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Understanding Loss of Self in *My Beautiful Broken Brain*

Erika Collin

The word “loss” isn’t exclusive to death. People can lose parts of themselves and have to relearn and rehabilitate in order to live out the rest of their lives as functionally and as successfully as possible. Loss can mean losing a limb, memories, abilities, or even a sense of who you are as a person. Often, in cases of loss of self, the sufferer isn’t near death; sometimes, quite the opposite. They have a whole life left to live and rehabilitation is crucial in order to continue that life.

One of the most common causes of loss of self is brain injury. An article published in the *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* attempted to define the idea of loss of self after a brain trauma:

There is no single, widely accepted definition of loss of sense of self within the brain injury literature. However, there exist a number of points of apparent consensus among authors in regard to its characteristic features. First, loss of sense of self involves conscious awareness on the part of the survivor that she is somehow ‘not the same person’ as pre-injury. (Myles, 2004)

“Not the same person” is exactly how Lotje Sodderland felt after experiencing a severe stroke at age 34. Sodderland is a co-director and subject of the 2014 documentary film *My Beautiful Broken Brain* that captures her post-stroke rehabilitation. The process of creating the film was crucial to Sodderland’s rehabilitation and can serve as an example of how films about loss of self can assist in the recovery of viewers who are going through similar self-loss.

My Beautiful Broken Brain, directed by Sodderland and Sophie Robinson, follows Sodderland’s journey through the year after her hemorrhagic stroke at age 34. The stroke



Therapists in training.

initially left Sodderland without the ability to read, write, or speak coherently. Sodderland, a filmmaker herself, made the decision to start filming her rehabilitation in order to give her own story some structure. In the year after her stroke, Sodderland goes through intensive therapy in order to attempt to regain the basic mental abilities she once had. She works incessantly with language therapists, becomes an inpatient at a neurological rehabilitation hospital for three full months, and even partakes in an experimental electrical brain stimulation study. That study contributes to a seizure Sodderland suffers that causes her to

regress. She recovers from the regression and the film concludes with her coherently giving a

presentation about her rehabilitation to a group of therapists in training.

The film shows the most intimate and emotional moments of Sodderland's rehabilitation, made possible by the fact that a large portion of the film is captured by Sodderland herself. Sodderland often films herself with her iPhone while having difficulty falling asleep at night or when she has insights about how her recovery is going. This footage gives the film an incredibly intimate perspective into what is going on inside Sodderland's head.

Not only does Sodderland's recording of her daily life contribute to the viewer getting a peek inside her new mind, but the video and audio effects throughout the film also help convey a crucial sense of perspective. Sodderland wrote an article for *theguardian.com* shortly after the film was released at festivals, in which she stated:

Apart from the scar under my hair, my face and body were perfectly intact. To look at me, you wouldn't have noticed a thing. But everyday life no longer made sense to my new brain. I struggled to find the logic in a toothbrush, or the system that goes with the washing of hair, even though I knew (without really understanding) that these behaviors were a necessary part of human life.

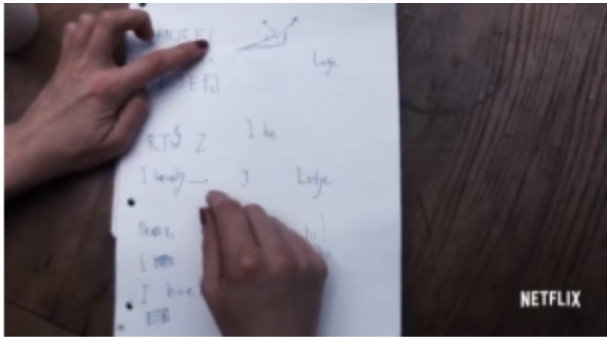
While Sodderland appeared normal, what was going on in her head was anything but. Her vision was dramatically affected; her left eye saw things clearly, but her right eye distorted the world around her. Colors were more vivid and lights were brighter. The film emulates these sensory changes by adding saturation and blurring effects to footage Sodderland took on walks around her neighborhood. The viewer is able to glimpse the strange, surreal world Sodderland was experiencing. She explains these distortions in her vision as beautiful but also scary. "It's like a new dimension," she explains. "It's an exquisite, painful, sometimes like a nightmare place inside my head, but it's also somewhere where I can get completely lost inside this beautiful and extraordinary new place that I, myself, discovered where my brain once was."



