



WHERE THE LIGHT GETS IN

ONE MAN DISCOVERS
THE ILLUMINATING POWER
OF STARTING OVER.

KEITH YAMASHITA is an expert on what it takes to start fresh. His consulting firm, SYPartners, guides and supports companies through major transformations. But when he suffered a stroke at age 51, Yamashita faced his most challenging reboot yet: his own. In the pages that follow, he details this harrowing experience and the truths it revealed—truths that can be applied to any serious setback. Read Yamashita's extraordinary story and follow the companion prompts he's created to help spark a renewal of your own.

CERAMICS BY **RAMI KIM**

I'M HAVING A STROKE,

but I don't know it yet. I'm sitting in a car dealership in San Francisco, simultaneously trying to buy an SUV and conduct a work videoconference on my laptop. This kind of "efficiency" is a symbol for my entire life; I'm constantly trying to cram as much as I can into every moment—so much so that I'm not really ever fully present. I take a gulp from my stainless steel water bottle. Water leaks from my mouth and down my chin. *Odd. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention.* I take a bigger swig, more mindfully. All of it dribbles onto my shirt. I realize I can't purse my lips to keep the water inside.

After a few more tries, I go "off video" and call my husband, Todd, who's in New York, to tell him something is happening to my face. "Love," he says urgently, "you have to get to the hospital." I make up an excuse to leave the video meeting early and tell the car salesman we need to finish up—no, there's no need to show me how the windows and locks work. I'm in a hurry. I grab the keys and shakily head off.

The drive to the ER is filled with tribulations. Trying to exit the dealership, I'm stalled for 15 minutes by an 18-wheeler blocking me. Once I get going, I'm baffled by an endless series of wrong-way one-way streets. I forget where the hospital is. And when I find it, there's the matter of what to do with the car. By this point my cognitive processing has so deteriorated that I don't remember how parking works. So I just turn off the car and get out. I try to lock it. Wrong button. Now the tailgate is open. I know it's not right, but I don't know what's wrong. I finally rush into the ER, where relief gives way to hopelessness when I see a long line of people in various stages of disrobement and disrepair, waiting their turn. *I'm doomed.*

A security guard approaches and asks, "Why are you here?" (Such a philosophical question at this moment.) I tell him, "My face isn't working"—or rather, I mumble some poor facsimile thereof. "Go like this," he says, opening his eyes wide like moons. I try to mimic him but can't. I cannot feel or control the right half of my face. Next thing I know, I'm lying on a gurney being wheeled at high speed to the MRI room, where I'm swallowed into a metal machine for 40 minutes as radio waves gather data about my besieged brain.

IT IS INSANE, OF COURSE,

that I drove myself to the ER in the middle of my own stroke. But that's how much I needed control, especially at this phase of my life.

A little backstory: For the 25 years leading up to the stroke, I'd been focusing on the company I founded. And my passion for the work often meant I'd chosen board meetings over helping with homework, sending one more email instead of being home for dinner. I'd been a successful entrepreneur but a bad dad to my two kids.

My intuition had begun telling me I needed to simplify my life and commit to being a better parent. But it was more than that. I'd been having premonitions that if I stayed in the frenetic, always-on culture of New York City, something terrible would happen to me. It was hard to talk about this with Todd and the kids; it's hard to put words to things that aren't rational. But after nearly a year of discussions, I'd decided I had to go back to California, where we'd lived before moving to New York. I said that while I would love for the kids and Todd to come with me, it was time for me to leave, no matter what. This unilateral decision had not gone down

well with the rest of the family. Still, we made a plan to move. Colette, 13, and Miles, 12, would come with me. Todd would join us later.

Now, here in the hospital, less than 24 hours after our arrival in California, the terrible thing I feared would happen is happening. The lead resident crinkles his nose, swipes his forehead with his finger, warms up his vocal cords as if he's rehearsing a marriage proposal. He says, "You're having a stroke." *At 51?* "It's happening in the base of your brain." When you're having a stroke, little moments drag out for impossibly long stretches. I examine every detail of the doctor's face, follow the curl of his lips. Seemingly at one-tenth speed, he tells me the stroke might continue to do damage to the base of my brain. Each word feels like another ten-pound weight on my chest. "The base of my brain?" I manage to ask. "What happens there?"

"Breathing," he says. "Swallowing. Bladder control. Autonomic things like that."

"Things like that," I whisper. I start to sob—for me, for my kids. I'm their supposed protector, and I cannot even say my own name.

RENEW YOU

Listen to your intuition.

The voice inside us is powerful. It can urge us away from destructive behaviors or toward a new future. We may ignore it because we want to show that we're in control. But that voice has a way of making itself heard. What are the inklings and intuitions in your life right now? They might be physical feelings of anxiety or excitement. Or daydreams you've been dismissing. Or a series of small coincidences that you haven't yet connected. Write them here, then think about what they might be trying to tell you.

THE NURSES

leave me to sleep. Aloneness has always been my nemesis, and there are few places more lonely than a hospital room. I reflexively pick up my briefcase to look for distraction. I find a poem (*far right*). The final lines: “Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? / Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” Only this morning, these seemed like poignant questions for someone else.

