Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

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1. Poor Brother Ass

12 July 2014

More than halfway through my seventh decade on the planet, I experienced a stroke. I choose not to use the more common phrase “suffered a stroke” because suffering is something we ourselves create, not a circumstance inflicted upon us. None of us can avoid pain so long as we live, but it is our choice whether that causes us to suffer or not.

This is not a mere semantic difference. My stroke was painful and, over the course of the first several days, humiliating in the extreme: I could no longer control my body; my mind had a mind of its own. Some of my worst fears were realized, now portrayed and projected in the flesh for all to see. What had I done to cause the stroke; what had I not done that allowed it to happen?

I was guilty as charged: a fool who did not treat well the most valuable asset he has: his own mind and body, his consciousness. I often treated my body, as St. Francis of Assisi referred to his, as “poor brother ass.” Had I squandered my personhood for an extra plate of fish and chips or more pints of beer than any sane person required to get over even the worst of days? Was I a fool or a criminal? Either way this was payday. I had reaped what I had sown.

The stroke may or may not have been my fault, considering the role of genetics. But it could easily have been fatal. I might remain half-paralyzed for the rest of my life. I might continue living for who knows how long, but I choose to not suffer in my current condition. I will have to work as hard as I can to get over the effects of the stroke. This seems hardly a choice at all to me, though the results will be uncertain.

I could not go back and undo the stroke and maybe not even the behavior that may or may not have led to it. I did, however, choose not to suffer because of it. It was an enlightening moment and one that made me feel extremely powerful: in some degree I could steer the future course of my life through an idea. By simply thinking about it, I could choose not to suffer. I am no longer either the victim or the perpetrator. I am instead an observer, one with the power to affect the actions on the stage simply by thinking about what I wanted the actors to do. It is an exciting prospect and I cannot wait for the curtain to rise.

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2. The Triumph of Piddling Persistence

13 July 2014

The loss of control, the crimping of one's freedom, is, in essence, a kind of imprisonment. The stroke was my jailer, locking me inside a body that was no longer the one to which I'd been accustomed so long. The rules of the prison were random and capricious, and the fractional improvement I'd made one day was yanked away the next. It was as though my body had also lost its muscle memory. I had to begin over while having no surety that I would retain the range of movement the next day or even the next hour. Trying the classic neuromotor test of closing one's eyes and, with arm extended, trying to touch the tip of one's nose with the index finger, I succeeded only in poking myself in the eye, adding injury to the insult of the stroke. But I was not, after all, at war with my body; I was only trying to regain the control over it I had once enjoyed without giving it a thought. Now I had to be conscious of everything, and even this intense effort of will did not guarantee the movement would actually be made. Most often the commands remained floating somewhere in my head.

These spastic efforts to regain some strength and coordination in my left arm, hand, leg, and foot reminded me of the first time I tried to use a computer mouse. Surely it was an impossible task that no one could master, designed only to make one look foolish. I might have thought the same about the movements of my arm and leg except that I had had mastery over their movements—quite sophisticated and fluid motions—for more than sixty years. In time I mastered the random and quirky movements of the mouse. I had no pre-existing skills in this regard but one: I could be doggedly persistent. By repeated misses, I got closer to the target, in this case the object on the screen on which I was trying to click. Now the only difference was that I was trying to control the grosser movements of my limbs.

There is no athlete, chess player, musician, or artist who has not learned the value of nearly mindless repetition. It is the triumph of piddling persistence. And the only defeat is the surrender to despair, giving in to the belief that mastery will always prove elusive.

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3. Bees Attracted to Vinegar

14 July 2014

It became enticing to feel sorry for myself, being half paralyzed and unable to care for myself. What else was there to do or to occupy my mind with? It was also tempting to envy all the hospital staff and the stream of visitors because they were all ambulatory. But I also know that each of us has his or her path to follow and none are easy. Some can only trudge through life and some burdens seem beyond their bearer's capacity to carry. So I turned away from these thoughts as quickly as I could and instead did a mental calculation of all the things for which I was grateful. Once in that more peaceful realm, I could consider how fortunate I was.

There were others in my room who were similarly confined in their bodies and some in confused mental states as well. When asked when I was last hospitalized, I replied, "Sixty-five years ago when I was born. How lucky is that?" Many to whom I gave that honest response blinked in disbelief. What, I thought, did I really have to complain about? My body was simply making up for lost time and I was doing all my hospital stays at once.

A fellow patient in the four-bed room was a constant and angry complainer who even made threats of legal action that impressed no one. He didn't like the bed, the food, the doctors, the nurses, or the hospital staff taking care of him. I listened to his litany of woes and thought that there must have been something that was all right, but there wasn't. No matter was too trivial for him to refrain from complaining about it.

I watched as he was habitually the last on the list of our daily routines: he was last when the food was brought even though his bed was closest to the door. I don't believe he was being in any way mistreated, but this squeaky hinge was oiled only when necessary and then only reluctantly. I doubt there was any conscious conspiracy against this fellow by the nurses and other attendants. It seemed to me he had simply not learned one of the elementary laws of nature—of human nature, at least: that few bees are attracted to vinegar.

Perhaps the hospital had been built and staffed solely for his care and comfort, as his attitude suggested, but I didn't think so. His name did not appear on a single dedicatory brass wall plaque anywhere in this wing of the hospital.

P.S. When I was asked the standard neurological questions to make sure I was not having a recurrence of the stroke—name, date, location, president, etc.—I decided to answer that it was Bastille Day. The alarmed nurse questioned me further and, when I had decided that I did not want to be moved to the psych unit, I told her it was July fourteenth. Being right doesn't guarantee you won't be considered crazy.

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4. *Know ye not that ye are gods?*

22 July 2014

I am always reminded, whenever I'm inclined to feel sorry for myself, how the situation might easily be worse. For me, from the perspective of several decades on the planet, it has become a true consolation. I might have died in the woods or failed to make it back to the house to the telephone. My stroke could have been more debilitating than it was. I am grateful that none of these worse cases has come to pass. And I am reminded daily by the doctors, nurses, nursing assistants and other staff, floor polishers and trash collectors, who left unsafe conditions in their home countries, how fortunate I am to have been born an American.

The staff of the hospital in Albany is a United Nations of people from Russia, Ukraine, Jamaica, Nigeria, Albania, and other places who came here to make better lives for themselves, often starting over again at the bottom. They want to be here. And their dedication to their jobs, from low to high, is an inspiring example to me. Most of them go way beyond the mere requirements of their vocations. I believe they genuinely want to help people. They are givers. They are healers.

It is easy for most Americans to take their freedoms and security and even their health for granted. These emigres were not born into these blessings but had to struggle, often learning a new language and adjusting to a new culture, to obtain the privileges and graces so many born-Americans do not value or even consider. In all that has happened to me and around me, I have been blessed beyond measure and I am grateful not to have forgotten this.

As I look out the window of my room and see the rippling of the flag in the wind, I think of the sacrifice of blood and limbs and lives offered for our common safety and welfare. I am reminded of the rule of law that protects us from tyranny and abuse, that orders our lives in mutually beneficial ways, and enables us to look forward to better lives for ourselves and our children.

So, when I might feel my complaining would be justified, I am happy to gain a truer perspective that reminds me of how much worse circumstances are for the greater part of my fellow human beings. We live like kings and complain like paupers. *Know ye not that ye are gods?*

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5. Unpasteurized Milk and Honey

25 July 2014

My father had a stroke at age fifty that only slightly affected his motor abilities. Except for a slight slurring of his speech that persisted a while longer, he had recovered from the damage in less than a month. He never had another stroke and lived an additional thirty-one years, succumbing, finally, to cancer.

Far worse was the stroke that struck my maternal great-grandmother at age eighty-eight. Elodie was a robust and energetic woman who outlived two husbands. She maintained an immense garden and grew and canned all her food except corn, for which the far northern Wisconsin growing season was too short. She was fiercely independent and strong-willed, and enjoyed her life with a vitality that was an example to all of living a good life. I loved *Metchen* more than any of my other relatives at the time—or since. If children are spoiled by their grandparents, great-grandparents elevate that special treatment to the next level.

The entire family called her "Metchen" or "Grandma Metchen." The nickname was Flemish Belgian for "girl," meaning "serving girl" or "wench," and akin to the German "Mädchen," from the days when she ran a boarding house. Metchen was laid low by a stroke when I was twelve years old. I remember clearly when my family got the phone call. It changed my life and the way I looked at the world ever after. Her stroke was complete, meaning that she was paralyzed on both sides and could not speak. She was quadriplegic.

There was no doubt she recognized people, could hear and understand them, and had a sense of what was going on around her. But she was imprisoned in her body and could not communicate in any meaningful way with the world around her. I thought at the time that a crueler disability could not have been devised for this woman who had become my model of a person who loved life and lived it to the fullest according to her own lights.

My visits with Metchen over the next year always made me cry, but I did my best never to show my tears to her. At this time, the early 1960s, few hospitals or nursing homes were air-conditioned. About all I could do to ease her discomfort was to wet a washcloth in cool water and bathe her face with it. Often her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat. Her expressions showed her gratitude and relief from the oppressive air.

To relieve her sense of entrapment, I told her everything that was happening in my life and at school. Her eyes remained alert and fixed on me the entire time, so I had no impression that my prattling bored her. I learned to embellish the truth to make it more interesting to this poor woman whose body was her jail.

Metchen lived but a few days short of a year after her stroke without the slightest

improvement. I believed her suffering absolved her of any punishment her lusty and unapologetic way of living might have merited her in the hereafter. She had paid the debt in full—with interest.

Two of my fondest memories of Metchen include the time, when I was about eight-years-old, that she sent me to buy corn from a farm market by the bridge over the Nemadji River. On the way back to her house I crossed an enormous mown field that was more yellow with dandelions than it was green with grass. I picked dandelions for her by the fist-full, realizing too late that I had set the paper sack of corn somewhere along the way and could not find it. I backtracked and meandered back and forth across the field, but never found the corn. It was growing dark and there was not enough change jangling in my jeans pocket to buy more.

I presented Metchen with the finest array of dandelions I had ever collected and pulled the change from my pocket, but had to explain, quite sheepishly, that I had lost the six ears of corn. Metchen said not a word. She placed the dandelions in a water-filled blue-and-white vase that showed them off quite handsomely. She opened a jar of her pickled corn from the previous year for she, and I, and my great-grandfather Arthur. She set the vase of dandelions in the center of the table for all to see.

The second memory or, rather, memories, were repeated often over the years. It involved Metchen sending me out to her garden to pick raspberries for my cereal. She made an exception to not purchasing store-bought food in getting me a box of Rice Krispies for my visits. She filled a china bowl with the cereal and sent me into the garden to gather as many berries as I thought I could eat. There were never too many. I and the raspberry bushes grew at approximately the same rate, so the reddest and juiciest ones at the top always remained just at the edge of my being able to reach them. I considered the small prickly thorns to be the charge for gathering one of favorite fruits. I recall many mornings when the dew glistened on the fine fur of the berries and soaked my gym shoes on the wet grass between rows. Back in the kitchen with my bowl of cereal and raspberries, Metchen dripped honey over them and drowned them in the unpasteurized milk she preferred.

