



Mindfulness & the Stalled Brain by Geills Meredith

I'm standing in front of the stove. I have a death grip on a cookie sheet filled with shortbread I have just made. I want to put the cookies in the oven to bake. I have no idea how to do that. So I stand in front of the stove looking back and forth at the cookies, at the oven.

My daughter comes into the room. "What are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm trying to put these cookies in the oven."

"Oh. Okay." She waits, watching me. I stand there, not moving, embarrassed.

"I don't know how. I don't know what to do." She reaches in front of me and opens the oven.

I am lost.

Now I'm standing in front of an elevator where my daughter works. I don't know what to do.

I have just successfully navigated my first independent hour-long trip on public transit that involved two transfers but I don't know how to get onto an elevator...? I decide to pretend I'm waiting for someone—should anyone notice my hovering. I try to be invisible and hope the spreading panic inside me doesn't show on my face.

I am first embarrassed, then ashamed. This feels like when I was in grade one and peed my pants at my desk, after Miss Lawrence refused my bathroom request. I feel helpless, oppressed by my situation.

Finally someone comes to use the elevator. I watch as he pushes the button, waits and walks inside when the door opens. I smile at him, still pretending to be waiting for someone and mimic his actions after he's gone.

This isn't ordinary memory loss. This is different. To me, remembering is an act of locating. We travel around inside our head, our thoughts, following threads of information until we connect, find what we need—remember.

This is information black-out. Like when the starter on my car died—I turned the key in the ignition and... nothing. This is huge black nothing inside my head. There is no thread to follow. No information to connect to.

I am broken.

Now I am at the river with the dogs. It is a wild place with twists on the hiking trails, coyotes and the occasional bear. Still, down at the water life is pastoral. I can sit on the beach, watching river

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otters, osprey, eagles, while my border collies run in and out of the river's shallow parts. Most of the time no one else is around. It's just us, like we owned the place—there is stillness and peace. Unlike in the forest where I must be on the look-out, here I can exhale, breathing out the constant stress of navigating brain injury.

My dog Finn starts making strange sounds, hunched in his spot and I realize he is choking on a stick he found. I am immediately on alert. It's okay, I know exactly what to do. Yet there I sit, riveted to the spot, unable to move. Finn looks at me, alarmed, expecting assistance. I talk softly to him. It's okay, I can get that stick out. I know what to do. Still, I do not move. *I cannot.*

Sliding into panic, I understand that my brain is not giving my body the information it needs in order to act. I push myself mentally, searching desperately for the information that will lead to action... nothing. This is crazy. I know what needs to be done! Nothing happens. I call for help. No one answers. We really are alone at the beach and it is up to me to work this out.

Finn is panicking now, too, looking at me for help. I can only talk to him softly. I am awash in horror as I realize he could die, that I might sit there, unimaginably helpless, watching him slowly die. I hyper-ventilate at the thought and immediately focus on my breathing, slowing it down, a conscious intake and exhaling of air.

Finn has stopped making sounds, is wobbling now, front legs collapsing, is losing consciousness. I am failing him! Still, I concentrate on breathing. I have to—me in panic removes all hope of helping him. I close my eyes, just for a moment and out shoots my arm so abruptly I startle myself. Eyes open again, I lunge toward Finn, grasp his jaw and push my hand down his throat. I grab the piece of stick and pull it out. We both fall into the sand. Sitting now, Finn's body stretched out, his head in my lap, I start to cry. Huge, wracking sobs that sound more howl than human.

I am broken. I am lost.

All the way home I think, mantra-like: "I refuse to live my life like this. *I will not.* There must be some way around it."

Stalling

I grew up in southern Ontario during the Fifties and Sixties, bound by the stark parameters of the Protestant Work Ethic, in a house where mistakes were viewed as personality flaws. There were high standards to meet, excellence in all things was expected, as was rigid conformity to the norm. Tired? Bah! That's weakness. Need a break? Don't be lazy. Stay with the job until it is done, regardless of how hard you must push yourself. Sick? If you can stand, you can walk, if you can walk, you can work.

These tenets were woven indisputably into the fabric of my becoming, fuelling the sometimes frantic drive that pushed me through my adulthood. Within minutes of meeting me my neuropsychologist said: "I see that failure is not an option for you."

Yet I am discovering that failure is the handmaiden of brain injury and has much to show us. I need to find a way to accept and work with this.

Since the incident with Finn I have become frightened about potential danger when my problem-solving abilities unexpectedly shut down. Of all the things I need to manage, this seems most

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important to resolve. I look for patterns, triggers, behavioural or situational connections, because I really need to define what's happening when I hit the wall of nothing-between-the-ears.

