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JUST ANOTHER EVENT – EXCEPT IT WAS ME

I hadn't counted on all the introspection.

Sure, I fully expected a few side effects. I expected a little survivor guilt. I expected to feel overwhelming love. I expected all that. I received all of that. But I didn't expect the introspection.

After all, when someone runs a red light and almost broadsides you, your knees may shake for a few minutes, but you don't wake up in the middle of the night thinking about it. You don't stare at walls. You don't cry about it. You just get over it. Quickly.

But not with a stroke.

A stroke wakes you up in the middle of the night...thinking. A stroke makes you stare at the walls...thinking. A stroke makes you cry spontaneously. A stroke makes you grateful you're still alive. A stroke makes you very, *very* introspective.

Assuming of course you can survive the crazy thing to begin with. Like I did. Quite luckily.

I have found another introspective twist on having had a stroke. You are now a walking ghost. Or at least that's how I feel anyway.

For example, if a friend and I were to pass someone on the street who has had cancer we would both just think "he had cancer, hope he stays ok" to ourselves. If we were to pass someone who had a heart attack we would barely nod. But pass someone who has had a stroke! That's different. As soon as you're out of earshot it's all "there's that guy who had a stroke....."

Or. Maybe not, maybe that's all just my personal reaction. I probably need more time staring at the wall on that one. Sigh.

How did the word "stroke" become associated with such a monstrous event anyway? After all stroke is a word usually associated with something gentle and caring. Or something "sweet," like Tiger Woods' golf swing. But when you combine the word "stroke" with the words "had a" or "have a" the meaning changes very quickly.

I "had a" stroke on July 30, 2009.

That was only 7 days after having one of those carotid artery screenings to make sure I wasn't a stroke risk – and passing with flying colors.

It turns out we all have more to worry about than the condition of our carotid arteries. They aren't the only ones carrying major blood to the brain. You have two others, called the vertebral arteries. As you might imagine they go up the back of your neck, sort of winding thru your vertebrae and they supply the brain stem, and in turn much of the rest of the brain.

The good news is that we are all born with 2 such vertebral arteries. The bad news is that some people only have one that ever really works. Maybe that's where the phrase "half my brain tied behind my back" comes from. But anyway, that was me. I was born that way, with only one.

Granted, I can't point to a lifetime of perfect self care. Until a few years ago I had largely ignored highish (OK, high) blood pressure. But I have never been overweight, smoked or drank. I never ate more pizza than the next guy. Full fat milk on my cereal? Yeah, maybe *twice a month* for gosh sakes. No, in my case it came down to having only one artery to do the work of two.

So when the detritus of a lifetime of eating (I'm 63) ended up in my blood stream it only had one vertebral artery to coat, instead of two – so sooner or later it was destined to close down like a greasy kitchen drain. Which it did on July 30.

Now, there *is* such a thing as Drano for such situations in the form of clot busting drugs. But not all hospitals keep them around, because they're not like giving a penicillin shot – you need a neurologist to administer them properly. As my luck had it, the hospital in my small town was among those marked "no Drano here."

There was another option of course, which was to get my by now right-side-paralyzed-keister to a hospital that *did* have clot busting drugs. Except this meant a 60 minute ambulance ride, or 15 minutes by helicopter. "Okay, gimme the helicopter," I said. "Ahhhh, sure, but it takes the helicopter 20 minutes to get here." And then it was another 10 minutes to handle the paperwork, load me in and probably go for donuts.

Anyway, by the time I got to the big university hospital the doctors cheerfully informed me I was now "past the window" during which clot busting drugs can be used. "Yes, we have clot busters, but, sorry, you took too long getting here..."

Momma never said there'd be days like this.

But as you have probably guessed by now, things got better from then on. This huge and very concerned team quickly stuck me into an MRI machine (the noise was barely noticeable) and amazingly right after that a bright looking surgeon ebulliently informed me there was a procedure that could fix my situation. I didn't ask him if he was crossing his fingers behind his back. I said "Do it!"

It meant carving into an artery in my groin and threading a little wire cage up to that blocked vertebral artery (yeah, inside my skull), knocking the blockage out of the way with a balloon or something – maybe a knitting needle, I forgot to ask – and releasing the cage (called a stent of course) to hold the artery open. Forever.

Two hours of surgery and 24 more hours of intubation and amazing family bedside vigils later and the doctors were asking me to squeeze their fingers, smile, stick out my tongue, raise one leg, then another and stuff like that. The paralysis was gone and everything was working wonderfully, I couldn't believe it.

Sure, it hasn't been a party since. I spent the first couple of days in bed gripped with fear that the room would spin when I walked. But it didn't. Returning home floored me for a few minutes. I realized I never thought I'd see the place again as I was dragged out the door to the ambulance on July 30. But that passed quickly.

It's the introspection though. That hasn't passed. And I am not sure it should, I am not sure I want it to. After all, when you dodge such a bullet, who wants to just forget all about it and go back to the same old way of looking at things?

Introspection brings an unbounded world of new appreciation. Of friends, of family, of sunshine, of sleep, of, love, of everything.

You know how from time to time you hear someone who has survived an accident or a disease say "the experience was good for me?" You've heard that, right? Well, I used to think that was just a coping mechanism. Poppycock basically.

Now I know different, it is the real truth.

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