Decades later the smell of raspberries, even from their plastic containers at the supermarket, evokes these memories and transports me back to my great-grandmother's garden on a dewy morning. On a china plate beside my bowl of cereal, she placed a thick slice of her homemade raisin bread. Every morning there were baking pans of rising bread dough covered in linen towels at the sides of the stairs coming down from the upstairs bedroom. Onto my still-warm slice of raisin bread she smeared some of her special butter from the butter dish. I learned much later that her homemade butter was actually oleomargarine. What I thought was her churning the butter was her adding the packet of yellow food dye to the clear, gelatinous oleo, a practice mandated by the Wisconsin law that forbade look-alike non-dairy products. Metchen had never disabused me of the notion that she made her own butter, too.

I realize now how these unexceptional memories of quite simple and ordinary incidents have enriched my life. Their immediacy is still with me and I can call them up whenever I wish. Their tastes and flavors and images are always at hand. They are the legacy of this beautiful woman who played a major role in making me who I am. I have drawn from her wellspring of

fortitude and patience in bearing up under my own stroke.

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6. Tingling and Numbness

30 July 2014

On the day of my stroke I spent the morning as I did many others in summer. I dressed in Levi's, a long-sleeved work shirt, and rubber boots, jeans tucked inside, because I would be working in the creek. I ate a bowl of oatmeal, checked my e-mail, and responded to those couple that seemed more urgent than the rest. I went for walk down the gravel town road and surveyed the area where I would be working.

The week before, a storm brought down the oldest and largest maple tree on my property, one that was gnarled, slightly twisted, and, I guessed, at least 150 years old. I'd spent the two previous days cutting apart the wreckage of this stately maple with a chainsaw and hauling away the largest branches and sections of trunk and logs. This was to be the easy day: raking the leaves, twigs, and small branches from the creek into which it had crashed before they impeded the flow of water.

After working about two hours without a break, I decided to head back to the house for lunch, only about an eighth-mile up a gentle rise. I judged it to be noon or shortly thereafter. I chose to work just a little longer, around the next bend in the creek, up to the next stile in the stone wall I'd been restoring when there was no other work to do.

I noticed my left leg, particularly at the hip, growing numb. Perhaps I'd spent too long bending over or maybe I'd cinched my belt a hole or two too tight. I kept raking the debris out of the creek, standing as straight as I could. But the tingly feeling in my leg did not improve. I found it easier then to kneel at the edge of the creek, disregarding the cold stream of water and the cold mud. At last I felt it was time for a break. Discovering I could barely stand—as though drunk only in my left leg—I turned to go back up the hill to the house. My left leg became unwieldy, turning and twisting precariously in every direction except the one in which I was directing it to go with increasing frustration. The thought bubbled up that I might be having a stroke.

Employing the sturdy garden rake as a staff, I stumbled and tottered toward the house. My determination seemed to require every ounce of strength and willpower to take a single lurching step. My left leg became more jellified. I knew that if I fell I would probably never reach the house or be able to call for help. I judge the time it took me to stagger those 350 yards to the deck at a half-hour. I did not know that I could make it, only that I must.

Upon reaching the deck, I leaned forward over the railing to support myself. The strange tingling and numbness had begun in my left arm and shoulder. I had no doubt by then that I was undergoing a stroke. Yet, stupidly, my first concern was to take off my muddy boots and jeans. I did not want to get the house or anyone's car or the white sheets of an ambulance stretcher dirty,

even though I knew people saturated them with their blood all the time. I wasted another quarter-hour struggling to get undressed on the deck. When at last I was ready to go into the house to the telephone, I fell, toppling onto a chair I had overturned while struggling to yank off the tight boots. I crawled on all fours like an infant to get inside.

When I reached the desk where the phone was, I tried to lift myself up by grabbing the back of the wooden chair, but succeeded only in tipping it over and falling to the floor. Again I was unhurt, but this time my reaching the phone and calling for help seemed more urgent than at any other time during the entire episode. Still, I had not been afraid. I trusted that I would reach the phone and help would arrive. It had not occurred to me what a dangerous game I had been playing because I did not want to inconvenience anybody with my muddy clothes.

I called Father Hunt, the pastor of the Episcopal church I had not attended in several years. We'd remained friends and often had supper at each other's house. Father Hunt got me into a terrycloth bathrobe and moccasins and drove me to the local hospital in Delhi. He drove his Jeep through an opening in the stone wall and across the lawn so I would not have to crawl or stagger precariously to reach it.

There were so many things that might have kept me from getting help that I believe I could have more easily died than have survived. The experience taught me I am brave, strong, and resourceful, qualities in which I felt I was deficient. And, on the obverse, I learned how obstinately thick-headed I can be.

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7. Running on Pure Adrenalin

3 August 2014

The fact that I wasted time after the onset of the stroke because of a misplaced concern about my muddy boots and jeans getting someone's car dirty was only one indication that my thinking was a little fuzzy. Another involved the following. At one point surgery was suggested to physically remove the blood clot from the artery within my uppermost neck vertebra where it had lodged, thereby causing the narrowing of the artery (stenosis) and restricting blood flow to the brain. I said to the doctors I would much prefer the surgery since it would entail far less work on my part. All I would have to do is lie there. The alternative was a demanding regimen of physical and occupational therapy.

When the doctors presented me with the odds of the surgical and the drastic pharmaceutical approaches, a bit of sense returned and I, with their encouragement, actually chose the option of slow neural and muscular re-education. I knew it would be a slow slog, but therapy would not make my condition of left-sided paralysis any worse. I could only get better.

I was airlifted by helicopter from Delhi to Albany Medical Center. It had been twenty hours since my stroke: not even a full day. My stretcher was positioned next to the pilot whose name was Nick. Pilots always have only one-syllable names. Two nurses, who sat behind us, propped my head up on pillows so I could see out. One of them put enormous sound-deadening earmuffs over my ears that also served as earphones carrying conversations among the crew and, on occasion, me.

This was as close to actual flying as I had ever gotten, surrounded by a plastic bubble that made for an unobstructed view at 3,000 feet. In my flying dreams I was always in this exact position: lying on my back, feet first. It is the opposite of the way Superman flies and, I presume, the way most normal people fly in their dreams. It was during this stay in the hospital, too, that I was forced to sleep on my back—a position I had never found comfortable—because the bed was like a hammock and I hadn't the muscle strength or coordination to turn over.

I was surprised how many of the roads and buildings and natural landmarks I could pick out during the 66-mile trip to Albany, as the raven flies. It was exciting, though the cost of admission was a little steep. The nurses were thrilled by my enthusiasm since, as one of them put it, most of their patients were unconscious. That simple observation, offered over the headphones that connected us, made me very aware of how fortunate I was to be alive and how tenuous my situation still remained. I was being flown out of urgency.

I reflected, too, on my recognizing the symptoms of stroke thanks to a friend's e-mails over the years outlining the telltale signs. Though I tried to ignore these warnings at first, had I persisted in my denial of what was happening to me, the stroke might easily have been fatal and I

might have remained in the woods undiscovered for a week or longer. I might have fallen during the arduous trek uphill back to the house. I might have knocked myself unconscious or broken bones if I had fallen. The list of circumstances that proved lucky grew as I pondered the chronology of my reaching the telephone and help.

One of the doctors suggested I was probably running on pure adrenalin to have reached the house in my condition. I was not afraid at any time during this ordeal. I had a single goal in my head—reaching the house—but it was not an obsession, merely a destination. It was simply something I must do in order to survive and I trusted the Higher Power at work in my life that I would reach help. I did not even speculate what would happen next. I trusted fully that I would receive help. I was comforted in the very midst of the worst travail I had faced in my life. As a result, I was relaxed and in a better frame of mind than if I had been fearful and panicky. I believe that helped me remain standing and able to climb the hill to the house.

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8. *Bien con Bien Se Paga*

6 August 2014

My trust in the fact that I would reach help, that I would be taken care of by the Higher Power of my understanding never wavered for a moment. I was not concerned. I realized that I needed only to align myself with the Power for Good and I would not only survive but thrive once again. This has been the course of my recovery for the past month. I am in an environment that promotes health and healing, and everyone I encounter, from the doctors and technicians to the cooks and the woman who changes my bed linens (Claudette from Jamaica), have only my welfare in mind. I have only to accept their love and care with gratitude and follow their advice to the best of my ability. It was a tall order, but every smile, thank-you, and joke was reciprocated. I made a point to remember everyone's name, including the tongue-twisters and the people I saw only infrequently. *Bien con bien se paga*.

Not once did I fail to receive the same attention in return. Not once was my request denied or forgotten. Like begat like and I made friends quickly, even among those whose mien seemed aloof or surly. The slightest compliment bore an abundance of good humor. I especially liked the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-ages of the staff and patients. It felt like home; it felt safe.

My first roommate sorely tested my equanimity. He and his entire family were rude, crude, loud, and overbearing. I left the room whenever they visited, lest my patience be frayed to the snapping point. A group would visit my roommate and spend hardly a minute talking to him—or even to each other. They brought out their phones and all but shouted over one another and the ever-glowing television to carry on conversations with people not in the room. Every utterance was banal, hardly worth the breath. Even their various ringtones were obtrusive and obnoxious.

They brought containers of food for the patient that were a list of every substance he was not supposed to ingest except—as far as I knew—for alcohol. It raised his glucose level and blood pressure and caused him to be incontinent. I surmised they wanted their inheritance sooner rather than in the natural course. My roommate claimed to be constantly in pain and took as much Oxycontin, Vicodin, Tramadol, and morphine as the doctors permitted him. He slept through most of the day, often skipping therapy, and lay awake for most of the night watching insipid re-runs at high volume. He was uncooperative and delusional and complained about everything and everyone. What was worse is that the man's wife and son bought into his delusions. They balled out the staff over his not being fed or attended to and believed that persons unknown were injecting strange drugs into his IV at night.

I handled their uproar by leaving when I could and when not, I obtained earplugs from one of the nurses. It was easier to plug two ears than to get a roomful of morons—in the best

sense of the word—to keep it down and be courteous to others. To them, there were no others.

This one person, a nice enough fellow on his own most of the time, tested me sorely and did all in his power to get me to lose my temper and fire with both barrels. But I had better, calmer influences that outnumbered him and his tribe. I held my tongue and kept my patience. He proved it was possible to shun everything that was offered to help one get better. He seemed not to want to get better.

I prayed for him, especially since he would soon be imprisoned among his toxic relatives with no hope of parole except landing in the hospital again. His family seemed adept at enabling him. This was his third prolonged hospital stay of the year and August had only begun. I didn't doubt it was his only way of escaping his toxic tribe short of a final departure.

My roommate, 78 years old, was also on nicotine patches because, up to the moment he was admitted to the hospital, he still smoked. Everyone in his family that I met was a smoker. They brought their tobacco aroma in their clothes and hair and breath. The women had deep, husky voices. The poor patient had been twice weaned off tobacco during his two previous stays, only to resume the habit upon his release, likely within the hour. He was given nicotine patches to diminish his craving since smoking was not permitted anywhere on hospital property.

I congratulated my roommate on overcoming his nicotine habit even if it had not been voluntary. The physical addiction is broken after thirty days. He told me he would likely take up smoking again once he went home. One of his daughters, in fact, had bought him a carton of his favorite brand and promised it would be waiting for him when he got home. Ignorance, I'm afraid, often proves invincible.

I pray for Donald and his family, who certainly deserve each other.

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9. *Mother Nature's Son*

7 August 2014

Though I was born and raised in Chicago and later moved to New York, I feel discontented and anxious when I am confined to the city for longer than a month. Sometimes it takes less than a week. Civilization is enormously overrated.

