

A Summarized Account of My Experience

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If you are reading these words, chances are that you, or a family member, or a friend has been stricken by a stroke. You have joined a very large crowd because stroke is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and the third most common cause of death. The word stroke rightly strikes terror in the heart, much like the word cancer.

Strokes, although common among us, are as different as the individuals who suffer them. That being said, there are often common threads that run through the lives of stroke survivors. You may not relate to all the things I write here, but many of my experiences will strike some common ground for those who have been touched by stroke.

Writing this means recalling things that I never wanted to revisit. However, if what I write serves to help anyone work past the feelings of hopelessness that a stroke brings, then no matter how difficult, the writing of these words is very worthwhile. There is hope -- hope in Christ -- always and in all things. Doctors are marvelous but the great Physician of body and soul is still in charge of all. Hope in the Lord, even in seemingly hopeless times. God is always there!

So where to start? You might ask, "Where do I look for blessings among the problems that stroke has brought into my life?" As a survivor, the answer is that you celebrate any functional recovery as a gift from God. At the same time, you can rejoice in seeing the people around you as the blessings they truly are. If you are a caregiver, look deep and you will see opportunities to show love in new ways. Stroke changes life... there is no getting around that. How your life is changed depends upon your attitude....

My life Prior to Stroke

I grew up all over the States. My father's job transferred us regularly, so making new friends in new places was a necessary life skill. That skill served me well when I became a minister. For someone that loves people, the ministry is a great place to be.

My first assignment was to begin a new church in Jupiter, FL. Shepherd of the Palms Lutheran Church was birthed by that assignment. Next I found myself following a call to the other coast of Florida, to Clearwater, serving

Christ the Lord Lutheran and enjoying the new blessing of also being involved with a school program. Next, I traded sun tan lotion for snow shovels (some say I was crazy) and began serving a congregation, St. Paul, with 125+ years of history in Slinger, Wisconsin. Across the years of ministry, I also served the church at large in various capacities. Life for me has been very full. The talents that the Lord had given to me were being well used in many different settings. Being able to serve, brought me great joy. What a privilege!!

So it was in the spring of 1999 that life was humming along to the busy beat of church work and home life. I have five offspring that look to me for sustenance and guidance, making my home a place of great hustle and bustle. My health had always been stable and dependable. My energy level was high. I had been treated for hypertension for some time, but medication had brought that down to acceptable levels. I was not prepared for the dramatic life change that I would experience on May 1, 1999.

Some diseases are insidious, stealing away health a little at a time, over time. Stroke, however, is instantaneous in its impact. Stroke is like being shot with a gun, there is no time to mentally prepare for the challenge. Stroke simply happens and the life change it brings, is a right now kind of proposition. What follows is a summarized account of my stroke....

The Stroke

Life had been busy. Pastors always face a hectic schedule around holiday seasons. While other families tend to relax a bit, the holiday services serve to make a pastor and his family look forward with special zeal to the end of the holidays. So it was that the busyness that is Lent and Easter had again passed by and I was preparing students for Confirmation on the first Sunday of May, and afterwards, my responsibilities would lighten a bit. The drawing near of summertime meant more free-time to spend with my children and wife. Those thoughts were in my mind as April concluded. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep knowing I had to be up early the next morning, May 1 1999, to meet with the young confirmation class.

When I awoke, I could hear my wife pattering around in the front section of our home. The bed felt warm, and with her absence, I could stretch out my arms and legs, and I enjoyed a few extra minutes of hoarding the bed to myself. Shaking off the sleepiness, I stood up, and my world changed dramatically in that moment! I knew I felt wrong, really wrong. Hoping the feeling would go away I entered the small bathroom adjoining our bedroom to look in the mirror. I had a difficult time moving. Everything was in slow motion. I had to hang onto the wall to remain upright. I looked at myself in

the mirror. What was happening to me?! I considered going back to bed, maybe this would pass. But I was having trouble standing up. I called out for my wife. "Shusan, cmmmm hrrrrrrr." My words were all slurred. My mouth was not working.

Susan came to me and was confused by my words. I managed to stammer, "I thhhhhhhnk Imm hvinnn a hhhrt attttack." But having seen her grandfather just weeks before suffer a stroke (and die as a result of stroke), she knew that this was no heart attack. With her help I made it out of the bathroom and across the dining room. Well, almost across, I fell about half way through the room. She instructed me to stay still while 911 was called. I'm a stubborn German, and not wanting the paramedics to find me on the floor, I managed to crawl with her help to the couch in the living room.

The sound of a wailing siren broke the morning silence. An ambulance pulled up in front of our house. Paramedics began taking vital signs and asking questions. They also began administering oxygen. On a gurney I was raced out the door and heard the ambulance doors close with a thump. One of those attending to my needs was related to a girl I was to confirm the next day. She reassured me that this was probably not anything major, a TIA or mini stroke, a warning to fend off something major. Her words rang true. With the oxygen flooding into my blood, the effects of the stroke were disappearing. She patted my hand and said, "Do a good job tomorrow!"

