

Coastal Communication: A Mother and Son's Moving Collaboration by Jane Jackson, Aaron M.P. Jackson

What follows are selected excerpts from ‘Coastal Communication’, by Jane Jackson, Aaron M.P. Jackson

Introduction

On June 2, 2006, my husband Blyden’s 70th birthday, I had a life altering experience. After arriving home from an exhausting day at work, I was suddenly unable to speak or move my arm. I just wanted to lie down and sleep, which would have been the worst possible thing for me to do. Blyden, a former Emergency Medical Technician, immediately recognized that I might be having a stroke of some kind because of my inability to speak and the pupil of one of my eyes being dilated. He and our daughter, Gail, rushed me to the Bayonne, N.J. Medical Center, near where we live.

The doctors discovered that a blood vessel in my brain had bled. I received immediate and expert care. Blyden quite literally saved my life, as my doctor informed me the next day.

In the aftermath I worked to overcome fear. Lying in the MRI machine at the hospital shortly after we arrived, while I was barely aware of what was going on, the pounding noise inside the machine convinced me that I was dying. Fear gripped me as I wanted very much to live, which thankfully I did. I continued to experience an intense fear that the same thing could happen again as I gradually recovered. Over the next few weeks, after I was discharged from the hospital, EEG’s and further tests revealed that the blood vessel that bled in the left parietal region of my brain was most likely deformed from birth but why it bled on that day remains a mystery. The bleed was in an area that if not quickly controlled could have resulted in my death in the first hour. I was one of the 20% of people who experience such a bleed and are able to recover full or nearly full functioning. As I worked at recovering my verbal skills, I was comforted by familiar music, readings, and practices such as keeping a journal. My short term memory and speech patterns were affected, so that I, who had edited a medical dictionary and published a resource book for nurses and had always been good with words, found myself with an inability to handle everyday sentences, mixing up words and frequently repeating the same questions. Our daughter, Gail, was a tremendous help by having long conversations with me so that I began to gain back my confidence in my thought processes and speech. She and Blyden patiently answered the same questions over and over until I could process what had happened, filling in the blanks of the hours in the emergency room and beyond, of which I had little recollection.

Our son, Aaron, a poet, lived 3,000 miles away in Los Angeles. When he was a child he and I would get together with a friend and her young child who was Aaron’s age and write “poetry”, each of us taking a turn writing a line, then passing it on. To help me gain

confidence in writing again, and to help bridge the geographical distance, Aaron began writing interactive “poems” with me through e-mail, with each of us taking turns beginning a poem and alternating lines. We sent daily e-mails to each other which included our blossoming collaborative poems. Whenever one of us felt a poem was finished (usually Aaron), we would tell the other, and then a new poem would begin. This book is a compilation of those poems and the experiences we had while creating them. My hope is that it will help others who have suffered strokes or other life changing events to know that old practices can bring new joy and hope and help us to connect and reconnect with those we love. It is meant as a testament to the power of words and language in healing, not only physical healing, but emotional, psychological and spiritual healing as well.

- Jane

I had already called my Dad to wish him a happy birthday, so it was with some surprise that I saw I had missed a phone call from my parents while I was finishing out my afternoon shift at work. As I was walking down La Brea Ave in Los Angeles, I was completely shocked to hear my sister’s recorded message, “AJ, Mom had a stroke, we are at the hospital, and my cell phone is out of minutes.”

Needless to say, I was in a bit of a panic. Nobody answered the phone at my Mom and Dad’s house and as my sister pointed out, her phone was out of minutes. I debated calling my Grandmother or my Uncle in Vermont but decided against it as I figured if they didn’t know anything, they would end up being as panicked as I was. After what could have been ten minutes or an hour, I finally got in touch with my father and I got the information as to what happened. True to the optimistic nature of my family, my Dad told me that everything was fine and there was no need to worry.

One thing is very clear about what my family refers to as “The Incident”, due to the quick action of my father and sister my Mom pulled through. It is a strange and sad part of growing up, facing the reality that parents are vulnerable.

