

I THOUGHT OF IT AS A CHALLENGE

By Len Upin
© March, 2006

My stroke happened on January 29, 2003. I woke up and felt crummy, so I announced to my family, "I'm staying home from school today." They knew something was wrong, because they couldn't understand what I was saying. My wife drove me to the closest 24-hour treatment center. Fortunately, it was only two miles from our house. The emergency doctor asked me one or two simple questions. They were something like, "What's your name" or "what day is it?" Apparently, I failed his test because within a couple of minutes, the paramedics showed up and wrapped me in blankets for the 15-20 minute run to the hospital. I clearly remember the treatment doctor said to my wife, "I think your husband had a stroke."

During the whole time, I was aware of the places, actions and people around me. I only complained of a headache. There were no other pains; unlike the other many surgeries I had before. I had surgery on my left eye; an excision for a melanoma (skin cancer); a splenectomy (twice), and for my left knee (twice). Each of those surgeries had its own group of unique side effects and problems. In addition, I've been in and out of hospitals for 25 years for a low platelet disorder. The abbreviation is ITP. The weekly blood tests, the monthly IV sticks, and periodic bone marrow drilling by specialists got old fast. My ITP was directly related to both my splenectomy and a case of pancreatitis. There was a good chance that the IV infusions that I took, and still have to take, could have caused my stroke. I have had to deal with student interns and teams of doctors who prodded and probed me. I felt like I've conducted my own research study about physical and psychological pain. So, when the treatment center doctor told my wife that I had a stroke, I figured it was "just another day at the office."

When I arrived at the hospital, I was laying in a small, curtained, emergency room cubicle surrounded by my brother-in-law, my nephew, and my wife. I dozed off and on and remembered my family laughed that I was able to use perfectly clear, four letter words to express my feelings about my latest dilemma. I then woke up and immediately recognized my brother, although I was a bit confused about how he got from Pennsylvania to Illinois so fast. I thought my stroke had just happened! My wife and my parents alerted me that I had had a seizure and had been in a two day, induced sleep. To this day, I am upset that my wife and my mom had to witness that frightening experience. At least, my mom was still quick on the draw in her mid 80's. I found out later that she sounded the alarm to the nearby nurses in the hallway when I went into convulsions.

My 47th birthday gift to my family and myself was to go home from the hospital. Within three days, I was enrolled in a therapy facility. My stroke had left me with aphasia, a language disturbance. It was a weird sensation, not being able to

All material is the property of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.
<http://www.rrtc-stroke.org/research/r4.php>

understand, yet having perfect hearing. At that time, I was not scared. I thought of it as a challenge. I was well trained from all of those years of other medical problems. It paid off. In the first six or seven months, I rapidly regained my vocabulary, conversation, and general memory. I was regaining my confidence. I thought I would be able to go back to work as a high school art teacher even though my therapist painted the reality picture of aphasia. She thought it would be better if I started to think about a new job.

The world collapsed two months later when our 23 year old son, who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, killed himself. Suddenly, my partially silent world of aphasia seemed just fine to me. The challenge, humor, the drive were gone. All my life, I've been a workaholic about everything, but suddenly I stopped. I was not interested in doing anything. Nothing. Needless to say, my speech exercises suffered without my focused attention. My depression grew as I thought about my son and what he went through all of those years. Many days he could not get out of bed. My wife and I wrestled with him to help him finish high school, to start college classes and try to keep a job. He was a handsome, loving child with a wit to match his intelligence and artistic talents. My wife and I accepted our full time job as parents. We had three kids and now our entire family rhythm would be out of whack forever.

Time heals, they say. It is true. Slowly, I came out of my grey blur. The worst part of my stroke now is that sense of lack of purposefulness. What am I going to do now? At least I am moving. I am not standing still. It helps when I meet with professional speech coaches, therapists. It helps. I participate in a number of research studies and have joined a conversation group. It helps that I created my own homemade speech therapy program. I guess once a teacher, always a teacher. The collection of hand written and word processed exercises, as well as a combination of names and numbers, simple addition and subtraction problems, and a variety of other drills help my "brains" keep fresh. There is always something to pick and choose from the long list of things I see right in front of me.

Finally, I started making my art again. I drew and painted immediately after my stroke. I wanted to check if that part of my brain still worked. It has only been recently, after over two years since my son's death, that I felt interested in being creative again.

I still don't know what the future will bring, but at least I am able to think and carry on an intelligent conversation with people other than myself. That five-year period was traumatic for me and my family. I felt as if each event made things worse and worse. Much has happened in such a short time since my stroke. I lost so much. I have not been able to heal completely because I cannot return to my pre-stroke life. I have to find a new life minus my son and my father as well. At least when my dad got sick in 2005, I felt my purpose was to help him and my mom.

I have a different perspective on life now. I am still pretty much the same person I was, but it is just that my priorities and sensitivities are different now. The subject of life and death is higher on the agenda where before I never thought about it at all. I am worried about dying myself. I have this selfish desire to live so my kids and wife will not have to experience any more pain.