And so I have broken down what I know for sure into the smallest components possible: I have the attention span of a gnat, couldn't organize my way out of a paper bag if my life depended on it, can remember detailed information from my early childhood but often not what happened five minutes ago.

Possibly most frustrating: I'll be humming along, connecting, understanding, and then seemingly randomly, speech, reasoning, focus, problem-solving, thought-to-action shut down like switching off a light. It's all about numbers of things my brain must process at any given time. Too much stuff in my head leads to massive information fail. I have learned to warn people about impending overload: "Too many things" is often the most I can manage to say at those times.

"Too many things" can make life dangerous for me when I ignore them and endeavour to function as I used to—this is what leads me to escalating anxiety, which leads to panic, anger, depression, insomnia. I need relief from attempts to navigate life like I did before brain injury. I need new skills. But what skills?

Language, particularly spoken language, has become my greatest difficulty intellectually—conversations transform into gaping abysses where my brain tailspins and inevitably crashes. Sentences become incomprehensible. Long strings of words, without breaks or breathing space, make my mind unravel. After only a very short time I hear this: "Blah blah blah Geills, blah blah blah eat, blah blah blah now." It's funny but it's not.

Over time I have realized that my brain no longer ceaselessly processes information. There is intermittent blockage, a backing-up in my head that only grows when I push myself. All this unprocessed information piles up until my brain can't take any more and cohesive thought shuts down. This means I'm not making information connections in my head, not connecting to the experience, to the moment—so either I retain no memory of it or I can't access memory I need.

My neuropsychologist said that I must pace myself. What will this look like? How do I incorporate it into my life in a consistent and reliable manner? How do I implement it *for sure* in an emergency, when my stress levels are at their highest and my brain is most hobbled?

I am learning that in order to successfully complete a task I must first see it in my mind. I take my cue from the way athletes visualize the steps crucial to reaching their performance goals.

So I have imagined a big empty box inside everybody's brain, into and out of which information is constantly being loaded and unloaded. It's a smooth operation, flawlessly efficient, continuously working. Information streams into the box and miraculously, invisibly, is instantaneously sorted, sifted through and unloaded throughout the brain as required.

Despite my brain injury, information still comes in at the pace it always has—however, now it isn't being continually unloaded. Much like the papers on my desk, it piles up until it overflows. When this occurs the sorting simply stops. I become confused, disoriented, sometimes I can't speak in full sentences or I stutter. Ultimately I careen into the big black nothing. It really is like hitting a wall.

Superficially, the solution is simple: I need to find a way to connect to the information my brain receives, *when* it is received.

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For me, living with brain injury feels like juggling myriad stresses simultaneously, pretty much every waking minute. Everything seems stressful, whether it's happy or aggravating. My brain is unfocused and reactive, my mind anxious, my body is chronically in flight or fight mode, on alert, hyper-sensitive. They are not working together, they struggle disconnected, functioning in separate solitudes and along parallel lines.

Since the accident it seems as if my brain and body operate in opposite directions simultaneously. I have backwards days: spoon, face down when I try to eat soup; tooth- and hair brushes bristles up or out, away from my head; completely unrelated words come out of my mouth when I am trying to speak; attempting to use my right hand, my left rises up for the task. My balance is perpetually out of whack; sometimes I weave around like I'm drunk, I slip easily, stumble, fall and lose my bearings all the time. I am continually at sixes and sevens with myself, coming and going all at once, awkward, ungainly, feeling stupid and out of control.

Finding ways to successfully manage this level of stress is intrinsic to learning to cope effectively with brain injury. I chose 'Restorative Yoga'. Or, rather, my daughter chose it for me.

It was my first experience with this type of yoga and initially it overwhelmed me. Just the thought of it was burdensome because it relies extensively on props: cushions and blocks, weirdly shaped stuff that looks tricky. Too many things! However, I learned quickly that letting go of control, allowing Tara, the instructor, to take charge, simply following directions provided me with relaxation that wrestled down my constant anxiety and stress.

Brain injury creates a mind-body relationship significantly different to that of uninjured brains. The smooth instantaneous messaging from one to the other is gone. The *in tandem* to and fro as the body and brain communicate to keep us up and running has been irrevocably altered. There is no 'auto-pilot' functioning with brain injury—we're on perpetual manual over-ride now.

Effective management of brain injury means massive realignment, wholly conscious living, developing ways of coping with the magnitude of actually doing that and, ultimately, avoiding being overwhelmed by it all.

