

Words Before

This is a true story. I wrote it after a stroke took my words leaving me unable to speak, read and write – and after I learned how to teach myself those skills again.

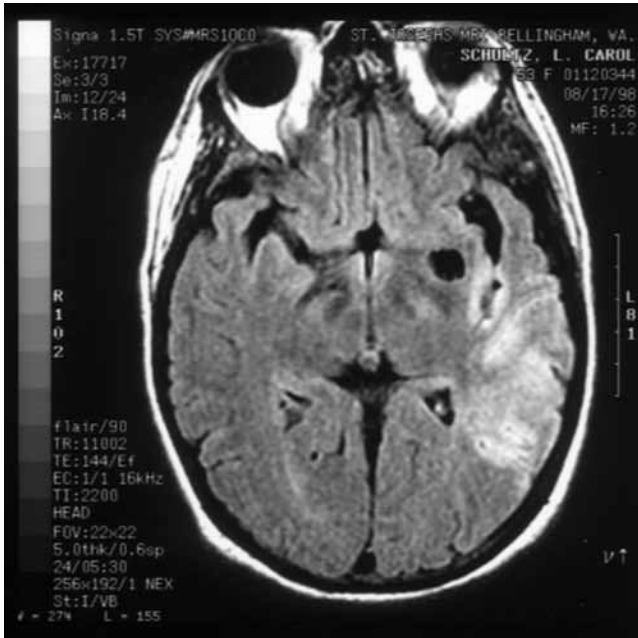
Called aphasia, *without speech*, this condition presents itself to the victim as an inability to say words and, sometimes, the inability to understand the spoken word. Aphasia is due to brain damage caused by stroke, injury or birth defect.

Aphasia comes with difficult to answer questions. For example, what is it like inside the aphasic mind? How does one learn to speak, read and write when an impaired brain prevents landing spots for that learning? Where does learning go when it cannot go where it has been?

To realistically portray the early aphasic experience, and answer its questions, *Crossing the Void* should have been told as it was then. Silently, on empty pages ... wordlessly. But how could you have understood, and how could I have written ... without words?

Even as I begin to write, I teeter on the brink between two worlds. The one, of not being able to find the words I need, and the other, of almost always being able to find them. It is almost too soon to be writing, as words still come at a premium. It is not easy, this chore ... but manageable.

The Void



Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the author's brain the day after her stroke. Viewed as if looking up from below, the right side of the image is the left side of the brain. The infarct is seen as the clouded area on the right side of the image.

Part One

Entering the Void

There's a land where the mountains are nameless,
And the rivers all run God knows where ...

There's a land—oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back—and I will.

—Robert Service, *The Spell of the Yukon*

Mysterious, compelling, the Yukon had called to us, too, as it had beckoned Robert Service. My husband and I are returning from our second canoe trip in the Yukon. As outdoor enthusiasts and owners of a specialty sporting goods store, we had first paddled the Yukon River from Whitehorse following the route of the gold rushers to Carmacks two years ago. Now we have paddled down the Teslin and Yukon Rivers from Johnson's Crossing to Carmacks with my sister, Betty Ann, and our friend, Randy.

I had been eager to go back to the Yukon. But this time it has not been the same. Usually on a trip like this, even at 53 years old, I feel better and better and stronger and stronger as the days go on. This time, I have not. Always short of breath with an elevated pulse, no energy, no strength. I am not definably sick, but neither am I well.

This morning in Whitehorse, we put Betty Ann on a plane to Boston, Massachusetts. Frank, Randy and I plan to take three or four more days to drive down the Alaska Highway to our home in Bellingham, Washington. Tonight, we have made camp in a campground just a few miles south of brilliantly aqua-green Muncho Lake in northern British Columbia.

The campground is in a partially cleared area with primitive campsites located around a loop road through the trees. The store/gas station/restaurant is by the highway and is noteworthy for having a nice, well worn bathhouse with a shower that has lots of hot water – a welcome switch from the metered showers in most of the tourist showers in the Yukon. After settling in, we sack out in our tent while Randy starts snoring in his.

The nightmare does not pass

I am restless in a strange sleep. In a quandary how to make myself quiet. I start with my knees propped up to lessen the back pain that's been with me this trip. When lying on my back brings no relief, I lie on the left side until my arm goes to sleep. Then I switch to the right side until the other arm goes to sleep. Thick mucus accumulates. My mouth wants to clear it. Cannot clear it.

In my sleep, I am in a bad dream. I am half asleep and half awake. My being half asleep hears Nature calling me to go outside the tent into a raging storm. My being half awake knows there is no storm outside the tent. It is calm outside. The storm is in me.

The conflict between them leaves me confused. It would be nice to go to the bathroom, but I do not want to deal with a storm's turmoil. I do not want to go outside. To get dressed. To fight the rain, the cold, the wind. Hold it. Postpone it. This storm will pass. This nightmare will pass. Sleep.

The nightmare does not pass. Something is not right. Can I find a better position? I thrash. My arm is asleep. My throat is stuck to itself. I need to move. I want the turmoil to go away. Want to sleep. Want peace. The raging storm will not leave my head. Through it, I hear Frank's voice: "Carol, are you all right?"

Why is he bothering me? I respond by muttering to him. My head does not want to wake up. *How much time passes?*

Frank is insistent, "Carol, are you okay?"

Did he not hear me? I am so tired. Again, I mutter to him.

I struggle to find peace. Frank rustles. I think he is getting up to go to the bathroom. I should go too. Then maybe I can find rest.

“Carol, what’s the matter with you?” he demands.

Frank:

I was awakened about two a.m. by Carol thrashing around on her side of the tent. We were sleeping under, not in, our sleeping bags. I asked her several times what the matter was but she didn’t respond, just kept on moving around. I turned on my headlight and asked, “Carol, are you all right?”

I make my mind open its eyes and see him sitting beside me with his headlamp beam focused on me. *Why is he looking at me?* He never turns his flashlight on to look at me. What is the matter?

My head slowly and deliberately thinks out my condition. I want to answer. I think out the thoughts carefully. My throat attempts to clear its thickness. I speak. The sounds are gibberish.

Frank:

She was lying there with a blank, vacant stare on her face and emitting some faint, guttural grunts.

Have I had a stroke? Frank’s father had a stroke some years earlier. Even without words for them, I recognize that my speechlessness is a symptom.

Frank is visibly alarmed. I see he wonders too. He pulls my sleeping bag aside to look at my right arm. I know what he is looking for. He knows loss of speech often includes right side paralysis. I know that too. My right arm is dead.

I have had a stroke.

I pull my right arm up with my left and place it over my chest. Frank covers me with my sleeping bag. He says, “I’ll take care of you. I’ll find help.”

Frank:

I alerted Randy that Carol had had a stroke, and we had to get her to help. We both dressed, and got Carol into the van, leaving our camp to take care of itself.