



Andrew

Opening the Door to a New Life

Andrew was lying on the stretcher outside the operating room, overcome with a profound and inexplicable sense of peace and an inner feeling that everything was going to be fine. It made no sense. At 58, his life as a successful business consultant, newspaper columnist, husband and father had been completely shattered. The operating room nurse interrupted his reflections to confirm his identity. “What’s your date of birth?” she asked.

“March 5, 1948,” Andrew responded but he added in his own mind that he was also born a second time, just two weeks ago, on Christmas Eve, when he suddenly fell ill. His cancer diagnosis arrived as “a present wrapped in barbed wire”. Velma, his loving wife of thirty years, woke up to a violent shaking in the bed. (He joked later, “Not the type of shaking you want to have on your bed.”)

Andrew was trapped in a grand mal seizure; he was shaking uncontrollably, gritting his teeth, eyes staring deep into nowhere. Velma called the paramedics. The seizure continued in the ambulance, into the emergency room, shaking the life out of his body. Forty-five minutes later he was sedated. His CAT scan showed a tumor the size of a tangerine in the front of his brain, but the doctors couldn’t be sure if it was malignant. Surgery would follow in two weeks.

As his nurse wheeled him into the operating suite, Andrew was still aching from the seizure that ripped his muscles, yet he felt an incredible sense of peace that defied any sense of reasonableness given what was to come. Dr. Bernstein, a renowned neurosurgeon, was about to drill out a large piece of bone, cut through the normal brain tissue, and carefully dissect out as much of this tumor as possible—all while Andrew was awake.

This ‘awake-craniotomy’, done as a three-hour day-surgery procedure, is used to minimize effects on the normal brain. But even with the cutting-edge technology, Andrew and Velma had been told that he may come out of surgery with his emotions flattened, expressing no joy or sorrow, or so irritable and lacking in insight that he’d blow up uncontrol-

lably— or his mental function may be so compromised he'd 'wake up like a vegetable.' Regardless Andrew relaxed into the table, enveloped in a peace that passed all the understanding that he'd ever known.

Andrew's thoughts were drawn to his 96-year-old mother-in-law. A decade earlier, when Andrew's sense of humour had exceeded her tolerance, she suggested that he should have his brain examined. Now, lying on the stretcher, Andrew mused that "With an elementary school education, she knew the diagnosis long before the 'doctor-guy' with the long list of letters behind his name and fifteen years in university."

Andrew also contemplated his mother-in-law's initial reaction to hearing that he had a brain tumor. "Andrew, you have not been listening to God." He later wrote, "This was quite a remarkable insight which blurted out of her mouth automatically. Perhaps it was a blinding glimpse of the obvious to her; however, to me, that insightful chord struck deep. It was one that I listened to and that still lingers in my mind—often during my daily meditations."

Andrew was willing to peer deeply into any situation, listen to every comment, and investigate it with an open heart and mind. Instead of being angry at his mother-in-law for a thoughtless comment, he thought about what he could learn from her way of thinking.

The surgeon started his saw. It made a terrible grinding sound like a powerful coffee blender. It took Andrew over a year before he was able to go into a coffee shop for fear of this terrible sound.

With his fingers deep in Andrew's brain, the neurosurgeon asked Andrew if he was seeing anything unusual, trying to assess whether Andrew's brain was being irritated by the manipulation. Suddenly, Andrew was pulled upwards and inwards all at once. He saw a beautiful purple/violet flame, an image that mysteriously appeared twice during the operation. He was no longer just in the 21st century; he stretched himself back in time more than two thousand years. The songs of wisdom passed down for generations echoed in his head: "Ezekiel saw a fire a-burning, way in the middle of the air ... a fire within a circle of fire a-burning..."

His visions of a spiritual light reminded Andrew of his father-in-law, Arthur. As a young man, Arthur emigrated from Britain, farmed in Northern Ontario, and then served in World War II. Called to the ministry on his return, he brought his wife and three young daughters to Montreal, where he attended McGill University's School of Divinity.

Arthur and his family were dirt poor but happy and thriving until

he suddenly contracted meningitis and fell into a deep coma. His fellow divinity students organized an around-the-clock prayer vigil, praying to God to save this inspirational young man. Dr. Wilder Penfield, the pioneering neurosurgeon who first performed awake-craniotomies, the same procedure that Andrew was undergoing, was called in to try to save Arthur's life. Penfield watched as Arthur's body shrivelled, and two weeks later suggested that the family gather to say their last goodbyes.

Meanwhile, Arthur felt angels pulling him to heaven. He felt himself going through a tunnel with a brilliant array of colors that are not seen in this physical world. He felt such a profound sense of peace that he was sorry he had to return to this world. But he understood his time had not come and his work was not done.

The next morning Arthur was sitting up at his bedside eating breakfast. Dr. Penfield was dumfounded and called it a miracle. Arthur went on to serve others in the ministry for 47 years and had an enormous impact on many people. He had a deep love of nature, the earth, the planets, and the stars. He truly wondered about the magnitude of the sun, the sky, and how the universe came together. To him it was more than just idle chatter.

The same forces that hold the stars together and allow the grass to grow were working in Andrew's body as he was wheeled to the recovery room, then in the car ride home later that same evening.

Andrew believes he thought about his father-in-law on the operating table because he was expecting a miracle as had happened to Arthur. His belief that his brain tumor happened for a purpose has not wavered. But the wait for the results and his experience over the next few months clouded over his faith in a bright future. It took two long weeks for the doctors to process the specimen from Andrew's brain. The diagnosis: anaplastic oligodendroglioma, a rare but aggressive tumor affecting about 1 in 10,000 people with a cancer diagnosis. Andrew was completely beside himself when told that without further treatment he had perhaps a year to live.