Even as a child, visiting my mother's family in northern Wisconsin along the shore of Lake Superior during the summer or staying on a dairy farm in north-central Wisconsin with an aunt's family on my father's side, I was always very sad when it was time to return to the brick and concrete and traffic of the big city. I learned more about how the world works on a farm than in the park. I also learned about calendars and how to use them because I wanted to know how many days remained before I could again roam and explore the countryside. The feeling remains with me to this day: a great sadness when I must leave the wild places.

While the parks and beaches of the city offer respite from the sun-baked pavement and the preponderance of ugly man-made environments, it was not enough for my soul. I often had to contend with hordes of other people in the same small green spaces. Many had no more respect for nature than they did for civilization. Litter, graffiti, defacement, and noise were everywhere. It felt as though barbarians had invaded my private sanctuary and destroyed anything of beauty.

As a young man of thirty, I and my wife bought a twenty-acre parcel of land in central Wisconsin about 225 miles from Chicago. It abutted a wetland conservation area on three sides. I cleared hiking and walking trails, maintained a two-acre spring-fed pond. We planted over 13,000 coniferous and hardwood trees, particularly ash, over the next twenty-five years. At first there was no house and we camped beneath a stand of old red oaks. We swam and bathed in the pond. I took care of all that nature had bestowed on this piece of land and planted bushes whose fruit and berries the wildlife ate.

I spent as many weekends as possible and every vacation and other time off from work on the land. My wife grew less enamored of "roughing it," though I continued to sleep outdoors often. I camped in winter several times as well. I learned nearly all I know of the natural world though unobserved observing: keeping still and watching all the wonders to which nature opened my eyes.

But, over the next quarter century, the area grew more populous and the noise from the county highway, once it was paved, grew to an incessant reminder that I was no longer as alone as I desired. I could not only see the smoke from my neighbor's chimney, I could also smell it. It was time to move on.

For two years I returned to the place in Friendship, Wisconsin, in between jobs in New

York City. I did my best to be a good steward of the land. But it became clear that I would have to sell the house and acreage and build a very different life with my partner in the big city once again.

I satisfied my hunger for green and quiet places with treks through nearly every New York City park, though they were not always so quiet. Still, I learned where I could be most alone. I hiked along the trails in the New York and New Jersey Palisades and climbed Bear Mountain and other places near to the city whenever I had the chance. I joined the New York Hiking Club. But I missed the solitude, the aloneness with nature that made my appreciation complete. Frankly, I am selfish: I want a little piece of nature all to myself. Absolutely No One Allowed.

When I cashed in my meager stock portfolio in early 2001, Anthony and I went scouting for the right place in the western Catskill Mountains. We settled finally upon six acres in Bovina, New York, that had a completed two-car garage on the property, though there was no driveway leading up to it. But the view was breathtaking.

Casa Bovina, as we call it, is only 150 miles from New York City, but it is a world away. Like Wisconsin, it is an area of dairy farms. It is Wisconsin with mountains. And, as I learned, emigres from Friendship, New York, settled Friendship, Wisconsin, in the 1840s.

Over the next few years we slowly turned the garage into a year-round cabin. It sits near the top of Bramley Mountain at approximately 2,500 feet, commanding a view of the mountains and valleys to the east, including Mount Pisgah. Once the house was liveable beyond what Anthony called “camping in the hard tent,” I turned my attention to the outdoors and devised a never-ending string of projects. I cleared trails, rebuilt the dilapidated stone walls, planted a few trees and berry-bearing shrubs, erected cairns and other monuments of stone, dredged a creek with hand tools, and built a small wildlife pond at its lowest end.

I learned about what species of plants, herbs, and berries and fruits I could encourage, cultivate, and harvest. I made peace with my two-legged and four-legged neighbors, and spent longer and longer stretches of time in the country. The more time I spent in the mountains of Bovina, the more my respect and awe for nature increased. I was at last, after a hiatus of less than two years, once again in my element.

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10. A Stroke of Luck

9 August 2014

I often joked to myself and friends that since I spend so much time outdoors, I would likely be found dead in the woods. The worms and insects and foxes would make use of me and, after a couple of autumns, my remains would be buried beneath a blanket of moldering leaves. The thought does not frighten me: such an outcome seems fitting. The day of my stroke, now one month ago, I came perilously close to achieving that scenario. The Old One, as Einstein referred to God, could have finished me off with a single stumble and fall, a single stone placed six inches to the left. That He did not suggests I have more work to do. I have no clue what that work might be, but I shall sit still and listen.

What I mean by God changes like the weather, hour by hour. I am constitutionally unable to accept anyone else's notion of who or what God is, much less their notions of what He or She wants from us or for us. The more specific the belief and the more unbending the propitiating behavior required to remain in His good graces, the more ridiculous I find such a system. Why would God play favorites and only speak to some of us? I find God in nature and in the stillness of my mind, and I often find both inspirations at the same time.

Am I a pantheist? Sometimes, especially when I am out in the woods. Am I an atheist? Sometimes, especially when others proclaim they have received God's direct counsel.

If God exists as a being worthy of having devised such an astounding creation, It is an entity so beyond our current powers of perception and abilities of comprehension as to be practically unknowable except in ineffable flashes. I think any of us can get a glimpse of God when our minds are empty of chatter and our hearts are compassionate. To attach any specific details to this always very personal experience is to tell lies and mislead others. Each of us is capable of experiencing God in his or her own way.

If God wants anything from us, I like to think it is to be exactly and fully who we are, as She made us, and to have compassion for all our fellow creatures. While that may be a simple concept, it is not an easy one to fulfill. It is a life's work.

I feel closest to God when I am in my garden. I observe the miraculous happenstance of life and observe myself noticing it, who is also enmeshed in the web of life. My consciousness holds a mirror to the universe, giving back a small bit of what has been provided for me. It is at these moments that I am serene, and not desirous of anything more.

While having my stroke out in the woods, I did not fear for my life or limbs. I trusted that I would be all right and accepted what was happening to me as something beyond my control. My sole mission was to get back to the house and phone for help.

Not once did I think of the stroke as punishment or as a lesson whose meaning was beyond my comprehension. It is in the nature of Nature that all things sicken and die. But I did not believe my time had yet come. I strove to reach help.

What I learn from the stroke is a matter of my own choosing. I could ignore it—a kind of denial—and possibly contribute to having another stroke, even a fatal one. I could carry on as though there was nothing to be learned. But neither of those ways of regarding it suits me. They seem wasteful and stupid. I have tried to learn from every experience life brought to me and to become a better person for having accepted whatever it was. I am not always a quick study, either. Often an experience has to be repeated, often more than once, before I can glean all that I may gather from it.

As George Eliot remarked, we are everywhere faced with a "hard, unaccommodating Actual," yet I have thrived. My life has been so rich and so blessed, and I have so few regrets, that I feel as though I have already lived two very good lifetimes. It appears now that a third one is being offered to me and I can only accept it with gratitude, building upon what I have learned in the previous two. Having approached so closely the brink of death, I am not the same person in either mind or body. (To be honest, I don't see mind and body as quite distinct.) I want to make of this new lifetime all that I can, both to my own benefit and to that of everyone I encounter. I want to make the most of this great stroke of luck.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

11. Patience and Determination

10 August 2014

During my first week on the rehabilitation floor, I learned of a medical center garden available to the patients and their families. The prospect conjured images of solitude and quiet, and during Anthony's first visit we got directions from a nurse and headed for the greener spaces.

The garden was a small area lodged in the courtyard between four hospital buildings. While highly structured, the overall effect was pleasing and well-proportioned in the manner of a Japanese garden, one of my aesthetic preferences for enjoying nature in a small space. The planters containing small ornamental trees and the elegant benches were all of oiled teak. Each of the planting areas was curved, the arrangement of shrubs and grasses seemed well thought-out, but they were not rigid or too geometric. The design felt fluid as opposed to solid. The spaces without ground plantings were strewn with rounded river gravel of various colors, a few of which stones I pocketed as souvenirs.

When the sun was out, some corner of the garden was fully illuminated and warm, but except for the noon hour, there was always one corner in shade. I was astounded by the beauty and simplicity of the garden, something I had always striven to accomplish with my own planting areas and stone arrangements. The pavement, rather than a continuous slab of concrete, was made of blocks of gravel-imbedded concrete that were fitted around the curved limestone borders defining the planting beds.

After that first afternoon in the "Massry Healing Garden"on the sixth day of rehab, I ventured down each afternoon or evening after my therapy, and often again after supper. On rainy days I checked the weather radar online for an opening in the clouds that enabled me to spend time in the garden in between downpours. During threatening weather, I was usually the only person outside, even though all it often did was merely threaten.

The garden was especially sweet-smelling after the rain had washed the air. I was reminded of home and all the beautiful places I had ever seen and wandered through. The fact that it was called a "healing garden" seemed redundant. Nothing could have suited me better or contributed more to my good spirits and thoughts of getting better. It reminded me that one day I would be returning to my own gardens and woods and vistas. I felt hopeful.

About twenty years ago I had a short story published called "Bonsai Jack." I realized as I wrote it that it might be a prescient account of what I might go through if I lived long enough to grow very old.

Jack was a fellow in a nursing home who had outlived his wife and siblings, and was far away from his children. He had been the owner of a landscaping and tree nursery business. Upon his retirement, he satisfied himself with maintaining the garden and shrubs around his house. After his wife's death and his own enfeeblement, Jack was able to "get down in the dirt" by taking care of the window boxes. At the time the story opens he is confined to the nursing home. He learns from a young Japanese volunteer the art of *bonsai*: creating miniature trees. He is in his element again. The scale of his endeavors with living plants does not matter. He is fulfilled and grateful for his continued ability to work with nature and succor and grow his trees.

I saw the diminishing process of aging in my own family and knew that realistically it was not a fate I myself would escape except through a premature death. I did not look forward to it, but knew I could accommodate myself to growing old so long as I could maintain some semblance of a garden, even one no larger than a window box or a flower pot. I am grateful to have understood early on what changes await us in aging, but I am also graced with both patience and determination to be able to make the best of whatever situation befalls me.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

12. Selling the Future Short

11 August 2014

I am amused, but also saddened, by those who think they will not grow old or die. They are denizens of a youthful ghetto who do not know their grandparents, and who find even their parents outmoded and incomprehensible. Their attitude suggests that aging is an unnatural process that can be avoided through diet, cosmetics, and will-power, as though it were merely an infirmity of mind or inattention to taking care of oneself that leads to sickness and death. People grow old who allow themselves to grow old. They believe that they will not. They, like the clothing store whose name brings me much mirth, will be "Forever 21."

Their struggle to retain their youthful vigor and figure is, of course, doomed to failure, which will likely make them terribly depressed. I feel sorry for them. Their attitude is as parochial and narrow as the two young women whose conversation I overheard near Washington Square in Manhattan. "Oh, I never go above 14th Street. There's nothing there." Imagine how much of life we'd miss if we never wanted to go above age thirty.

To my way of thinking, the best is always yet to come and experience has borne this out, even though I don't always want to believe it. The future, predictably, is never what I imagined, but is not just different; it is better. I am continually selling the future short. I have never been happier than I am at this moment, even when I was hale and thirty.

My circumstances in life make me neither happy nor sad. That comes from within, not without, and it is a matter of choice. It's an inside job. Others can help you only to the extent that they can teach you beauty and a right way of living. I never got any of this knowledge in church. There I learned only how inadequate I was, how my very nature and being was fallen from a higher state even at birth. I was fallen even before I learned to walk.

