

## **KLONDIKE NEUROLOGY**

**Some years ago, working on a novel about brain damage, I realized that it could not go farther until I met up with those who'd suffered it in its clinical form. This meant working in a hospital of course. At first, I encountered all the barriers lawyers set up to ward off nosy writers, but eventually I wrangled permission of authorities at a VA hospital to spend time with a severely dysfunctional patient whom I'll call what those on the staff did—the professor. I was granted access because he was a dull and helpless patient who would never leave the hospital, did not require a great deal of care and had not yet excited researchers. Since no one else wanted to be with him, they were happy to see me on the ward. 'Professor' was not a pseudonym but a link to his past life. Until viral encephalitis damaged his brain three years before, he'd headed the sociology department at a large northeastern university.**

He was a stocky man in his mid-sixties who, despite the fact that he got no exercise beyond his walks around the ward, looked to be in pretty good shape. His face retained just enough of his past authority and intelligence to make it possible, though certainly not easy, to forget his condition. He was an unusual patient because he retained his verbal and motor functions but had lost his short-term and most of his long-term memory. He spent most of his time trying in vain to recover biographical information such as – despite the fact that his wife and daughter visited him once or twice a week -- whether he was married, had children, and, most obsessively, why such questions stumped him. Again and again, as if with revelation, he said, “I think I have problems with my memory.” He usually ended his investigations by concluding that his problems were caused by acid indigestion, which in turn was eased by candy bars. After I understood this and began to bring him a stash when I visited, he was pleasant and lucid and seemingly glad to see me, but he never recognized me. If I left his room for even two or three minutes, he’d greet me when I returned as if he’d never seen me before. He liked to cover his deficit with one of two long-out-of-date

**expressions --“See you later, alligator!” or “After awhile, crocodile!” -- which, despite his amnesia, he’d retained from his adolescence.**

**Obsession with my own brain had brought me to the book I was writing, and endless frustration with the book had brought me to this research. Since he was obviously a great research opportunity, I met him at first with the detachment and curiosity that is the researcher’s bulletproof vest. Though my book was driven by the view that the human brain, ‘healthy’ or ‘damaged’, is basically capricious and tyrannical, I felt safe from too much identification with him until I realized we shared an addiction. Klondike solitaire was the only activity that interested him, and it interested me a lot more than I liked to admit.**

**I could not match him for frequency of course. He played hour after hour, all day long, every day, with fixed concentration that repetition and boredom never diluted. Like visits by me or others, each candy bar I brought him, each breakfast of each day when he woke up, and each realization that he had “memory problems,” every game was his first. Since he did not, like me, own a computer, he played**

with real cards, spreading them carefully on his tray table, which he rolled back and forth as he moved between his bed and the lounge chair in the corner of his room. Visible in his face and posture, the attention he gave to the game was fierce and unequivocal, locating him so completely in the present moment that any hint of his tragic circumstances disappeared. Like anyone who plays a game - any game -- wholeheartedly, his life dissolved in its temporal arc. Its outcome was the only future that concerned him. Outside the game, he could not bear his memory deficit, but while he played, he forgot it. The fact that nothing mattered but the next card was a State of Grace to which he constantly returned. His disease, of course, was an accident of his past visited upon his future, but since the game freed him of past and future, it was impossible to doubt that, as long as he played, he was free of it.

Much though I wished to, I could not deny that the interest and concentration I felt when I played were every bit as avid as his. Nor could I pretend, since interest and concentration, not to mention the organization, logic and sensory-motor control the game required, are clear measures of neurological health, that the game's effects on my brain

were entirely different from its effect on his. Though I was more equivocal about it than he was, suffering no little guilt about wasting time on this dumb, useless activity, I was obviously no stranger to the State of Grace the game conferred, indeed, not at all sure, given the fact that I tended to be compulsive and puritanical in my work-habit, that this state and “wasting” time were synonymous.

Unlike him, I did not play with cards. These were the days when the personal computer was becoming a commodity. The Internet was fairly new, but it was years since Microsoft had discovered that solitaire, which had begun more than 200 years before as a form of fortune-telling -- eg, whether or not a game “came out” supposedly indicated whether or not the player’s desire would come true -- would become the most-used program in the Windows universe, the perfect means by which to develop fluency with a mouse and, as one of their programmers put it, “soothe those who are intimidated by the operating system.” (As an article in ‘Salon’ reported, “The Game’s pedagogical elements were also a handy cover story. When a Minnesota state legislator got caught playing solitaire during a 1995 debate on education funding, she claimed she

