



PRESENTS OF MIND BY Gellis Meredith

It was all very well to say 'Drink me,' but the wise little Alice was not going to do THAT in a hurry. 'No, I'll look first,' she said, 'and see whether it's marked "poison" or not'; ... she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison,' it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

However, this bottle was NOT marked 'poison,' so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice ... she very soon finished it off.

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

I am a bit afraid of writing this article. Afraid of the complexity of what I am discovering. Afraid of my own feelings, my anger toward conventional medicine for how it has failed me. I have fallen through gaping cracks in the medical system, left (for the most part) on my own to sort through what brain injury has created inside my head.

And I am most afraid of saying something that could cause harm. Of making suggestions that backfire or damage.

So I have procrastinated in every way I know. Mostly by immersing myself in research, filling my head with Science so I am distracted; mired in information processing. I am playing a head game with myself—research is the intellect's perpetual out. If I am doing research I can convince myself that I am not avoiding, that it is valuable and necessary. Hey, I'm learning what I need to know. Leave me alone, I'm not slacking off!

Yet I am avoiding. I know it. This is my truth: I have no background in science or medicine. I am probably like most people—historically preferring to leave medicine to those who actually know what they are doing. Who are educationally and experientially qualified to give an opinion on health concerns.

Then again, my transformation these past few months has been so dramatic, so consistent and wonderful, that I really feel it warrants sharing.

Brain injury has been my crucible. Responding to the difficulties it has caused has changed and shaped me more than any other experience in my life. I have discovered that not one of my previous coping skills adequately addresses the myriad problems delivered by brain injury. It has challenged everything I know and understand.

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Despite my exasperation with conventional medicine's limited response to my needs, I have mixed feelings: part of me feels abandoned, resentful at the lack of help available to me; part of me wonders if I am expecting too much from my doctors or the medical system itself.

By focusing on symptoms rather than root causes, current conventional medicine keeps me a patient. I have begun to question that perspective in a fundamental way. Outside of any physical problems, when dealing solely with emotional and cognitive impairment, is it necessary or even appropriate to treat the long-term, chronic effects of brain injury conventionally? My brain broke, but does that make me sick?

How do I voice these thoughts and concerns without challenging the medical establishment? The anger I feel at having been kicked to the curb by a system woefully ill-prepared to genuinely help me threatens to overshadow everything, hijacking the conversation. I am unsure of how to talk about this without getting stuck in judgment and contention.

Conventional medicine has offered me only two routes for treatment post-brain injury: pharmaceutical and behavioural. The pharmaceutical option centres on anti-depressants. Ostensibly these are to control the anxiety and panic that can prevent people with brain trauma from functioning capably.

I have so many questions and concerns about pharmaceutical approaches to brain injury I think my head could explode. Oh, wait, it already did...

How does the doctor absolutely know what the medical problem is before anti-depressants are prescribed? Is there a pre-prescription protocol that requires testing and isolating all the factors that come into play when the brain has been traumatized? How does anyone know for sure?

I learn that there is a process. Prescribing anti-depressants is based upon collecting anecdotal information (symptoms the patient describes), observation (what the doctor sees) and an educated guess (combining the above).

It then becomes a "most likely" scenario. Dosages are adjusted (increased or decreased) depending on how the individual reacts; combinations of several anti-depressants may be tried as well. Depending on effect, on side-effects, benzodiazepines and stimulants such as amphetamines may be utilized—creating a cocktail of pharmaceuticals. Whatever transpires, it strikes me as awfully experimental.

Anti-depressants, benzodiazepines and amphetamines are potentially dangerous drugs. Warnings about their side-effects and addictiveness are frightening. They might not work for me, they could make me worse off and I won't know until I try them. If I do try them and they don't work as intended, is it possible I didn't ever need them? What do I do then?

Figuring that I have enough to deal with trying to navigate my cognitive and emotional problems, I reject anti-depressants and turn to the other treatment offered me: behaviour management.

In varying degrees, for seven years my life centres around deep-breathing, mindfulness meditation, identifying triggers for anxiety, circumventing panic, pacing my activities to reduce disorientation and confusion from information overload, anger management and impulse control, reducing reactivity, coping with fatigue as well as creating an effective, consistent infrastructure that becomes the framework for my entire life.

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FATIGUE

Once expansive, busy and dynamic, mine is a small life now. Numbingly mundane. I navigate each day from within rigid parameters. There is no relief from fatigue. It binds me to day after unremarkable day of sameness. I have no energy to follow through with endeavours that interest me. Once an art student with promise, I haven't drawn or painted a thing in 18 months. It is a task-focused and heavily routinized life, based on daily necessities.

I am bored beyond measure. A weighty scream wells up inside me and I must actively work to stifle it. No one I ask (doctor, neuropsychologist, family members, friends) seems to know what the scream means or how to stop it. Some days I can just barely contain it. It scares me—I have never experienced such a thing before.

As long as I stay squarely in the moment, in Now, life is okay, I'm good, I can cope. Venture beyond this and I am lost. I find myself slowly giving up, relinquishing dreams for myself and my future. I dare not allow dreams when I can't achieve them.

