had ever gotten, surrounded by a plastic bubble that made for an unobstructed view at 3,000 feet. In my flying dreams I was always in this exact position: lying on my back, feet first. It is the opposite of the way Superman flies and, I presume, the way most normal people fly in their dreams. It was during this stay in the hospital, too, that I was forced to sleep on my back—a position I had never found comfortable—because the bed was like a hammock and I hadn't the muscle strength or coordination to turn over.

I was surprised how many of the roads and buildings and natural landmarks I could pick out during the 66-mile trip to Albany, as the raven flies. It was exciting, though the cost of admission was a little steep. The nurses were thrilled by my enthusiasm since, as one of them put it, most of their patients were unconscious. That simple observation, offered over the headphones that connected us, made me very aware of how fortunate I was to be alive and how tenuous my situation still remained. I was being flown out of urgency.

I reflected, too, on my recognizing the symptoms of stroke thanks to a friend's e-mails over the years outlining the telltale signs. Though I tried to ignore these warnings at first, had I persisted in my denial of what was happening to me, the stroke might easily have been fatal and I might have remained in the woods undiscovered for a week or longer. I might have fallen during the arduous trek uphill back to the house. I might have knocked myself unconscious or broken bones if I had fallen. The list of circumstances that proved lucky grew as I pondered the chronology of my reaching the telephone and help.

One of the doctors suggested I was probably running on pure adrenalin to have reached the house in my condition. I was not afraid at any time during this ordeal. I had a single goal in my head—reaching the house—but it was not an obsession, merely a destination. It was simply something I must do in order to survive and I trusted the Higher Power at work in my life that I would reach help. I did not even speculate what would happen next. I trusted fully that I would receive help. I was comforted in the very midst of the worst travail I had faced in my life. As a result, I was relaxed and in a better frame of mind than if I had been fearful and panicky. I believe that helped me remain standing and able to climb the hill to the house.