In the emergency room, I was able to sit up and communicate clearly. My arms and legs were working again. My sense of equilibrium had returned. Even my speech had returned to normal. I remember telling the physician, "Man, that was scary." I was going to be OK. Everything had returned to normal. And then... I felt the sickening numbness returning. It started with my neck and lips. Neurologists were consulted. TPA, a new drug used to help stroke patients was administered, and it seemed to work. I was returning to normal again. My speech that had slurred, improved, and I talked with my wife who had joined me. But then...

For a third time the symptoms returned. The third time they came on with a vengeance. I would go in less than 24 hours from a healthy and vibrant 40-year-old in the prime of life to a man fighting for his life on a respirator. My family would be called in the morning of that Confirmation Sunday to visit me in the ICU of the hospital for what seemed to be likely the last time.

The Early Days

Tests revealed that the stroke that I had suffered had struck the pons area of the brain stem. The pons is the part of the brain that controls much of the

body's automatic functions. Breathing, blood pressure, body temperature, some of the critical commands the brain controls for life are located in the pons and were impacted. The stroke I suffered was as severe as a stroke can be and as life-threatening.

For several days I struggled to hold onto life and because of the heavy sedation that had been administered I lived in a dream world. The dream was interrupted at times as faces of loved ones came into view and as I rode in another ambulance to a larger hospital in Milwaukee (St. Luke's). Unknown to me, my new doctors were sharing the grim news and a pessimistic prognosis with my family.

An MRI test had shown where the damage had been done. It also revealed the extent of the damage. Talk was shared of months in the hospital (if I didn't die) and maybe if things really improved... life in a nursing facility. As for me, I would stumble out of my slumber long enough to hear the pop of the ventilator machine that was breathing for me.

Gradually my vital signs improved, and the antibiotics began to reverse the pneumonia that was filling my lungs with fluid. (The pneumonia nearly killed me, a horrible side-effect that resulted from my body having lost the ability to swallow correctly and saliva that was being aspirated.) Still, things improved to the point where the doctors were able to lighten the sedation, and the dream-state of half-consciousness ended.

Reality

It was now that I became acutely aware of how desperate my situation really was. I tried with all my might to move my fingers, my toes, anything, and nothing responded. I was able to blink my eyes, outside of that, I was totally paralyzed. I remember at one point, trying for two hours to will my fingers to push the buttons on the hospital bed, before finally giving up in total frustration. Nurses and aides helped me with all my needs.

I was fed through a tube that had been drilled into my belly. I was also given water to drink through the same tube (which caused a strange tingling sensation in my stomach when administered). I was like an infant, totally unable to control my body. I couldn't believe what was happening. I was trapped in a body that could not move, but my mind was sound and I could feel touch/pain.

I learned how to communicate with people by blinking my eyes to spell out words as they slowly pointed at the alphabet on a letterboard. It was a agonizingly slow and frustrating way to speak, but liberating in that I could

share my feelings. The first phrase I remember spelling out was, "I'm ok", seeking to reassure those dear to me. I also recall being thankful that I was a decent speller!

In those initial days, I was scared, but not afraid. I knew I was in God's hands, like always.

Hard Work and Healing

I have made wonderful progress in during the journey that has followed my stroke. I have met so many wonderful doctors, nurses and therapists. I'm grateful to all of them. I have received so much love and support from family, friends and people too countless to number. For this I also am so very grateful.

Through therapy and healing much progress has been made. I never had to go to a nursing home. I came home after 3 weeks in ICU and 3 weeks in rehab (half of what the rehab doctors thought as an optimistic goal initially). My ability to swallow returned and I am able to eat normal foods. The hospital bed, wheelchair, leg braces, walkers and canes that became needed tools are all gone and only memories.

I worked hard to get back as much as possible in the rehab gym (3 months). Then, when i was cut loose to work on my own, I continued the physical work 3-5 days a week at a local gym. I am able to drive. Although my stroke is becoming distant history, I still see small improvements taking place slowly. I continue to heal.

I worked part time for several year. I carried out administrative tasks and made various types of visits to homes of the congregation. Through voice surgeries my ability to speak improved to the point that I was able to return to fulltime ministry in February of 2002.

Updates on my recovery/life are posted on the website. I have recovered fully, with the exception of my singing voice was lost and some mild sensitivity loss on my left side. The words you just read were written in 2002. I write this postscript in 2006 with the encouragement of much more healing has taken place over the course of those four years. Recovery from stroke is a marathon, not a sprint. For the determined "runner", advances can occur even years following a stroke!