After I moved from New Jersey to Los Angeles and prior to my mother’s incident, we exchanged emails daily. It was a way for us to stay in touch outside of our weekly Sunday phone conversations. For me it was very disjuncting being in a strange city in a part of the country that I was not very familiar with. My mother is not a fan of her children living far away and being out of touch. As she began her recovery journey, she thought it would be fun and would help in her fight to speak and recall words, if we began to write poems a line at a time. We had done this at a poetry group she brought me to when I was a very small child. I wrote some of my first ever poems at this group and I was delighted that, even from across the country, I could help my Mom become whole again.

For me personally poetry had always been a form of expression and word usage is an art form with which I have always been captivated. Whether it was a poetry group with my mother or as I became older, a spoken word performance or a print article, words have always played a huge role in my identity and ability to express myself artistically.

Somewhere along the way we realized that the poems we were writing together were pretty good. In addition, we were helping my Mom in her recovery, it was very important to me to be a part of her recovery, even from a distance. I have always been glad to have experienced the writers’ group as a child because it contributed to my understanding of

the power of words and how that power cannot be overvalued. Words allow us to share experiences across generational as well as state lines. My Mother has made a great recovery and I know she has many poems left to write.

- Aaron

This first poem took several days to be completed because I couldn't work at the computer for long without getting a fuzzy feeling from just looking at the letters, a feeling somewhere between dizziness and nausea. I kept a thesaurus at hand because I wanted to be sure the words I used had the meanings I intended and to ensure that the first word that came into my mind was indeed the one I wanted. It was an exhausting process at first but well worth the effort as I saw our poems take shape. I tried to type in an e-mail back to Aaron the very first response that the line he had just sent me brought to mind. This helped to sharpen my thinking skills as well as my use of language. As a writer I know the value of rewriting, often over and over, but the immediacy of the call and response that made up our joint writing seemed to me to need no rewrites as each line was a gift and a step on the path to full recovery.

-Jane

We would each take turns starting the poem and then we would go line by line from there. In the beginning I would usually decide when the poem had reached a good finishing point. But as my Mom became more confident in her grasp of the words she began to have a sense of the end of the poems as well. In fact, I can't recall a time when we have disagreed as to whether or not a poem was finished. I think as a rule we tried to keep the poems on the shorter side in the beginning of our poetic efforts, but the more poems we wrote, the longer they got.

-Aaron

Red Light Green Light

Red light green light, you're never far away
Seasons come and go, the connection does not change
Un-severed cords of faith-filled love cover the expanse
East and west, time is insignificant
Orion illumines both our skies
Bringing peace and security
In shared past, future, and unopened presents.

I have always been happiest when Aaron and Gail, as they moved into adulthood, lived close to home. We moved back to the New York City area (where Blyden and I had met in 1974 when I moved to New York from Vermont to attend graduate school at Columbia University) four years before my aneurysm, in part to be closer to Aaron, who was finishing college in New Jersey. For a period of time, during the year before "the incident" Aaron and his wife Jan were living in Los Angeles and Gail was in Seattle, but they were always close in my heart.

-Jane

In the early weeks after the bleed in my brain I asked questions constantly, trying to piece together what had happened and to fill in the time I had lost to awareness. The work on the poems gave me something concrete, a focus, away from the blankness and questions. It was an anchor to my mind which often felt hazy and unfocused and the poems' appearances gave me great confidence that more would appear, that I had a future tied to my memories but not dependent on the ones that were lost in the recesses of my injured brain. I learned to move forward, to build new memories, even when I couldn't grasp all of the old ones.

-Jane

As we began to exchange emails for the poems it was very reassuring to know that my Mom was alive everyday and able to respond to my messages. It was clear that she wasn't her normal self, but any Mom is better than no Mom. During our weekly talks on the phone my Mother would often tell me the same thing a couple of times during the conversation. I could also tell that at times she had not been able to follow along with what I was saying. However, since she had the time to think out her answers in emails, I think it helped her regain her confidence in her grasp of what was the right word at the right time.

