

Freshman year started off with a bang. Literally. An incapacitating headache led to four doctors, a hospital visit, and, finally, answers. The doctor walked in: “Classic Good News-Bad News Situation. Bad news, you have a brain hemorrhage caused by the largest AVM I’ve seen, stretching from the front to the back of your brain. Good news, you also have a brain aneurysm, which we wouldn’t have caught without the initial bleed.”

“Well you know you're having a shitty day when the good news is ‘you have a brain aneurysm,’” I said, attempting to break the tension in the room. Little did I know that the doctors had informed my parents that I had already suffered significant brain damage, and they didn’t think I would make it through the procedure. And I thought they were crying because my joke was good...

Coming back to school I had a new identity: no longer was I the smartest or the fastest; in fact, I was the slowest, coming in for help before and after school, struggling with classes that used to be easy. I was post-stroke with a bomb in the middle of my brain, threatening a second hemorrhage at any time.

It all sounded pretty dismal, until an 11 year old autistic kid, indefatigably precise and squirming with excitement, explained (over Chinese food) that I was in fact a hero--within Joseph Campbell’s Theory of a Hero’s Journey, that is. It seemed cheesy at first, but as he explained, the parallels between my life and one of Campbell's theory were clear. My call to adventure: the stroke. My first threshold: cognitive impairment so extreme I couldn’t tell you where I was or read a clock. My greatest challenge: all the implications--struggles with my new identity, adapting to vision loss, no sports, new friends, 504 plans, and academic challenges. And, ultimately, my “Road back with elixir,” my new perspective. It was clear this impassioned child had christened me a comic book hero. So I suppose this essay is the synopsis of the “Adventures of Stroke-Boy,” the blurb on the back jacket selling the heart of the story within.

What is this elixir, this gift of the gods, the newfound superpower of Stroke-Boy!? It’s not some prodigious academic gift or athletic prowess. While I have recovered the same intellectual abilities as before (although I may think slower or more deliberately), I didn’t acquire perfect pitch, mathematical genius, or foreign language abilities. This elixir is nothing more than the ability to give and receive. It may sound small, and it is. It won’t revolutionize the world, but it has revolutionized my life.

To understand the importance of interdependence and to participate in the world in

a way that reflects that understanding--that is a gift. I learned how to accept help with an open heart and a present mind; and in that process, I learned the full gift of reciprocal service. As a white, male, middle-class, native English speaker, my life has been full of privilege. This privilege has enabled opportunities and advantages-- it also created a delusional tunnel vision of priorities and understanding. I may have thought quicker before, but I thought on a predefined track, following the equation without understanding the reasoning.

My interdependence and the reciprocal responsibility imply changes in the way I orient to the world and broaden my ability to connect across lines of difference. I don't know what I will do in five years, but I do know that I will be a person connected, participating fully in giving and receiving. I do know that whether it's the global environment or the way we talk one-on-one, our interdependence invites opportunities for connection. And these connections expand my understanding of others, understanding of myself, and understanding of my purpose. With a Stroke of Luck and armed with the deadly weapon of perception, Strokeboy is bursting with excitement for his next adventures in college.