The Art of Recovery by Jon Caswell

The Answer to ‘Why Me?’

“I discovered there is an answer to the question ‘Why me?’ — but it lies deep within yourself, and you have to search it out.”

Before

As a hearing aid audiologist, he had made a happy career treating children and adults all over the world for hearing disorders. He was 68, at the top of his profession, and looking forward to going to work every morning.

Then, in 1997, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor that required surgery. Though the tumor was removed, there were significant post-operative consequences: facial palsy, balance problems, difficulty eating, loss of manual dexterity and lack of spatial awareness. “Life as I knew it was finished,” he said.

For the next four years, Monty battled to recover. He estimates that he got back 90 percent of what had been lost. Then in March 2001, he felt an odd tingling in his right hand and foot, and when he stood up, he collapsed.

It was a stroke, and it changed everything. “I was shattered,” he said. “I just couldn’t believe that after nearly four years of slow recovery, I was back where I started.” The stroke had affected his right side and brought back the balance problems and facial palsy as well as problems in closing his right eye. He also became deeply depressed.

“I felt helpless, hopeless and frustrated because there was so much more I still wanted to do with my life, but how on earth was I going to do it? ‘Why me?’ became the question of the hour.”

In the midst of this moping, “my wife Victoria challenged me: ‘Do something, anything, take up drawing, but don’t just sit there!’ And that’s how my new life began.”

He visited a library and checked out as many books on art techniques as he could find. He went home and traced pictures out of them, then he started drawing on his own, and eventually painting with watercolors. He could see himself growing in the work, which was the beginning of self-motivation.
“One day I was trying to think of a subject to paint, when anger and frustration welled up in me, and I wanted to strike out violently on a canvas. I slashed vivid colors across it and caught myself saying again and again, ‘Why me? Why me?’

“Of course, no one else can tell you why. I realized that life isn’t fair,” he said. “There’s no one to complain to. A better question would have been, ‘Why not me?’ After all, I’m no different than anyone else.”

Calming down as he painted, he found himself asking if there were something to learn from the stroke. “I started searching my mind as I painted – as I had never painted before – and I realized that painting was a ‘gift’ that had been given to me to help release the feelings that were pent up inside. The stroke and my recovery showed me that life goes on, albeit differently, with limitations, but you can do things you never dreamed possible.”

During this internal conversation, Monty continued to paint. His frenetic brush strokes calmed, and he began to see signs of a painting. He slowly finished the work, which he titled “The Burning Forest.” “At the end, I was exhausted and emotionally drained, but I was also at peace with myself. I realized that while I would never be the same person as before, it was possible that I could now reveal another facet of my personality, and be a person again.”

Since “The Burning Forest,” Monty has discovered an artist living inside the audiologist. He is a full-time artist now, mainly using a computer screen as a canvas, a mouse as a brush and software as his paints. He is exhibiting in galleries, and dozens of his digital paintings are available at his Web site. One of his fantasy images called “Orchidii Monti” was selected for the cover of a review of contemporary poetry introduced by England’s poet laureate. A poem Monty wrote about his stroke was also included.

“This has been an exciting time for me,” he said, “going from the depths of despair to joyful elation, despite the fact that echoes of the stroke live on. I recently had to have yet another eye surgery.

“Eventually I discovered there is an answer to the question ‘Why me,’ but it lies deep within yourself, and you have to search it out. You can stay as you are, accepting what has happened to you, or you can fight to live another day. After all, you have only got yourself to battle. Go ahead, give it a go!”
Painting through Self-Doubt

"I know that self-doubt is part of painting and that if I keep painting, I’ll find my way through the doubt."

brain stem strokes in 24 hours can derail a dream-come-true, but for Alison Bonds Shapiro the strokes created a life-enriching detour.

At age 55, she was finally fulfilling an ambition to illustrate a children’s book. She had worked hard to learn to draw, paint and plan. She had completed three paintings on a 17-illustration assignment for Just for Today, a 32-page illustrated children’s picture book, when the strokes struck.

She tried drawing while still in the hospital. “It looked like the work of a 3 year-old,” she said. “I cried. I didn’t know how I would ever be able to fulfill my dream.”

