The experience of stroke and the life of the Spirit

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In this paper, I have tried in the first instance to describe the experience of stroke, and to set my own story in the context of more general observations on strokes and on the appropriate care of stroke patients. The paper makes clear that the stroke brought my active working life to an abrupt end, but I am keen to stress that in my case at least the thinking must go on. The production of this paper offers a test case of this last proposition. The paper does not attempt to survey my whole working life (mainly as a Church of England parish priest) and its interaction with my faith, but it does try to explore some of the consequences for faith, and for prayer, prompted by the stroke. There is a personal story of sometimes bewildering complexity behind every stroke. “But why is stroke any different from other serious illness?” This paper seeks to identify some of the distinctive characteristics of strokes; but I leave it to others to answer the question more adequately. It only needs to be stated here that all strokes, in some measure, affect mental processes, sometimes profoundly; and we easily underestimate the extent to which our performance is affected by our states of mind.

I am not the only stroke patient who hates the intended sympathy of: “I know just what it feels like”. We have all lived before and after stroke. We know very well the effect it has on energy levels, staying power, getting things completed, appetite and zest for life, mood, and much else. For some of us, these all culminate in the effect of stroke on faith, prayer, and moral urgency. If our interlocutor has travelled all these byways of the human spirit, and others too, then perhaps he/she does know “what it feels like”.

My title invites the attention of a wide range of readers. For some, who are already experts in the field, I can only offer the testimony of personal experience set alongside a more hidden and elusive human discipline. Certain stroke victims who have made good recoveries have set it all down already, in books or in interviews. One, Rosemary Sassoon, most helpfully mixes her own experience with valuable advice from experts in the field. Many other people lack direct knowledge or experience of this condition; and it is for them that I shall include some general information about the impact of strokes.

My brain surgeon, Peter Crawford, was a little surprised when I raised the question of “spiritual impact”. He had plenty to say about the process of physical recovery; and he was even more interested in stimulating a revival of mental appetite. But he left it there. I took his point; and so I shall attempt here to begin to answer my own question. My training was in theology, which is why I believe that all pastoral ministry within the Christian church should come under the searching scrutiny of theology. That scrutiny ought to extend to cover the personal experience of the minister.

We shall begin from the trauma itself. Bad things had happened in the past, but this was something quite new. It might help if we were to speak of a brain attack. That does convey something of the violence of the impact. For it affects everything, especially that decision that has to be made: should life should go on? During that shadow time when consciousness was allowed to return, I was dimly aware of a choice still to be made: “to live or not to live”. Was it as simple as that? Perhaps; perhaps not, though I do distinctly remember a period when, to me, extinction really didn’t matter. The raw experience of existence was so awful. Even then, however, I could still understand my value to those who are closest to me. This may go some way to explain my reported response to the innocent question: “What shall I tell them in church tomorrow”, following my restoration to consciousness. I replied: “Indestructibly hopeful”. I don’t remember saying this; but others have said that it’s authentic, and I’d like to think that those two words brought a smile. They also offer just a hint of a life sometimes disciplined by the study of theology; and with hindsight, I suggest also that the decision not to give up might have been shaped by the words of Jesus beginning: “not my will/not what I want, but ...”.

In those early days of returning awareness, and right through my two months in hospital, I seemed to be faced with the withdrawal of God. I have said to friends that “I was reduced to praying, because that was almost the only thing I could gladly do”. That sounds odd, but then the circumstances were strange and unfamiliar; and bodily weakness may have made the mind more alert. Let me fill in the picture. I didn’t eat for a fortnight. I couldn’t read. I was uninterested in the radio, and I even lost my taste for classical music.

In spite of my immobility, however, the determination to focus mind and heart together on the task of prayer prevailed. It was a prayer of the utmost simplicity. Often, just a single word repeated. I think it sought to drain off lingering self pity and make more room for the love of God. God’s absence was real enough, but his love was conveyed through the constant care that surrounded me. There is a paradox for tidy thinkers. And now let me add another: over all
those weeks of rehabilitation, God’s providence was strongly felt, but not his presence.

