Being a Stone

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An experiment in suspended animation

Published on
Booksie

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The Stone

â So tell me, doctor, am I fifty two years old or one hundred and two years old?â

â Chronologically, youâ re one hundred and two, physiologically, youâ re fifty four. You did age physiologically two years while you were hibernating these last fifty years, which falls well within the acceptable range. As we expected, you emerged physically very fit, and weâ re happy to report, also apparently mentally fit. Actually, thatâ s what took so long. After the first four years you had told us all we needed to know for the space travel part of the experiment, which was devoted mainly to learning how to develop equipment that would keep the body exercised and fit. But we had made a deal with you to try to replace or repair damaged neurons in you brain. Working out how to do the neuron work took a lot longer than anybody had anticipated though we did, finally, succeed. Because of you, people all over the world with brain diseases can now be effectively treated, thankfully in a much shorter time than it took for you.â

My day had begun a few minutes ago with the doctor smiling as he extended his hand. â Welcome back, traveler. â Thanks, doctor. Iâ m glad to be back but I expected to see Dr. Augustine.â

â Dr Augustine, to whom all space travelers are indebted for his pioneering work, has been dead for . . . twenty three years now. A great man. Iâ m Dr. Johnson and Iâ ve been watching over you twenty two years. Iâ m glad to finally get to talk with you.â

â Just how long was I out of if?â

â Fifty two years. Iâ m on the second team to look after you.â

â Fifty two years? Amazing. Now what?â

â We already know that youâ re physically ok. Weâ ll give you a battery of mental tests then youâ ll be free to go. Although having been out of circulation for half a century, it may take you an adjustment period before youâ re ready to go anywhere.â

After a long day of testing and working puzzles Johnson said, â It took a bit longer than we expected, but we are happy to report that the treatment was completely successful. According to the tests you are actually somewhat smarter than you were when the experiment started, although it is possible that you had already lost a little ground. While we were at it, we gave you a pair of 20/10 eyes.â

So this was how it had all worked out. Not what I had expected, but then, what had I expected? At any rate, the adventure had ended with me still on the green side of the grass, which wasnâ t a sure thing when I started and certainly a better outcome than I was headed for when I first went to my doctor some fifty years ago.

â Iâ m sorry to say, Mr. Carson that the suspicions that brought you here were correct, you are suffering from early stage brain disease. â the doctor had said. â As you probably already know, we donâ t know how to repair damaged neurons nor can we do anything to stop the disease from progressing. There is,

however, a slight ray of hope in your case Iâ ve discussed it with Dr. Augustine, who may be able to help you, and made an appointment for you for this afternoon.â

â Thank you doctor. Itâ s not what I hoped to hear, but itâ s what I expected.

I was surprised to find that Dr. Augustineâ s office was in the Space Center. Still, considering my situation, what did I care where his office was?

â Iâ m sure youâ re wondering how our paths intersect,â said Dr. Augustine, â after all, you have a degenerative brain disease and Iâ m interested in human space travel. The connection is not immediately obvious, so Iâ ll explain. In a few years we will be planting a colony on Mars. This will mean transporting a significant number of people. People who will be consuming lot of air and food and who will be transmitting diseases to each other because no matter what we do, somebody will come aboard with a virus or bacteria that we didnâ t detect. One way to mitigate both problems would be to put everybody except the crew in suspended animation at very low temperature. This will slow down all the metabolic processes reducing the consumption of air and stores and will also limit the transmission of disease. At least thatâ s the theory.â

â Sounds reasonable to me but where do I fit in?â

â At fifty two you are relatively young and still physically very fit. Except for a few neurons, you are also mentally fit. That means that you are still able to understand and give informed consent to our proposal and weâ ll be able to test your mental ability at the beginning of the experiment What we propose is to put you in suspended animation for a few years during which we will learn how to repair your neuronsâ

â Weâ ll get to see how our suspended animation protocol works and youâ ll get your brain repaired, with the side benefit that your therapy will also work for other people. Weâ ll be killing two birds with one stone. If you agree, you will be that stone.â

â What have I got to lose? Iâ ll put my affairs in order and say my goodbyes, in case things donâ t work out, and weâ ll get on with it.â

â We were hoping youâ d agree because you would be an ideal candidate, but youâ ll need to act fairly expeditiously. You need to be able to give informed consent and with your disease that window will close fairly rapidlyâ

We discussed a few more details and, believing that time was not on my side, a week later I was back at the Space Center. The last thing I remember before seeing Johnson was the anesthesiologist saying, â count back from 100â

â 100, 99, 98, 97. . .â

A nurse came in and asked if there was anything I wanted.

â I'd like to see a newspaper

She looked at me. â Newspaper? I don't think we have anything like that..â Then she smiled brightly. â I remember my grandmother telling me about them. It was how you got the news, wasn't it? We don't have them anymore. Now we get all our news on our personal coms.â She took a small object from her

pocket. â This is my com. Everybody has one. Of course, we have a bigger version on the wall. I'll show you how to use it.â

I spent the next hour looking at the com. It was amazing how much the world had changed. I wondered how I would ever be able to catch up and fit in.

Dr. Johnson walked in. â How is it going?â

â As well as could be expected, I guess. But from looking at the com for the last hour or so I don't see how I'm ever going to fit in. This isn't the world I left. I don't know anybody in this world and I don't have any skills. I suppose that my children are still alive but they'll be older than me and we won't know each other. I feel like I would be exploring a new planet.â

â Quite so. But you won't be as alone as you think.â He pressed a button on his own com. The door opened and the same nurse ushered in a smiling woman. I looked at her and couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was this woman, obviously older but trim and fit and put together. She looked almost like my wife did when we said goodbye, only better. I was speechless. How did they do that.?

She walked up, threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. â Agatha?â

â It's really me, Bobby. Are you glad to see me?â

I didn't say anything. I just grabbed her and kissed her and held her tight. â I guess you are, but let me breathe, big boy.â

Johnson said, â We'll leave you two alone. You've got some catching up to do.â

â You got here just in time. I'd been looking at the com on the wall and beginning to think that it had all been a big mistake. I had thought that I'd wake up in the world I left. I should have known better but I guess I wasn't thinking straight. Boy! Am I glad to see you.â I hugged her again.

â How did this happen?â I asked.

â I know you told me to get a divorce and remarry. I thought about it. It seemed like the sensible thing to do. But I could never bring myself to do it, knowing that you were still alive. I'd come out every now and Augustine would let me look at you through the window. The machines were exercising you and you looked good. As time went on I noticed that I was not only getting old but looking old. Augustine was always very cordial and I told him that I didn't want you to come out, youthful, fit and vigorous and find a frail old lady. We had always, I told him, wanted to grow old together and you were staying young while I grew old. Just before he retired, I asked him if he could put me in suspended animation and bring me out when you came out. The idea had never occurred to him but he agreed to think about it. I came back a couple of weeks later and he told me that it could be done. He thought he could justify it scientifically by saying that I would be a 'control', It was, he said, a bit of a stretch on the concept of 'control' but he thought he could sneak it by.â

â I went home,â she continued, and discussed it with the kids. They were all grown and married, you've got some neat grandkids. It took the kids a while but finally they agreed that it was my life. And here I am. Suspended animation here is better than any health spa. They work you out and you don't even know it. I came out in better shape than when I in. We can explore this strange new world together.â

â First,â I said, â we've got some catching up to do,â I said, grabbing her.

Agatha giggled.

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