

What My Brain Has Taught Me

*A teaching memoir of hopeful service
for those living with and through brain tumors, surgery and/or injuries
as well as for those who love and care for them.*

Rev. Regina Maria Cross, MS

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In The Beginning

DEDICATION

To God, Thank You for saying; “Yes, Live”.

To Jesus and Elizabeth who have never left me alone.

To my Beloved Kenny who lives truth daily
and has never left my side nor right brain.

To Drs. Arthur Koblitz, M.D. and Ladislau Steiner, MD, PhD,
Neurosurgeons par excellence.

I am here because they were there for me.

To Patricia Beamer O’Sullivan, my Brain Buddy Bookend, my “Beamer”,
who knew if we put our heads together, we could save the world.
“If they’d only listen.”

To all who are mentioned between the pages.

To all who are presently living with, to those who have survived,
and to those who will experience brain trauma in their life
as my intention has been in writing this book
to be of service to you and your caregivers needs.

Remember:

“You’re braver than you believe,
stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

Christopher Robin

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Know I am eternally grateful for all of you and the assistance you so willingly gave through your hearts and souls being a part of this plan of service to humanity.

You are ALL Awesome! (Capital “A” plus exclamation point)

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FOREWORD

What My Brain Has Taught Me by Rev. Regina Maria Cross, MS is a beautifully written story of courage, transformation, and healing. A brain tumor diagnosis of right temporal lobe meningioma was devastating for Regina Maria. Such a diagnosis required deep courage, strength, and faith. Through her profoundly inspiring and touching story, she shares the wisdom she gained on her path to living a life that nurtures body, mind, and the spirit, and awakens one to the joy of living. Throughout her book, she provides helpful words of love and encouragement, and describes how to live life more meaningfully and fully. As a retired hospice chaplain, I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is dealing with life threatening brain cancer.

Rev. Katherine James Klemstine, D.Min.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up my book. Thank you even bigger if you have bought it. Thank you to those who have given it as a gift. It is in the realm of gifting I hope it is identified. This book is nothing magical, nothing medical yet my hope is, it is mindful in Service. It is my gift to you for surviving a very scary chapter in your span of days, for your courageous one step at a time moving forward living life again from a higher point of view. It is my gift to those who love and care for you during the journey navigating through the unknown. My hope is by virtue of the contents of its pages you will find inspiration, new thought, a smile, a prayer, an encouraging way of accepting your new normal as you re-create your authentic self.

Stories are sprinkled through the lessons within *What My Brain Has Taught Me* because I met a woman one day who made me realize many of our stories are the same.

When we hear our story coming from another there is the realization that we are all connected by a fine web of adventures meaning we are not alone through a dark night of the soul journey. There is Heavenly help and Earthly assistance as we grope through the navigation of whence, we know not. Inside Part One *Once Upon My Time Stories* there are narratives, I know you will recognize as your own, different names, dates and times yet you have lived them. Hopefully there in front of you as you read or are read to, know my intention is to honor your story as well.

Held within the contents of Part Two *My Brain Has Taught Me These Things* you will find tidbits of information helpful as you travel your road of recovery, guidance of care which took me years and some decades to acknowledge as such. Self-Attentiveness in the realms of: Your blessed head, your spirit, your attitude, your emotions, your movement, resources and so much more.

Please do have fun with the *Today I Count My I AM Blessings* Card Deck. Hopefully they will inspire you to believe just how great thou art through the awareness of Blessings coming your way on a daily basis.

The blank Personal Journal *Look What I Can Do* is all about you because you deserve it to be.

Now, it is time for my book to do its work right along with you.

My book is a teaching memoir of survival. My book of service is timeless. It is about staying fully alive in your body, your mind, your heart, and your soul, realizing the gift you have been given living with and through a brain tumor, surgery, or injury as you accept and appreciate the Blessing you are. It is brimming with soulful wisdom and heartfelt humor. It is chock-full of information your Neuro people may not have. I want you to be inspired through the journey, be excited about the Aha's as they may work for you, laugh through the concession of this is truly goofy, praise and feel gratitude for that which is real and smile big, for you are a living, breathing miracle right here, right now all by yourself.

Namaste,
Rev. Regina Maria Cross, MS

A NEW DAY DAWNING

A sacred time 6:00am, as all time is. My time of birth. The time of waking preparing me for a craniotomy. I am alive because God said “Yes Live.” I am blessed to breathe into another day this side of life, rebirthing the bliss through ordinary living. Deeply caring for that which truly matters. Then I am alive as I am meant to be.