I alluded earlier to other sad experiences in my life. One at least relates to the matter of this paper. Almost exactly eight years before the stroke I had become seriously ill; and on that occasion I had to endure two weeks in hospital before the doctors decided that the rigors and a violently fluctuating temperature were being caused by a heart infection (subacute bacterial endocarditis or SBE). The illness had already sapped my energy; but after two months I had to face the further blow of not getting better, once the infection had been driven out. At this point, on my first encounter with the cardiologist I was offered a drastic remedy: open heart surgery in a hospital, with mitral valve replacement. I can still remember how this decision came to me as welcome relief but to Clare as another brutal shock.

In the early stages of this illness, I hadn’t much appetite for reading or for prayer. But, on my first trip into hospital, I took with me a copy of the poems of George Herbert, and I tried to read one poem a day. My instinct must have told me that he would best nourish the spirit, when more conventional prayer dries up. When the awesome day of the operation came round, with the inevitable two hour delay, I had arrived at Obedience; and these lines leaped from the page and imprinted themselves on my memory:

O let thy sacred will
All thy delight in me fulfill!
But as thy love shall sway,
Resigning up the rudder to thy skill.

At that critical juncture, Herbert spoke to me as one who is thoroughly at home in the language of prayer (often in the robust style of the psalms). So, once his words had sunk in, I knew that I must neither seek nor claim any special favours from God. Still, the operation was successful; and after another four months off work, I resumed the full round of my duties, until this second blow struck.

It has been stated that, after cancer and heart attacks, stroke is the third commonest killer in this country. What is less well known is that it leaves more people disabled than any other condition. It should not be difficult to think of people known to us who are clearly affected by a stroke; but few are aware that children suffer strokes, along with a thousand cases a year affecting the under thirties and some ten thousand a year among those of working age.

Stroke recovery brings with it complex, sometimes stormy moods: all in all, an intriguing psychology. So, stroke presents a varied picture, mixing visible and not so visible effects. But stroke patients will be quick to remind you of important common characteristics—for example, the loss of feeling or sensation, and tiredness. (‘‘Tiredness becomes a fact of life’’. Rosemary Sassoon) Another that should not be overlooked is an often well concealed anger or frustration. To conclude these general comments, I stress that we are not only required to care for the survivors but also for the suddenly bereaved. For many are killed outright by stroke, and yet in institutional terms rather than in personal terms this is never the worse for a sharp dose of self knowledge. The unfulfilled potential of the role has strengthened faith, an unimportant cog, has helped me to keep my eye on God. The continued pastoral role, just when I had to let go of my established position; and it was a time when reading and writing did not come easily, but sociability was returning. Since then, much has changed in my condition. I am ready now to bring my chaplaincy to an end. This continuing of a pastime which has to mean ‘‘doing just what you want to do’’. Retirement came as a huge relief; but it was not total.

Thanks to the generous attitude of the principal of my college, an avowed agnostic, I was enabled to continue in part time chaplaincy among students. This gave me the sense of a continuing pastoral role, just when I had to let go of my established position; and it was a time when reading and writing did not come easily, but sociability was returning. Since then, much has changed in my condition. I am ready now to bring my chaplaincy to an end. This continuing of a pastime which has to mean ‘‘doing just what you want to do’’.

We return to weighing up the testing that followed retirement. Its severity only struck us when, after a six week extension, we finally moved house in mid-January. We were lucky to be moving less than a mile across the centre of Durham. At the beginning, we had to pick our way around some hundred and fifty packing cases, many of them laden with books! Some of our friends thought that we would never get them all opened; but we did. We more or less put the new
house in order in the first four months, in spite of the
distraction of having to complete the clearance of our very
spacious vicarage, in which we had lived for more than twenty
years. I don’t really know how we did it. I had so little energy;
and at first, so little strength. I couldn’t leave everything to Clare;
but we should never underestimate the potential of collective
will power, even though it has its dangers.

