



HEADSTRONG

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CASS' CORNER

"Where Did that Dream Go? Was It Even There. . .?!!!"

I never thought I would hear of anybody else going through what I did, following three-month hospitalization following my car accident, at the end of March, in 1985.



Sure, common sense and rationale would dictate that there are surely countless individuals who have similarly suffered.

Brain injury and the resultant effects on one's physical and mental health are simply not high on the list of conversational topics for us. Our families are intimately familiar with the accident and trauma caused by it. Classmates in school or co-workers are surely aware of the incident. I would like to think that, in the small tourist town I lived and grew up in, a good percentage of the community's population heard about it or were otherwise made aware.

It is safe to say that one may call it kind of a 'private infirmity' or happening. Circumstance or occasion to talk about what may be more minor effects of said accident do not often arise. Maybe (hopefully?), people are simply more concerned with or aware of your recovery.

Sooner or immediately following my brain injury and release home, from hospital, I think I had to have been super happy. Being alone in bed, in the sanitized environment that is your hospital grows tiresome.

I remember one thing, and that was venturing down the hallway during the long bed-ridden hours, to the nurses' station. One of these appreciated professionals showed the fifteen-year-old patient I then was, how to measure blood pressure (I do not, now, recall how to do that, but I know I was shown).

You know what? I recall something else that really bothered me, too:

I knew I was the one in hospital. Pretty sure I was aware what had happened and even the classmate I had been in the Audi 5000 car with, when the accident took place.

My mind's eye, though, told me something else. I was devastated because I 'just knew' that Mom had been in a car accident. I was sure of it! I soon learned that my suspicion was inaccurate and nothing of the sort had actually occurred. Still, though . . . given ample time and opportunity, our minds are masterful at creating fictional circumstances.

It must have been last week. We were at the Hamilton Brain Injury Association (HBIA) clubhouse. In all honesty, I do not recall how the topic came up.

One of our group's beloved and long-term members, though, made the statement that he had had only one dream in the past thirty-five, forty years, since he suffered his cranial trauma.

That rang eerily familiar to me. My short-term memory was severely affected following my coma, but one memory is etched deeply: for several years (roughly speaking) following that time, I did not dream, either!

My friend (of whom I spoke, my fellow HBIA member) is insistent. He has only had one dream in the past near-forty years (perhaps I am the lucky one; I have beautiful, vivid, often sentimental dreams, now).

Another group member and acquaintance shared a similar history and concern. This led me to research and investigate:

Material I uncovered online, from Michael J Breus Ph.D. of Sleep Newzzz talked, in general, about study of the dreaming brain, using neural-imaging tools from EEG to PET scan and even MRI to observe brain activity while dreaming.

A lot of what is known about brain mechanics in general comes from observing what happens when the brain is damaged. The frequency and characteristics of dreams following injury or neurological illness have been studied somewhat.

Swiss scientists, for instance, shared the results of a study involving a 73-year-old woman who had entirely lost her capacity to dream after suffering a stroke affecting parts of her occipital lobe (located in back of brain). The occipital lobe is deeply involved with visual information, including colour, perception, spatial awareness and the detection of movement. The woman experienced visual problems following her stroke but, more unexpectedly, she also experienced a complete cessation of dreams.

I was the same way. Previously, I (and she) recalled dreaming regularly, but, following our respective head traumas, there was no recollection (or existence, perhaps?) of any dreams, at all.

Earlier research concerning the apparent loss of the ability to dream following brain injury is from descriptions from 1883, from Charcot, the individual describing the discussed malady.

I read about it in a piece, 'Cessation of Dreaming After Brain Injury,' from M.E. Humphrey and O.L. Zangwill (Department of Neurology, Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, and the Institute of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford). In the writing, I read of the patient, who was 'a linguist and classical scholar of some eminence,' who suffered a sudden and nearly complete abolition of their visual memory after said cerebral trauma.

The patient was formerly an excellent visualizer, but following the accident was entirely unable "to imagine the appearance of his wife and children, or to summon up a mental image of his childhood home." All spheres of the patient's visual memory were disturbed, as such.

Considering the patient's otherwise well-preserved intelligence and overall memory, this defect was regarded by Charcot as a 'circumscribed visual amnesia.'

It is not customary to attribute this infirmity wholly to lapses in visual imagery. This illustrates that, regardless of the era in which the brain injury is diagnosed, it remains, forever, enshrouded in mystery.

I have toyed with the idea in the years and decades since my accident that maybe I actually was having the dreams and simply did not remember them, upon waking.

Talking about it, even now, though, is as frustrating as anything.

When I was in a high school physiology course, sooner after my trauma, I learned something that intrigued me and that I thought provided the answer I had long sought.

Perhaps the hypothalamus in my brain had been affected, or damaged, in the accident.

See, the thalamus "determines the body's reaction,' to outside influences. The hypothalamus, as I recall from these high school studies, dictates the precise bodily response or reaction to said influence.

Hence, if my hypothalamus was so affected . . . confusing and frustrating, isn't it? Maybe my brain 'had now forgotten how' to react to such injury and influence.

Life goes on . . .

