

Popular Press Book Review

My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey

by Jill Bolte Taylor, Ph.D.

2008 Viking Penguin, Hardcover, 183 pages

Reviewed by Ashley R. Baumann

Gustavus Adolphus College, NeuroCapstone PSY-385

21 February, 2010

With a fascinating and ironically educated perspective on a dangerous life-changing stroke, the Harvard-trained neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor recounts in eerie detail her plunge into a “formless abyss of a silent mind”.

On the morning of December 10th, 1996 Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor suffered from a massive hemorrhage in the left hemisphere of her brain that occurred as a result of a congenital malformation of blood vessels (in other words, a blood vessel ‘exploded’ in her brain). This was a rare form of stroke called AVM (arteriovenous malformation). The few hours after the onset of a stroke are known to be the most vital, and the more time that is allowed to pass is correlated to the extent of damage and loss of function. It was during these critical hours that Taylor was able to vividly recall, and it was then that she was alone and helpless.

Taylor’s book, *My Stroke of Insight*, which has become a *New York Times Bestseller*, offers a scientific yet personal and realistic account of this experience that she miraculously remembers. It also functions as a guide for medical practitioners treating victims of non-traumatic brain injuries by clarifying what is helpful and what is not during the recovery process as well as a ‘valuable recovery guide for anyone touched by a brain injury’.

This book is a smooth, intriguing read; written in simplistic scientific jargon meant for high school students, it is easily understood by the non-scientist. Taylor includes just enough anatomical and physiological background on the nervous system in order for the reader to

understand the significance of her stroke, its location and how that was an important factor for the change that she experienced. She captivates her reader by including such explicit detail that one can almost feel the euphoric deterioration that she describes.

The chapter titled ‘Hemispheric Asymmetries’ delves into an in-depth description of the differences between the human brain’s left and right hemispheres, and how those differences manifest themselves into an individual’s psyche. This is a pivotal point in the book, and must be fully understood in order to grasp the philosophical ideals later proposed.

“In 1780, Meinard Simon Du Pui claimed that mankind was *Homo Duplex*-meaning that he had a double brain with a double mind” Taylor writes. She continues on this track by explaining the “Duality of the Mind” theory (introduced by Arthur Ladboke Wigan) which in sum proposes that each hemisphere of the human brain was one mind, giving us each two, independent minds. This is relevant to Taylor because the stroke left her in the complete control of her ‘right mind’.

You may (and should be) wondering what the difference between our brain’s right and left hemispheres actually is. Each hemisphere consists of different structures that are responsible for different functions (although some structures exist simultaneously in both hemispheres). The two halves are separated by a structure called the corpus collosum, which facilitates their communication. According to Taylor, our ‘right mind’ works as a “parallel processor...and is carefree, spontaneous and imaginative. It allows our artistic juices to flow free without inhibition or judgment.” In contrast, the left hemisphere is known to be more of a factual, decisive entity that focuses on chronology and details. These differences are important to fully understand, because the philosophical perspective and spiritual experience that Taylor commits to for the entirety of the book’s final half is due to her right mind experience.

“I remember that first day of the stroke with terrific bitter-sweetness. In the absence of the normal functioning of my left orientation association area, my perception of my physical boundaries was no longer limited to where my skin met air. I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle. The energy of my spirit seemed to flow like a great whale gliding through a sea of silent euphoria...this absence of physical boundary was one of glorious bliss.” This is how Dr. Taylor recalled the day of her stroke, and she goes on to compare her experience to the Japanese Buddhist philosophy of Zen and reaching ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Nirvana’.

At first thought, I was in disagreement with the idea that a massive stroke, a trauma that quite often leads to death or extensive damage, could change a person in such a positive and deeply spiritual way. Also, Nirvana is a state of mind that has only been reached by very few Buddhist monks, and only after an extensive period of strenuous meditation. My personal life experiences and scientifically-based college education has simply not influenced me towards this direction of philosophical thinking and optimism. But as I pondered the situation and its outcome for some time, I realize now how intricately intertwined Taylor’s new personality was with her anatomical abnormality, and that the ‘absence’ of or the specific damage to her left mind resulted in such a dramatic perspective alteration, I concluded that her story had the potential to change the world of brain science as we know it.

I recommend this book to anyone with a curiosity about what constitutes the ‘mind’ and ‘self’, or is interested in neuro-anatomical study with a little bit of spice. It is a story worth reading, knowing and telling. I guarantee you will learn a great amount about your own brain (consciousness), and a little something more about your personality. It may give you a fascinating perspective into why you may be more or less creative than others. So go ahead, don’t hesitate; just let your decisive ‘left mind’ take over and read this book.

After a strenuous eight years of recovery, today Dr. Taylor has been named one of *TIME Magazine's Most Influential People in the World* for 2008, she has been interviewed by Oprah and PBS' Charlie Rose, spoken at TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design Conference), and given numerous presentations on various topics involving the brain to professional organizations around the world. With 25-pages on her *curriculum vitae*, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor is utterly successful. A speaker, teacher, artist, writer, researcher, author, friend and daughter; she is a tremendous recovery story and a light of hope for all.

Ashley R. Baumann

Submitted to the New York Times

Target audience: General public