As Tara talked me through each moment of the poses, inviting me to fully notice how I felt, orienting me to mindfulness, to the nuances of this experience, a shift occurred in my mind. Concentrating only on what was before me, on completing the poses to the exclusion of all else, my mind began to focus more clearly, without hesitation or distraction.

Practicing the poses, the breathing, relaxing my mind, placing the cushions and blocks so I was comfortable shut out the meandering anxious thoughts that swirled incessantly in my head. Over time this calm, the focus, the attention to Now spilled over to when I was not in yoga class. They became a habit, a way of receiving the world, its information, audio and visual stimuli.

Ultimately I developed a new way of being. With that I noticed a marked lessening of reactivity, of the foggy disorientation that comes with information overload. Repetition of mistakes decreased as I began self-correcting faster, mental melt-downs receded, unrestrained anger abated. As clarity of thought increased, so did my skill level and I found myself in a new cycle: one that was internally supportive, where my brain and body were on the same side again, working together.

This internal unity was an awakening. It opened me to myself until the fragmented I was connected in mind, body and spirit so absolutely that that is simply how I function now.

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Noticing

For me, mindfulness is an acute paying-attention without analyzing or assessing. I am observing what is happening—what I'm feeling—without absorbing it. I simply notice.

Noticing takes time and slows me down. Slowing down provides my brain with the opportunity to process information. Effective information processing connects me to the moment, the event or information. This is where I attach to what I'm experiencing, reading, thinking, doing—which increases my ability to recall or access information. I encounter with all of my senses and then I let go.

"Focus your thoughts on the world around you: where can you feel tension in your body, what you can hear from the street or smell in the room. Allow yourself to accept the present, and that things are just the way that they are. ... A useful technique is to imagine your thoughts as passing cars. See yourself as a pedestrian watching them as they arrive and then disappear into the distance, without you catching a lift or giving them too much attention." (1)

I follow those suggestions and pace myself as well—alternating difficult mind-brain tasks with simple physical jobs, to give myself ongoing breaks. Mindfulness practice and alternating mental with physical work create the necessary conditions that keep me aware of impending information overload *before* my brain stalls. This enables me to have a life where I am a director, a manager (rather than victim) of my challenges.

I have always imagined meditation as requiring time to get away from the hustle of the day. As needing a quiet place to sit, with an altar perhaps, some incense and a good solid mantra or statement for focused repetition. Mindfulness meditation is nothing like that. It is a technique that escorts me *into* my life, the day, my feelings. I can easily practice it anywhere, any time.

Psychotherapist Deirdre Fay writes: "As a trauma survivor you can benefit from mindfulness meditation by cultivating your ability to witness life. With that you can notice what's happening without getting carried away by it, or need to shut down around it. ... Being mindful provides the skill of seeing what you are seeing without being caught up in it." (2)

Staying in the moment protects me from ruminating about the things I cannot change. It is ruminating that feeds my anxiety and increases my stress till I reach a breaking point. While I can learn from the past, I cannot undo it and while I must consider the future it is impossible for me to live it now. So I respect and acknowledge both past and future, I feel their presence, but the weight of my life is centered fully in what is directly before me. I have learned something that is a turning point in corralling my stress and anxiety: I *can* manage right now. Right now is not so big or incomprehensible or demanding that it overwhelms or unravels me.

Practicing mindfulness, staying rooted in the moment in a deeply noticing, wide-awake way, keeps me focused. If I can be disciplined or practiced enough to focus on Now when things unravel, or to pull myself back to what is concrete, in front of me, then I feel very much like I used to before my brain injury. It bridges the gap between what my mind wants and what my brain delivers.

And so I find a new way of relating internally, experiencing my mind/body/spirit differently: an active, fully-present triumvirate of me! We are conscious collaborators these parts of who I am, unified in reaching commonly-held and mutually-supporting goals.

This means I function more fully now, deliberately and intentionally, using more of me than before. I am connected in mind, body, spirit in ways I had not imagined possible. Now my experiences are richer, there is wholeness to them, I get more out of what is happening than before my brain injury.

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Four years have passed since that awful day at the beach with Finn. He has not left my side since then. He walks everywhere with me, lays at my feet when I sit, sleeps on the floor by my bed at night. While we have resumed walking with ease in the forest, along the river, we do avoid the sticks now.

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FOOTNOTES:

(1) <http://www.wellsphere.com/anxiety-article/how-mindfulness-meditation-can-reduce-your-anxiety/22609>

(2) <http://www.meditation-ptsd.com/MindfulnessMeditation.html>

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