

[The tombstone for Andrew Gunn McIver is in the Forest Hill Cemetery also
THE SPIRITUAL ANATOMY OF SHOCK

One takeaway from my postings here on my recent stroke is that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is involved in a stroke as it affects our spirituality. And by "spirituality," I mean our basic or intrinsic awareness of life. Our "Awareness" of having a stroke is not itself affected by the stroke. That Awareness is what it has always been. It is beyond the physical.

In other words, a physical stroke is just that "physical." A physical stroke is not only not-spiritual; it does not directly affect our spirituality. I will try to explain using a simple analogy.

The onslaught of a stroke directly affects the physical brain, but is NOT connected (or hard-wired) to our intrinsic Awareness such that if we turned up the volume on a radio, both the brain AND our awareness would get turned up. Only the brain would get turned up, so to speak. Our intrinsic awareness would be unaffected except, of course, perhaps indirectly.

A stroke happens in our brain and not in our awareness. That's why we can be aware of having a stroke. That Awareness does not itself have a stroke. That is a crucial fact to understand.

Yes, there I was after the stroke hit, unable to speak or mumbling words that had no meaning. However, aside from the shock of it all, my mind inside was still crystal clear. While gibberish was coming out of my voice, inside I thought I was clearly saying something. What appeared as a non sequitur was not.

In other words, nothing had changed in my intrinsic awareness. This fact might be of interest to those who have never had a stroke and certainly it should be of interest to those who have. Stroke victims know their mental Awareness is still functioning as it always has, subject to brain or bodily impairment. That, IMO, is a key point.

There is another important effect from the stroke that was not

[The tombstone for Andrew Gunn McIver is in the Forest Hill Cemetery also so clear to me at first. In fact, this effect was a total surprise, one I believe that as a dharma practitioner I was completely unprepared for. It never occurred to me, yet dominated the aftermath of the stroke.

And this was the fact that when the stroke shattered my Self and its composure, causing my assemblage of personal attachments and fixations (i.e. my Self) to vacate or be voided, this included ALL of my attachments, the good as well as the bad.

And so, a lot of bad personal habits of attachment went right out the window in a flash, leaving me in a kind of no man's land, one without a past or a future. As scary as that was, there was a certain sense of refreshment as well that was undeniable.

Yet, what was totally shocking to me was that along with the loss of my personal Self's attachments, went ALL of my attachment and fixation on the Dharma. Aside from the physical aftermath of the stroke, with the endless tests, scans, and blood samples, I found myself without ANY of my attachment to the dharma as well. Just imagine. That was a real shock.

If you think I had my finger on the scale of my likes, dislikes, prejudices, and judgements, imagine what I had ginned up over 40 years of attachment to the dharma. My attachment to the dharma was immense and it was stripped from me at the stroke like all of my other attachments. Voila! This I was totally unprepared for. And it was devastating.

In fact, it has been so devastating that I have not even written about it until now because I was still plumbing the depths of what it meant and putting that puzzle back together as best I can. So, there I was, stripped raw of every attachment I had accumulated since I-don't-know-when and then thrust back into the center of my life with no clue of how I felt or was used to feeling by habit.

And it was refreshing to suddenly have much of my personal excesses removed in favor of what I can only call reality. And what remained was who I am without so much of the "me,

[The tombstone for Andrew Gunn McIver is in the Forest Hill Cemetery along with myself, and I.” In other words, I experienced myself as pretty much purely authentic. “Authentic” is the only word I can come up with that characterizes how I felt or was. Yet, there was the caveat that this loss of attachment also included my attachment to the dharma and dharma was a mainstay of my life.

In other words, just as my life’s fixations and attachments that went beyond reality were removed by the stroke, so was whatever undue attachments to the dharma that had accrued. And I experienced this as soon as I was able, for example, to sit down on the cushion and do my daily meditation practice, which was not possible for some days after the stroke. Sure, I had said prayers and mantra all along, but something as formal as a sit-down practice was not possible until the winds of change from the stroke had blown themselves out a bit.

And then, when I did manage to sit down on the cushion, fill the offering bowls, and all of that, I had a rude awakening. Everything and anything that was put together, trumped-up, and in any way artificial about the process of my dharma practice was also gone. You might think that this is good, to be totally natural and unelaborate with my daily dharma practice.

Yet, I soon found out that much of what I had put together as a formal practice was, in fact, one kind of elaboration or another. And in that first attempt to formally practice, I had no attachment to it at all. The practice left me cold. Just as my Self’s attachments and fixations had been stripped out, so had any and all attachments to the dharma as well. Attachment is attachment, plain and simple. And that was another whole kind of shock, in a way worse than the stroke. LOL. What a tangled web we weave.

The patina of practice that I had built up from 45 years of dharma-practice was completely gone and there sat I practicing dharma in what, to some real degree, seemed like an artificial manner. My finger was no longer on the scale and much of the practice seemed so unnatural and unnecessary. It’s like the decades of trying to practice and all the scaffolding I had built to make that happen were politely

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And what remained was my mind with no elaboration and no attachment, one way or the other. My respect for the dharma was still there, in fact so much there that it could not accept or tolerate any artificial or exaggerated attempts on my part to support my practice through good-will gestures on my part. The dharma does not need our good will; perhaps we think we do. I am reminded of a line my first true dharma teacher drilled into my head back in the 1960s. "My god is no beggar! He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet."

In a similar way, the dharma did not need me as its pimp, to additionally pull for or promote it. It is already everything, just as it naturally is. As mentioned, all of the devices or aids to get into my practice that I had accumulated for decades were not only unnecessary, they were completely absent in that they had no effect on me. Nada. They were even somewhat repulsive or at least of no use and totally redundant. And so, that is how my formal practice went, my dear dharma friends, which should make for an interesting read.

If fact, it took weeks for me to find a new approach to my daily practice, one that still included the bare bones of it, like filling the offering bowls, etc., but came at it in a deeper, more natural manner. I am still working on that.

In summary, the point is that along with losing my Self's fond attachments and fixations came my Self's attachments and fixations on the dharma, which themselves got no special treatment and were not grandfathered into my life after the stroke just because they were "dharma." No such thing occurred in my experience. Attachment is attachment, good, bad, or indifferent. They are all part of the bathwater and not the baby.

This has got to be part of some cosmic humor pageant or other. So, there you have what I came across that was entirely unexpected and somewhat devastating. I am working through it and am better off for it, but I can't say it has been a walk in the park.

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I will write more on this, if you have some questions.

[Photo taken by me recently.]

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http://traffic.libsyn.com/spiritgrooves/Links_to_Michael_Erlewine-V2.pdf

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”