

When a Brain Scientist Suffers a Stroke

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As a Harvard-trained neuroanatomist, Jill Bolte Taylor has always known more about brains than most people. But when a brain hemorrhage triggered her own stroke, she suddenly had a front-row seat on the deterioration of the brain.

Dr. Taylor recounts the details of her stroke and the amazing insights she gained from it in a riveting 18-minute video of her speech at the Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference in Monterey, Calif., last month. Her fascinating lecture includes a detailed explanation of the differences between the left and right sides of the brain, complete with an incredibly cool prop — a real human brain.

On a December morning in 1996, Dr. Taylor woke up with searing pain behind her left eye, the beginnings of a hemorrhagic stroke. As the left side of her brain shut down, she began to feel disconnected from her body and entered an almost-euphoric like state. It took her a while to make sense of the experience, but as her right arm became paralyzed, it dawned on her that she was having a stroke.

“How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?,’ she said. “In the course of four hours, I watched my brain completely deteriorate in its ability to process all information. On the morning of the hemorrhage, I could not walk, talk, read, write or recall any of my life.’

Her account of the experience of stroke is vivid, and at one point, she recalled, she felt like someone had taken a remote control and hit the mute button. 'I was shocked to find myself inside a silent mind,' she said.

What is so surprising about Dr. Taylor's story is that she experienced a sort of euphoria as she was left with only right-brain functions. She lost her sense of self, but she also shed the stress of her life and, as she puts it, '37 years of emotional baggage.'

'Imagine what it would be like to be totally disconnected from your brain chatter,' she said. 'I felt a sense of peacefulness.'

Dr. Taylor's lecture is challenging and thought-provoking, and I encourage you to take the time to watch it in its entirety. It took Dr. Taylor eight years to recover from the stroke, but she said she was motivated by a desire to share her experience of stroke and recovery, particularly her increased awareness of the right side of her brain. 'I realized what a tremendous gift this experience could be, what a stroke of insight this could be to how we live our lives, and it motivated me to recover,' she said.

To learn more about Dr. Taylor, visit her Web site.