

THE GIFT OF MY STROKE

The Trip to the Hospital

On Friday, Sept 6th, the anniversary of my birth 74 years ago, I went to bed about 9:30, feeling a little strange but hoping to get rested to do a funeral at 9 AM the next morning. I woke up around 11 PM and felt numb on the entire left side of my body, as if I had received a massive shot of novocaine.

I called Sr Anna, my partner in ministry, who lives in the apartment above me. She had been formating a version of the homily I was planning to preach at the funeral on Saturday that I could give to the family. She came downstairs, calling my neighbor, a retired nurse who lives in the apartment next to mine, and asked what she needed to do first. Her immediate response to Anna was, *"Call 911, and get an ambulance."*

With some effort, I was able to change into sweatpants, crocs & a tee shirt, realizing that I would be going to a hospital. The ambulance arrived quickly, and I was driven to Ellis Hospital in Schenectady, about 45 minutes away. Anna rode in the front of the ambulance. She called Megan, her neighbor in the other upstairs apartment, who immediately told her she wasn't home but would meet us at the hospital.

When we arrived at the ER, I had a CT scan that made it clear that I was experiencing a stroke. A TPA shot to break up the clot was considered, but not administered because of the time between the first onset of symptoms and the added fact that I suffer from type 2 diabetes. I had first agreed to the shot but was secretly relieved when they were unable to give it to me because of the possible side effects. I also had an MRI in the wee hours of the morning. It was excruciating and felt like torture. After that test, Megan drove Anna back to Middleburgh, and I waited until around 6 AM to go to a room in the Neurological Intensive Care Unit.

The Hospital Stay – September 6 - 9

Though I had a private room, it took a while to get used to the routine of the Neurological ICU. I wasn't hooked up to an IV but I had a port in my hand. My heart, blood pressure and oxygen were constantly monitored. The nurses were attentive and listened. I ordered meals from a good menu, and mostly got what I wanted. The only problem I had with the food service was that they kept sending me decaf coffee. I was able to get around that (with the consent and the help of the nurse) by asking the person who brought the food cart to give me regular.

Anna arrived in the early afternoon, driven by Jerry, a member of our Franciscan Spirituality Group. Fr. Mark, from Siena, visited along with another Friar. He was happy to see that I was not seriously disabled because early on Saturday he had received a voicemail from the funeral director to ask if he could cover the funeral I had been scheduled to do. At first, when he heard that it was a Funeral Director, he thought I had died. It was too late for him or any of the Friars at Siena to cover the service, but the parish deacon was able to do it.

My three sisters visited me. The funniest story happened Saturday late afternoon when the young doctor – who was covering for the weekend – came into my room while Anna, my sister, Marita, and my brother-in-law Rod were visiting. The doctor was compassionate, clear and professional. He looked at me, and my visitors, when he spoke. But after he left, my brother-in-law said, "I have shoes that are older than that doctor."

On Sunday, there were more tests, more visitors and football on TV. I was able to convince the nurses to take the blood pressure cuff off when they weren't actually taking my BP. I also declined insulin when my sugar number was a few points too high, because my diabetes is under good control without it, and they complied. My numbers were down at the next test.

The First Two Weeks of Healing ~ September 9 - 20

I was discharged on Monday, and the case manager agreed that some days of vacation and rest – which had been previously planned – were a good idea before I started Physical Therapy. I returned to Middleburgh with Anna and Jerry and was pleased with the medical team that would be guiding me through recovery: My primary care physician, the local pharmacist, and the physical therapist.

I was tired when we returned to Middleburgh. I needed a cane to keep my balance. I was barely back when I had two canes to use, one from my neighbor, and one from Jerry, who had been our driver. Frank & Sena, a couple from our spirituality group, brought a chicken dinner that lasted for most of the week. I had an appointment with my primary care physician on Wednesday, and she helped me schedule a carotid artery ultrasound and the physical therapist.

I received many phone calls, texts, emails & cards with prayers & encouragement for my recovery. On Friday, Anna and I left for Bolton Landing, on Lake George, to spend a week of vacation at a cabin owned by one of my classmates from Grammar & High School. They had dinner ready to welcome us. It was a restful week, in what we came to call our "Senior citizen treehouse."



On Sunday, two more of our spirituality group, Angela & John who also had visited me in the hospital and driven Anna there as well, came to the cabin for Sunday Eucharist. Afterwards, they drove us to the Lake George Jazz Festival – which we have attended every year since 2010. With the help of my cane, we got the best seats we had ever had in the outdoor park – in the handicapped section – and enjoyed two sets. Then we returned to the cabin for the rest of a quiet week. We ate the leftovers from the first dinner, as well as the food Jean and Bob had left, and twice went out to eat locally. I even got to try fishing off the dock in town and to get behind the wheel to drive short distances, which the Dr had recommended. We left for Middleburgh on Friday, Sept 20.