was merely doing ‘homework to improve her mouse dexterity.’”) If, like the professor, I’d had no computer, I’d have had to clear my desk of the notebooks, research material, envelopes, bills, shopping lists etc. which usually covered it, and then, of course, play the game, as he did, at a pace which, in contrast to its lightning speed on a computer, would seem like super-slow-motion, a slide-show rather than a movie. After shuffling and spreading my cards, I’d have had to endure, what? a time-lapse? between each brain-hand-eye coordination. In comparison to the effort required by my mouse, my physical actions – shuffling cards, laying them out, placing one on another, etc – would seem almost aerobic. With no discernable gap between visual perception, logical association and the clicks they produced, the temporal arc in which I played was so compressed that it seemed to eliminate separation between cause and effect, not to mention move me at breakneck speed toward the gratification which eluded me everywhere else in my life. While the professor had to put one card on another, thus deal with two separate entities, I put them together so fast that it seemed as if they’d never been apart. Day by day, I was more startled by my speed and facility, the spontaneity of my response to the

cards. Was it possible I was getting smarter? It was as if my brain were constantly being upgraded with smaller and faster chips and a better operating system. Needless to say, I'd failed to notice how much the game had changed my work-environment. I took it for granted that it was always available on my desk, accessible through the same instrument I use for composition, allowing me with a single click on the same keyboard I'm using to write this sentence to shift from endlessly complex and anxiety-producing work for which coherence and beauty, not to mention truth, are always uncertain and gratification highly unlikely to the immediate gratification of a game I play with the same hand and almost the same mind I'll use to edit, save or delete this sentence or, if I get too anxious or frustrated or angry at myself, escape through the computer's rabbit hole to other games, such as checking my email, surfing the net, calling up a newspaper, magazine or pornography or ordering a book I'll never find time to read. So powerful and dependable, so comforting, grounding, and ventilating is such escape that resisting it order to hang in with my work can seem masochistic or, as I've noted, puritanical. No need here to explore how all this -- digital speed and ease versus typing or hand-writing, the

**difference between the absolute-solitude-no-escape in which I used to work and the constant escape offered me now, etc -- affect my writing or that of countless others who use this technology, not to mention our longed-for readers who use it as well and are thus, like us, becoming so habituated to immediate gratification and intolerance for anxiety that a sentence like this tries their patience as much as would shuffling and spreading cards for the solitaire game they can just as well play on their computer, tablet or smart-phone.**

**As I'd noted, however, the professor and I were proof that the game's effects were independent of technology. Fast or slow, it recalibrated desire so that it aimed at possible rather than impossible gratification. It replaced his hopeless desire for memory and mine for a reason to write in a world overwhelmed with information with desire for, say, a black Queen and a red King and the absurd feeling that one actually accomplished something by putting them together. Some days, it seemed to me that all my accomplishments, perhaps all accomplishments in general, were nothing but inflated versions of this essential act of organization -- putting things together, moving a step closer to**



**the point where all objects of your attention – in this case your cards, in others, your ideas, insecurities, conflicts, etc – would merge into one. Games of any sort, of course, are shaped by such concentration, and no serious player would question such neurological benefit. Accept the rules and spread your cards and you'll always feel, at least for a moment, that dread is not immutable. To watch the professor's face when he played was to know that doing so was more curative, not to mention more fun, than any medication the doctors could offer. Watch mine and I can't doubt that you'd see effects not all that different from a shot of vodka, a toke of marijuana or, if I'd taken that route, an anti-depressant. Like these drugs, the game was addictive, and like all addictions, as the professor discovered when the game was over, temporary in its benefits. What do you gain from consolidating cards but the need to consolidate them again?**

**As I say, my habit was not so different from his, but as it happened, I had another means of working with my brain. About a year before I met him, I'd discovered the Zen practice called zazen. For one hour every morning I sat cross-legged on a cushion before a blank wall, counting my**

**breath, watching my mind and, of course, dealing with my neurology. As in solitaire, I stepped outside my ordinary life but not into a game. I had no cards, no goal, no rules, no object of attention but the present moment, which always, of course, disappeared as it appeared. Every time I sat, my frenzy of thought, memory, boredom, doubt and anxiety showed me how much my brain required, if not the long-term desires of my ordinary life, at least the short-term hope and organization of a game like solitaire. Why was I convinced that they were antithetical to each other?**

**Early on in Zen, one is dangerously prone to over-excitement, belief in ultimate, never-to-diminish breakthrough. Even if one has known them before, the feelings produced by such epiphanies will often seem unique, almost intoxicating. One such moment occurred a few weeks after I met the professor. While sitting that morning, I was suddenly nothing but the act in which I was engaged. More exactly, I was nothing but the moment in which it occurred. Stripped of any future-sense, I sat without purpose, hope or desire, thus freed up entirely from the organizational function of my brain. Despite the fact that (as here) I'd**

later remember, celebrate and (as here) reflect on the moment, it seemed to me I was free of memory and self consciousness. You could say that, by becoming the present moment, I had become as transient and formless as it was. My brain was firing as before but between myself and it there seemed to be a temporal and spatial gap that differentiated it from me. Though it continued to produce its usual onslaught of memory, thought and emotion, its firings seemed like transient flashes which had no more to do with me than a blink of an eye or a muscle cramp. I was observing its game, not playing it. *Just* sitting, *just* in the present moment, I had entered a realm in which time itself was a function of band-width, an electrical pulse which was not by any stretch of thought or imagination related to what I took to be myself. Since all my desires were laughable, my contentment was unqualified. I'm sure this wasn't the first time I'd known such peace, but it seemed to be so. It felt like victory in the only game I'd ever wanted to play, and it made the neurological state I'd left behind – 'normal' brain function – look like brain damage.

