

Life Is A Journey

by Sharon Leitheiser

It was August 11, 1996 at the age of 49, when my life came to a screeching halt. On that day my husband Hal and I had gone to the Edmonds Fair and spent the day sampling lots of rich foods. Afterward, we had decided to stop at the docks before going home.

I will never forget the complete relaxation that I had felt that evening. The air was warm. The sunset was filled with colors. The Olympic Mountains were tall and dark and so far away. I didn't want to leave. I just wanted to stay there. I felt so at peace. But Hal had to go to work the next day and I was getting ready to take a class (I was an elementary teacher) before the school year started. We left for home.

We had just walked in when the phone rang. When I answered the phone a state park ranger told me that I had to come and pick up my nineteen year old son, who had been drinking.

Hal and I went and picked him up and dropped him off at a friend's house. He didn't want to go home and we didn't feel like arguing with him. Lately, it had been just one thing after another with him. On the way home I was so angry and irritated with him I didn't feel the pain coming before my lights went out.

When I awoke, I discovered I was in a hospital. I remembered nothing after the vessel in my brain ruptured in the car and little of my hospital stay beyond visual impressions of color and touch sensations, like warm water dribbling down my body when I took my first shower or the softness of a hand touching mine.

My connection to the real world moved slowly.

Later I was told that I had had a hemorrhagic stroke and had had brain surgery two days after “my lights went out” in the car. I was told by my husband that when we got home I had started to throw up and told Hal that I had a horrible headache. Hal had assumed that I was sick from eating too much rich foods at the food festival. Vomiting and severe headaches are two warning signs of stroke, but since I had had a hemorrhagic stroke, which is often fatal, the clot-busting drug would not have worked with me even if I had gotten to the hospital within the three hours of the onset of my symptoms. The cause of my stroke was unknown. I could have been born with a weakened blood vessel that ruptured.

The speech area of my brain was permanently damaged. I was left with aphasia (in my case problems with speaking, reading, listening, writing, and social skills) and short-term memory problems.

There is no cure for aphasia, and every person who is stricken with aphasia has different problems learning to live with it.

I was diagnosed as having anomia, which means I have problems with word finding.

For example, if I was shown a spoon, I would recognize it at once, visually, but would not be able to say the word “spoon,” saying instead, “That is something you eat with.”

I also have a “tip-of-the-tongue problem being able to say the first letter of many words but am not able to get the rest of the words out. Over time that has improved. I can get most words out without too much problems; once in awhile, I will goof-up by

looking at a sheep and calling it a “fish”. I now can laugh about those goof-ups because I have learned to love life just as it is.

But there was a time when I didn't laugh. After losing my teaching career and living with aphasia and deep depression for several years, I have learned to live with aphasia.

I had speech therapy for nine months and was back to driving 9 months later. Going back to driving varies for each person. Some are not able to go back to driving, but many have learned to use the bus system or ACCESS.

Over the years after my stroke, I have taken correspondence classes to improve my writing and my spelling, joined a Toastmaster Club to improve my speaking and listening skills and received my CTM (Competent Toastmaster) pin, and am not upset anymore when someone reminds me not to interrupt when someone else is speaking. I have completed 2 marathons for the American Stroke Association, I hike in the mountains and on the beaches, have written a book EMBRACE THE MOMENT which is now being released, and have had fun practicing my public speaking story: THE COURAGE TO MOVE ON.

I have been with the births of all my 6 grandchildren and have been blessed to see my family grow in spirit facing many of their issues of alcoholism and drug addiction.

Life is a journey. I believe in showing not telling and have learned to embrace each day as it comes with a smile and a grateful heart.

I am a survivor and SO ARE YOU!