September 21 - October 20



The 1st week back home we were able to host our regular weekly Monday contemplative prayer meeting & continued to so from then on. That week I had an ultrasound for my carotid arteries on Tuesday & an appointment with a nutritionist on Wednesday. My arteries are clear, and I was pleasantly surprised that I was already doing a lot of things right in my choices around food. I did learn a lot & began to cut down on salt & pay more attention to sugar in what I drink. I was even able to have small amounts of my favorite, low salt potato chips (in small amounts) & occasional frozen entrees from Healthy Choice. On Thursday, Lou, my college classmate, came with his son David to clean the grit off the headlights of our Pontiac Vibe.

Our local community is there for us with what we need in many little ways. On Friday, Sept 27, I had my regular monthly massage. Our first outreach in ministry was a trip to Ellis Hospital to visit Ed August in the ICU to anoint him. His daughter & son, who were up from Brooklyn, let us know he had asked for us and was not doing well. Neither Anna nor I felt up to driving, so we asked Jerry Werner, also a member of our spirituality group, to drive us. We prayed with Ed & I anointed him, absolved him & gave him what we thought might be Viaticum, his last Communion before death. He had an unexpected recovery & was moved to rehab a few days later. The trip was tiring, but a blessing for Jerry as well as for Ed & his two children. It was strange not to go out for Mass on Sunday, but Anna & I celebrated Eucharist in my apartment with a couple who were celebrating their first wedding anniversary.

My family was supportive in many ways, but I am especially grateful to my brother, Stanley, who is a professional violinist. We talked about my initial inability to play the violin because of the weakening of my left side & shoulder & he said, simply, "Keep playing, it will help in the recovery." But the most valuable gift he gave me was to recommend a book entitled, "My Stroke of Insight" by Jill Bolte Taylor. I read it through & went back to re-read different sections. Her experience and insight helped me to see my own stroke as a gift, leading me to transformative growth.

On October 1st, I began 6 weeks of Physical Therapy twice a week. I was greatly blessed to have a therapist who himself had suffered a stroke. He had great empathy for my situation & warned me that I would experience depression as a part of my recovery. My life fell into a pattern of PT, home exercise, ordinary household cleaning, meal prep & daily naps. I felt stronger every day but was easily tired by both physical & mental activity.



Anna and I celebrated the Transitus together on Oct. 3 in my apartment. On Saturday, Oct. 5, we kept a promise we had made during the summer to lead the renewal of vows for a 50th wedding anniversary at Thacher Park. I had gotten enough function back to play the violin a little, & we both led the ritual we had created for them. After it was over, I was surprised at how totally spent I was & that I even let others bring food to me.

We invited several members of our Franciscan Spirituality group to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis on Sunday, Oct. 6, with Mass at my apartment, a few days after the actual date of the feast. On Oct 9, we ventured out to the first Ecumenical NET dinner at Our Lady of the Valley this fall. They were happy to see me walking, even with a cane, & I compared stories with the Pastor, Fr. James Davis, who had just finished a course of PT himself for a leg injury. We attended the ecumenical clergy meeting on Friday – beginning our preparation for the annual Ecumenical Thanksgiving Eve service. Anna & I were asked to lead the sharing.

On Oct. 15, I went to the dentist & had a permanent filling put into the tooth that had a root canal the week before my stroke. It was much easier than I had anticipated, without novocaine. On Friday, Oct 18, I went to a follow up appointment at Ellis Hospital with a staff doctor. I actually saw a picture of my stroke taken from the MRI I had early in the morning of Sept 7. The doctor examined me & said I was doing very well. On Oct 20, we led the Franciscan Spirituality Group that had been originally scheduled for Sept. 8.

October 21 - November 10

I had an 8:30 dental cleaning on Tuesday, Oct 22; then returned to Cobleskill for a 3:30 PT session. Drove to Cooperstown with Anna to see Dr Mannel on Wednesday, Oct 23. He injected two fingers on my left hand which were developing trigger finger symptoms. Now I can play the violin, but not yet with my previous facility. He examined me for carpal tunnel symptoms and scheduled a test for early Jan. Later that evening we attended a NET dinner at the Lutheran Church hall. On Oct 29 I went to see my primary care physician, only to discover that she was away until January. I gave out candy at my apartment to Trick or Treaters on Halloween with Anna.