This dramatic conclusion to the year of my stroke may
seem to focus chiefly on physical testing; but that only tells
half the story. For I came to realise that this great upheaval in
my life, but also in our life together, had much to say about
the life of the Spirit. An unsought break in my life’s pattern
did not provoke a spiritual crisis; but it did make me face the
realities of change, and gave me glimpses into the meaning of
resurrection.

During the long weeks in hospital it was one thing to have
to make myself eat; but I had also to rekindle my appetite for
life, my zest, my joie de vivre. I could, and still can, be very
negative. A black period would settle on me like a cloud. I
had to work hard on stretching my stamina and staying
power; and I needed to mix with other people. I often spoke
of my need to rejoin the human race. Later, there were things
like not being allowed to drive, which I accepted, reluctantly.
I also became aware of a longing to make myself reconnect
with God. I know it cannot be done, just like that; and yet
something changed. We shall return eventually to the
question of the life of the Spirit, and to the ways in which
it may be reshaped by the upheaval of a stroke; but first we
must hear a little more about the practical effects of recovery,
and their implications.

Throughout that first year I was busy relearning some very
basic skills, like walking, and sustained reading, and being
sociable. These three not so random skills represent three
essential strands in the rope that holds our human nature
together. You may prefer to regard them simply as three
facets of our human make up.

The first concerns the fact that we are embodied. In learning
again how to move across a room, and then how to
reappropriate the practice and the pleasure of walking, we
are attending to the most basic needs of our bodies. I am
more aware now than I was before the stroke of the necessity
to maintain a good level of bodily health. This does not, must
not, constitute an end in itself; but after a major trauma, we
know all too well how much our physical form and our bodily
functioning shape and influence all aspects of our human
being. So, let the recovered enjoyment of walking stand for
the complex realities of embodiment.

What then of intellectual activity; of the kind of thinking
that might lead me back to writing? In the early months of
recovery, the surgeon had helped me to accept that the
activity of walking needs to be complemented by the activity
of thinking. This humble word covers so much that is
common to human experience, but it also has a privileged
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of thinking. This humble word covers so much that is
common to human experience, but it also has a privileged
place in the work of philosophers. I am trying to find the
means of setting down in words and images what belongs to
everyone. Most people rightly shy away from defining ideas
such as mind and intellect. I am now much more aware of the
physical effort that goes with these apparently non-physical
activities. For now it may be enough to say that an interest in
ideas has come back, with increasing force. So, as I have been
looking for new ways of testing my stamina, I have realised
that thinking must lead on to writing. It may be obvious to
others, but for us stroke cases, trying to find our way back
into life, all that goes with thinking is much more deliberate.

“Do we want to expend energy on that?” More than two years
on, writing, with all the mental and physical labour it entails,
has become a key activity; but it was well over a year and a
half before the ability to focus my mind effectively for writing
came back.

There remains a third and crucial strand, waiting to be
woven into this picture of our human make up. A fragment of
personal history gives us a way in. We already owned a house
in Durham, but much work needed to be done on it before we
could move in. The work on the new house involved both of
us in the business of planning and decision. It also entailed
collaborative and rewarding human relations. If, at this critical
juncture, I had not regained the art of being a sociable
creature, I would not have been much help. Instead, the
urgency of the work to be done, and the need to plan and talk
through a variety of different projects drew me in. In this
critical hour, I had rediscovered my love and care for
buildings, and the pleasure of engaging with people, which is
both a hard-learned skill and a hard-earned pleasure. I prefer to say that we are relational creatures. Our
creativity, our very humanity, thrives on our engagement with others.

It can be argued that the best of our notions, that is the
fruits of our mental activity, benefit from being challenged and even from being proved wrong by others. Where there is
no relationality, we are truly disabled. It is like losing a limb,
or being paralysed. In the early days of my recovery, random
visitors were not made too welcome. They, unwittingly,
showed up my need to learn again how to relate. I could only
goat its importance from the experience of having to ration
my sociability. I can see now that an excuse was available:
“I’m weary”. But, in time, that had to be challenged and then
overcome. It is not quite the same as losing your taste for
sweet things; and yet, like that, it
can be relearned.

