

A Mending Tree

by Michael Finley

I finally get my first look at what happened to me, when the radiology lab sends me my very own copy of the first MRI scans. They come in a huge manila envelope -- about a dozen oversized sheets of negative images, some with as many as 24 images per sheet.

I pore over these images for several hours, trying to understand them.

My first impression is one of wonder at the complexity of what occurs between one's ears. There is no other way to think about all the folds and intricate membranes of flesh, and the threaded rivers of blood wending their way through the canyons. You are looking at mind, or the closest you will ever come to looking at mind. It is no accident, no mutation. It is the end result of a trillion years of trying -- nature acquiring a tool for thinking about itself.

I think I look pretty damn good. But I have a dickens of a time locating the meningioma. I know it's up around my left ear, and I pore over every image of left ears looking for something -- anything -- that looks like it doesn't belong there. Everything looks strange, but nothing looks like it didn't belong there. Then I figure out I have the negatives upside down. I have to look on the side on which the letters appeared backwards.

And then I see it. Looking directly into my eyes, and off to the side, is an odd shape hovering over my ear, a shape that is not also hovering over the other ear. It looks like a little curlicue, about the size of a computer mouse, above my left ear. It reminds me of the stub of a worn-down pencil, the kind you might place over your ear while playing miniature golf; only this pencil is located inside, not outside, the skull.

From another angle, on another sheet, the tumor looks like a pastry cuff, nautilus-shaped, and twirled at the end, like the tip of a frozen custard. If it weren't so pernicious, I might find it cute.

I position the negative on my computer's page scanner, and digitized the image of the meningioma. Then I use a drawing tool to draw a red circle around it -- X marks the spot. Then I take the image and upload it to my website, so anyone who wants to can see the thing inside me that caused all this commotion.

I continue to examine the scans. When I look into the eyeholes of the skull, I do not think death's head. There is no way to think about these shadows and shapes now but as something pulsing remarkably with life.

I see my eyes in one set, and I see through them in the next. I see my tongue at different densities. I see a thin, luminous corona sheathing brain from bone -- the meninges. I see

deep into the falx, into the sacred center of the limbic region, where ecstasy and terror reside.

But it is on the last sheet that I find the most interesting pictures. Taken from the back of the head, they show the network of veins that radiate across the entire lower basin of the skull. Their job is to take the aortic blood that has passed through the cortex and is now spent and deoxygenated, and return it to the body's primary circulatory highway -- and on to the heart and lungs to be re-enlivened.

In a normal picture of this system, the veins in this location are like a round spreading tree, rising from two sturdy, nearly intertwining trunks and then reaching out in every directions, filling the space allowed.

But in my picture, in my brain, half the tree is missing. The right side is flush with the venous drainage system. The left side is -- empty. When I had my stroke, the main branch of my left venous drainage system shut down completely, and lost all its bulk. It was as if lightning blasted the tree to oblivion. No wonder it hurt.

The picture explains everything to me. It explains why, for weeks following the stroke, doing anything that required a little oomph, a "body push," caused me excruciating pain.

It's why I couldn't do situps, why I couldn't have sex, why it was disturbing to go to the bathroom, why even coughing hurt.

With half the circulatory network downed by a storm, the remaining network was overtaxed. It couldn't handle the volume that the body pumped into it -- especially during moments of exertion. Headache pain saved my life at times like this. Had I continued, I might have blown the other half of the tree -- and then where would I be.

But a miracle saved me. From the moment I collapsed from my stroke, the tree set about to repair itself. It couldn't grow a new trunk where the old one had been -- I'm not a skink, regenerating a tail. But it could "promote" the capillaries in the remaining network, allowing them to expand and grow to take on greater volume. Every breath I took, every step I took, strengthened the reorganizing venous system.

So instead of getting headaches every time I climb a few stairs, I can climb more, and more, and more every day. It is as if some very clever entity said, let's make these things symmetrical, so if a part on one side fails, the part on the right side can pick up the standard.

I find that breathtaking.

Here's another consideration. Let's say I guessed I had a brain tumor a year earlier, had my head scanned, and verified the meningioma's existence and location. Let's also say that I wanted to get that sucker out of there, as soon as possible, and ordered my surgeon to go in and remove it.

By going in before the stroke shut down that half of my venous drainage system, a surgeon would in all likelihood have triggered the same kind of shutdown. And this shutdown would have doubled or tripled the trauma resulting from the surgery, complicating my chances for recovery. My body would have had to cope simultaneously with tumor removal and a pretty substantial stroke.

But my brain saved me from this double whammy by chopping down the tree in advance, and blasting it to bits. The blood in that vein simply clotted inside it, sealed itself off, and is now being slowly resorbed into the body, like a suitcase full of diamonds at the bottom of the sea. There is no danger of clots breaking up and going to my heart and killing me, I'm told, because of the freak way the tree was uprooted by the tumor.

Ain't that a kick in the head.

I started all this a gbook I wanted to write about [i]Moby Dick. [/i]At the end, the whale bashes in the side of the Pequod, and the ship and all its hands go spiraling to the bottom. Only the narrator, Ishmael, pops up -- and with him, the coffin of a friend, to use as a raft.

Looking at the image of my brain, with the tree all gone, but another tree rising up to take its place, like a miracle, I feel so blessed.

And I've learned a lot. I learned that the everyday world -- the one we walk through and work in, with all the jokes and TV and busy-being -- is full of hurting. There isn't a house on your block that is not in some kind of anguish.

So be kind to people, and let them know you know. It's surprising what people will share if they know it's OK.

I now know what my sister went through when she died at 15, and my stepfather, too. I know the horror, but also the limits of the horror. Everyone has good days and good moments. You cannot scream for very long -- life takes over even when you're dying. There is mercy in the cruelest moment.

I always felt I was a loving, if distracted husband and father. I still am. But I now feel how loved I am by Rachel and the children, how important I am to them. Not just how awful it will be if I leave and they have to move to less expensive digs. But to know I am inside them and will always be, as long as they breathe. That, and not all this typing, is my great accomplishment in life.

What happens now? Interim scans show that my venous drainage is working perfectly adequately, and at this point (cross fingers) the tumor has not grown even a centimeter. It doesn't hurt to have sex. The tiny blood vessels that survived the stroke expanded to accommodate heavier traffic. I do pretty much anything I want.

It may be that the tumor has done all it will ever do, that its job in life was simply to make a vein in my head explode and bring me to my knees, and the rest was up to me.

Or, and this is likely, it will start to grow again, and I will have to have it removed by the knife, before it gets closer to my language center and I lose my ability to think and speak.

If that happens, I hope it's sooner rather than later, because I can cope with the trauma of the operation better now, as a younger older man, than I can later, as an older older man.

Meanwhile, I stare at these pictures, and the gray shapes in them, and the withered branches, and the resurgent white lines, and I am so grateful for my chances, and amazed at the mind inside the mind, that responds to the assault it is under.

And even more astonished at the greater mind that has cradled me through all this, and taught me so much about my life, and my heart, and where I am to go from here.