

► **You're the Healthiest Person I've Ever Seen** by Maureen McCarthy Breath of Hope Magazine 2009

There is a strange phenomenon in my life where strangers stop me in the street, even in foreign countries, and tell me I'm the healthiest person they have ever seen. This has happened 13 times in the last 10 years, all of which I have had a rare, fatal lung disease called Lymph.angio.leio.myo.matosis or LAM for short, which has left me with only 10% oxygen capacity left. It happens when I'm not on oxygen and the people have no idea I have a lung disease, so they're not saying I look good considering my health situation. Now I can see how someone might stop a person to say "I like your dress" or "You have beautiful hair," but to say I'm the healthiest person they've ever seen? That, to me, is just weird. And they've all specifically used the word healthy. My husband and I are no longer surprised when it happens, even when it was in the middle of a Russian market in St. Petersburg where the woman barely spoke English.



So what compels people to do this? If I had to guess, I would say it's about the story I carry in my body.

My first lung collapse was 20 years ago when I was twenty-two, I have high levels of pain in my body every day, and the side effects are too numerous to count, yet I know I am actually one of the healthiest people you will ever meet. I have a lung disease, but I'm not sick. Sickness, to me, is a story I need to buy into and I don't happen to be interested in buying into that one. So when strangers stop me to say I'm healthy, I think somehow my world is reflecting back to me the life I have chosen to live.

I've come to believe that everything is a story that I must choose, and when I choose the stressful ones it hurts. And I truly do believe that if I bought into the story that LAM is a terrible thing, or that dying young is awful, I would already be dead. Stressful stories weigh us down more than any lack of oxygen ever could. Say you and I are standing in front of a window watching the rain pouring down. If I just packed a picnic I might believe that rain is a terrible thing, and if you just planted a garden, the rain would be spectacular. It's the same rain falling from the same sky, only each of us has attached a different story to it. Nothing has any meaning till I assign it meaning, so I prefer to choose the meaning that feels peaceful rather than stressful. Having LAM is only as hard as the story I buy into.

For many years I've been curious about how the stories we choose impact our day-to-day lives. I've known from experience that it works that way, but it wasn't until I came across a book called *My Stroke of Insight* by Jill Bolte Taylor, a Harvard brain scientist who at age thirty-seven had a stroke when a blood vessel exploded in her brain, that I understood the why of it. You may have seen her short video circulating on the internet from the TED Conference, which brings together the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers, who are challenged to give the talk of their lives in 18 minutes. (www.ted.com) It's one of the most impactful stories I've ever come across. Through the eyes of a curious neuro-anatomist, Dr. Taylor watched her mind completely deteriorate to the point where she couldn't walk, talk, read, write, or recall any of her life. She describes how the two hemispheres of our brain function very differently. The left brain is like an enormous filing cabinet that our mind instantly accesses in order to analyze and compare what's happening to everything we know from the past and it then projects it into the future. So for instance, when we're told we have LAM, our mind instantly recalls every story we've ever heard or thought about disease, loss of health, dying, etc. and in milliseconds our mind tells us it's a devastating diagnosis. At the same time

the left brain is also projecting that devastation into the future and telling us life will now be burdensome and that dying is insufferable.

The right brain, on the other hand, processes information in an intuitive manner and enables creativity and empathy for the universe, sidestepping our ego and our need to judge people or situations. It is the part of our brain that sees oneness over separation. The right brain always knows everything is going to be alright and that sickness is a state of mind. The right brain is happy with things exactly as they are, no matter what is happening. It experiences being "in the now" and loves it as it is.



Having lost the categorizing, describing, judging and critically analyzing skills of her left brain, along with its ego center, Jill Bolte Taylor's consciousness shifted away from normal reality. In the absence of her left brain's neural circuitry, her consciousness shifted into present moment thinking whereby she experienced herself "at one with the universe." She said she felt the hand of God.

"We have two brains, we have two personalities, we have two ways of being in the world, says Dr. Taylor. We have two options which leave us always capable of choosing. You can choose to live a more peaceful, spiritual life by sidestepping your left brain."

We have been brought up in a world that teaches, through its education system and cultural stories, to be left brain dominant. It's why people experience such high levels of stress on a daily basis. But we can 'tend the garden of our minds' to maximize our quality of life by consciously choosing a different story. So my right brain experience of being diagnosed with LAM tells me that I'm ultimately a spiritual being having a human experience and that I'm healthy and strong and have much to gain from this experience. It's not horrible, it just is. Some people wear contacts, I wear oxygen. So what? Being on oxygen in my thirties and potentially dying young is a reality that has to be labeled as good or bad. The diagnosis doesn't make me a sick person, it's when I label it as bad that I ruin my health, and I prefer to be healthy.

We can consciously influence the neural circuitry underlying what we think, how we feel, and how we react to life's circumstances. When we are constantly accessing our left brain, we create neural pathways that become so automatic that we no longer think our thoughts, our thoughts think us. It's like water running down a mountain, it will take the worn path over any other. Our brain takes only seconds to release a chemical telling us how we feel after experiencing an event, and it will always trigger the neural pathway most often used. Negative thoughts foster more negative thoughts. But when we take a moment to question our stories and see them as stories, we have the opportunity to engage our right brain which only lives in the moment and is always at peace. LAM is LAM, that's all it is. Our lives are what we make of them one thought at a time.

I've been teaching this to people for years through my company *Engaging the Soul @ Work* and have watched thousands of people shift their thinking to a healthier way of interacting with the world. I've seen what happens to people when their stressful thoughts are questioned. The universe brings us what we believe.

And if my own thoughts create my reality, then it's not surprising when strangers stop me on the street to tell me I'm healthy. They're just reflecting back to me the life I live.

You can view a video Maureen's 15-year-old daughter made about how she lives her life at <http://maureenandzelle.com/creatinganewnormalvideo2.htm>. Maureen K. McCarthy is Director of the Center for Collaborative Awareness and is the co-creator of the *Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document* with her business partner and husband, Zelle Nelson. As Maureen worked within corporations and communities large and small, she realized that rather than fixing what was broken, she was drawn to pioneering new foundations that would build healthier individuals and groups from the start. The *Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document* is one of those foundational tools, which is now being used in 100+ countries around the world in both business and personal settings. Visit www.blueprintofwe.com to download the concept paper and sample Documents to create your own *Blueprint of WE Collaboration Documents*. Maureen and Zelle teach and speak on the *Blueprint of WE* in many parts of the world, as well as offering a *Facilitator Certification Program* and online classes. You can reach Maureen at maureen@blueprintofwe.com. She lives in Asheville, NC, USA.