My life goes like this: get up, get washed and dressed, eat, feed and exercise the dogs, rest, do some housework, sleep. Afterward I can choose one activity. More housework or grocery shopping. Perhaps I can read, spend some time on the computer, watch a bit of television, make dinner, write a paragraph or two. There will be energy enough for only one of these.

Always there are consequences if I attempt to break out of this pattern. A visit to a friend means I will lose the following day to sleep. Processing conversation is so exhausting I will have to sleep for hours to recuperate. Special events such as Christmas cost me several days afterward. My body simply will not get me through the following days without excessive sleep.

Pushing myself in order to participate in life means that I don't process what's going on, don't connect to it and so will have little or no memory of what was said or done.

Still thinking at this point that I can slowly re-build stamina by the way I behave, I challenge myself: each day I will do one thing beyond the usual. It can be small, but it must be done. So I have a house that looks a shambles now. Partially disassembled bulkhead dry wall where I started the kitchen reno. And look, half-peeled wallpaper over there. Piles of bills and envelopes and letters from the time I thought it would be a good idea to organize and purge my papers. Piles of laundry that need folding. Outside, in the garden, a jungle of dried-up vegetation scattered about from weeding attempts.

I am living in chaos both inside and outside my head. I feel like I'm chronically moving through mist and quicksand from ongoing 'brain fog'.

This idea to accomplish, move ahead, is a failure. Things unravel around me and I am beginning to feel defeated by the messes I create. I feel caught in a strange deconstruction vortex where I simply move in circles, never gaining ground.

Now I have become fearful as well. Once fiercely independent, accomplished, proud to a fault, I have become dependent upon others. Imprisoned. My life is too small, painful, impossible, achingly confining.

And so it goes, year after numbing year until I start to rebel. Rebel I must. This is no life for me. It is not enough. The thought of living like this for the next twenty or so years is driving me frantic.

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Behaviour management techniques are somewhat effective, they do help me, but they are not accumulative. Every day I feel as if I am starting at the beginning. This is untrue, of course, there has been progress, but most of the time it feels as if when I take one step forward, I also take two back. I am consumed with exertion, accomplishing, digging myself out of this perpetual twilight into which I have landed.

To the exclusion of everything else, my life has become defined by brain injury—something I promised myself I would avoid. Who was I kidding?

Always searching for more, determined to solve this debilitating dilemma, I read everything I can find about the brain. My daughter helps, researching too. I have recurring and pivotal thoughts:

My primary problem with pharmaceutical and behavioural approaches to post brain injury difficulties is that they are symptom focused.

It seems to me that only addressing symptoms means there is no possibility of getting ahead of problems. I feel trapped on a plateau— circling, circling, never escaping. I want solutions; causal explanations.

There are recurring issues I just can't seem to resolve: anxiety, panic, reactivity, insomnia, fatigue.

The fatigue is the worst. This isn't typical tiredness. This is drop-to-my-knees, fall-on-my-face, hit-the-wall-with-a-thud exhaustion. Intense. Perpetual. All-encompassing. Debilitating. Sleep is never restorative. Regardless of how much or often or when I sleep, I wake up tired.

Does the anxiety cause the fatigue? Or the other way around? What is this? Why is this happening still, nearly eight years after my injury?

"The brain uses more energy than any other organ in the body." (1)

So the brain gets the bulk of energy coming into the body and I learn that, typically, about half the energy directed to the brain is stored in reserves. The other half is distributed according to need. In the injured or traumatized brain so much energy is needed for cognition, for emotional and physical demands that there is almost nothing left for reserves.

I am gaining ground with neither anxiety nor fatigue. Constantly on high alert, I react to trivial things as if they were catastrophes. Stuck in 'fight-or-flight' mode, I can only relax, calm myself, while actively meditating or deep-breathing. The rest of the time I am waiting for the world to explode.

And then my daughter cracks it.

"Do you think you have a GABA problem?"

"What the heck is GABA?"

GABA (*gamma*-Aminobutyric acid) is defined as a primary neurotransmitter responsible for inhibiting neuron (nerve cell) excitability. It is used in the brain to calm us down. While reducing anxiety and stress GABA also increases alertness.

We're off and running!

My daughter and I are thrust into a world of neurons, neurotransmitters, grey and white matter, brain waves, amino acids, adaptogens, naturopathy. I have no idea what I'm doing. The scope of this is overwhelming.

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Nonetheless, I press on, sensing the answers I need are hidden here.

SUPPLEMENTS

I sustained one of those tricky brain injuries: not terrible enough to be immediately apparent; not mild enough to allow me to continue unfettered with my life. No serious physical damage, no bleeding in my brain, cracked open skull, no spinal involvement.

For all intents and purposes I look and sound the same as I always did. That I have times where I seem perfectly “normal” and others where I can’t even figure out how to tie my shoelaces confounds the people around me. The lack of consistency doesn’t make sense.

I am always a dollar short and a day behind, as they used to say. Always running to catch up, perpetually lagging behind, getting cognitively lost and distracted, sidetracked, crashing, shutting down.

