

# “I’M A SURVIVOR TOO”

*Reflections of a Stroke Victim’s Spouse*

BY JIM MERSEREAU

March 3, 2007 was a day that changed our lives forever. It was a Saturday. We’d planned to do yard work, clean house, and have friends over for dinner but Linda woke up sick. She had a terrible headache, vomiting, dizziness and she ached all over. She decided to spend the day in bed and we cancelled our dinner plans.

Around two o’clock in the afternoon I heard strange sounds coming from the bedroom, almost as if someone was calling for help, but in an odd weak voice I’d never heard before. Entering the bedroom it was immediately obvious Linda had suffered a stroke. Her face was twisted, her speech distorted, and she couldn’t move the left side of her body. A sense of dread washed over me as I realized what had happened.

The paramedics arrived quickly. The ER staff in our little local medical center was professional and efficient. Initial reports were encouraging, it was a minor stroke and the effects were already fading. Still, the staff decided to transfer her to a stroke trauma center seventy-five miles away in Chattanooga - just to be on the safe side. In the days to come I’d find myself thanking God for that decision.

Erlanger Medical Center is a level one-stroke trauma center, one of the best in the nation. Over the next five hours Linda was admitted, evaluated, and determined to have had a minor stroke in the left hemisphere of the cerebellum. The decision was made to keep her in the Neurological ICU for several days of observation.

After staying with her Saturday night and all day Sunday, she seemed to be doing well so I decided to go home for the night. Around ten o’clock, just after I’d fallen asleep, the telephone rang. It was Linda’s ICU nurse.

“Mr. Mersereau? Please hold for Dr. Strait.” Through the fog of sleep I found myself wondering who exactly Dr. Strait was and why he wanted to talk to me at ten o’clock at night. Suddenly that sense of dread from the previous day came rushing back.

“Mr. Mersereau, this is Dr. Strait, I’m a neurosurgeon. Your wife has taken a significant turn for the worse. The left side of her cerebellum is rapidly swelling and pressing against the brain stem, cutting off vital life functions. Sir, we have to operate right now or your wife will die.”

Now I was wide-awake but totally confused.

“This was a minor stroke.” I said. “She was doing well. What happened?”

I don’t remember his answer but I do vividly recall the increased urgency in his tone as he told me again, “If we don’t operate soon, she will die.”

“Will she survive the surgery?” I asked, afraid of what his answer might be.  
“I can’t tell you that sir. All I can say is she is very sick and in great danger.”

It was a long ride to Chattanooga that night. The roads were dark and deserted. I was painfully aware as I was driving that Linda was in surgery - brain surgery, and she might be gone before I even made it to the hospital.

My mind was a jumble of unanswerable questions: “Will she make it?” “If so, how handicapped will she be?” “What will our lives be like?” “How will I take care of her?” “What if she doesn’t survive, how can I handle that? What will I tell the kids?”

The surgery was finally over at 3:00 am. The doctor said he had to remove a large portion of the left side of her cerebellum. Would she live? Probably, but the next seventy-two hours would be critical.

The next three days are a blur in my memory. Our children arrived from out of town. They struggled for days with the shock of what had happened to their mother. There were hotels, and restaurant meals, and numerous consultations with an army of doctors. The good news was that Linda would live. The bad news was it would be a long road to recovery. An extended stay in a Rehab facility was in the immediate future, followed by twenty-four hour in-home care and a long period of outpatient therapy.

It was at this point I started becoming aware of my own little crisis. Physically I was exhausted. Up to that point my body had been running on adrenaline and caffeine. I was beginning to crash. Emotionally, I began progressing through the five classic stages of grief:

- Denial – “This can’t really be happening!”
- Bargaining – “God, if you’ll heal her I’ll spend the rest of my life caring for lepers in Calcutta.”
- Anger – “These were *supposed* to be the best years of our lives!!!”
- Depression – I fought it, and denied it, but the fact was I suffered through a low-grade depression for several weeks afterwards.
- Acceptance – I’m still working on this one but progressing nicely, thank you.

The following year was difficult and challenging for both of us. Linda had four weeks of in-patient rehab followed by four months of outpatient care; we’ve had to deal with a mountain of medical bills and associated expenses; and I missed a lot of work and several important business trips. But in the process we discovered several strategies that helped us weather the storm:

- Relying heavily on our faith, we trusted God daily for recovery and strength. I found myself wondering how people make it through a crisis like this without a strong faith in God’s Goodness and Mercy.
- The support of friends and family was crucial. We were overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and concern, along with meals, financial gifts, and many

other kinds of assistance. We quickly came to appreciate the wisdom of simply accepting all help that was offered.

- To help alleviate some of the financial stress we reprioritized our budget, eliminating all unnecessary spending. Rather than being a sacrifice, this step actually provided a good deal of relief and some much appreciated breathing room in our overall financial picture.
- Finally, we made an intentional effort to simplify our lives. We stopped trying to do so much – stopped being so busy. We spent much more time at home, just enjoying each other and relishing those things that are truly important in life.

As I look back now, fifteen months after the stroke, I realize that hidden deep within all the pain, challenges, and disappointments there were also a surprising number of blessings. I've already mentioned the outpouring of love and kindness from our church family that was so helpful and meant so much to us. Additionally, our youngest son decided to come home from California, so the empty nest is now not so empty for a while. Also, Linda has gained a new, calmer approach to life. I tease her and say that the stroke sure took a lot of the starch out of her personality. But the truth is she really does have a sweet, gentle spirit. I also admire her for the grit and determination she displays as she strives everyday to overcome her disabilities.

But without question the biggest blessing is what's taken place in our marriage. We've always had a reasonably good marriage but over these last fifteen months we've grown closer than ever. Our marriage is actually even stronger now as a result of what we've been through.

This road we've walked together has been painful, uncertain, and often scary. And yet, here we are. The road that lies ahead is also uncertain, filled with questions about health and employment and finances; but I know we'll be ok.

This has been an incredible, life-changing ordeal for Linda. Through it all she has proven herself to be a fighter, a survivor – and I'm proud of her. But this has been a harrowing journey for me as well, and I'm glad to report that despite the uncertainties and my occasional lack of faith; even after all the worrying, anxiety, and sleepless nights; I'm a survivor too and the future really doesn't look so bad after all.