The good teacher brings one to new ways of looking at the world and better ways of wending one's way among its many pitfalls. A good teacher fosters not fact gathering, but rather the value of knowledge, not in terms of anything else, but for its own sake. She teaches compassion and generosity of spirit as the true application of all knowledge. A good education brings clarity of thought through an ongoing questioning of ALL things, not through the codification and ossification of someone else's opinions or wishful thinking. God is not the goal of our searching, but its beginning. Change is neither to be avoided at all costs nor embraced for its own sake. Change is, simply, a fact of life and in the nature of all living things. It is the engine of evolution. Lack of change signifies death, whether of the body, mind, or spirit.

I shudder when I see children marched off to Sunday school or the *shul* or the Islamic *madrasa* before they have learned of any alternatives. It endorses a murder of the mind and spirit, and succeeds only in perpetuating what is worst in previous generations. It is decidedly

devolutionary. Growth is not promoted through blindly following one's elders. If what one's elders teach is good and valuable to life, wouldn't one be expected to come to such conclusions *naturally* on one's own?

It is clear to me that the education of our children is a failure because no one teaches *how* to think, only *what* to think. For each such opinion there is often an equally valid opposite opinion. Each of us must come to the truth on his own after a long process of learning how to think about and evaluate evidence. Everything else is merely rote or mimicry. It is why the same mistakes continue to be made by successive generations, why hatreds and warfare go on for millennia without any victors and entire peoples of the vanquished, downtrodden, displaced, and starving.

Peace will be obtained only when the young may safely ask, "Why is our enemy bad?" and be able to follow their own path in investigating the validity of the answer they receive.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

13. My Friends

12 August 2014

One of the greatest blessings I have had in life has been my friends. There have always been relatives with whom I saw eye-to-eye, but friends have the advantage that they are chosen rather than inherited.. From my earliest days I have always had at least one close friend, very dear to me. It was only our changing circumstances that came between us, never a rift or argument. My friend of longest standing I have known for almost sixty years, since first grade. I am loyal: I have never abandoned a friend nor failed to provide comfort and aid when it was called for.

Through the years I have had friends of every age, all races, several ethnic backgrounds, varied occupations, diverse sexual orientations, all genders, and many religions and classes. About the only thing they had in common was me. With some friends I shared elements of our backgrounds, but this did not add to or detract from the depth of the friendship. At the base of our mutual attraction lay respect for one another, allowance of differences, compassion, and, of course, love. I have always seen some reflection of myself in my friends. Though some traits are not so beautiful or savory or beneficial, I must acknowledge those too. Carl Jung said, "Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darknesses of other people." There have been sexual attractions to both male and female friends that was often not acknowledged or shared. This did not diminish the reality of my feelings to me. The closer I felt to a friend the more honest and open I could be with him or her. Revealing one's darkest secrets to another human being requires full trust and opens one up to possible rejection. But if reciprocated, such equal admissions form the deepest and most permanent bonds of friendship.

My four dearest friends at the moment include a Jew, a Moslem, a Christian, and an atheist. They are three men and a woman, two homosexuals and two heterosexuals, two Caucasians, an African, and an Asian. They range in age from forty to seventy-five. They all know of one another, but have never met. It is difficult to see what they have in common except for me. I am the common denominator of a strangely wonderful and beautiful equation.

I have never seen my friends as members of any group other than Brian's friends. I have never been able to lump people together because the members of any group are often quite different. This attitude has saved me from the worst ethnic and racial phobias. I am free to take people or leave them as they come, with no baggage and no atonement necessary for the sins of my fathers. They are not my sins. It is far easier for me to see what makes each of my friends a unique individual. What could I possibly learn from someone that was a lot like me? To paraphrase Groucho Marx, why would I want to join a club that would have *me* as a member?

Both my mother and father had African co-workers whom they liked a great deal, but they never associated with them outside of work. The only prejudicial remarks I witnessed in the

family came from my grandmothers. My father's mother, an immigrant from Ireland a decade before the partition (about 1912) when she was sixteen, hated anyone of Japanese descent. Though she lost no one of her family or acquaintance in the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, she held all Orientals responsible for it. Once, when I visited her in Los Angeles when I was about ten, she sent me to the local bodega for some bananas and other groceries. She questioned me upon my return, looking at me sternly with her lips pursed. "You didn't buy these from those lousy Japs, did you?" she asked. "No, Grandma," I replied. "It was a Korean market."

"Same difference," she snarled and, snatching the paper bag from my hands, she tossed the entire parcel into the garbage can. Even in the privacy of her kitchen, she embarrassed me, and I never told a soul about her outburst until now.

A few years earlier, at about age six, I watched on a hot summer day as an African man, the usual man, with skin so black it seemed almost blue, shoveled coal from a tarpaulin, where it had been heaped by a dump truck, into an enormous wheelbarrow. He carted load after load to the coal chute of our apartment building in Chicago where I grew up. The coal chute was situated too far from the street and the alley so that the dump truck could not connect its conveyor to it. The entire load was dumped on the street, sidewalk, and grassy parkway atop an enormous canvas tarp. The poor African fellow shoveled coal for the rest of the day, winter or summer. I liked him very much and peppered him with an endless stream of questions which he always answered patiently and with humor, often including a joke or a riddle.

On this day, when the beads of sweat stood out like gems on his coal black forehead, I ran into the kitchen and asked my grandmother, my maternal grandmother this time, if I could bring him some water. My grandmother had apparently done this herself on previous occasions and she produced a tall frosted white glass with red polka-dots from the topmost shelf of the kitchen cupboard beside the sink. She let the water run for a while and filled the tumbler three-quarters full.

"Be careful. Don't drop it. And don't drink out of that glass when he's done."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because Negroes have different germs than us."

The coal shoveler accepted the cold water with a broad smile and drank it down in a single swallow. Sneaking quietly back into the kitchen, I climbed up to the sink and ran a little more water from the tap into the glass. I drank it down and, since I did not sicken and drop dead on the spot, I was pretty sure my grandmother was mistaken or, as my father often put it, "talking through her hat again." It was a simple test, an experiment with loose controls, and it spared me from ever thinking that people were not all the same under the skin. And ever since that day, I decided I was just as qualified as any adult to test any theory I had a question about.

I am grateful that I never wasted a minute on a single racial or ethnic prejudice, though I did not tolerate very well those who did. Whatever else might be said about my Catholic education, the nuns always insisted we were all God's children, none any better than any other

except by their merits. When in high school I was overheard making an anti-Semitic remark. The dean of men made sure I accompanied him to a Sabbath service and later to my first Seder. Like the dean, I wore a yarmulke. I enjoyed and learned a great deal from both experiences and regretted making such simple-minded and mean remarks. I am pleased to say that no other such lapse in judgment has entered my head since. And I am grateful to have been taught early on a generosity of spirit by my teachers. That lesson is worth all the geography and history and science I have ever learned, and it has helped me the most to get along in life.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

14. Skin-to-Skin

13 August 2014

Before my stroke at age sixty-five, my previous stay in the hospital was sixty-five years ago when was born. The great grace and good fortune of that long stretch of good health was not lost on me. All my previous experience of hospitals was as a visitor who had gone to spend a couple of hours with sick relatives or friends. I was often aware of their discomfort and pain, and even boredom, but other than interceding on their behalf with the doctors and nurses, there was little I could do for them but read to them or offer a caressing touch and some gentle words suffused with humor. Yet now, as a patient of more than a month, I have come to regard what efficacious medicine touch and humor are. For my own health I did not want to see long faces or hear cross words, and I did my best with all my fellow patients to lighten their load by lightening their mood. I have no medical, surgical, or pharmaceutical skills, but I can tell jokes, make puns, relate stories and anecdotes, and offer a couple of words of encouragement. I would have thought these skills paltry when up against illness, debility, and death, but when I was on the receiving end of them, I recognized what good medicine good humor was.

The nurses, assistants, and attendants, being around grumpy sick people for most of their day, I realized, were as much in need of a good word as any of the patients, and, at the very least, if I did not know them, I offered a nod and a smile. It cost me nothing. It was the cheapest treatment available and there were no side effects except, perhaps, an aching side from laughing and a tendency to pass it along to the next person. In a matter of days I became known as a joker, a disciple of the Good Humor man, and I did not mind the epithet. Their joining in the fun only encouraged me further.

The other layman's medicine of great value was touch, even in the overly germ-conscious atmosphere of the hospital. A handshake, a touch on the arm, a pat on the shoulder or back were freely given and gratefully received. Skin-to-skin was better, but a touch even through clothing was more effective than none. Not having slept with anyone for the longest stretch of my adult life induced a sort of skin hunger in me. It could be satisfied in so simple a fashion and without the sexual overtones of libido that could make one uncomfortable. And yet, like the best of sexual intercourse, it could be given and received simultaneously.

The physical therapists and, to a lesser extent, the occupational therapists, were in near constant physical contact with me throughout our sessions. I had more female than male therapists, but that was more a result of their numbers within the profession. I quizzed them on whether they felt more comfortable with same-sex or opposite-sex patients, but never received the sort of definitive answer that one could say constituted even an anecdotal survey. Their therapeutic energies were well-sublimated and I was not in the business of making anyone feel uneasy, least of all those whose touch was restoring me to health and wholeness.

A young male nurse's assistant, a twenty-year-old Russian who also attended the hospital college in order to get his nursing certificate, became the one to tuck me in each night that he was on duty. With his classes on hiatus for the summer, that was most nights, varying only by the time he was assigned his break. He got me from the wheelchair to the bed, helped undress me, got me into a hospital gown, adjusted the pillows, and covered me with a sheet and blanket. We had our ten- or fifteen-minute conversations before he turned out the light and bade me a good night's sleep.

It struck me early on how well-suited Ivan's aspiration to the profession of nursing was. He was strong and gentle at the same time, and had great enthusiasm for his calling, and could cite many interesting facts and ideas about the human nervous system. During our nightly chats, we each managed to learn something and that is the best sort of conversation.

I was slightly surprised to find the male nurses as caring and careful as their female counterparts. Did I find Ivan sexually attractive? Perhaps, but only from a distance. He was awfully young for my tastes. Our ages were sufficiently spread to suggest grandson and grandfather more than anything else. Obviously, he sought my company, too, and I learned there were only a slightly older brother and his mother at home. He'd been in the United States for less than four years. I quizzed him on his future plans and he cared for me in very tender fashion, as though we had actually assumed the grandson-grandfather roles. The relationship was almost entirely about touch and healing and wishing for the other's well-being.

I realize that I may next find myself in a hospital situation some years hence near the end of my life—or it may be just around the corner. The prospect of death does not frighten me, but I think I would like someone like Ivan to be holding my hand as I slipped from this realm towards whatever, if anything, might lie beyond.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

15. A Grown Man in a Toddler's Body

14 August 2014

The progress of my therapies seemed as up and down as a Wall Street chart. I learned not to pay too close attention to the sawtooth peaks and valleys of my abilities on a daily basis and look instead at the longer trends, which were all upward, however gradually. From week to week my improvement was fairly astounding, and that was the chart I chose to pay the closest attention to.