We drove to Dingmans Ferry, PA for one of our regular Prayer House Community meetings on Nov.1. At the business meeting on Nov 3, I resigned as President of the 501c3 legal entity called *Prayer House Community Inc.* Anna also resigned as the Secretary. Since there is no one to take those positions, we began a process of dissolution of the legal entity, while keeping the community as an ongoing reality. This has been a gradual evolution over the past 5 years. After the meeting, we returned to Middleburgh by way of Scranton; where we visited Anna's closest IHM friend who was recuperating from surgery this fall.

On Tuesday, we voted in the local elections. On Wednesday, Anna had an MRI. On Thursday, we both had massages. I had my last PT session on Nov 8, completing 6 weeks of therapy. Randy discussed a treatment plan, which included joining the gym on the street where I live. On my way home, I visited a chiropractor in Schoharie & scheduled Activated Release Therapy with Dr. Sarah Collins on Nov 15 to address carpal tunnel symptoms that had begun before my stroke. We met with the clergy of Middleburgh later that day to plan the ecumenical Thanksgiving Service on Nov 27. After that meeting, I collapsed in exhaustion.

November 11 - 25

We had our usual prayer meeting on Monday, Nov. 11 at my apartment. I had been planning to go to Siena on Tuesday, but there was a snowstorm, so I changed it to Wednesday. Anna & I asked Jerry Werner to drive us there on Wednesday, Nov. 12. We had lunch in the Siena Friar dining room – Jerry was delighted with the lunch & treated us as if we had done him a favor by asking him to drive. I had an official meeting with a Friar from Ireland who represented the community in preparation for our 2020 Chapter meeting. After that, I had supper with the Friars & joined a few of them for a faith sharing at 8.



College roommate Len & Peter with their Prof, Tom Kelly

On Thursday, I was planning to meet with some of my college classmates for a memorial gathering in honor of one of our professors & mentors at Siena, Tom Kelly. I was going to get a ride back to Middleburgh with one of them who was coming past my residence. However, I received a text that morning that Lou was taken to a hospital in Utica with symptoms of a stroke. Anna ended up coming to be with me & my classmates for the gathering & driving me home. That seems to have been God's plan all along. As I often like to say, - "We plan, God laughs!"

On Sat, Nov 23, Anna and I attended a traditional Native American Mohawk dinner followed by a concert with Peter Yarrow & his daughter, Bethany, at her home in Schoharie County. It was an evening to benefit the THREE SISTERS SOVEREIGNTY PROJECT to re-establish a traditional Mohawk community in the Schoharie Valley. Two friends of ours from the Bronx, Terry – who is of Native American descent - & his fiancée Adrienne, drove up on Friday to stay with us in Middleburgh so they could go with us to the concert.

November 27, Thanksgiving Eve [Reflection at this year's Ecumenical Service]

I began the sharing part of the service with the following reflection:

I have been thinking & praying about what in my life I am grateful for, especially the past 3 months.

A leper in Luke's Gospel gave thanks for being healed [Luke 17:11-19]

– I wonder if he was able to give thanks for the very disease that led to meeting Jesus.

St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that he came to consider the sufferings he endured to be nothing compared to the glory already being revealed. [Romans 8:18]

In another letter, he says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." [1 Thessalonians 5:18]

St. Francis sings in thanksgiving even for his trials & pains.

"All praise be yours, my Lord...through those who endure sickness & trial.

Happy those who endure in peace, by you Most High, will they be crowned."

I received a birthday present at 11 PM on Sept 6 this year -A stroke!

My first reaction was not to give thanks! I denied it, but called for help, I hated what was happening, but endured it After some time, I even found peace and began to see blessings.

I give thanks for the community that has supported us – starting with the MEVAK ambulance that came minutes after Anna called 911. I give thanks for our neighbors who helped us respond immediately and came to the hospital to bring Anna home. I give thanks for many in our spiritual family-who fed us and drove us many places.

I give thanks for the doctors, nurses, massage therapists and especially the physical therapist who himself had suffered a stroke and helped me understand what was happening to me in my body, mind and emotions.

Today, after 3 months, I am beginning to believe that the stoke itself is a gift, a gift that has led to spiritual growth, deeper ability to receive love and care, and more strength in my body. I am walking and exercising every day, something I needed to do, but never really got around to it. I've even lost about 20 pounds so far.

It has led to more balance in my life, more reality in my thinking about my gifts and limits and more depth in my prayer. I am closer to living in the present moment than I've ever been, practicing what I've been preaching for years. I am almost ready to "forgive what is", to accept new limitations, and sing with St. Francis:

"All praise be yours through those who forgive, enduring in peace, in you they shall live..."



Sunrise in Schoharie County on Easter Morning