AN IRISH BLESSING

May you never forget what is worth remembering

Nor

Ever remember what is best forgotten

Amen

PART ONE

Once Upon My Time Stories

Chapter One

Before Brain Surgery (BBS)

My Brain This Side of Life

Or

It's All In Your Head

Starts with a “B” * October 19, 1989

Kenny and I woke with excitement in our hearts as this was the day, October 19, 1989, that finally, after six years of diagnostic testing and surgeries, we just may have answers to our baby making journey. So, we felt assured he need not be with me for the last of testing that day. As his sister, Jeanne, was visiting from Florida and she and I were close, she traveled with me to the hospital for what we thought would be an effortless day with reason to celebrate by days end. Following a check-it-off-the-list testing procedure called HSG—Major Ouch!—she assisted me down the hallway to the MRI capsule like a Girl Scout helping an old lady cross the street.

Why an MRI? It was a fact, my prolactin level (a hormone released from the anterior pituitary gland that stimulates milk production after childbirth) was high enough I could be the official neighborhood wet nurse. Our beloved Endocrinologist Reproductive Specialist, Dr. Christos Mastroyannis, felt an MRI was in order checking for the possibility of a pituitary tumor, which, as he stated, is a relatively simple fix. All right let's go for it and get on with making mine and Kenny's babies.

So, relieved to be lying down after my morning procedure, I was slipped into the capsule. I sighed a big sigh, thinking; *I'm clueless as to what is happening, but it can't be any weirder than what I have already been through. And this is it! We will have all our answers very soon.* The alien noise began, and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud as visions of National Geographic Hooters Women danced in my head to the rhythm of the magnetic drumming. After what seemed a very long time the tech came bustling in grabbing my right arm as the capsule bed slid out toward him and with a syringe the size of Manhattan said, "You've got something in there. Something in your head." He shot me with some orange goo and hurled the rolling table into reverse throwing me back into what seemed like something akin to a NASA Space Capsule now ready for blast off. My thought regarding his electrified comment; "You've got something in there." *OK, one would hope. Of course, I have something in there. It's called a brain!* My choices here are to panic or relax into the idea that I have more time all to myself for meditation. I chose the latter.

When he pulled me out, I became wrapped in the entire night's bizarre episode of "Excuse me? Say what? This can't be true!" Before my jelly-like legs had rounded the table's edge, before my near numb feet touched the floor, this crazy man was saying; "You have a brain tumor and we've got to get it out right now." Well, that just did not register even in the slightest. *This guys a nut.* Then I saw my sister-in-law's face and became puzzled and frightened inside.

He rushed me out of the MRI room so fast, I barely had time to snatch her hand to come with me keeping me safe from this quack. He was just a little too stimulated and the situation a little too surreal for me as he took my hand bolting me into the reception area of the X-ray Department waiting room full of weary people. Sitting me down, throwing a woman's magazine (I figured that because there was a

woman baking cookies on the front cover) into my lap repeating over and over “Read something to me.” “Excuse me?” “Read! Read something now!”

This guy is totally freaking me out. I had come to the hospital that day for the last of the “baby questing” testing procedures thrilled by the idea that now Kenny and I would have our answers leading to our next step toward the direction of our baby in arms. Meanwhile this near hysterical man is telling me crazy things and demanding I read. Fear jolted through me unknown to anyone other than Kenny at the time. My inner guts just wanted to scream at him, *I can’t read!* Instead, I had to quickly be clever once again in life hiding shame while my outer demeanor was trying desperately to hold onto some semblance of reality. Looking up into his anxious eyes, doing my best to appear calm while closing the magazine, I quietly stated, “I’m sorry, you just told me I have a brain tumor (at which time everyone in the room turned and stared). I have no interest in reading to you.”

He hurriedly grabbed my wrist, again, as I tried to grab the phone off the receptionist desk saying, “I need to call my husband.” “There’s no time for that now. We have to get you into surgery.” I grabbed Jeanne’s hand, as he pushed his way past those waiting in line at the reception desk and into the Light Room where only doctors, nurses and doctors’ kids are allowed. Ahhh, now I get it. This guy thinks he has found something on my MRI. Not only did he actually see something on an MRI, which must be just a little exciting for him, but he found it in Dr. Alfred John Suraci’s, the Chief of Surgeons daughter’s head. He wants me to know he knows everything he has ever learned in school so I can tell Dad and he can show Dad how brilliant he is. Holy MRI! Why else would we be going deep into the secret inner sanctum where he throws a galaxy of semi-translucent images unlike anything I’d seen before up on the Light Boards. He said, “See! You

have a brain tumor, and we need to get it out right now.” *Oh, yea, I know what you’re looking at. Sure, I see it clearly now, of course. Everybody step back from the nut case. This is absolutely no way to treat a patient! Someone get him away from me! Someone save me!”*