When I wake the next day, I can’t bear to look in a mirror, but I know I have to reckon with the damage the stroke has done to my face. I pick up my phone to sneak a peek in selfie mode—and I can’t unlock it. My face is no longer recognized as the passkey. I punch in the numerical code and hold up the phone to take stock. No matter how hard I try to move my muscles, I have no power over my right eyebrow, eyelid, cheek, nostril, lip, or chin. It feels as if I’m trying to control someone else’s face with my mind. Not a single twitch.

As the hours unfurl, I will discover many more things I am unable to do. Speak clearly, for one; the sounds of the letters *B*, *P*, *F*, and *M*, among others, are impossible to create. Or drink. (My mouth can’t contain the liquid.) Or eat. (I can’t tell where food ends and my mouth begins. I can’t reliably swallow.) It reminds me of the time, 30 years ago, when my apartment was robbed—but so neatly and carefully that at first I only noticed my TV was missing. I failed to realize that my boom box was also gone, that my watch had disappeared, that the plates I ate from were nowhere to be found. The robbery unfolded as one dawning loss after another.

I’ve always believed I was good with words, quick with ideas, skilled at charming people. These are my prized assets, the things that make me who I am. Now I discover that they can all be stolen in broad daylight.

And no one is sure what else the future holds. The neurology team can’t predict if or when I’ll have a second

stroke. My lead doctor runs some tests and draws a diagram of all the contributing health factors: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar and insulin resistance, sleep apnea, chronic infections, the standard American diet (also called, appropriately enough, SAD), underhydration, lack of exercise, and, above all, stress. I have to change my diet, manage my hypertensive and prediabetic conditions, take drugs to reduce my cholesterol. I need speech therapy, facial-muscle therapy, brain-oxygen therapies to help my nerves reconnect—22 hours a week total. In an even bigger blow, the doctor says I’ll be out of work for at least six months, probably longer. I have never taken off any considerable length of time. I finished college on a Friday, started my first job on a Monday, and so it has gone, on and on, for the past 30 years.

When I walk out of the hospital three days after I stumbled in, I’m walking into the unknown. In the days that follow, I try to pretend to other people that nothing has happened, but I’m literally wearing my disaster on my face. I attempt to fake my way through a conversation with a neighbor, telling her things are going fine. Then she asks for the third time, “How are you—really?” And I break down in tears. At the local burger joint, they cannot understand me when I order (even though burgers are the only thing on the menu). I cannot fulfill even the simple fatherly duty of getting food for my kids. Coco and Miles have to help me with everything—counting my pills, answering my phone, remembering names and faces. I’m ashamed that not only am I a bad dad, now I’m a bad, useless dad, even though I never get a sense they’ve given up on me. I cry a lot, especially in any moment that points out how fragile life is. Will this be my last chance to help the kids buy clothes for a new school year? The last time I get to drop them off in the morning? The last Spider-Man movie we see?

The Summer Day

BY MARY OLIVER

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

RENEW YOU

Mourn what you’ve lost, celebrate what remains.

Change can feel like a loss, and loss must be grieved before we can fully move on. Part of the process is taking stock of and appreciating what we still have. Think about a painful moment in your life—maybe it’s one you’re living through now. Make a list of the things that were “stolen” from you. Then make a list of the things you kept.

WHAT WAS LOST

WHAT REMAINS

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THE GOOD NEWS

is that I survived my stroke. The bad news is that if I want to keep living, I have to exercise. This will require no small amount of bravery. As I know from my work, transformational moments often require us to confront negative beliefs. Here’s one of mine: I am not an athlete.

This belief dates back to 1971, when I was 5 years old and my father—a letterman in every sport he played—decided I was going to take up track. I became a pretty fast runner, but on the day of my first official meet, when I took my position on the track, I got confused. There was one boy, then another, and then another, each in his own lane—all ahead of me. Why was I in last place when the race hadn’t even begun? No one had ever explained staggered starts to me. When the gun went off I froze, while all the other boys raced forward.

My parents had to come remove me from my frozen stance. I still feel the shame of walking back up into the stands with them. Masculinity, competition, physical prowess—they were indelibly sealed into one category: things I am not good at. And that negative belief grew stronger with every passing year.

Now, some 45 years later, I am on seat 54, the very last bike in the very last row in a SoulCycle

studio. Molli, our ebullient instructor, hops onto her bike at the front of the room. “Make sure you have everything you need to ride: your water, your towel, your juju!” I’m struggling to clip my rental shoes into the metal holders on the bike’s pedals. I think, *You have two Stanford degrees, and you are going to be defeated by biking cleats?* The studio fills with music at ear-shattering decibels. “In here, we ride to the beat!” Molli projects over the music. “I don’t care if you look pretty!” I’m flailing in a sea of perfectly synchronized legs. Once again, everyone is taking off without me. But suddenly one shoe magically snaps in, then the other. The beat gets more intense. Molli’s not so sunshiny anymore. “*Turn...up...the...resistance!*” I’m already feeling plenty of resistance, literally and figuratively, but I twist the dial that makes the pedaling harder. And wow, it is much harder.