Later that morning, I visited the professor again. Since the hospital was a long subway ride from my home I had

plenty of time to contemplate my revelation. Among other things, it seemed to me I'd finally understood why zazen and solitaire were antithetical to each other. Though both were about freedom from purpose and desire, solitaire provided it by means of limitation and reduction, replacing the great ontological yearnings – for certainty, say, or safety, not to mention freedom from illness, loneliness and death – with the limited goal of organizing cards. In essence, it was a metaphorical experience of that which Zen, aiming at altogether freedom from goals, aimed to provide concretely. Was it possible that such concrete freedom was, as I'd experienced, freedom from the brain itself? Could such freedom endure beyond the transient, intoxicating level I'd just known? If so, Zen was a lot more radical and Quixotic than I'd ever suspected.

In “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind,” Shunryu Suzuki, quoting the great Zen patriarch, Ehei Dogen, writes: “To study Zen is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self.” More than once, however, he also notes that “losing the self” – by which he means any form of escape -- is antithetical to Zen. Like most beginning Zen students, I'd thought a lot about this point-of-view, but it seemed to me, just

then on the subway, that I'd only now understood it. What I'd known that morning -- *just* sitting, *just* in the present moment -- was "forgetting" myself, but what I knew in solitaire, fixed on external objects and aiming at a specific goal, was "losing" myself. The latter was useful and restorative, of course, but it was also -- as the professor and I had constantly discovered -- transient, seductive and addictive, a respite from suffering that, like any drug or escape, left us, in the end, exactly where we'd been before. All junkies -- crack or weed or anti-depressants, alcohol, TV or video games -- knew this trap. Indeed, the world we lived in, almost entirely organized around the need for entertainment and escape, was every day more consumed by it. Losing the self solved nothing. Indeed, since it generated an insatiable need to do so again, it was almost guaranteed to make things worse. Where would I see better proof of this than in the professor and me, addicted to a game which left us, every time we won or lost, with a greater yearning to play it again?

When I arrived he was in the midst of a game, sitting up in bed and, as usual, fixed on his cards like a child on a favorite toy. I knew at once that things were looking good for

him. He glanced at me when I arrived but an instant later turned another card. Standing at the foot of his bed, I knew that it was the just one he needed. His smile was radiant and, as I discovered with my own, contagious. One by one, he moved his cards until they were arranged in four horizontal lines near the top of his tray table. After enjoying for a moment this perfect order he'd achieved, he swept them into a single pile and arranged them in a deck he squeezed with force and satisfaction. Finally, nodding in my direction, he noticed the bag of candy I'd brought and, with almost as much interest as he showed in his cards, examined its contents. Extracting a Milky Way, he unwrapped it carefully and, with serious, concentrated pleasure, took a small bite and chewed it slowly, purposefully, as if to extend his pleasure as long as possible. How many times had I noted the similarities between the impulse toward solitaire and desire for sweets, not to mention sex or, to bring it round to its obvious parallel, masturbation?

**"Hello, professor."**

**"Hi."**

**“How are you today?”**

**He shook his head. “No good.”**

**Abrupt mood-shifts were hardly uncommon for him, but I’d never seen his face go dark so quickly. Once again, he was the prisoner of his recalcitrant brain, a hopeless victim of his pathology. “I’m having problems with my memory.”**

**“I’m sorry to hear that.”**

**“Am I married? Do I have children? I’m trying to remember, but I can’t!”**

**So much without thought did I answer him that I’d no idea where my words originated. It was as if my brain split off from me, producing words on its own as it produced the clicks of my mouse when I was caught up in the game.**

**“Instead of trying to remember, why don’t you try to forget?”**

**“What?”**

**“You spend so much time trying to remember things...why not try to forget? After all, you’re an amnesiac. You should be able to do that easily.”**

**For a long moment, he stared at me expressionless. Then he laughed aloud. He wasn’t smiling. One could not suspect that he found anything funny. Mirthless, hollow, louder now, his laugh resembled nothing so much as the “Ho! Ho! Ho!” you hear from a professional Santa Claus. He’d always been mild, congenial, no threat to anyone, but his laugh seemed more and more aggressive. I left the room quickly but even at the far end of the long hall between his room and the nurses’ station, where a doctor and nurse on duty were also taking notice, I could hear him bellowing. “Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!” I don’t know that I’ve ever heard a more frightening sound.**