


DEFINING MOMENTS



Definitely Defining: How Pressing the “Pause” Button Empowers the Force of the “In-Between”

Annegret F. Hannawa 

Faculty of Communication, Culture, and Society, Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)

When I was invited to write an essay for “Defining Moments,” it made me contemplate: Do we define our moments, or do they define us? And what moments can we classify as “defining”? Moments in which we achieve great things, or moments that sweep us off our feet, be it in overwhelmingly rewarding or existentially threatening terms? How do we differentiate “grand moments” with fleeting impact from “minute moments” that change the rest of our lives? Which of them can we “define” as “defining”? And, most importantly: Do we even have the capacity to do so?

These past couple of years of my life have been filled with a number of moments along that full spectrum. I experienced *long-lasting* moments that served nothing but to befriend me with human mortality. One such instance occurred when my injured brain did not respond properly to the anesthetics during a post-stroke surgical intervention. I had never before experienced pain such as this, which cruelly dissolved my body into its particles. Shall we consider near-death experiences like this a “defining moment”? Did the mere fact that this moment nearly killed me make it “defining”?

Then there are also very *brief* moments that can change the rest of our lives, such as the brain stroke I experienced in February of 2019.

Sunday, February 3, 2019. My 8-year-old son and I sat on our living room floor, facing each other with the “Kahala” board between us. We enjoyed a peaceful Sunday morning with his favorite board game. He won the first round. With a cheeky smile, I said: “Fine!” and leaned forward, getting ready to cuddle him. As I moved toward him, my body suddenly changed direction—it dodged to the right and sunk onto the floor. I instinctively pulled my arm up underneath my head and then rested. I got dizzy in a way I had never felt before. While slowly surrendering into a dream-like state, I heard a heavy animal-like breath in the room. It sounded a bit as if a buffalo was gasping right next to me. Where was this scary noise coming from? I looked over at my son, but it wasn’t him. It took me a while to realize that this sound must come from me. Embarrassed, I set out to ask him: “Why am I making such a weird noise?” But no words came out of my mouth. Instead, I heard myself expelling an inhumanly deep voice without any vocal coordination. It was as if a stranger was talking through me. My mouth seemed to be stuck, there was no way to pronounce even a single word. After a while, I was able to slowly push my body back up into vertical position. I looked at my son, who didn’t seem to know whether he should be laughing or crying. “Mommy, why

did you sound so funny?” I lulled, still with an incredibly deep voice: “I don’t know, go and get the other game you want to play now.” While he left, I got the phone.

The stroke itself lasted less than a minute, but it triggered a two-year long process that changed my life forever. Does that make my stroke a “defining moment” on its own? Or does the stroke now define me?

If a stroke by itself *is* indeed a “defining moment” – then how could it be that some stroke patients resign, whereas others redefine themselves? Are all stroke experiences not created equal?

Or could it possibly be that such moments define us at first, and then it depends on us to define them in return?

In the afternoon. The hospital neurologist suspected a stroke. But the confirming diagnostics would not be available until the next morning, and my children were waiting at home, so I left against medical advice with the agreement that I would be back at the hospital for the diagnostic tests early in the morning. When I came home, my eight-year-old was crying in bed bitterly. My fallout in the morning had visibly traumatized him. “I am too young to be living without a mom!” I gently held his head to comfort him. “You’re not even 40 yet, you haven’t even lived the first half of your life!” I looked into his searching eyes and I tried to comfort him with equally straightforward responses: “If my life were to end at age 39, then that *would* have been my full life. And yes, that would not be fair to you.” He looked at me and said firmly: “I will not close my eyes, because when I open them in the morning, then you will not be here anymore!” I didn’t know what to respond. Other than: “Honey, it is not your fault.” He now fully released his tears. I stayed with him, and every time I repeated these words, they seemed to further him into an inner calm: “It is not your fault.” This sentence seemed to strike an important nerve with him. It allowed him to let it all out. When he calmed down, I looked at him and said: “You know what—I was *not* in pain. When I heard that deep breathing, I didn’t know where it came from. It was as if I was watching everything from a distance. I felt nothing. I was just observing.” My son countered: “But mommy, your eyes looked at me *so scared*.” I reassured him: “I was not scared. I was at complete peace. I felt light, relieved from any weight or concerns, free of all matter. It was beautiful. Please do not be concerned about me. I was doing fine!” I smiled at him gently. My pretense of inner calm seemed to successfully calm him down, and he was able to finally go to sleep. My son’s assertions veiled me that entire night. While my responses had been truthful, I knew that his fears were justified. The neurologist

at the hospital had told me that if this was indeed a stroke, there was an elevated likelihood of recurrence of another stroke episode within the subsequent 72 hours. Such a recurrent stroke could also transpire while I'm sleeping, he said. Depending on its strength, this could mean that I either wake up paralyzed, or not at all. So I hesitated to get myself ready for bed. The purpose of going to sleep now under such a forecast felt absurd. Instead, I tried to think of a snack I could eat. A treat, something like a "hangman's meal!" But nothing—really *nothing* that would normally get my taste buds jumping got me even slightly excited. When I finally laid down in bed, I consciously tried to keep my eyes from closing. I found myself preoccupied by the same thought my son had shared with me, the only one of his assertions that I did not have a response to: *I will not close my eyes, because when I open them in the morning, I might not be there anymore.*

Reflecting on the past couple of years that followed this dramatic event, there are numerous things I learned about life and our co-existence on this planet that I could never have learned without having had that stroke. One of the most powerful lessons I learned was that we have the agency to transform moments that define us into moments that we define as ours. In simple terms: To turn a life we live determined by external forces into a self-determined life.