I can’t keep the beat, and I am not looking pretty. My sweat-drenched T-shirt is now so sheer it reveals my fat rolls. Molli is practically levitating, her hair gloriously suspended, as if she’s riding in front of a photo-shoot fan. For the end sprint, everyone else stands, but I’m hunched over my handles, taking garbled gasp-breaths. After class, as I stagger out, Molli says, “I’m happy you’re here.” I manage to not throw up in my towel, and this feels like victory.

RENEW YOU

Unpack your negative beliefs.

Rising to new challenges often means overcoming negative beliefs about ourselves. Those beliefs probably formed long ago and have calcified over time, but naming and challenging them helps rob them of their power. What deep-seated beliefs have entrapped you, and where did they come from? Write about them here, then consider evidence from your past that disproves these beliefs.

RENEWAL HAPPENS

in the most ordinary ways. Over the next months, I see small signs of improvement: A tiny patch of feeling returns to my upper lip. A few weeks later, a tingle returns to my right eyebrow. A few weeks after that, I can move part of my nostril. My speech still sounds punch-drunk, but I can basically be understood. And for the first time in my kids' lives, I'm home with them every day. The stroke has given me the chance to do what I wanted to all along: be a better dad. As I'm discovering, this is all about the small moments—finding the missing kneepads in time for soccer practice, moderating sibling squabbles about who gets the front seat. I'm starting to meet Coco's new friends and getting to know them by name. We have a ritual: She's given all the girls code names—Apple, Banana, Pineapple—and tells me stories using these names, sharing her friends' dilemmas and disappointments. I have no idea which girl is which name; Coco doesn't want me judging her friends when I see them in person. This way, she thinks, our conversation can be more pure. We have a lot of conversations now, multilayered and complex. I feel like I really see our kids, perhaps for the first time ever.



I'M DRIVING.

Miles is in the back seat. Coco is in the passenger seat. Our new rule is that the shotgun rider has DJ rights, so Coco is scrolling through the playlists on my phone. Suddenly she sits bolt upright. "Dad? You have a playlist called 'My Funeral Songs'? How... in-CRED-ib-ly MOR-bid," she says, stretching out the syllables as only a teenager can. She taps the phone, and we listen to Earth, Wind & Fire's "September." It's followed by "Superman/Sidekick," written by my dear friend Michael Friedman. "Why are you so obsessed with your own death?" Coco says. "Is this because of the stroke?" I tell her, "It's not morbid. They're songs about how I want to live."

I actually made the funeral-songs list well before my stroke, on a friend's dare, and picked songs that capture how I wanted to be in the world. It's kept me inspired during this time of recovery—a reminder of what my life is truly about. So much of the music we love isn't about just the notes, but what those notes evoke in our heart. Designing a funeral playlist allows you to spend some time with this question: How do you want to be remembered for the life you actually lived? Then you can come back to living that life with more clarity.

RENEW YOU

Create a funeral playlist.

The songs that tell our story represent the things we value. While we're alive, they remind us to live as our truest selves. Which song always brings you to tears? Or gets you on the dance floor? Write down the songs that are essentially you. You can share your list with #MyFuneralSongs.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

"WE'RE GOING TO DO

a death meditation now," says Jade Leblanc, a willowy yogi from Los Angeles. Todd and I are at a wellness retreat—something we would never have done before my stroke—surrounded by 60 people we've just met. Jade's instructed us to sit in pairs across from each other, on the floor, knees touching. In all 28 years of our wondrous and sometimes turbulent marriage, Todd and I have never looked so intensely into each other's eyes.

Now Jade instructs us to close our eyes, so we do. "Imagine you've just been tapped on the shoulder and told your time is up," she says. "This is your last day on earth." I feel a chill throughout my body. Jade's guided meditation leads us down a long corridor where we meet the people who have mattered most to us—the one who believed in us most when we were children, the person we most need to forgive. Every scene she conjures feels as real to me as the physical world. We give each person's hands a final squeeze.

Then Jade says, "Think of the person you love the most. Who has your heart? Visualize that person. Think about the joyful moments you've had. Think about your arguments, the things you've laughed at, the memories you've made. There's so much you need to say to this person on the last day you'll ever be together. You have so many thoughts, whole paragraphs, poems you want to share. But you get only one word." I think about all the things I'd want to say to Todd. *I love you. I wish I'd been more. I wish we'd had longer. I wish I hadn't hurt you.* Then Jade says, "Now say that word out loud."

Todd and I lean toward each other to whisper in each other's ear. Then we both say, so simultaneously it could be one voice, "Sorry." We're crying. We hold each other tightly and can't let go. We're not out of time yet. We are still right here. What shall we make of this one wild and precious life?

RENEW YOU

Go deeper.

To delve further into the process of renewal, visit Keith Yamashita's website, a-human-being.com, where you'll find immersive podcasts that expand on the lessons offered here (including the full guided death meditation)—as well as extended prompts to ignite insights that will enrich your journey.