There is more to be said about those so called random
visitors. I knew then, and now I know better, how much care
was taken in bringing visitors to my bedside. Clergy in
hospital can easily be overwhelmed by well meaning
colleagues, but this did not happen to me. On the contrary,
some visitors sensed the need to come alongside me in my
undiagnosed spiritual isolation. It is unlikely that they knew
precisely what they were doing for me, but it is as though they
represented God; and at the time, I would not have been
thinking of there being any spiritual significance in their
presence. This is what makes any talk about “the life of the
Spirit” so difficult to articulate. Nevertheless, while I was
going through a real experience of desolation, the reality of
God was mediated to me by people. It was chiefly by their
presence and by what they did; much less by what they said.

By friends and family, and by many expert carers in the
hospitals, I was being made to think anew about the
character of God. “If there is a God, then what is he like?”
One part of me seriously doubted whether I could come up
with an answer. But another voice would not let me give up;
and the clue to this second voice, may be found in the
unspeakable articulation that I was still a Christian. I can see
now that, as for other thoughtful Christians facing a crisis, it
was the person of Christ himself who stood across my path—
like the angel who barred the way for Balaam’s ass—saying
me: “I have been here. Don’t be afraid of the darkness”. The
mysterious alchemy of faith must originate in a stirring
of God’s love; but still this rediscovery of the importance of
relationship—of valuing people and being valued by them,
and of being moved by the love of others to return their
love—all these very human exchanges offered me a way back
to God.

The stroke patient, who is trying to fight back and to join in
of the hurly-burly of so called normal life, ought to be
aware of those three strands in our human make up. Most
people will take them for granted, but we have had to work at
them. That much applies to all who suffer a stroke, but this
paper springs from the further question that began to press
on me, during my apparent recovery and return to sociable
life. By now, I seemed to have accepted that God is. (I hesitate
to define the meaning of those two small words! But this very practical question remained: “How do I reconnect with God?” For I had experienced a real severance/loss/emptiness/vacancy. I never forgot the core language, that is the language of prayer. It is, however, one thing to be able to convince (and to comfort) others that I have an answer, and quite another to convince myself!

The passing of time is beginning to confuse my tenses. Three years have passed since my stroke. My immersion in the life of the Spirit is closer now to where it was before the stroke. Habits of thought about God have reconnected with earlier knowledge and practice; and yet the actual practice of prayer has moved on. There is more time, and there are fewer pressures; but those gains are balanced by the real loss of energy. Now I know that physical tiredness affects me to the spiritual centre of my being. So, an inner discipline requires that I learn to wait. For God? Not precisely; but I must wait for the gift of prayer. I have known what it is for this gift to seem to be withheld; but now confidence—and with it, faith—grows stronger. I am willing to wait.

In those first weeks, it was reassuring to find that I still knew my way around the spiritual classics. I would welcome the arrival in my head of lines from Mother Julian of Norwich—“All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well”; or a phrase from The Cloud of Unknowing—“short prayer pierceth heaven”, or just a single, repeated word from St John of the Cross—“nada, nada, nada, nada, nada” (“nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing”); or even the closing words on the bookmark belonging to St Teresa of Avila—solo Dios hasta. (“God alone suffices”).

To my increasing surprise, and delight, this now seems to be where I want to spend my time. The day ought first to make room for my pondering the deep things of God and the real difficulty of living a recognisably Christian life; only then should I direct mind and heart to the world’s mess and all its anguish. I am learning to cope with enforced retirement; and in my daily routine, I seldom need to rush around in expense of nervous energy. Instead, more solitude makes me attentive to an insistent inner voice, which asks “Are you for God”. And in spite of all my agony of spirit, I hear my prompt reply “Yes!”

Out of this story of a life restored, does it make sense for us, and for all that he has made. We may find it harder to accept that the stirring of the Spirit brings disturbance into our lives; and that includes the disturbance of death. But, uniquely in my experience, the Spirit of God takes away fear, and replaces it with love. And that I now know to be true, with a knowledge wrung from the experience of faith.

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