-Aaron

One of the most frustrating after effects of the aneurysm, along with an overwhelming and long lasting sense of fatigue, was that my emotions were right at the surface and I cried frequently, which was very uncharacteristic of me before the incident. On my early morning walks I would often let the tears flow and sometimes I sat on a park bench and just cried because I remembered a time when I didn't cry all the time. I wondered if I would ever reach a time again when tears were not so ever present. The focus on words and the poems helped me to feel like myself again and as my agility with words increased, the tears decreased. One morning, sitting on my "crying bench" as I called it in the park, a whole poem came to me, words flowed instead of tears. I repeated the words over and over until I got home and could write them down, fearful that I would lose this precious gift. I was elated. I was alive. The next poem is the one that had come flowing to me. The following ones show Aaron's stepping in time to my newfound hope and encouraging me in it.

-Jane

It was inspiring to watch my Mother regain her confidence in the weeks following “the incident” as she became more and more sure of herself. (My father coined the term “the incident” rather than referring to it as the aneurysm, which he thought sounded too dire to say aloud, so this became our common reference word.) I could hear in the joy of my Father’s voice and the relief in my Sister’s when talking about “the incident” that my Mother was well on the road to recovery. My wife Jan and I came for a visit some weeks into my Mother’s recovery and it was clear that although sometimes she would get flustered with herself for not being able to recall the word she wanted to use, my Mother was still her normal loving and caring self.

-Aaron

Unseen Birds

Invisible birds bring concert through my tears
Calling me back to the here and now
In now is hope
In now is faith
In now is love
In love is God.

Dreams Wait

Developing enterprise
Getting it together
Hope abounds
That miraculous energy force
Mucho possibilities
Never too late to begin
Dreams don’t age like people
They wait until just the right moment
Plans are sprung
Inertia transformed
Creation complete.

As my sense of hope was gradually restored, so was my faith in new possibilities. I believed that my life had been saved for a purpose---that I had more to do and more love to live. As I struggled to determine just what that renewed purpose for me might be, I came across a book by Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation. Reading this book helped me to dare to dream that I could once again find more meaningful work. One year and four months into my recovery I was thrilled to embark on a new and more fulfilling challenge, as Grants Director for a large non profit organization on Staten Island, Project Hospitality, which works to eliminate hunger and homelessness.

-Jane

What Is Peace?

Peace is the world smiling
With a hug for the moon
Arms extended toward the sun
Peace is everywhere
The angelic face of a sleeping baby
Scent of fresh flowers
A cooling sea breeze
Multicolored leaves underfoot
Peace is possible

The concept of peace and finding a sense of peace in life is something my mother has certainly instilled in both my sister and me. I think it was important for her in her recovery to find places of peace in life and as someone living in a strange city I also in my own way was looking for a peace of sorts.

-Aaron

I came to an awareness that part of the new that I was meant to be, a slower moving, smelling the flowers version, is to simply be, in gratefulness for every minute and day with which I am gifted, to share with loved ones and new people along the way. I am new. Every day is a new blessing to be cherished. Sometimes I have felt that the new me is diminished from the old one, slower in ways both perceptible and in ways not so apparent. Most of the time now I feel the newness is fuller, more complete, more evolved with a great-full-ness for life. Aaron started the next poem to urge me on.

-Jane

There is an appreciation that I certainly have for the time I have with my Mom. Each email and every poem is a reminder that in many ways, miracles can happen. Many of these poems reflect the power of taking in the moments and enjoying the pleasant things in life. In such a busy world it is easy to forget to take the time to be appreciative for what it is that we have. My Mother has made a remarkable comeback and it has been so wonderful to see her regain her confidence and share in her knowledge that sometimes it is important to just slow down and take in the goodness of things.

-Aaron

Unforeseen Places

The world has not ended
Blue sky seeps through overhanging leaves
Expectation of the rising sun
Air to breathe
The fire is not extinguished
Geese fly south
Spirits warmed
A consensus of hope
Joy around the corner
In unforeseen places
Positive thinking rewarded
An inner dance filling the heart

Cosmic Agelessness

Wisdom trades places, at home with the young
Seasons pile up
Roles reverse in the natural progression
Old as forgetful as youth
A cosmic agelessness
Passed through generations
Time compresses, coming home
Traveling afar
A condensing of sources
Always the same essence