

Worth Payton
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Journalism
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Death and Rebirth

“This isn’t the life I want to live” I said trembling, tears streaming out of eyes in my local hospital admitting room.

“I know” my mother said sullenly, one hand on my wheelchair the other on my shoulder, watching her twenty year-old child’s life fall apart.

We both continued to cry, in shock of what was happening. I slowly raised my head to see my father quietly sobbing with his head in his hands. He sat in the farthest chair away. It was the same kind of chair I would come to know existed in hospitals and doctors offices in 75% of the medical facilities I would encounter over the next couple of months.

January 5th, 2016 was a normal and ordinary day for me. I had been taking care of my aunt’s house in my hometown while I was on break from college, two weeks fresh off of a plane from my semester abroad in London. I had watched my favorite television show all day, waiting for my time alone in a house to be over, getting ready to head back to school in two days to spend time with my friends. Around 7:30pm I picked up a to-go order from my local Panda Express for my family to eat that night. I had been frustrated at the amount of time I had to wait for the order to be completed so I hurriedly drove home so I could eat dinner quickly and return to my aunt’s house to continue watching an obscene amount of television.

This is how much of my life had been lived until this point. I was always frantically on the move, doing what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it, constantly annoyed by the amount of time I would waste waiting and feeling frustrated. I had little understanding of how much time really meant, beyond the cliché “life is short” motto that everyone lives by, but doesn’t really understand, myself included that day.

At 8pm that night, 20 minutes after arriving home, I collapsed at my family dinner table, the dinner table I had eaten at since I was a baby, the dinner table that I now feared would become my tomb.

I grew up in Longview, Texas, a town of roughly 70,000 people in the middle of Northeast Texas. I had an interesting childhood there, consisting of doing absolutely nothing extremely productive or healthy for a child. I predominantly remember doing everything that I was supposed to do and not much more. I made good grades, was involved in every club I could get in, and I had a good group of friends. I was “the child everyone wanted,” as my tennis coach would say to me. It’s a characterization that I resented at the time and still rebel against today, constantly trying to be independent of anything that makes me seem normal at home.

I was sure of about three things when I graduated high school and left home: one, that I didn’t want to be anywhere near Longview; two, I didn’t want anything to do with anybody I had grown up surrounded by. But the third thing, probably the cause of the other two certainties, was that I always felt different than everyone else. I wanted a grand life in a big city following dreams larger than Longview could grasp or supply. I did not want to become trapped in the cycle of going off to school, only to return home to live and die in the same place in which I was born.

Beyond this, what tennis had taught me was that I could never quite perform as well as the other kids. No matter how hard I practiced or exercised, I was constantly out of breath, struggling to keep up. Just as much as I had resented my hometown, I resented myself for not being as good as I could be, for not working as hard as I thought I needed to just to be normal. In just a few short years, I would come to understand the irony of what made me different would come to mean.

“Kathleen! He can’t speak!” I watched my dad yell at my mom a few moments after I had collapsed in my chair.

“I know! Let me get my blood pressure monitor and call Saritha” she retorted, putting her medical training to work and calling my doctor.

I was having a severe stroke, I would find out about twenty-four hours later. As I sat there silently, unable to move any part of my body except my eyes, I stared at my parents as I screamed on the inside, unable to make any noise. This is the moment in which I was closest to death. This is moment in which my life changed forever.

I had a front seat view of what was going on in the room, almost like I was looking through mirrored glass banging on the surface while I could do nothing in the process. No one knew it at the time, but I had fallen into a rare syndrome called “locked-in syndrome.” An area of my brainstem, the most vital area of the brain necessary to life, called the pons, was suffocating of oxygen as a blood clot was trapped in one of my arteries in my brain. The pons is the messenger superhighway of the brain, connecting the three sections of the brain: the cerebrum, the cerebellum, and the brainstem. When the pons suffers damage, the messages cannot make it through, preventing all voluntary movement from taking place, as well as the ability to breathe normally.

I became a prisoner in my own body and slowly my head lowered to the ground as I stared blankly and felt the last breath I was supposed to take.

The pons also contains the facial nerves and as this was occurring I felt as every nerve began to mix sensations, like throwing battery acid on one’s face and giving no ability to get it off. I felt as if I was slowly burning alive, with no clue what was going on. At the same time, I also had a strong a sense that everything was going to be okay and a feeling that I was at complete and utter peace, the most at peace I have ever been. How could someone feel as if they were burning alive, yet be at peace? I’ve come to understand this feeling as something almost indescribable. I’ve come to understand that this is what death felt like to me, something one has to experience to truly understand.

About a year beforehand I began taking an anti-seizure medication for my severe migraines, migraines I had had all my life that could present themselves as stroke-like symptoms. I had missed a dose of my medication the day before and took twice the amount my body was used to that day. “You’re having a reaction to your medication” my doctor said over the phone, “but if you get worse go the hospital” she continued. I agreed and went to go lie on my couch, still shaking and slurred, but otherwise fine.

Thirty minutes later my eyes began to burn, like someone was sticking hot drill bits into my retinas, but nothing else was happening so I thought it was just an after effect. I went to sleep that night with the somehow innate knowledge that I couldn’t move the left side of my body, but like I had been told I kept reinforcing the idea that “you are going to be alright, Worth. Just sleep it off.” But I wouldn’t be alright. This time my cerebellum was slowly degrading, all of the

muscle movement on the left side of my body fading away with it. The independence I had always prided myself on was fading away with it as well.

I awoke the next morning, throwing my left leg off of the bed but unable to make it work. I knew I needed to go to the hospital, so I slid down my hallway, crawling at one point. "I want to go to the hospital," I exclaimed, bursting into tears, realizing that something was seriously wrong with my body. My mom carried the left side of my body as I hobbled with the right, trying not to stumble.