All the necessary parts are still there inside my head—they’ve just stopped talking to each other.

Finding out about the existence and importance of GABA causes me to start thinking in completely new ways about my broken brain. I think about my body’s other organs—how they function; what they need. Without essential nutrients and appropriate conditions they malfunction, stop working properly.

Why would my brain be any different?

So I wonder what my brain needs, what nutrients and conditions will help it function—and start the search for natural substances that assist neurotransmitters. I have never thought about feeding or nutritionally supporting my brain before. This is so new to me, so complex, that the only way I can figure to address it is to break it down as small as it will go. I keep it simple, asking ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ with every piece of information I read.

Certain herbs, called adaptogens, have been used for generations in Russia (by truck drivers, athletes, cosmonauts), Scandinavia, Germany and Japan among other countries and have been traced back thousands of years in China, India and Greece. Much more recently they have been used in North America for the treatment of cancer—to build cell strength, to balance, before or during or after chemotherapy and/or radiation.

Unlike drugs, adaptogens neither inhibit nor stimulate. They provide what is necessary in order for cells to normalize (homeostasis)—increasing the body’s resistance to trauma, stress, anxiety and fatigue.

So I throw myself into this strange new world of plants and brain cells. The adaptogenic herbs I choose address anxiety, fatigue and my ongoing problem with confusion and disorientation.

Synergistic, adaptogens are collaborators, working best when taken in groups. Research I have found indicates they have few or no side effects and no long term residual effects. Because of their supportive nature they work differently with everybody, determined by need. If not needed they will likely have no effect. And, so important to me, if I don’t react well to them I simply stop taking them.

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Introducing them one at a time, I decide on a combination of Rhodiola, Ashwagandha, Siberian Ginseng and Licorice Root. I add one more supplement, an amino acid precursor found in green tea—L-Theanine.

Because it has no known side-effects, I start with L-Theanine.

Immediately I feel a rush of... of... awakening.

Feeling braver, I start the Rhodiola. The nerves around my mouth and in all my fingers and toes tingle like crazy. Not sure I like this... and then, after about 20 minutes: Oh, hello, brain—how I've missed you!

There is a sharpness to my thinking that is almost immediate. Within a week I am no longer exhausted by spoken language, no longer chronically forgetful—word recall and retrieval come with surprising ease.

One by one I add Siberian Ginseng, Licorice Root and finally, Ashwagandha—which works really well but upsets my stomach, so I stop it immediately. I fiddle with dosages. Starting with the lowest I can find, I increase Rhodiola slowly; ultimately I divide the dosage in half and take it twice a day.

A month later my life has been fundamentally transformed: I have energy. I can stay awake, do stuff. Sleep is restorative. The internal scream urge is gone. Anxiety—significantly diminished. I can think on my feet again and need to rely less on written lists and prompts. I consistently have both mental clarity and calm alertness.

FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

My mother stops talking suddenly during our phone conversation.

"You sound different."

"Different how?"

"There is a brightness in your voice that I haven't heard since before the accident." She sighs deeply and I connect viscerally to her hope.

I'm still not completely clear about the biochemical processes occurring between my brain and adaptogenic herbs, but I do know one thing for sure: whatever is happening is real.

It's almost six months since I started taking adaptogenic herbs and L-Theanine. I have accomplished more than during the previous four years combined. I am making headway cleaning up all my partially finished projects and have just re-organized my art room.

I have developed a sound practice of complementing behavioural techniques with supplements. My life is stabilizing. I can cope better with disorder now. Sure, I still hit the wall from time to time, but recover more quickly. Still have to rest between tasks; take short naps. When over-taxed I still become exhausted. However, my stamina is slowly rebuilding—it takes longer for me to tire out.

Disorientation and confusion happen rarely now. Anxiety is fleeting and manageable. Impulse control is more effective. Anger management techniques are working because I now have the mental clarity and focus to consistently utilize them. Reactivity for the most part has been

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replaced with a calm, clear responsiveness. Unrestrained 'fight or flight' impulses no longer rule my mind.

Today I almost felt like my old self. Today my mind was clear, my brain complied, nothing was too taxing or exhausting. Today there was no struggle to push through the moment. Today I almost forgot my brain is broken. Another good day.

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Footnote:

(1) <http://www.brainline.org/content/2009/11/recovering-from-mild-traumatic-brain-injury.html>

Also, on page 2 of this article is an excellent pie chart showing the distribution of energy in the brain pre- and post-trauma

NOTE: Always consult an appropriate health care practitioner or clinical herbalist before taking any supplements.

LINKS:

Adaptogens:

<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-an-adaptogen.htm>

http://www.chiro.org/nutrition/FULL/Adaptogenic_Herbs.shtml

History of Rhodiola use:

<http://www.mdidea.com/products/herbextract/salidroside/data02.html>

GABA and L-theanine:

http://naturalmedicine.suite101.com/article.cfm/green_tea_and_ltheanine_natural_anxiety_relief

How pharmaceuticals affect GABA—but also really thorough brain site:

http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/d/d_04/d_04_m/d_04_m_peu/d_04_m_peu.html

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