What was perhaps the most frustrating development was that the skill I seemed to have mastered one day was nowhere to be seen the next or even the next several days. I forgot that this was the case the first time I learned to walk and get into mischief. This was the case for any number of other motor tasks I undertook for the first time. I was simply not conscious of my body or my mind in the same way I am now as an adult—an impaired adult. I remember only a sense of wonder and adventure. I speculated that it is perhaps my greater awareness and my ability to envisage different outcomes that has led to greater frustration. But one thing remains unchanged from my first steps as a two-year-old: my determination to get it. That was the one asset that rendered all my deficits temporary and, ultimately, of no consequence. But now I was a toddler trapped in a grown man's body, and it was only the toddler who could learn to walk and to reach for things again.

I felt discouraged that the therapists were continually reminding me to be conscious and deliberate about so many separate movements at one time. Thrust my hip forward, lift my leg, strike with my heel, bend the knee, shift my weight, and then, as if these were not a sufficient number of tasks of which to be mindful at once, they added, "And don't forget to breathe." I doubted at times that I could ever relearn what had once been automatic and smoothly executed. I wanted to throw my hands up and surrender. "I can't." The words caught in my throat and never left my lips. If I couldn't do it, who was going to walk for me?

One of the more disappointing episodes occurred near the end of my fourth week in rehab. My usual physical therapist, Jean Hornberger, had had three days off, but I'd found the advice and input of a different therapist to be helpful. The new fellow had suggested an easier way for me to get up from a sitting position without having to grab hold of anything to boost myself up. He, Allen, also thought I might find it easier to use an ordinary cane for support and locomotion as opposed to the four-footed quad-cane I'd been using. I took to this easily as well and found I could walk just a bit faster because I wasn't first having to balance the quad-cane before I could rely on it to support me. I considered two advancements in a single day to be progress indeed. A second new therapist took me out for a long walk in the corridor between wings of the hospital using the new single cane. Upon her return, Jean, my customary physical therapist, was impressed with my facility with the new cane, but as soon as I noticed my doctor watching me from a short distance off, my left foot got "stuck" and I lurched backward to

recover my balance. Dr. Forrest was instantly upset that the physical therapists had not had me fitted for an AFO (ankle-foot-orthotic), a foot and calf brace that forced the heel to touch the floor before the toes when taking a step. As luck would have it, a prosthesis salesman was on the floor that very afternoon and he and the doctor commenced to fill out the necessary insurance paperwork.

I felt I had failed both me and my therapist miserably when, a half-hour before, when no one special was watching, I performed admirably. It was as though I had been struck with stage-fright. I became a tottering toddler again and my father was not pleased with how dangerous a feat of feet I was attempting. I felt terribly thwarted and was certain Jean would be disappointed in me. She had tried from the beginning to see whether I could escape having to be fitted with one of these contraptions. She was of the opinion that if I could learn to walk properly earlier on, I would not need the device at all. She felt the AFO would only delay the process of walking naturally on my own.

Since it was the nurses and therapists who spent days and hours with the patients as opposed to the cursory five minutes when the doctor poked his head in, I felt they and not the doctor were in a better position to assess what I needed and devise a therapy that provided it. The stumbling episode confirmed my opinion that the doctors devise treatment and that it is the nurses and therapists who actually heal. And it is the patient who must provide his own cure. I decided that I was not going to allow my doctor, well-intentioned though he was, to sideline my recovery.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

16. Life or Death

15 August 2014

Two weeks before my stroke I received word that my partner's nephew was very ill. John was only thirty-three-years-old, apparently at the peak of his health and vigor, when he was diagnosed with bowel cancer. It was considered an older man's disease. My own father, in fact, had died of bowel cancer—or at least its complications and aftermath—at age eighty-one. Further tests proved that Anthony's nephew's cancer had metastasized and was now rampant throughout his body. He was given three to five months, longer with aggressive treatment.

I called John to offer words of encouragement and support, and was astounded by his positive attitude and strength. He thought that while he may not be eating as many White Castle burgers in the near term, he had every intention of ushering in the era of flying cars. He was looking towards a future that included him in it. He was determined to beat the odds on the dire prognosis his doctors had handed him. I though that if anyone could, John, by his determination and will, would own a sporty red *Aladdin*. I was also gratified to note his sense of humor was completely intact.

I had said to Anthony and other friends, by way of contrast, that faced with a similar hardship, I would undoubtedly be a big whiny baby, bemoaning my fate and passively waiting for the end. I believed what I said but could not have been more wrong about what reserves of character and strength were in my own as-yet-uncharted depths. I was inspired by John's fortitude and courage even before I had any serious need for such a shining example. I admired him and told him so.

Owing to one of life's curveballs, I was laid low by a stroke a mere two weeks later and, confined to a bed and strapped to countless monitoring devices, barely able to move even on my good side and completely dependent on others for all of my needs, I had plenty of time to reflect and decide what my own course would be. Only two days later, someone on the fifth floor pushed himself out the window to his death. I had a choice, too.

While my situation seemed dire, I didn't think it merited crawling out my window——if I could even do so—and smashing myself on the concrete below. The next day I began this journal.

I do not claim to have the slightest insight into God or even to know who He is. On most days, I cannot even conjure up sufficient faith to state unequivocally that He exists. But I also know that if God had meant to finish me off that day in the woods, a single stone or hidden tree root would have been all that was required to trip me up and bring me down, never to rise to my feet again.

Why hadn't He? I could only surmise in a vague and very general way that I had not yet proved myself worthy of the grace that had been bestowed on me. I had not yet paid for the good and rich life I'd already enjoyed. I read the stroke as a gentle reminder that I had work to do and that time was running out quickly. However it would develop or turn out, I felt that this journal might be a small way for me to pass on some of the extraordinary blessings I had received. I had, and have, no other purpose in mind. I haven't a clue what God wants from me or anyone else aside from generally godly behavior, if, in fact, He exists in any of the myriad ways we humans have imagined Him or Her. But I knew it felt like the right thing to embark on this journey of the wounded healer.

Earlier this week, out in the hospital garden, I saw a young couple wheel out a young child in a brightly-colored wagon lined with blankets. The child, a girl not more than two-years-old, was hooked up to various tubes descending from a wheeled stand that trailed along behind the wagon and which included three blinking monitoring devices. Though they were probably no older than thirty, the couple's faces were careworn. The child was cranky and only slightly interested in the games they devised for her. The father lifted her out of the wagon and held her to his chest while the mother walked beside them with the now unattached stand of fluids and tubes and wires and blinking lights. I nodded to them and smiled, but I could not bring myself to inquire what afflicted the poor child. It broke my heart to watch them.

I began fruitlessly to engage in the age-old pastime of trying to explain the afflictions of Job. I could understand why someone such as I, who had lived long and sinned much, might be struck down, but why a young man such as Anthony's nephew or a young child of whose complete innocence I could be assured. I feel embarrassed when non-believing friends challenge my half-hearted belief in a tenuous God who could permit such suffering. I have no ready answer for them for such dilemmas. I admit it perplexes me, too, how a loving Creator could behave in such abysmal fashion. I am not God's apologist; I simply do not know. I like the Alcoholics Anonymous concept of "a God of one's understanding." I am afraid I do not understand much of anything, least of all a Being light-years beyond my comprehension.

Does suffering make us stronger? By itself I don't think so. Suffering can also break us. It becomes a choice whose outcome only the sufferer can determine. I would not blame him if he chose to let himself drop from a fifth-floor window. But he may have denied himself many wonderful and beautiful experiences. They might well have been worth a little more pain in the short term. Only the sufferer can solve that equation. My God would not condemn him. He forgives everything.

The sufferer might also have deprived those around him of invaluable insights and a healing remedy for other troubled minds and spirits. But this choice is the sufferer's alone, even if we are inclined to see it as selfish. I think that the world could always use one more example of courage and determination in the face of great hardship. Such accounts describe what it means to be fully human in an indifferent world. "Je m'ouvrais... à la tendre indifférence du monde," as Albert Camus put it. "I opened myself up... to the tender indifference of the world."

God knows no one has it easy.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

17. Dandelions and Daisies

16 August 2014

I have long felt that we Americans concentrate too much of our energies on the acquisition and maintenance of material goods. But as the culture of materialism spreads—it is hardly an American invention and hardly new—there is not a corner anywhere that does not use this material standard of value. It is even in evidence here in the hospital where there are those who can afford private rooms and televisions and telephones, and seem to complain the most about nothing being right. None of the extras they enjoy appears to confer the slightest health advantage and instead makes them dissatisfied because, naturally, they expect even more.

A woman on the floor received an enormous and elaborate floral spray that would have been the envy of any newly-deceased. There were rumors she was important, but no one new for what. A compendium of four-letter words perhaps. The arrangement of flowers and grassy paraphernalia, when it was placed on the windowsill, all but blocked any sunlight from entering her room. They conferred a mood of somberness rather than joy. Within a week the flowers were desiccated and desaturated, and even more funereal than when they arrived fresh.

Though I pick dandelions and wild-flowers on occasion that grow in profusion in the fields and meadows around my house, in general I am opposed to cut flowers. Better to let them be so that all passersby may enjoy them. Cut flowers seem a little selfish and imply one is too busy to water a live plant once a week and pick off dead leaves. I tried to nip in the bud any notion my friends may have had to squander money by sending me flowers killed by disinterested third parties.

My neighbors in Bovina, Cay Sophie and Christian, stopped my partner on the road and handed him a bunch of field daisies, black-eyed susans, and an assortment of what the uninitiated might call weeds, with instructions to give them to me when he visited the hospital in Albany. They were limp and half-dead by the time Anthony gave them to me, but they revived miraculously in a paper cup full of water. They were the best bouquet money did not buy because they were simple, well-meant, and they reminded me of home. I liked that I had a part in their revival and survival, at least for a time. The ones in my fellow patient's room reminded me only of extravagance and pointless waste. The woman's chair faced away from them, too, so they probably received only the occasional glance. My humble daisies outlived her snapdragons by a full week, thriving on the attention they received. My visitors would see the daisies on the window sill before they found me.

A cousin and his wife, Kevin and Ellen, however, not having heard my suggestion on how to better use the money for flowers to buy a homeless person a meal, sent me a large flower basket. I was dismayed at first but saw they were all live plants: two varieties of ivy, some small yellow roses, and a tiny white flower with enormous succulent leaves that continues to bloom

three weeks after their unexpected arrival in my room.

My cousin could not have devised a better floral gift for me—other than none at all. Their floral arrangement required tending: I had to prune the dead blossoms and make room for the new ones. I had to make sure all the plants got watered and I turned the wicker basket every two days to face the western sun. When it looked as though the ivy were about to escape the basket and trail down the wall, I wound it round and round the braided wicker handle. It was my own little Eden, a miniature garden, that thrived because of my caring for it. And I had every intention of transplanting all of them in the ground near my house as soon as I got home. Perhaps my cousin and his wife had this in mind all along.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

18. The Man Who Owned Everything

17 August 2014

When I think of all the effort, struggle, and bloodshed involved in the acquisition and retention of so-called wealth, it makes me wonder that riches are considered assets rather than liabilities. While I appreciate the cities and skyscrapers and technological marvels—including modern medicine—that this mind-set has brought to us, I find it is an utterly useless way of determining the value of those things most important to we human beings. It is beauty, family, love, friendship, and knowledge that bring most of us the greatest pleasure, and none of which can be purchased. Why do we ignore these great gifts to wish for and acquire more wealth and possessions than anyone could make use of even in multiple lifetimes? The possessions are often bequeathed to unknown heirs, thereby robbing them of their own struggles and achievements, means by which their own characters may be developed and strengthened.