Fortunately, another test showed that the tumor had a special genetic change (1p19q) that meant Andrew could be offered a new chemotherapy. Andrew is extremely grateful to the medical professionals who provided this state-of-the-art treatment and he quickly agreed to take the chemotherapy every month for a full year. His physical healing had begun.

But, everything in Andrew's life had changed. He could no longer work. His ability to concentrate and think clearly was compromised. Even filling out insurance forms, something that would have been a snap

just two months earlier, left him gritting his teeth in frustration. He was on edge, no longer able to hold up the mask of the competent consultant.

As a result of the seizure, he lost his driver's license and was forced to be a passenger, a role he had never played in his previous life. Still agitated from hearing that he might have only a year to live, when he saw his wife make a lane change too quickly, he swore uncontrollably. "For *!#*\$* sake, Velma, what are you doing?" Thankfully, Velma could see how the stress of the situation and the damage to his brain was at the source of his emotional ups and downs. She could easily forgive Andrew the outbursts, for he was also more open emotionally. Velma says she loves Andrew even more the way he is now.

Andrew felt overwhelmed by multiple stressors in his life including sorting out all the issues in his house, the fear of the unknown, his anger, dealing with death, and making medical decisions when given conflicting information. Andrew reflects back on this dark period and says, "Sure I was fine. I slept like a baby...I'd wake up every few hours and cry." He can laugh now, but he acknowledges that it took time to heal from a profound grief.

For months Andrew felt like he was being tossed in waves of emotional turbulence, but at the same time had an overwhelming sense that something much bigger than himself was buoying him up. He was working to be both proactive and willing to surrender, to re-learn how to trust in the journey and to accept his struggles.

His personal mantra throughout his journey has been "Pray as if it is up to God, but act as if it's up to me" and as the poet Anthony Mizzi said, "Every problem offers new possibilities for something wonderful to happen." Andrew is too busy looking at the door opening in front of him to be concerned about the one that has been shut behind.

So while receiving the best that modern Western medicine can deliver, Andrew did everything else he could to maximize his chances of recovery. He attended many counselling sessions, something he would never have considered a year before. He used his 'beginner's mind' to follow his intuitions about what Eastern and other complementary medical approaches could offer. He changed his diet, exercised more, lost weight, allowed himself more sleep, began a daily meditation practice, became a Reiki Master, practiced Qi Gong—whatever made sense and felt right. In some sense he was going with the flow, and listening to God as his mother-in-law had suggested.

Andrew was led to Dr. Alastair Cunningham, an immunologist-turned-psychologist, who himself had undergone a spiritual transformation just before being diagnosed with an aggressive colon cancer. Dr. Cunningham created and ran the Healing Journey program at a university hospital in Toronto since 1980.

A study of Dr. Cunningham's pioneering work showed that people like Andrew, who have been given an incurable diagnosis and who take a proactive and positive approach, often live longer than those who are only mildly interested in integrative care. Some of the study participants who were highly involved in their own healing are alive with no evidence of cancer more than a decade after their physicians expected them to die.

The Healing Journey program introduced Andrew to the concept that cancer cells grow in the body chemistry or 'soup' created by the molecules in the bloodstream and that he could change the soup through his actions and his mind. Andrew wanted to change the ingredients in his life. Many of the things that fit into his old life did not fit his new life, and so he sold his house and car, gave away old furniture, closed his business, and retired. He and Velma moved to a new city where they felt they belonged and began life anew.

Another key teacher on Andrew's journey towards wholeness was Adam, the Dreamhealer. At age sixteen, Adam first gained notoriety when he helped facilitate the miraculous healing of rock star Ronnie Hawkins. Apparently the distant healings and the visualizations Hawkins learned from Adam were critical to his complete recovery from a medically incurable pancreatic cancer.

Andrew had taught a corporate version of visualization to executives in his previous work, but his own healing visualizations were a much more intense experience. He would picture his tumor cells being zapped by lightning bolts and energy packets and then turned into a dusty substance that was expelled in a shower of light. Andrew learned the success of his visualizations depended on fully engaging his emotions in the process. He truly felt he was making changes to the cellular structure of his cells.

Remarkably, from being a highly controlled person who always lived in his head, Andrew feels the cancer diagnosis cracked his emotional shell wide open. A caring comment from a friend will bring tears to his eyes and a frog in his throat as he peers deeply into their eyes and heart.

He wants to dance at hearing happy music and cry with sad music. The aromas and odours that he smells are more distinct. He can smell carrots

five feet away and flowers from thirty feet away. The pungent smell of a pig farm in the country is as wildly exciting as car fumes are painful. “Life is so vibrant that it is like when I fell in love with my wonderful wife.”



Andrew is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to experience the wholeness of life and is committed to serve others for whatever time he has left. He does not believe it is his time to die yet. He says, “There’s still more ‘stuff’ to do.”

How long he will remain on this earth is no longer a concern to Andrew. “I have surrendered with acceptance. It’s not my choice of when I come and go. As far as I know, I may have some input and I can do all I can while I’m here. But that final decision is not mine. There was a great relief when I started to accept that.”

An entry from his daily journal reads, “As long as the human spirit rises to the challenge of each new day, as long as we pursue worthwhile goals, as long as we strive, suffer, wrestle with our difficulties and endure, and find wonder in the world, we are living our dying with love.”

Now, more than three years after his original diagnosis, there appears to be no indication that his tumor will recur. He may ‘live his dying with love’ for years and years to come.