While in my frigid (which is no reference to our baby questing by the way), I still have not exhaled since you first seized my life stance, doctor faces that I knew well from visits in my parents’ home suddenly started appearing over the tops of their seclusion isolation cubicles. They too began to hold their breath. *Oh, this is so not working for me.... easy day supposed to be an easy day.*

Suddenly, and quite literally, I felt a Brilliance of Light Rays, much like the Chaplet of Divine Mercy painting, shine behind me, embracing every fiber of my Being. I turned to witness Dr. Christos busting through the door with a fused look of sheer anger on his face toward the tech while complete savior toward me. Christos took my hand and along with Jeanne stole me away from cuckoo, loopy, fruitcake man, into the cloaked back halls that only hospital personnel and some of their children knew existed. We walked in silence through the long beige tunnel into the elevator to the third floor. *Third Floor: lingerie, ladies’ purses, endocrinologist fertility specialist’s office, and talk of a brain tumor. Please exit safely.* Again, heading down the halls of precisely, indescribable beige, his fingers entwined in mine were the only thing keeping me grounded. And yet, I could feel his terror of truth.

This dear, sweet man needs a laugh. I know I do. I looked at him with a smile on my face and said, “OK, came in for a baby, I’m hearing brain tumor. Starts with a B, so possibly someone got things mixed up? And speaking of mixed up maybe they aren’t my MRI’s. Maybe they are someone else’s. Not that I want them to be someone else’s but

maybe...” While watching his face, I could tell he was trying ever so hard to spring up a smile, but it wasn’t working.

Hours passed in the office with Christos, Dr. Robert Simmons, the Medical Director of Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C. and Jeanne as I was trying my best to grasp what was being said. How am I to go home with this news and tell my Beloved, “Nope, no baby, but, I do have a brain tumor.” What about my parents? I know I’m thirty-nine but no matter how old I get, I will always be one of their babies. If we do not tell them tonight, when Dad walks into Providence Hospital tomorrow morning for his rounds everyone but he will know. Also true for my baby brother, Michael and baby sister, Pattie, both of whom are nurses here. This truly is bizarro-world.

For five... count them five... years Kenny and I had gone to doctor after doctor after doctor trying to find reasoning for my horrific intense headaches. As the day grew longer it was as if my head were in a vice that just kept tightening with every passing hour. One doctor actually thought I was making it up, no big deal, take a few aspirin, or actually if it will make you feel better, he did not mean physically, I will give you a prescription for Naprosyn. Then he patted me on the head. Really, did you not hear me? Painful! I’m having seizures! Once on the way to another baby questing doctor appointment before we met Christos, I started to seizure in the car. After arriving for my appointment, I told the doctor reminding him sarcastically as if it would make a difference that he had to legally tell me I could not drive anymore. His response while he continued looking down at his clipboard was, “Don’t drive anymore.” He continued, “Now let’s...” “Seriously, do I pay you for that? I need help.” We needed help and no one helped. For five years, no one helped. They all pretended I was not in my right mind. Come to find out, on this day of expected elation, I had a right

temporal lobe brain tumor nearly the size of a well-fed turbo golf ball now impinging parietal as well as the occipital lobes of my brain.

I will never forget the look on Kenny's face nor the embrace he held me in when I told him the news. Simultaneously, Jeanne was telling her husband, Ken's parents and other siblings. At the same time, Dr. Robert Simmons had already called my parents' home and spoken with my Mom. Thank God my baby sister, Pattie, was there beside her. Robert would call back after Dad's arrival home from his long hours of doctor day.

The last thing Dad said to me that night was, "Baby Girl, if we have to go out of state, if we have to leave the country, you will have the very best in the very best environment." In that moment I knew how Blessed Kenny and I were to have such a weight lifted from our shoulders as we stepped through Door Number 2 of unknown territory.

Within 24 hours my MRI's had traveled throughout the United States. Within 3 days they had journeyed around the world. Ninety-nine percent of all answers came right back here to Washington, DC highlighting a Dr. Arthur Koblitz, who as a young intern, saved James Brady's life the day he and President Reagan were shot. More Blessings. More story...