

My Brainy Mentor

By

Robert Smith, 30th January 2012

“His Lordship will see you now sir”

The silver haired lady, speaking in a gentle voice, opened the door that led to the inner sanctum.

His Lordship was seated in a high-back chair, behind a clutter-free highly polished mahogany desk, on which my letter lay open. He was a handsome man, in his sixties, and also silver haired. Smiling, he rose and welcomed me with an outstretched hand.

“Please sit down. I’ve read your letter and found it interesting. But I am not quite clear what you would have me do.”

I’d been sitting in his waiting room
waiting for my turn
Nervously rehearsing what I’d say
My thoughts all a-churn

So much depended on my words
When seated face to face
With England’s leading doctor
As I tried to make my case

Lord Brain, what a perfect name
For the top nerve physician
Why was I there? Let me explain
The purpose of my mission

First, who was Lord Brain?

Lord Brain was the most prominent neurologist and the most revered physician in post-World War 2 Britain; physician to His Majesty King George VI and to Sir Winston Churchill and his wife Clementine. He had received honorary university degrees from Oxford, where he had graduated in medicine, from Durham, Manchester, Southampton, Belfast and Wales. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, the highest scientific recognition in Britain. He wrote particularly on the cerebral circulation, epilepsy, cancer and the nervous system, Parkinson’s disease and was a

major figure in the field of Multiple Sclerosis. He was President of the Royal College of Physicians and as such was leader of all British medical specialties. He was a literary scholar and president of the Dr. Samuel Johnson Society, wrote essays on Shakespeare, on neurology in William Harvey's time and was the accepted authority on the works of England's leading poet of the day, Walter de la Mare. He was a considerable poet in his own right. He was the medical profession's major spokesman during the creation of the National Health Service and won the respect of politicians, doctors and patients

He was a prodigious and indefatigable worker. In spite of his considerable work load, he was a modest, quiet-spoken and unflappable gentleman with a fine wit and sense of humor.

Lord Brain did not inherit his title, nor did he seek it. It came as a reward for his multiple contributions to medicine and for his public service to the nation as a statesman.

His life began quite modestly in 1895 in Reading, the county town of Berkshire, where his father practiced as a solicitor. His family was non-conformist and had no objection when their eldest son, Walter Russell Brain, at the age of 17 joined the Society of Friends, better known as Quakers. He entered Oxford University with a scholarship intending to become a lawyer.

At the outbreak of World War, Russell as a Quaker, was averse to military service involving killing. He joined the British Red Cross as an ambulance driver. About this time he met his future wife, Stella Langdon-Down, who was working as a volunteer in a London Hospital. She persuaded Russell to become a physician. Her father, Dr. John Langdon-Down, was a neurologist and Chief of Staff at the Royal London Hospital. He was doing research into a condition in children then known as Mongolism or more cruelly as Child Idiocy. He created the first center for these mentally subnormal children in his own home, providing them with the care and attention they sorely needed. The condition is known today as Down's syndrome. Perhaps it should be more properly called Langdon-Down's syndrome.

Russell took Stella's advice and entered medical school at Oxford, did well and after graduation went to the Royal London Hospital for his clinical training. He was introduced to neurology by his father-in-law and was immediately attracted to this field. He began attending teaching rounds at the Institute of Neurology at the National Hospital, Queen Square. There he caught the eye of Sir Charles Sherrington, the leading neurologist at the Institute who recognized Brain as an exceptional student. Sherrington was a great teacher who had won the Nobel Prize for his work in revealing much of the internal structure and functioning of the brain. He became Russell Brain's mentor and life-long friend. They shared much in common including a great interest in poetry. Many years later Brain sent the following poem to Sherrington on his 90th birthday.

You first within the brain discerned
The meaning of its ordered ways
And man of his own nature learned
To tread the labyrinthine maze

May age, which clouds the body's eye
Still leave undiminished the inward sight
That reads life's secret poetry
With timeless wonder and delight

But back to my visit to Harley Street. I had been warned. "Brain is a very busy man. Waste no time when you visit him. Have your material ready. The white haired lady will come knocking at the door soon enough to indicate your time is up".

I took a deep breath and started off at high speed.

"Sir, I am here on behalf of a patient organization, the British Migraine Association. You probably have never heard of them. I am a G.P. working part time in research on pain and headache at the Wellcome Foundation. I am sure you have never heard of me. The Migraine Association, made up of headache sufferers, believes their members are neglected by the medical profession and I agree with them. Wellcome has asked me to see what can be done for them. I believe that you are the person who can lead the medical effort to bring them greater help. Sir, will you help?"

My God! I've put him to sleep. Lord Brain had closed his eyes and sat there motionless. Deep silence. Then I remembered Quakers do this sort of thing, they think a lot. All is not yet wasted. So I waited. He opened his eyes.

"Smith, I have heard of you. My office researches all who seek an appointment, who are not patients. You have been awarded the annual BMA Hawthorne Research Prize. I knew Hawthorne. A fine fellow. That's why you are here. By the way do you always speak as rapidly as you were speaking just now? I would have thought that a graduate of Trinity College Dublin would speak more slowly and more confidently. Relax."

He was now smiling broadly and I felt much better. He was treating me as a friend. But he had not yet agreed to my proposal. He closed his eyes again and I waited as he thought. Opening his eyes again he said, "My answer is yes." I was overjoyed. But he had not yet finished.

He continued "I have three requirements. Macdonald Critchley, who runs a headache clinic at King's College Hospital, must agree to chair the research committee. You will arrange for the Wellcome Foundation to provide us with a substantial grant to launch the project and you Smith will do all the work. If all parties are agreed by this day next week, you and I will meet again next week to develop a plan to create a Migraine Trust."

