

Brain span

Jeremy Stratton's Story

But where are the stories found? I find myself asking this as I look at brain scans on computer screens and I see all of the different areas in a brain – areas they seem to know all about. I say 'all' but my experience has been that they know what they need to know about our basic functioning as human beings. But the more complex issues of the heart and soul are still areas of dark ignorance for neurologists. They know about functions – co-ordination, smell, touch and movements and possibly language. But of deeper feelings? No. I on the other hand knew only about deeper feelings and had spent my life avoiding science altogether. So there was some possible conflict coming.

I am here in this hospital to have my brain tested in the ERM machine – it happens twice a year to see if the remnants of my brain tumour are threatening to come back and have another go at me. The idea of a tumour with its fists raised in some kind of Victorian Queensbury Rules boxing rant, amused me for some reason – but I dreaded it too, equally. It was not amusing having something inside your brain working against you. It's not like you could talk to it or eat some more carrots. It was just there – apparently according to the neurologists anyway. So I dreaded the noisy and claustrophobic machine where I would be imprisoned motionless for 25 minutes each time. It was a little tricky – which is a just a polite English way of saying it was fucking frightening. And of course nobody had any idea why the tumour had been there and had felled me in a series of sudden epileptic fits. So, if they don't know why it might be there, what the hell else did they really not know?

At the time of the tumour being discovered in me, and an operation organised, I had a unique chance to consider what my options were. Doing nothing would be fatal. Having the full operation or a biopsy to see if you need the full operation – which they kind of knew I did anyway. So I opted for the full operation, where they mess about inside your brain whilst you are awake. Joy. So I had some options here. I could run away from the hospital in my clueless gown and never come back. I could cry and give up and ask my wife to take me away. Or I could just have faith that some divine wish would keep me here; and I just have to surrender

to that and know that I will somehow survive all of this. I may be different but I may be better...

And survive I did. So here I was walking and talking (they let you out of hospital when you can do those 2 things) and two years on, being checked over. All good so far; there were no re-growths or weirdness in the remnants of my tumour. I was improving steadily. Living my life – sure with less energy and a need for a daily siesta - but I was living.

So living as I was, I had to come here to the hospital twice a year to have an ERM scan and a lovely chat with my neurologist; hey I am a lucky man, she was young, friendly and liked to practise her English. What could be finer? But the ERM closed in on my sense of peace and joy. It was a machine almost designed to promote a sense of agoraphobia; there was no escape from inside this tube, no chance to move or yawn. You just had to somehow settle in there for 25 minutes plus and be still and be calm. What a challenge that was for some of us, who love to wriggle, sniff, shrug and generally move more than is necessary. So to do this ERM properly, I needed to find a way of being unusually at peace. In my new 'I'm so lucky to be alive that I need to humbly appreciate it by not living in fear of stuff', I turn to God - and to meditation on the possible existence of a true me in there somewhere. So I hand myself over, believing fully that I will survive the 25 minutes of noise, vibration and torture to come. And so it generally is – although I did once have to have the whole ERM again, because I could not settle. So there you are, do it right, do it once.

I envied the radiology nurses and doctors for their contrasting view of the world. For them, it seemed to me, that life was what it was and the pictures of it showed up clear on the computers, showing the detail of our brains. Perhaps nothing was frightening to them except perhaps a man in front of them pointing a gun? They saw what was there and trusted the systems that brought it to them; it could be calculated whether there was a problem with this or that condition, or this or that brain. Such joy to know everything like that. No grey areas of doubt, wonder, mystery, possibility or creative imaginary worlds, no room for the wondrous potential of human life. Some of which could be bad.

No, for them, it was a case of shut it in, encapsulate it in bone, bond it with nerves and neurons and track how well it was doing. I did not want to be like that or live like that, (so nerveless and certain) but it sounded safer and simpler than where I lived! It had an

attractive surety around it, facts that would make you feel at ease and more confident in your decisions. Facts and their simple truths cannot be easily denied.

Backing into the ERM machine was slow and full of trepidation; the panic arrived like an expected express train, full and bursting with possibilities. What about this? What if you panic? What if you have a kind of waking nightmare? What if you feel full of fear about your future? What if your brain goes into some freefall you don't understand? Help I thought, where do I go with this? How do I stop it quick? The answer came to me; speak to God, ask for his grace, ask for his unique sense of peace and love, ask him to protect you from these fears. Ask him to help you pray now...

The grace comes faster than I thought it would. A moment of repose came upon me, dispersing the fear and bringing some calm to me. I was ready to meditate now, to reflect, to wonder and to descend into another place. To allow the shameful fears of a panicking rational mind to be sent away, as another level of my being came up and took some command now. It was the part of me that knew who I was, knew what I was here on this earth to do. It was the place where peace was normal and expected, where joy could come to the show. I settled, still and OK, with just occasional stabs of panic appearing out of the waves to disturb me. I prayed again to send them down. The time passed slowly, with regular interruptions telling me how long the next stage would last - 2, 3, or 4 minutes – I waited and waited, until finally what I liked to think of as the stretcher, began to move slowly outwards. It was like exiting a harbour in your sailboat and seeing the open sea again. Or coming out of the tunnel into a stadium, to play a longed-for match.

Out in the room again, everyone and everything looked normal again. The real world started coming back into my mind, with all of its real things and views. After 10 minutes waiting, the radiologist called me to discuss my scan. 'Is everything OK?' I asked. 'Well I think so', came the reply. 'But I do have some curious visibles here to show you - very unusual. The tumour is fine though. Here you are. Look at these purple swirls moving around this section of your brain...I've never seen anything like it'.

'Wow!', I said musing on the undetected presence of God being finally visible. How this could change the world I thought; the unknown is seen at last. Soon it would be measured and dissected. God help it then.