We arrived at the hospital, meeting my father there. Doctors began to examine and run scans and tests. Four hours later I was wheeled out of the hospital, my condition unchanged with the echo of the ER doctor saying that all of my scans came back normal and that I was having a migraine and would feel better in a couple of hours.

Unconvinced of this, I went to my neurologist who had treated me for my migraines over the past two years. Hours later, working on her own time now, she would call my cell phone after a MRI scan was completed of my entire brain, telling me that two parts of my brain had been annihilated and to return to the hospital. I bypassed the standard check-in procedures and was instantly taken upstairs, exactly twenty-four hours after the initial stroke. The unhideable shock and horror of my neurologist's face when she saw me is an image that I will never escape.

The human heart begins developing in the fifth week of pregnancy. In what is called the "embryonic period," the basic organs required for life begin to form. At week seven, the heart begins to beat, creating the first inklings of life, beating from this moment until the day this potential person loses their life. Roughly 4,000,000 babies are born each year in the United States. Most of these babies are healthy and normal, growing up to live healthy adult lives with only minor health issues. Only one percent of these 4,000,000 are born with a congenital heart defect, let alone two. I am this one percent.

Four months after my stroke I would come to realize everything that had gone wrong with my body. I learned that I was born with two congenital heart defects. The doctors had found a hole and an aneurysm, both in the center of my heart, the aneurysm collecting blood clots and the hole sending them to my brain, the cause of my migraines and the most likely cause of my strokes. The more information that I learned, the more I became overwhelmed that I had been born this way. My genetic curse had dragged me back home at the age of 20, over two years after I had first managed to escape.

In this moment and the moments after in which I have reflected on my heart condition, I realized that what had been wrong with me as a kid was not my fault, but a defect I had received at the time my body began to develop inside of my mother. It was kind of a relief. I was different and I had a reason to explain why I was different other than I had never fit in. I had a reason as to why I had always felt weaker than the other kids. I had always felt different in that I didn't belong, but now my physical difference seemed to converge and connect after all of these years later.

For the following three and a half weeks after I was originally admitted, I would leave the hospital only once, to be transferred to one of the best rehabilitation hospitals in the nation, The Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation. Over those three and a half weeks and two more months of rehabilitation three days a week back home, I would relearn how to be alive, something I am still relearning today. I needed to relearn how to speak and breathe correctly, eat and drink food and water safely, how to walk and run and jump, how to type and how to smile again, and what feels

like a million other little details that seem easy and constant. From being unable to compute basic math and forgetting the names of people I had known for years, I would relearn how to think and exist again in a “new normal” they would refer to it as. This new normal has become my normal today, a normal I am still acutely aware is not the normal I used to live.

I had spent my entire life running from what and where I came from and now I literally and figuratively had no choice but to face it and fight. My nights out drinking would be replaced with six pills a day keeping me from dying. My daily life would be affected in and out from the sheer anxiety and PTSD I would learn to cope with, never straying too far from the bottle of klonopin I would be prescribed for the terror I lived with everyday, a terror insidiously worse than actually having a stroke.

While I had always felt different from everyone in Longview, it was something I have come to admire today. I had always wanted to be different, I just never thought I would be different because of something my body was created with that I had never known about. I hesitate to call this experience a gift, but it has allowed me to view the world in a different way.

Every breath is now so much sweeter, everything my eyes see is so much brighter, and every experience so much more cherished because I know very much that I was given a second chance at life. With this, I strive to be kinder, more compassionate, understanding, and live each day smiling and laughing as much as I can. I am now more different than I had ever realized growing up as I have realized how these differences intertwine far more than I ever expected them to.

Author's Note:

This is the first article I wrote for Dr. Bednar’s journalism course. It is the article that I also spent the most time crafting, making the most important details of my story apparent. It was the most challenging on to write as well, due to the emotional and traumatic nature of the piece. I had never sat down written my story out like like this. Finding the most important details to include, when there is so much more to the story was unique.

When compared to the other articles I wrote, the profile of my classmate and the profile of an area doctor, this article feels the most complete. I know my story inside and out and therefore I get the pick and chose what I want to say and what I want to reveal about myself and while the two others that I profiled for the other papers were open and honest, making my story known compared to theirs was easier to digest.

I can live with the disappointment of not writing a good story about others, but I couldn't live with disappointing myself. Therefore, with the personal nature of this story I ultimately put more time and effort to ideally present myself and create how I wanted to be perceived. However, the overall format of these papers is relatively similar. In reporting about myself and my information to construct a bigger picture of myself, I had to do the same with the other two people I profiled as well. I wanted the best and most important details of the others to be represented in the articles I wrote about them and I wanted the same for myself.

Creating an idea about a person, including myself, is something found in all three articles. Just the idea I created around myself seems to be the most fully developed. Most likely because it is somewhat easy to want a specific idea about oneself to be conveyed, but more difficult to judge based on the other people. This is because ultimately, I was the one who created the ideas about the two others, they just gave the information to do it with based on my observations and my interviews with them.

This is a powerful story of my personal life, at least it is powerful to me. Creating a story about such a traumatic time in my life for the people of the world to potentially read is terrifying. As such, I wanted it to be a great article. From what I have learned about the class in terms of creating a story and an idea to go along with it, I feel that this is best article to do the job the class teaches. This is more than likely because of its personal nature, but feel as if I did justice to what I wanted it to say, more so than I could have compared to the other two people that I profiled.

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work an am unaware of anyone who has not. -Calvin Worth Payton, III