From an academic perspective, this highlights a fascinating process that falls somewhere in between *empowerment* and *self-determination*. Empowerment is a life-long "progression individuals navigate to gain mastery over their own care and lives" (Rawlett, 2014, p. 5). During these past two years, my "mastery" process has focused on developing new skills for my new life in the skin of a "stroke patient." This process caused a radical shift in me. It redirected me from an extrinsically motivated response to the far-intrinsic end of the motivational spectrum that Deci and Ryan (1985) laid out in their Theory of Self-Determination. In other words, my extrinsically (stroke-) induced empowerment furthered me into intrinsic self-determination, which in turn "reset" my entire life into its purest shape and form.

This notion makes me think back to the very first conversation I had with my primary physician after my stroke. He told me about a patient whose severe illness completely changed his life. He abandoned everything he owned and had worked for all his life, and now lives on a remote island "happily ever after." This story struck me as a cheesy fairytale that is completely unrelated to real life. Had someone told me at that time that only three months later, I would be abandoning my apartment to move to the very far geographic end of human existence on a tiny island north of Iceland, I would have declared them crazy! I also had no idea at that time that two years later, I would be residing in a small mountain village high-up in the Swiss Alps as the only communication scientist on this planet who flies along with rescue teams in helicopters to save lives. All that unfolded not *because* of the stroke, but *as a result* of it.

I suppose it was *in between* all those more and less substantial "moments" along these past two years since my stroke where that "defining" happened. Where my steadily shook-up consciousness slowly unfolded a new reality for my life. All this transpired *in between* those moments that continuously startled me up again like Covid news.

Thursday, February 7, 2019, Stroke unit. This fear. I try to fixate something to gain orientation as to where I am. I carefully turn my head to the left to see the window. There—at the window, there begins "outside!" I recall that "outside"—air, trees, nature. I don't know where I am in here, but I know that behind this window, there is "outside." Then it begins—a sudden massive dizziness strikes me again. It pushes my head downwards through the mattress and sucks my skull deeply into the ground. I can't breathe. The last bit of air I can grasp from my lungs creates tears. I gasp—the tears require more breath than I can give. I know, this is it. It's another stroke. I can feel, physically, how my soul is getting ready to depart my body. But, *my children!* I will never see them again? I didn't even get a chance to tell them everything they need to know! How merciless this is. My body is crossing the line—that's it. So sudden. Without a chance. My body is in the hands of Mother Nature now. She takes life, just like she gives it. Without asking. Just like that. Merciless. There is no time, no circumstance being considered. No discussion. But, who will take care of my children? Who will pay for their education? Who will hold them when they cry? Nature doesn't give a damn, it doesn't speak this language! All these contemplations are human nonsense, inflated self-importance! It is what it is, no matter what we want to philosophize about it: Nature has no heart. It engages in no sense-making. It just—*is.*

Not the moments themselves, but the connecting lines *in between* made them "defining." In those intervals, I learned about the enormous agency that rests inside each of us to determine how we live our life, and about the self-empowerment we can activate to get hold of our lives again, in sickness and in health. To mold our life back into its authentic shape and form, in the provided context that surrounds us. Because this is who we are, as humans. We are nothing but a speck of dust that is tolerated at the margins of a very powerful "Mother Nature" that confines us. The power *we* have lies *in between* us. Our communication is what makes us survive and what makes our life worth living in challenging times (e.g., Ozbay et al. 2007). In my case, it was my communication with a construction worker with whom I shared my hospital room in the stroke unit 2.5 hours away from my children, stripped naked from everything that ever defined me as a person. Each day, we woke up in blood baths. We endured horrifying scenes together. And feared for that next stroke together that would kill us. But within that context, we made each other laugh. We folded paper planes out of the newspaper we got in the mornings to turn our room into a paper-plane museum for others to visit and enjoy. It was also a nurse, who broke the rules to grant me a moment of joy by taking me to the cafeteria downstairs for a cappuccino with a cookie that I can still taste today. It was my love for my sons that kept me going. For things like they said, such as: "Mommy, the longer you are away, the greater my joy anticipating your return." So *in between* all these moments, *communication* transpired that made my life evolve, and that fed my life to continue. No medications, but human relations. And not communication in theory, but communication in practice.

My stroke has granted me the opportunity to re-define who I am on this planet. I believe that Covid is granting us a very similar, if not identical, opportunity to reflect on who we are as communication scientists, particularly in the field of health communication. I wish that we can seize the time gaps in between the Covid-news to regenerate a sense of empowerment and self-determination in our communication with each other, to recognize the enormous impact we can contribute to this world as

a field, with healing and health not only transpiring between individuals in the healthcare setting (e.g., Street et al., 2009) or within families (e.g., Alberti et al., 2018), but with it constituting the fundament for the continued health of humankind.

In summary, my “defining moment” was not my stroke. It is a compound of everything that evolved from it onwards, while I allowed it to happen naturally and opened my life for redirection; until today, with an outcome I can’t and don’t want to anticipate. It is a life detached from all structures that force us to be something we’re not. Because if anything is certain in our world and in our lives, it is the fact that when it comes down to trespassing to death, the structures we created for ourselves matter as little as they mattered when we were born. *This* is an authentic truth that no one can deny or object.

I suppose the common denominator of these very different kinds of “defining moments” is their relation to the very essence of who we are as humans. And the messages that they convey *in between*, from the darkest to the brightest ends of the continuum in which we live as humankind.

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ORCID

Annegret F. Hannawa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5036-5065>

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