He was ahead of me. But I had his support and that was what mattered, support. Once I had a brief conversation with the editor of the Lancet, Sir Theodore Fox, one of whose forebears, George Fox, founded the Quakers. He knew Lord Brain well and commented on working with him. "Smith, everything Russell touches turns to gold. Have no fears".

Wellcome gave an immediate down-payment of 50,000 pounds, Critchley immediately agreed, pleased that Lord Brain thought him an essential feature of the enterprise and Wellcome gave me the time was needed to work with his Lordship.

Lord Brain meant it when he said I would have to be prepared to do the work setting up the organization. There was much he did speedily and with a deft touch. In one afternoon he identified an office in Queen Square as our headquarters, with a retired naval captain as the office manager. With a series of quick phone calls he put together a small but powerful Board of Trustees. Lady Snow, Pamela Hansford Johnson, the novelist, who was president of the British Migraine Association. Lord Snow, C.P.Snow, novelist, playwright and Cambridge physicist who developed Britain's radar defense system during World War II. Sir Cyril Musgrave, Senior Civil Servant at Westminster, and Lord Aldington representing the banking world. A banquet was held in the beautiful ancient Apothecaries Guild Hall in the City where Lord Brain most eloquently appealed to 100 guest industrialists for funds to attack the migraine scourge. Later when the Trust was established and functioning Macdonald Critchley successfully recruited his patient Princess Margaret, the King's younger daughter, to become our Patron. She performed her duties faithfully until she died years later.

As the coordinating secretary of the Trust I was involved in a wide range of different new activities. I spoke on the phone regularly, not less than once a week, with Lord Brain. I was instructed not to present more than 4 problems per phone call. This worked quite well.

My main responsibility was planning the migraine symposium, choosing topics and speakers. There were few scientists then engaged in basic migraine research. Lord Brain came to the rescue by suggesting we deal with the background to migraine. For me this was a wonderful experience, chasing the literature in pre-internet days trying to identify nerve and blood vessel mechanisms that might be linked with headache production. Lord Brain did not spare himself in providing support from the literature. I found wonderful sources of information in his journal of neurology, titled "Brain" and his text book "Recent Advances in Clinical Neurology". I learnt a

lot. Remember I was not a trained neurologist. I was a practicing G.P. with some pain research experience. But I had easy access to a great teacher and the author of the material I was reading. I felt Lord Brain was not using me as an extra pair of hands. He was an educator and was especially interested in my ideas about academic family medicine. He encouraged my interest in headache. He pointed out that Jane Austen had no formal higher education. She wrote about people who surrounded her every day and to whom she had easy access. Headache qualified, for similar reasons, to be an ideal research area for a family doctor. Working with students and doctors in training brought him the greatest pleasure. He urged me to think likewise.

The first symposium was held at the National Hospital, in Queen Square. The lecture hall was filled. Eight papers were read including an opening speech by Kenneth Robinson, Minister of Health and Director of the National Health Service who believed the symposium was an important development in Britain's health field. A little volume that emerged, which I edited, had a good reception. The British Medical Journal considered it essential reading for all doctors interested in headache. The Medical Journal of Australia hailed the symposium as a useful start. This all gave me confidence that I had played a useful role in establishing the Migraine Trust and that migraine would now not be so completely ignored. There were other problems to be faced and none more challenging than Family Medicine's isolation from the medical teaching world. I went to Wellcome who were pleased with the development of the Trust and the part I had played alongside Lord Brain. The Trust was launched and firmly based and would continue and grow. In 1990, the Trust's 25th birthday symposium was held in a great London hotel. The largest headache meeting ever, with over 1,000 participants The volume of proceedings amounted to 78 chapters. I gave the keynote address.

During the period of helping to create the Trust with help from the Wellcome Foundation I had started a General Practice Teaching and Research Unit at Guy's Hospital Medical School in London. The first unit of its kind in England providing an academic base for General Practice.

What could be more exciting. The flourishing Trust and the new unit at Guys. As life would have it bad things inevitably happen. Lord Brain became ill with terminal cancer. He refused to stop working even when in hospital. At his request he asked that I bring Trust papers requiring his signature to his bedside. Stella was not too happy about this. I tried to keep the visit short. We had never discussed his illness. He insisted on giving me details of the cancer's inoperability. He blushed and closed his eyes and said no more. There were no goodbyes. Outside in the corridor eyes brimming with tears, Stella whispered "He has not long to live". A few days later he died.

The Friends' House in Euston was completely packed with friends, colleagues, grateful patients, members of parliament and representatives of the Royal Family. We all sat quietly. For sometime no-one spoke. Then gradually individuals rose, without introduction, and spoke

words of praise. He never sought recognition or self-advancement or great wealth or power. An elderly man rose to his feet and cried out angrily, "Enough, enough. If Russell were here, he would be embarrassed. Your praise is ill directed. Our thanks should go to the Good Lord who gave us our dear friend Walter Russell Brain to live his wonderful life among us." There were cries of "Amen" and no more was said. People rose and slowly left the great hall

My teacher and my guide
Achieved so much, kindly, modest,
No evidence of pride

Of that year so long ago
What do I most cherish
It was his smile for work well done
That I still so greatly relish

The Migraine Trust is now recognized internationally and migraine specialists from all over the civilized world attend its meetings. Treatments have greatly improved but as yet there is still no cure.

As Brain said of the brain
Great problems remain

Thank you.