Struggle, defeat, pain, and illness are integral elements of the human condition. No one is served, and no one is fooled, by trying to completely avoid them. Instead we would be better off teaching ourselves how best to deal with mishap when it visits and convey that knowledge and wisdom to future generations. Beyond their names and inexact, fading likenesses, who remembers the great kings and queens and leaders for whom so much human effort and misery were expended to immortalize them? Everything living will die and everything made will be destroyed. There is little point to fighting death when its victory is foreordained.

I lived a dozen years in Manhattan where the culture of mindless acquisitiveness and endless youth has reached perfection. Are most Manhattanites happier than other folk? My own experience and the anecdotal evidence of others suggests they are not. If anything, perhaps they are a little less satisfied than ordinary mortals. Why, then, all the hubbub?

Once the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and safety have been met, most people can attain a degree of happiness. Without these, most people are miserable. But it does not follow—and research has shown it to be so—that more things bring more happiness. In fact, the rat race, in which those who want more, more, more must engage, is positively detrimental to health and happiness.

In a short story, I posited the idea that one man, through mergers, acquisitions, and cut-throat elimination of all competition, manages to become the sole owner of everything and everyone on the planet. Yet he is thoroughly miserable and dissatisfied. There is nothing more to acquire; he even owns the future. The only thought that brings him any pleasure is that his astronomers believe a nearby massive star is about to go mega-nova and will destroy the entire Solar System. Without nourishing the mind and spirit, owning everything is an empty prospect. Yet the desire to possess ever more is the logical conclusion to runaway acquisitiveness.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

19. The Man Who Has Everything

17 August 2014

I produced a few online photos of my house in Bovina for the therapists to judge its fitness as a place for me to continue my rehabilitation. Beyond suggesting a short handrail by the front steps and a hand grip near the bathroom toilet, they thought it would be an excellent place for me to carry on with my mission. Both Lisa and Jean were impressed by the house's simplicity and economy. Yet to me it is my palace, better than many former kings or queens of England or France could claim. It has fresh running water and a cook stove. It is flooded with sunlight and is cozy warm in winter for very little cost of fuel. In addition, there is electricity, Internet, and telephone. What more could I want?

I have always been blessed with the basics of existence—and then some—and never wanted for any of them. I am grateful for every bit, morsel, and stick. I have never been envious of the possessions or station of others because I realize what is required to acquire them. I have all I need; I have enough.

In my opinion, money costs too much, especially in terms of the time and effort necessary to get it. Worse, one needs to relinquish or sacrifice so many simple pleasures merely to acquire more things that bring so little happiness for so short a time. Fortunately, that acquisitive spirit has never made much sense to me. I suppose I am by nature a bit of a slacker and an under-achiever. Perhaps I am un-American in stating that I have enough and do not want more. I am satisfied. I am blessed.

The house in Bovina began its life as a garage that my partner and I little-by-little over the course of four years turned into a small jewel-box of a house. One-third is devoted to a bathroom and bedroom, each with many windows to permit as much sunlight as possible to enter. The remaining two-thirds of this 24-by-26-foot (600-square-foot) space is comprised of kitchen, dining area, living room, and a small work corner, all in one undivided space. Here there are more windows, and the doors to the adjoining bathroom and bedroom are French doors, thereby allowing the southern sunlight to stream in.

The house, which we call Casa Bovina, is fitted with the usual modern conveniences of moderate price. It's heated with a very efficient wood stove with a large glass window so that the fire can warm us psychologically as well as physically. The decor is simple and uncluttered, with cedar wainscoting and unadorned plaster walls. Though I am an artist, I have none of my own work hanging. The windows and doors, all looking out on woods or meadow and the mountains and valleys beyond, provide all the art and scenery I require. Best of all, it is always changing and invariably beautiful, all without having to acquire or deaccession anything.

The new apartment condominiums in New York City near Carnegie Hall boast bathtubs

of Carrara marble that cost more than my entire house, property and everything in it and on it. Yet I can get just as wet in my own tub and it requires far less energy to draw and heat the water. I am blessed beyond measure.

My last job in Chicago before moving to New York was as a gardener for a city landscape designer. Perhaps that term conjures up wide vistas and earth-moving equipment. The work I did for the woman (Sally Callender) who employed me entailed planting and maintaining city gardens and small yards and rooftop planters. I found it to be very satisfying work in which I also got to make use of my wood-working and cabinet-making skills. In the off-season I was employed decorating yards and houses for Christmas. Later, it was spring cleaning, both indoors and outside, and the assignments often included various handyman projects where required. It was the most varied job I'd ever had, and it was impossible to become bored. I was also paid well and liked all my co-workers.

At one client's penthouse I designed, built, and installed huge planter boxes that accommodated small ornamental trees. I made other boxes for tall grasses, shrubs, and flowers. After carting tons of black dirt, mulch, and gravel across their pure-white carpet with my cohorts—during which process we expected at least one slapstick accident—the owners returned home early to inspect our work. They were enormously pleased and no accidents had occurred except in our Laurel-and-Hardy imaginations.

The owners were a professional couple in their mid-thirties with no children and plenty of money to indulge themselves and get whatever trinkets they desired, including the gorgeous rooftop garden we had just installed. When they realized I was the one who had designed and constructed their planter boxes, they seemed especially effusive in their praise.

"I wish I had the time to work in my garden, building and growing things," the husband told me. "You are incredibly lucky to be in this line of work." I agreed that indeed I was. "Maybe if your company has any openings..." the wife joked. "I'll mention it to Sally (my boss)," I replied, keeping the joke aloft.

I realized then that the nice apartment and furnishings in a tony neighborhood carried a very high price tag. I felt very sad for the young couple who earned far too much money to be able to afford and enjoy life's simpler pleasures, such as tending a garden and making things with one's hands. The experience confirmed for me again how incredibly fortunate I was. I am still. I am the man who has everything.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

20. The Fledgling

18 August 2014

With only a week to go before my expected release from the rehabilitation center, I was already glumly anticipating the leave-taking I would have to do. I have never been very good at saying good-bye, and I knew this situation was going to be especially difficult. I had been airlifted here in a broken body, a grown man in an infant's body who could not do the simplest things for himself. These people, the nurses and therapists, took care of me the way parents coddle a young child. They fed me, bathed me, wiped my butt, and tucked me in at night. The therapists held onto me as I took my first steps and encouraged me when I learned how to put round pegs in round holes and to retrieve baubles and beads from a wad of putty. They could not have been more concerned or caring if they had, in fact, been my parents. But as with any fledgling, part of my education—or in this case my re-education—is a preparation for my leaving the nest.

I observed over the course of the past five weeks that the nurses, nurse assistants, therapists, therapy volunteers, food servers, and all the other helpers and attendants seemed to have the right jobs. They took joy in their work and did it well. Their dedication infused the air I breathed, and I was relaxed and comfortable among them. They provided a milieu that was healing and loving. No doubt they had off days, but I did not witness a single one. The crankiness and acrimony came from my fellow patients, some of whom regarded our care-givers as their personal servants to whom they spoke in tones not even worthy for the family dog. I excused them by reminding myself that they were also sick and hurting.

I honestly felt as though I were spending the summer in a vacation rental with friends. Everyone had his or her assigned duties, each done to the best of their abilities. This put most patients at ease and left plenty of room for fun and laughter and jovial kidding, in which I also indulged. Laughter, after all, is one of the most effective therapies.

Now the time is approaching for me to leave this comfy nest and to attempt flight with these damaged wings. I had already asked my partner to bring me extra handkerchiefs because I know how I will react to leaving in advance. I hoped the good-byes will be more in the nature of au revoir and auf Wiedersehen and even vaya con Dios, but I suspect that some will indeed be farewells. I have promised myself that I will return some months hence to show them the man I have become under their tutelage. I will remain forever grateful and in their debt for all they have taught me about healing. It is a skill, a calling I intend to keep by giving it away at every opportunity.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

21. Trust

19 August 2014

I am an independent and often contrary cuss. I am not in the habit of asking others for help if there is the slightest chance of my accomplishing the task adequately and safely on my own. It is extremely humbling to surrender yourself completely to the good will of others. It is returning to the cradle where we depend on the gentle care of others to nurse us into strength and adulthood.

When you must surrender your ego and your entire sense of independence, there are but two ways to go: either you trust your care-givers or you do not. In either case, you are entirely at their mercy. Whether partial or complete, we depend on the kindness of strangers to help us through a tender stage. We become children again.

Infants are not thrown into a quandary over whom they can trust and to what extent. They learn instinctively how to trust those who cradle and coddle and care for them. I believe the default state is to be trusting. But if a child cannot trust or has been taught to mistrust, the damage may last a lifetime and color every interaction with the world and everyone in it.

Fortunately for me, I trusted my care-givers implicitly. The doctors, nurses, therapists, aides, and attendants all had their defined jobs and roles for which they were paid. But not once, from any of them, did I get the impression that the money was the primary reason for their being there. Certainly none of them was overpaid. In addition to their jobs and the work they did, each of them had a calling, and that vocation was primarily concerned with helping others, who were utter strangers, get better and learn once again to be independent. Their attitude exuded a quality of healing that I see as a major reason for my improvement with such alacrity.

I trusted each of them from the start, and that trust was not misplaced. These dedicated care-givers are unsung, and I sing for them now. Without their sincere attention and love, I would have remained a helpless infant confined to squalling and complaining. I would have gotten older without getting any better. Thanks to them, the quality of my life has improved almost miraculously. My gratitude is profound, and I owe to them everything I have accomplished since the afternoon of my stroke, and all I will yet do until I am laid in my grave.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

22. Fearlessness

20 August 2014

Most of my progress in the past several weeks in regaining the use of my limbs I attribute to a kind of fearlessness. My arm and leg already do not work as I wish. What could I do to make the situation any worse, barring a fall that injures my strong side? That is not likely to happen unless I am in a hurry, something it has been drilled into me not to do. I am, in fact, in no rush at all. I have the rest of my life to get better.

I learned this fearless, nothing-to-lose attitude many years ago when I bought my first commercially produced desktop computer, a 1993 Gateway 2000. It arrived with what the phone technician determined was a faulty motherboard. The company offered me two options: repackage the computer and ship it back to them for a replacement at no cost to me, or have them expedite a new motherboard to me with instructions and phone support on how to replace the circuit board myself. I was eager to use the new machine for which I had saved up for a long while, so I opted for the motherboard replacement. If I was unable to exchange new for old, I could still return the computer to them for a full replacement.

I saw this as a wonderful learning opportunity. The computer already did not work. How could I break it or make it work any less efficiently? If the repair was beyond me, I would learn that I ought to leave the insides of computers for the experts to fiddle with. The company would still replace it for me. How could I lose?

I further decided to forego the detailed, yet confusing, instructions shipped along with the new motherboard and made my own schematic drawing and notes on how to put back together everything I took apart. Gateway 2000 was not replacing the processor nor anything else plugged into the motherboard, which was, essentially, the rest of the computer. So, I had to reattach the old processor, hard drive, floppy drive, sound card, and all the ribbon cables back into the new motherboard.

