

Stroke One, Stroke Two, Stroke Three

by Bill Yarrow

On Monday, June 16, 1783, at the age of 74, Samuel Johnson suffered a stroke. Boswell records the event by quoting from Johnson's letters to friends and doctors in the *Life of Johnson*.

1. It has pleased God, this morning, to deprive me of the powers of speech; and as I do not know but that it may be his further good pleasure to deprive me soon of my senses, I request you will on the receipt of this note, come to me, and act for me, as the exigencies of my case require.

2. I have had, indeed, a very heavy blow; but GOD, who yet spares my life, I humbly hope will spare my understanding, and restore my speech.

3. On Monday, the 16th, I sat for my picture, and walked a considerable way with little inconvenience. In the afternoon and evening I felt myself light and easy, and began to plan schemes of life. Thus I went to bed, and in a short time waked and sat up, as has been long my custom, when I felt a confusion and indistinctness in my head, which lasted, I suppose, about half a minute. I was alarmed, and prayed God, that however he might afflict my body, he would spare my understanding.

4. I perceived that I had suffered a paralytic stroke, and that my speech was taken from me. I had no pain, and so little dejection in this dreadful state, that I wondered at my own apathy, and considered that perhaps death itself, when it should come, would excite less horror than seems now to attend it.

5. Though God stopped my speech, he left me my hand.

6. I then wrote a card to Mr. Allen....In penning this note, I had some difficulty; my hand, I knew not how nor why, made wrong letters.

7. I have so far recovered my vocal powers, as to repeat the Lord's Prayer with no very imperfect articulation. My memory, I hope, yet remains as it was; but such an attack produces solicitude for the safety of every faculty.

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On Monday, May 7, 2018, at the age of 67, I had a stroke, which, though it left my speech, vision, and understanding unimpaired, temporarily deprived me of all feeling and motion on the left side of my body. Sitting at my desk, I, like Johnson, "felt a confusion and indistinctness in my head." I grabbed a pen and a piece of paper to jot down what I was experiencing, thinking this might be of use to my doctor, but, like Johnson, I was unable to write distinctly or even to form numerals to note the time of the attack. At that point, I tried to get up out of my chair to find my phone and call for help, but I collapsed and fell on the floor, my left leg unable to support my weight. I felt an increased tingling in my left arm but no feeling at all in my left leg. Like Johnson, I felt no anxiety and "so little dejection in this dreadful state, that I wondered at my own apathy." But for me, it wasn't apathy, but rather curiosity. I felt like the narrator in Poe's "A Descent into the Maelstrom" who saves himself from drowning in a whirlpool by remaining calm and observing with neutral fortitude the chaos swirling (literally) around him.

In the ambulance, I flashed back to the death of a friend two years earlier. She, too, had felt suddenly funny and bowed her head at the seminar table around which a dozen poets sat assembled. She began to moan, "O no! O no! I don't want this to happen." There was terrible fear in her eyes and a terrible writhing of her body accompanied by a frantic shaking of her head. As the paramedics placed her on a stretcher, she called urgently for her purse and her books and her papers, all of which were thrown wantonly on her legs. Alas, she didn't survive. She lapsed into a coma on the way to the hospital and died a few days later. But had she survived, the doctors told me, she wouldn't have been the same, wouldn't have been the person I knew, the person her family and closest friends

knew. In an instant, that person had disappeared forever.

In an instant, we die. In an instant, we survive. In an instant, we change. Sometimes minimally. Sometimes utterly.

Johnson prayed not to change. Helen prayed not to die. For what did I pray? I didn't pray. But had I prayed, I would have prayed for mercy. I would have prayed for the mercy not to survive: not to survive my kids, not to survive my wife, not to survive my friends, not to survive my work. Sometimes it's a mercy not to survive.

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The cemetery moon half lights
these dead, the stones, the pond, the paths,
the half-bouquets and silent weeps
one master shadow over all.

The graveyard wind among the webs weaves
and gusts and rushes the clouds; crickets
lift their wings; the dust raises its head.

In a stroke, everything is set in
motion. The rain falls with fury on
the dust, falls indifferent from the moon.

Wet fingers move through hollow soil.
The rotting people of the earth.
The velvet stench of death relents.
The sounds of light begin to swell.