Unfortunately, not drawing was the least of her worries. The strokes had left her with limited control of her left arm and hand. Her eyes wouldn’t focus, and she was very weak and wheelchair-bound in a house on a mountain.

Enter Suzanne White, a smart, dedicated therapist who lived within walking distance. “Suzanne came twice a week and began getting me out on the mountain as soon as she could,” Alison said. “She took me on ‘hikes’ when I was still wearing a brace. She and I constantly devised ways to challenge the habituation of the disability.

“The house became a gym; we worked with whatever we found there. I worked with putty and clay and rubber bands to strengthen my hands. I typed because typing forced my fingers to work independently of one another. I did ‘opposite sequences,’ closing my left hand as my right hand opened. I wrote. I drew.

“I also had a lot of acupuncture, massage, chiropractic and a mind/body integrative technique
called Rubenfeld Synergy. My hands were very important to me, and I was determined to keep working them until they could do what I wanted them to.”

She had long been a meditator and continued. “Through meditation you can build a trust in the process of life and touch something vaster than your ego. And the mindfulness that meditation produces is invaluable when you are learning to walk again.”

Nine months after the strokes, she started painting. She returned to the fourth illustration and drew and painted for two months before completing it. “My heart was in my mouth as I showed it to the publisher and author. They said it was good enough to keep trying, but no one really knew if I could do 13 more or how long it would take.”

Three years after the strokes, Just for Today was finally published by HJ Kramer. Though a reader would never notice anything, Alison can see differences between the pre- and post-stroke illustrations. “The post-stroke paintings are richer. They have more meaning and symbolism.

“I have been painting since the book and working on my drawing skills. I can tell I am less judgmental, more open to ‘mistakes,’ more willing to take risks, freer. I’m not satisfied unless the work has some real emotional content. I am more patient. I know that self-doubt is part of painting and that if I keep painting, I’ll find my way through the doubt.

“I have learned not to give up. The disability becomes a habit if you don’t challenge it. You have to find a reason to keep going and keep challenging yourself. You have to emphasize your strengths and have compassion for and patience with your weaknesses. It takes time and effort, but you’re worth it.”
Elizabeth Cockey uses art to rehabilitate people’s minds and limbs.

For more than a decade she has worked with Alzheimer’s patients and people living with stroke dementia. She has seen many of these people improve, and even those who don’t get better long-term had fun in the group art lesson.

Elizabeth is the author of *Gertrude’s Cupboard: Recapturing Minds Stolen by Disease*. It’s about using art to treat Alzheimer’s patients.

According to the American Art Therapy Association, art therapy is based on the belief that the creative process in making art is both healing and life-enhancing. Through creating and discussing art, and the process of making art with an art therapist, a person can increase awareness of self.

People involved in art therapy can better cope with illness, disabilities, stress and traumatic experiences. They can enhance cognitive abilities as well, and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of artistic creativity.

Art therapy always involves the making of art, typically painting or drawing, but sometimes working in clay. “I always work with groups in nursing homes and retirement communities,” Elizabeth said. “They’ll have me for an hour once a week, and I see definite progress after as little as 20 hours. It’s a lot more interesting than squeezing a nerf ball. We paint with non-toxic tempera paint. I have large classes, 10-15 people, and besides painting, there’s a lot of laughing.”

Elizabeth has worked with a number of people with stroke dementia, which can occur after a stroke, and said they often improve the most.

In addition to cognitive recovery, Elizabeth has seen patients recover the use of limbs. “When someone restores the use of an arm, it makes it possible for them to do their activities of daily living, which makes a big difference to their caregiver.”

Success in art therapy requires the same motivation that success in other forms of therapy requires. “It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a lot of repetition to create a new neurological pathway,” Elizabeth said. One of the therapist’s main jobs is to keep people focused, which can be challenging with dementia patients.

“The most remarkable thing is touching the human spirit. When we let that come out in a safe place, everybody gets better.”

For more information on art therapy, visit the Web site of the American Art Therapy Association at www.arttherapy.org, or e-mail at info@arttherapy.org. You can find Elizabeth’s book online at Amazon.com.