Wanting to figure this new technology out, I was not in a hurry. While it took me an entire afternoon to effect the exchange, when I powered the computer up, it worked just fine. With periodic replacements and upgrades, and three new operating systems, I kept that computer running well enough to suit my needs for the next twelve years. I now make laptop and desktop computers for myself and friends from discarded machines and an array of parts I find in the trash room of my apartment building. I had confidence, another manifestation of fearlessness, because I couldn’t break what wasn’t working. It helped, too, that I didn’t know enough to realize that much of what I was attempting was impossible.

This attitude has remained with me ever since and translated across countless situations, including recovery from my recent stroke. I am happy to consider every bit of well-intentioned

advice sent my way, but I must figure out its application, if any, to my own life for myself. I have the confidence of those with nothing to lose for whom circumstances can only improve. This outlook has proved a life-saver to me. I pray for guidance and then get down to the task at hand, trusting that I will be able to accomplish what I have set my mind to. This disposition has never let me down when it counted most.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

23. The Cardboard Box Syndrome

21 August 2014

Gandhi said that fearlessness is the first step toward a spiritual life. While the world is a frightening place, I do not feel afraid. I like to think I am neither stupid nor foolhardy. I will take ordinary precautions to guard myself against injury. I do not walk in dangerous places, whether in the city or the country, after dark, especially if I can accomplish my task in the daytime. I take my medicine as prescribed and try to remain as fit as I can be without joining a gym. But I do not take extra-ordinary precautions. They become limiting without making one any safer, and they play into fear. I trust that things will be all right. I have chosen to leave fear for those moments of genuine peril when the body reacts according to its age-old script of increased heart rate and an inflow of adrenalin. I am simply unable to react with fear, even the low-level variety, to future situations that may or may not occur. That is just too nebulous an outcome to get excited about.

I faced my ongoing stroke with a singleness of purpose to get back to the house without falling. I was not afraid, though I am not sure why I was not. The stroke, which left my left side completely paralyzed, was rehearsed in earlier fears of being incarcerated, of being enclosed in the flesh in a body that no longer did my bidding. I saw the effects of stroke and paralysis in others, and this became my greatest fear of disability. Having confronted this fear many times and many years ago, apparently I saw no value in repeating it. The worst moment had arrived and I was now in a state of quickly developing paralysis. There was simply no point in being afraid of what I could no longer change. The best course, it seemed to me, was to accept the fact and see what I could do next. Denying the truth, or pretending it is something else, fixes nothing.

I often wish I could ease other peoples' minds, especially my friends', when they are beset by fear. All fears are irrational: they either deal with what has already happened and so are unchangeable, or, more often, they deal with the future and so are unknowable. They are all phantoms. When one is in a dangerous situation there need be no fear, either, for the heightened senses and other physical reactions are then on auto-pilot and guide us. They are preparations for dealing with the danger. There is no fear in the here-and-now either.

Fear does not respond to reason and each spawns still others. Lay one to rest and two more take its place. It is an interminable losing game of Whac-a-Mole and it is better never to begin it. I prefer to deal with my own fears by indulging them and letting them have free rein for ten minutes, allowing them to run amok and tumble towards their logical or, rather, illogical, conclusions. I call this the "Cardboard Box Syndrome." It begins like this: I have failed to do a simple task my boss sets before me. Though normally easy-going, this time he will fire me. Within a month I will be broke and unable to pay the rent. The landlord will evict me and I will be hungry and out on the street with only the clothes I am wearing and living in a cardboard box at the curb. Perhaps, I tell myself, I should leave work early before I make any more mistakes and go scouting for that cardboard box now. Maybe I will be lucky and find a sturdy refrigerator

carton.

It is the absurdity of letting my mind run off the rails that allows me to defuse the fear before it really takes hold of me. Meanwhile, the boss has completely forgotten he even asked me to do anything. No one's the wiser, thankfully, except I.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

24. A Blessed Life

22 August 2014

A former employer in New York City with whom I still stay in touch years after the last time he hired me, was first shocked by my informing him of my stroke. But he then became curious to learn every detail of the stroke and how I was being treated in the hospital. David has a sarcastic wit and we enjoyed many laughs on the phone at the expense of the nasty and stupid people who treat others despicably and then wonder why no one goes out of his way to help them.

I realized the source of David's curiosity: he was the family member who most directly dealt with the nurses and staff who took care of his mother in the nursing home where she spent the last few years of her life. She had dementia and was often less than kind to her care-givers. But my friend did all he could to make it up to them with profuse thanks and many small, but heartfelt gifts. As a result, his mother was very well cared for and she lived out her days comfortably and without the fear that bedevils so many demented patients. Her care-givers felt appreciated, even though it was not so much on the part of the patient.

My friend also wanted to know whether I had plans upon my returning home to visit the spot in the woods where I had so nearly met my end. I might have thought this an odd question except that David and I think along similar lines and the same strange notion had already occurred to me. I determined that I would like to revisit that spot on the very day I returned home or as soon thereafter as I could manage. I thought I would like to get down on my knees if it could be done safely and thank whatever God may be in my heart at the moment for my deliverance. Another friend suggested I return to the spot and shout at the top of my lungs, "I have survived!" But I thought that might seem arrogant or aggressive or hostile. That is not my feeling at all. Yes, I have survived, but it doesn't seem to me that I had very much to do with it. So, there was no need for me to be defiant about it, but only grateful.

Though my partner will be bringing me home on the day I return there, I am not so certain I want him to accompany me on my mission into the woods to visit the place of my moment of near-death, an experience that has so profoundly changed my life. It seems more appropriate that it be a solitary moment spent in quiet and reflection. Yet, at least for now, I don't think I could safely negotiate the uneven and stony ground.

I guess, when I am put to the test, I have difficulty addressing a personal God who answers individual prayers. My God cares for everyone, though I'd be hard-pressed to say exactly how that care is shown. I can easily pray for others, and I do, but it has been decades since I have petitioned God on my own behalf. As Jesus said, He knows what we need before we ask for it, certainly better than I know what I need. I truly lack for nothing. My life has been continually blessed and I have no reason to suspect that will change. As I have learned in

Alcoholics Anonymous, I pray only for knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry that out.

So I think when I return to the place where I almost died, my thoughts will be quiet ones and my prayers will be ones of gratitude for a life spared. I hope to carry out a purpose I do not yet even dimly perceive, but which I trust will be of benefit to all those I encounter during the rest of my days on earth. By God's grace I am ready for it.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

25. Tenacious and Adaptive

23 August 2014

Having spent seven weeks in the hospital, I used a good deal of my free time—time not in therapy, that is—talking with other patients and learning what I could from their experiences. My fellow patients ranged in age from twenty-eight to eighty-eight and came from a variety of backgrounds. Whether from an accident, surgery, or a stroke, we all experienced brain damage and its concomitant debilitations to various degrees. Some complained and cursed their fates, but most were brave and worked to their utmost to get better.

What I became aware of in every case was our frailty, even among the younger patients. Things could go wrong very quickly with one's health and the results were often very drastic—life-changing, in fact. Life is tenacious and adaptive, and these were our saving graces. But when I looked at my fellow patients from young to very old, I realized I was a witness to the whole process of aging, illness, and death. There were those whose wrinkled skin, sagging flesh, and frail bones told me what my future state would be should God or circumstance determine that I would be here a while longer. There were those who cooperated with their nurses to get better and those who resisted every suggestion. Some fought encroaching death tooth and nail and others who accepted, even welcomed it, not in a spirit of defeat but in an attitude of acceptance, of embracing what was inevitable anyhow. I hope I can be as calm and dignified about my own further decrepitude and eventual death as a few of these patients have been. I admired them and told them so, letting them know that the power of their examples had not been wasted on me.

I was also blessed to have known relatives back to my great-grandparents whose lessons of remaining interested in life and loving others deeply I continue to emulate. I have enjoyed every age I have been, including the present one, my seventh decade. While this is not exactly what I had expected would be my reaction to life's vicissitudes, it was one for which I was prepared. I had seen it often enough among my relations and friends. Each age brings its own challenges and rewards unlike any of the others. One may not be able to walk as quickly as formerly, but then there is less reason to hurry. One may not be as beautiful or fit as formerly, but then there is less cause to be concerned with one's appearance. I see this as less a debility than a kind of liberty, a gradual departure from this life and its concerns.

I look at people in their twenties and thirties and I think they look unfinished, that their faces do not yet bear the marks of distinction and character. It is too bad that our culture so mindlessly epitomizes youth when it is but one landing on a staircase of varying height and difficulty. I do, in fact, want to be each age that I have been, and to experience them deeply and fully. It is part of my education as a human being. I do not want to be twenty again any more than I want to be required to take a class over. I had no regrets and it was time to move forward. And if it is God's plan for me—or whoever pays out and jiggles the strings of fate—I look

forward to reaching my tenth decade, meanwhile doing my best to prepare myself to appreciate whatever it might hold in store for me.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

26. The Queen of Mirth

24 August 2014

It has been clear to me since I was a child that humor takes the sting out of a lot of life's wounds. The more absurd or precarious a situation, the more that humor can help. Laughter aids in many physiological responses. But the real value in humor lies in its ability to help us take ourselves and others less seriously and thereby forget, at least temporarily, our suffering. Seeing the funny side of all situations is a gift, and it has never served me better than during my stay in the hospital. Just like many bad things in a hospital, humor is infectious, but, unlike the microbes, humor serves the purpose of healing. It is medicine of a very powerful sort.

Many of my physical therapy sessions devolved into hysterical laughter for the whole gym room, especially when I would misunderstand, whether purposefully or not, the therapist's directions. When asked to lift my left leg behind me at the knee, I lifted my right leg. The therapist chuckled. "No, " she said, gently. Realizing my mistake, I said, "Oh, you mean the other left." As old and lame as that remark may have been, the whole therapy gym erupted with laughter. The patients and therapists worked very hard in that room and a little light-heartedness benefitted everyone. I tried to leaven the sessions with humor whenever I could, and it never seemed misplaced or inappropriate.

One fellow who, after a spinal operation, was told he would likely never walk again, pushed himself with more determination than anyone I had ever met. John was already scooting along with a walker, but he wanted to be ready for any situation he might face at home in the real world, such as falling outside. His therapist took him through the steps required to right his walker and pull himself erect on it. It was a tough session for both John and his therapist, Catherine, and, indeed, for anyone in the room who paid attention and witnessed this feat. There was a good deal of tension in the air.

I remarked to the therapist that for his next session John would like to be taken through the necessary steps for tornado preparedness in the event he is blown across the street and his walker goes up in the whirlwind. Catherine cautioned, "Don't give him any ideas." The entire gym, about fifteen people, again saw the humor in this exchange and laughed loudly for some time.

On another occasion when this same patient had struggled for nearly the entire hour-long session to pull himself up a short wooden staircase almost entirely by the strength of his upper body, his T-shirt became thoroughly drenched with sweat. One of the young African PCAs (personal care assistant) said, in her characteristic sing-song jive voice, "What? Is it rainin' in here?" I and many others laughed until our sides ached.

When I reached the therapy floor after being in Intensive Care for five days, many of the

activities and protocols were arranged on a fairly rigid schedule. I had roommates who were weighed daily, but I was weighed only weekly, and always around six in the morning on Monday. I sat at the edge of my bed waiting for the customary PCA, Daniel, to enter. Once I was more mobile, I offered to come out to the hallway so Daniel would not have to lug the cumbersome scale into the equipment-crowded room. He said it would help and I haltingly stepped outside my room. As I got myself up to the weighing platform in the busy hallway, he grabbed hold of my hospital gown and pulled it shut. "Your whole ass is hanging out," he said. "If I don't see it, I don't worry about it," I remarked. The corridor echoed with Daniel's deep laughter. I also sincerely believe it is good for anyone of a certain age not to be too concerned with appearances. A hospital is certainly no place for vanity, either.

