



The Joy of Being Alive

It happened...



I have been meaning to talk to you for a long time. There is so much I would like to say—let me try to make a beginning.

Exactly a year ago—June 26, 1982—I was wheeled into the theatre of a London clinic for a bypass operation. Earlier that year, I had had a heart attack and I was advised to go for a bypass. The heart is a little like a coil type boiler—only more complicated. There are several major arteries that supply blood to the heart—four of these in my case were choked up 80 per cent. If the boiler was to survive as a functioning unit, it was necessary to replace parts of the coil which were choked. This is done by grafting veins from other parts of the body (usually the legs) to bypass the blocked areas of the arteries. This is a fairly major piece of surgery; though, in the hands of a competent surgeon abroad, it is fairly routine.

Two days later, things fell apart. I had a stroke. I was paralysed on my right side. At the same time, other complications set in and at one time things seemed to be touch-and-go. But I survived...

Twenty days later when I was back a little bit to my senses, I realised that my right arm had been affected but, what was worse, my speech was affected. For some strange

reason, a miniscule blood clot had travelled up the blood stream from the heart and had lodged itself in the brain. I had been struck by a phenomenon called *aphasia*.

I wonder how many of us are aware how wonderful a piece of equipment the human brain is. The left side of the brain has areas that control the function of speech. When we say 'speech', we normally refer to the act of speaking. But it involves hearing, reading, writing and comprehending, in addition to speaking—together one complex whole. In a larger context it involves all the five senses; what they register gets transmuted to an idea or a concept, which in turn gets translated to a written or spoken word. Normally all this movement takes place instantly and effortlessly.

When I had a stroke, the part of the brain which controls the language mechanism became disorganised. The prefix 'a' in Greek stands for 'without'. Two of the common words which everyone knows are amnesia—loss of memory; and anaesthesia—loss of sensation. A third word is aphasia. This is, literally, the loss of speech. If you are simply gagged, you can still read, write and understand speech. But in aphasia, the language ability underlying all these activities suffers damage. My speech, my reading, writing and verbal comprehension were badly affected, but, curiously, my nonverbal comprehension remained unimpaired.

As I look back on the earlier months of my recovery, I am rather amused at some of the incidents that come to my mind. Anu would ask me the colour of a patch of grass and I would confidently say "pink". I would say "left" and put out my right hand. I could see letters on a newspaper, I could decipher a few simple words, but beyond that the newspaper made no sense. I could remember only a dozen letters of the alphabet and not in proper sequence. It took me almost a month's assiduous exercising to master the alphabet. Although, curiously, I could write my signature from the word go! It took me a lot of time and effort learning to add two digit numbers—although I could follow a sequence of numbers in a hand of rummy!

As I look back over this last one year, many thoughts come to my mind.

I often asked in moods of self-pity; why did it happen to me? I realise now that the question is meaningless. The only meaningful question is: I am alive—where do I go from here?

People have been very good to me. Yet, for the last several months I have been so hopelessly egocentric—I was only concerned with myself. I am just beginning to grow out of this. I am just beginning to realise what family and colleagues and friends mean to me. If I have been rude or unsympathetic, I ask your forgiveness.

In the last one year, I have learnt to be humble. I used to believe that verbal brilliance and impeccable logic are great things in life. I realise that there are other more important and lasting values—warmth, understanding, the joy of seeing other people grow, the joy of being alive.

To my young friends, in your twenties and thirties, I would say: do not take your health for granted. Nurture it, cherish it, hold it very precious.

Six months ago, I received a greeting card which then in that frame of mind, and even now, meant a lot to me. I would like to share it with you:

*If you think you are beaten, you are,
If you think you dare not, you don't,
If you like to win, but you think you can't,
It is almost certain you won't,
If you think you'll lose, you're lost,
For out of the world we find,
Success begins with a fellow's will
It's all in the state of mind.
Life's battles don't always go
To the stronger or faster man,
But soon or late the man who wins
Is the man who thinks he can.*

A year has passed by. I have made excellent progress. But I am aware of how far I have to go. And I know that you are with me. Together, I must overcome.

(Fireside, August 1983)