



## REHABILITATION

### The Gift Inside the Box

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Back in September I sat down to watch Monday Night Football. The New Orleans Saints were hosting the Atlanta Falcons and I had looked forward to seeing the re-opening of the Louisiana Super Dome after Hurricane Katrina and its horrific aftermath in 2005.

The big dome looked beautiful on this night. Gone were the tons of garbage that had filled it. Gone was the smell. Gone were the bodies.

It was fixed up and freshly painted inside and out, and there was a carnival atmosphere—A celebration with music and tailgating in the parking lots. Tantalizing smells of delectable foods wafting through the crowds. People were walking the streets with signs and smiles. While hundreds of thousands of people were displaced after the hurricane, it seemed like everyone who remained was in and around the Super Dome that night. Even as much as Louisiana and the surrounding hurricane-devastated region continue to struggle, there was something sorely needed and wonderfully tangible on this night. In this place, it was relief and it was hope.

During a crucial point in the game, the raucous crowd was called upon to make more noise in order to help the Saints' defense stop the Falcons' late drive. A television camera panned the frenzied crowd and then zoomed in on a man in a New Orleans shirt and colorful beads, pounding like crazy on the wall below his seat.

I half-laughed and shook my head. Here was this man, one simple man in this jam-packed stadium, amidst a city that

still weeps and limps and struggles. This man who, after a short four-hour reprieve, would likely head back into the dark night through ghost-town neighborhoods to his FEMA-issued trailer. Here was this man smiling and hollering and pounding like crazy. Trying to make a difference. Believing he was making a difference. Knowing.

Something about seeing him brought tears to my eyes.

**Rehabilitation after traumatic brain injury** is as concrete as the walls of the Super Dome and as fluid and changing as the people who filled it that night. For the survivors of TBI, rehabilitation affects and hits and heals on many levels. It can be, at the same time, the answer and the question, the hero and the goat, the bottom of the hill and the top of the mountain.

After the car crash in 1996 that caused my injury, I underwent physical, speech, occupational, advanced balance, alternative vocational, driver retraining, and psychological therapies. Looking back, I now understand that attending therapy once or twice or three times a week for an hour at a time was a lot like that man in the Super Dome pounding on the wall. No matter how dismal my situation lingered and waited and darkened outside, that hour of therapy made me feel like I was making a difference. Like I was affecting change.

I was unable to drive for the first eighteen months after my injury and it took many months before my insurance would approve a transportation benefit. I lived in an area I was told was a "dead zone." Cabs wouldn't answer calls near my home

because they received so few of them that it wasn't profitable to wait nearby.

In order to make my eleven o'clock appointment, I had to get up and get ready by 6 am, calling the cab company for a ride. It often took three or four hours for someone to begrudgingly pick me up and drive forty-five minutes to my therapist's office.

After our session ended close to noon, I would go to the coffee shop down the street and wait for one of my friends to get out of work. They'd pick me up at four or five and drive me back home. Sometimes we'd wait until six or seven for the afternoon rush to ease. My forty-five minute appointment each week took twelve hours to execute.

But I went. I went because I needed to feel like I was affecting my recovery. Physically, emotionally—I needed to feel like I was doing more than just sitting in my house waiting for this nightmare to end, my injury to be cured, and my old life to return.

Within our complex and often-confusing health and insurance systems, too many survivors are forced to wait excruciating weeks and months, even years, between and before they are afforded much-needed therapies. It is bewildering and dispiriting. Once we finally gain access to rehabilitation, far too many of us are terminated prematurely due more to insurance parameters than to an actual measure, or lack thereof, of progress.

One of the most beneficial aspects of quality rehabilitation is the feeling that something specific and concrete, regardless of how small, is being addressed and improved. When your relationships, your

career, your financial future and your sense of self are all swirling around you and raining down upon you like a hurricane, you would be surprised at how incredibly rewarding it feels to walk successfully between two parallel bars or to be able to read a simple sentence without messing up the words.

While I valued most of my therapies and therapists, I also came to understand something very important that greatly enhanced my recovery. It is that we enjoy only a fraction of our healing and improving during our time in rehab.

We cannot set aside time to heal. We cannot allow ourselves to simply compartmentalize healing within the confines of our therapists' offices. Our injuries are stubborn buggers and we need to do better than that.

While we are "inside the box" in rehab, we need to learn to think "outside the box." When our therapists give us homework, we need to require of ourselves even more than what they require. We need to ask more than they ask and demand more of

ourselves than they demand.

It took me a while to see my rehabilitation as more of a starting point than a finish line. I expected my therapists to cure me. I expected that, after six weeks of one-hour sessions every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I would be ready and equipped to return to my life and pick up where I left off.

It sounded good in theory. It wasn't until I started "thinking outside their boxes" that I began to see improvement. Instead of simply completing the reading tasks given to me in speech therapy, I went home and sang songs over and over to reclaim the smoothness and ease in my speech. After walking between parallel bars in physical therapy, I came home and used the walls in my hallway to keep me safe as I practiced turns and bends. When my occupational therapist used hand weights and rubber balls to increase the coordination in my fingers, I went home and molded clay and threw tennis balls to my dogs.

While many venues of rehabilitation available to us employ dedicated and

enthusiastic therapists, too often the time we are allotted to utilize their wonderful skills is cut short by the limitations of insurance coverage, finances or our own potential to improve.

It is crucial that we embrace the idea that healing is a life-long process that is not bound by four walls. The end line for healing cannot be prescribed. The possibility of healing cannot expire.

We need to listen to and take with us the advice and direction afforded by the people charged with our rehabilitation. They offer seeds that we can plant and nurture so that we might enjoy their lovely blossoms every day of our lives.

We are that man in the Super Dome that night—A year after the storm; five years; ten. No matter the darkness that remains or the feeling sometimes that we are forgotten, we owe it to ourselves to keep pounding that wall. We need to keep trying to affect change and improvement in our lives. Every day. Every day. ♦