Another roommate was having his stomach feeding tube flushed and, as the nurse, Joel (pronounced Jo-EL), was bending over him, the patient's wife recited the nursery rhyme beginning, "I see London, I see France," referring to the couple of inches of the nurse's underwear that were revealed above his scrubs. That merited a few chuckles from all of us in the room, including Joel. Then I added, "There are NO secrets in the hospital, even for staff," which engendered still more laughter.

There is in my mind absolutely no question about the therapeutic value of laughter. It defuses awkward situations, puts everyone at his ease, and enables us to thumb our noses at disaster and difficulty. It doesn't hurt that it gives our lungs a little burst of oxygen, making our heads, and what they carry, a little lighter.

I am reminded of a Stephen Foster tune I learned in first grade called "Some Folks." [1]

"Some folks fret and scold,
Some folks do, some folks do;
They'll soon be dead and cold,
But that's not me nor you.
Chorus:

Some folks get gray hairs,
Some folks do, Some folks do;
Brooding o'er their cares,
But that's not me nor you.
Chorus:

Chorus:
Long live the merry, merry heart
That laughs by night and day,
Like the Queen of Mirth,
No matter what some folks say.

[1]These and additional stanzas published by Firth, Pond & Co., N.Y., 1855.

I think it remarkable that, despite my stroke, I can still recall the words and the tune after so long a time, nearly sixty years. It is an idea and a way of living I was fortunate to have learned early on. It has abided with me throughout my life and served me very well. It is one healing benefit I intend to pass along as long as I may. It can be transferred as easily as sharing a good joke or a witty observation, and doing so costs nothing. Laughter is one of the few things that is beneficially infectious.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

27. A Prayer and a Poem

25 August 2014

Dear God, I now forgive myself for all my mistakes and misdeeds. I trust You forgive me as well, for I am Your Child. Help me henceforth to be worthy of the Grace You have bestowed on me and to shine forth the Light and Talent I possess with all Those I encounter, and especially with all Those in need of a kind word. Amen.

26 August 2014

Today was my release day from Albany Medical Center after nearly two months in the hospital. I was ready for it. In the evening I sat on the deck of my house in Bovina, New York, watching the last light of the sunset slip across the range of mountains to the east. I had my notebook at hand, but no clue what I might write. My heart was swirling with emotion: sadness at leaving my new friends and joy to be home again. What spilled out of my pen is the following poem, to which I changed but a single word after it was written.

This is a strange place,
lonely and dark;
the cry of coyote
in the moment between
sundown and starlight,
one at a time.

A place of magic
right here and now
of light and sunshine
and saying au revoir,
a downpour of tears
one at a time.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

28. Thank-yous and Good-byes

28 August 2014

As I expected, the day of my release from the neurological rehabilitation center felt as I imagine it must feel when, having served one's time, the prisoner is finally sprung. But the joy is slightly salty, mixed with tears.

The good-byes began at seven in the morning when the burly Daniel hugged me and engaged me in what I guess was a soul handshake, as though I were a bro' from the 'hood. He thanked me again for the art print I signed and gave him.

Also as in prison, the daily routine is highly regimented. Meals arrive at nearly the same time every day, and the menu varies from day to day, but it repeats on the same day every week. The nurses are the wardens in this analogy, but with a kinder attitude and purpose.

One by one as their shifts ended, the nurses said their good-byes and thank-yous and encouragement. I teared up and got choked up with nearly every one of them. There were none I would not miss, even the ones who gave me an injection in the belly in the middle of the night. The PCAs came in and out between the nurses. I realized I knew each of them by name and demeanor and had some notion of their backgrounds and aspirations. I realized, too, that I genuinely liked each of them and there was no instance of it not being reciprocated. My two roommates offered me their hands and their wishes for good luck and continued progress. They were not as quiet and considerate as I would have liked, so I would not miss them terribly much. I liked their wives much better, and admired how tenderly they tended their annoying husbands. They offered their men advice they expected would be heeded and brooked no recalcitrance, especially about working hard at their therapies. The men's expressions told me they heard it, if at all, as nagging. But both women would outlive their husbands. They were both in the room on the morning I was released and they added their voices to the general farewells on the floor.

The two doctors made their rounds, today perhaps more perfunctorily and with fewer questions, but they were clearly pleased with my progress. Dr. Forrest again mentioned how pleased he and his family were with the print of my artwork "The Healing Hand" I had given him. The social worker who oversaw all matters relating to my discharge told me what I could expect in the following couple of months. She came in and out of the room several times with papers requiring my signature and with reams of other papers and forms. I learned a good deal about her, too, in the two hours I had dealings and small talk with her. It was a day in which I liked everybody.

Deciding to take part in the final sessions of both occupational and physical therapy, though it was not required on the day of a patient's discharge, I got to exchange good wishes, handshakes, kisses, hugs, prayers, and encouragements with my fellow patients and therapists. I

was not the only one to get teary and choked up. The bonds formed among patients who share the same, or nearly the same, infirmity—as well as those who work at helping them get over it or at least get better—are incredibly intense. I recognize these friendships as one of the most powerful and rewarding experiences of my life. I have a long list of addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of a good many of my fellow patients and therapists.

As I reflected on all of this, I discovered I had committed to memory the names, histories, and personal details of nearly fifty people I had not known a mere two months ago. Each of them was important in himself or herself, but also, taking them together, as a factor in my recovery. I bless them all, and say my prayers for their health and recovery.

29 August 2014

But the person I found it hardest to say good-bye to was my physical therapist, Jean. She also cried and sobbed, each of us in the other's embrace. "I'm just no good at this," she admitted. "It breaks my heart."

Struggling to get the words out, I told Jean I felt the same. I realized I was bidding farewell to a true friend. I knew, too, that I had a bit of a crush on her, almost like a schoolboy's infatuation with his teacher. She was witty and intelligent and absolutely dedicated to healing. There were many sessions after which she gave up her breaks or going home early to "keep me after class" with up to one-and-a-half hours of additional therapy. I never said, "No."

I have cried a little each day since my release. I know that it will be like all the other heartbreaks, sorrows, and farewells. The edges will get more rounded and the hurt will begin to seem long ago. But I also know that it is better to have a heart that is broken than one love has never graced.

Jean took me from infancy to my first steps as a toddler, ever as protective as any parent. She gave me confidence and urged me on. She laughed at my jokes, and her smile lit up her face—no doubt mine as well.

I had a notion that this was a classic Freudian situation of falling in love with one's therapist, albeit one who worked with the brain rather than the psyche, though they are certainly not easy to distinguish. I was not going to deny these feelings or lock them away. I wanted to allow them to develop as they would. I suppose I had flirted from time to time. I have no expectations, but I do hope Jean and I—and Lisa, too—manage to keep in touch through correspondence and phone calls. Visits from time to time might also be possible and I would welcome them.

Even if we never see each other again, Jean has touched my life more profoundly than people I have known for decades. She has given me my future, however long that may be, and has taught me to give of myself in ways that can influence others positively and deeply.

One of our last exchanges before the day of my discharge went thus: I had just given her a print of one of my artworks, "Reflections," to thank her for all she had done for me. I asked

whether, for our final session, she might go easy on me and be nice to me for a change. She replied without hesitation, “Not a chance.”

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

29. Labor Day Weekend

31 August 2014

On Labor Day weekend I went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Hamden, New York. Anthony drove me there. Afterwards, a friend drove me to Delhi for breakfast, and another friend drove me home after picking up my tab. It was clear everyone was glad to see me and they were impressed with my progress, despite my awkward gait and difficulty getting in and out of their cars.

Anthony and I went to a couple of garage sales in the afternoon though neither of us was looking for anything in particular. We picked up some small, unique items for very little, including a pocket sundial. I bought a pair of stainless steel candle holders with star designs cut into their metal shades for five bucks. We talked to neighbors and had a friend over for supper. I made the salad and did most of the dishes and pans. Anthony did all the rest. I felt I was slowly, haltingly getting back into the swing of things after a long hiatus.

I was very stiff on Sunday after the previous day's walks and other activities. I was discouraged, thinking that perhaps I had been released from the hospital too soon. While Anthony was at church, I had a brief, but very intense, sobbing cry for myself. It lasted about two minutes and then I got on with my morning. I prepared coffee and breakfast for Anthony's return: English muffins and a store-bought but unbaked quiche Lorraine.

I worry about what it will be like when Anthony goes back to New York on Tuesday and I will be completely alone for the first time in nearly two months. While I am looking forward to the solitude, I always feel sad when Anthony leaves. I am concerned about the many challenges facing me. But I have God, my friends, angels, no doubt, and my many teachers watching over me in shifts. I feel unsure of myself, but protected. I hope it is so.

Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

30. Dawn or Twilight?

3 September 2014

A Long Night

Darkness crouches in corners,
shadows creep down the wall.
The candle grows dim,
gutters, and goes out.

Dawn's faint promise,
a hope a long way off;
then a brightening streak
until all is light.

Today I am discouraged and dispirited. The visiting occupational therapist who did an evaluation this morning determined that I am doing well and need only keep up with the exercises and activities I have been taught in order to make further progress. Why am I not so confident? Why does my body still do so little of what I want it to do? This is also my first full day with no one else around. I miss Anthony. I miss the body-mind-spirit I used to be. My spirit has grown larger, my body smaller.

Today I also fell for the first time since the stroke. I walked down the long, rough gravel driveway onto the town road, trying to go just a little further each day. I spied a large stone at the edge of the ditch and realized it might be perilous for the lawn tractor once the grass grew up around it and concealed it. I bent over and yanked it with all my strength. When it suddenly came loose, I toppled backward into the gravel road. I was not seriously hurt, but the gravel stung, and I'd gotten a few scrapes on my back and left forearm. It was a beautiful sunny day and I was shirtless. Using the methods I had learned from my physical therapist Jean, I rolled onto my stomach, assumed a crouching position, and picked myself up in under two minutes. Then I continued my walk down the road. I had time to ponder how much worse my fall could have been. And I again failed to carry my cell phone. It's simply not a habit I ever acquired.

Everywhere I turn I see what needs doing to keep the place up: the pruning, mowing, planting, gathering, and transplanting I would have already done if I could. As things get more overgrown and in disrepair, the more I despair of ever doing them again. I wonder if this is the best I will ever be from now on.

I lost a dispute with my New York City apartment management company over a large tax increase that nearly doubled my maintenance fee for the month of August. It felt like life's

troubles were closing in on me. I saw a quick impression of my downing all my medications at once: checking out and leaving a note, “I’ve had enough.” I knew that when I started down that path I needed to do a detour.

When I got back to the house, I washed off my scrapes and made a cup of ginger tea. I watched the play of setting sunlight on the clouds and mountains to the east. Somehow, now in a better frame of mind, none of the day’s discouragements had any bearing any longer on my happiness. The meadow was ablaze with the bright yellow goldenrod. The moon rose. The smell of wildflowers wafted on a cool evening breeze.

I lectured myself in a Jewish accent, “So what’s not to like?” That snapped me out of my dark mood. Nothing can impinge on my happiness but my own attitude. I decided that the pale sky could herald dawn as well as twilight, and it was only my thinking that made it one or the other, and with a breath I blew the clouds away.