Film's representation of Sodderland's vision

In addition to her vision, the stroke also affected Sodderland's ability to read. Sodderland suffered from aphasia, which causes difficulty producing or understanding language (ASHS, n.d.). She couldn't recognize simple words on a page or recall words from memory. In one filmed therapy session, Sodderland is asked to recall as many "S" words as she can. She manages to stammer out the word "summer" and then begins sobbing because she can't think of any additional words. Surprisingly enough, as her treatment progresses she is eventually able

to type sentences with ease on a computer. However, the part of her brain that remembers the



Sodderland relearns language

act of typing is different than the part of her brain that reads; this means she can type an entire paragraph, but cannot read it. The film helps the viewer visualize this disjunction by making the words become unrecognizable one-by-one as what she types appears across the screen.

One final symptom of Sodderland's stroke that the film portrays is her altered hearing. The documentary uses an echoing effect quite frequently, particularly when she hears loud noises or even when people are speaking. The

echoing effect is often disorienting, which puts into perspective how frustrating and life-altering it must have been for Sodderland herself. The viewer experiences only a fraction, an hour and twenty-six minutes, of what Sodderland had to tolerate every day in a much more inescapable way. At one point in the film she says that "It's a heightened sense of reality. Euphoric. I can experience colors and sounds like I wasn't able to before. So intensified. So exaggerated. Time has a new meaning. It's all elongated and transient." The video and audio effects used in the film were crafted with the help of Sodderland herself: she explained to effects specialists what was going on in her head and they recreated her descriptions for the film. A large part of this film involves helping the viewer visualize and vicariously experience what Sodderland was going through, however, Sodderland had to find a way to help herself understand what she was going through as it was happening to her. She found cathartic comfort in documenting her mental progress throughout her rehabilitation process.

The creation of *My Beautiful Broken Brain* was a definitive part of Sodderland's recovery. "During that first strange, solitary fortnight, I had an idea – my first linear thought. I had been a film-maker; could I film this? I figured out the video function on my iPhone, and began to record my new life." Filmmaking was one of the parts of herself that she still held onto after the stroke and she felt she could achieve something with it. Filming herself and having others film her throughout her recovery journey gave Sodderland the ability to vent, record memories, and gain understanding about her own loss of ability.

Venting into the lens was extremely helpful for Sodderland at a time of intense emotions. During her three month stay as an inpatient at a neurological rehabilitation hospital, she turned to recording herself frequently. The hospital was an isolating and draining environment, and she was able to open up about her feelings through the lens. In one self-recorded clip, she said:

It's been a very, very, very, very, very, very hard process to be here. I am different than I was, maybe I'm never gonna be the same. That's only really just occurred to me. But I'm still hoping that it's not true. How I'll end up when it comes to romance, my life, work, you know, those are the things that you start freaking out about.

The communication she had with the camera was an essential component to her rehabilitation. The lens acted as a friend that was always there to open up to. Conveniently, that friend was a recording device, so she was able to look back and observe what she had been thinking in certain moments. The ability to record her thoughts was important because the stroke affected her memory dramatically.

Her memory was almost non-existent, especially immediately after her stroke. Sodderland was able to record things and then look back on them, like prosthetic memories. She was also able to see her progress this way. She is recorded in the film by her co-director, saying:

I'm obsessed with recording everything and I'm unable to remember anything. I think it's part of the brain has become unable to remember things; you've become obsessed with recording it because you're just terrified it's going to get lost. In order to make sense of it, I want to record it. There is a hilariously kind of surreal reality to it.

It's understandable that Sodderland is concerned about her inability to remember. Memory is considered by almost all psychologists to be an essential component of self. John Locke wrote in his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

Memory, in an intellectual creature, is necessary in the next degree to perception. It is of so great moment, that where it is wanting, all the rest of our faculties are in a great measure useless: and we in our thoughts, reasonings, and knowledge, could not proceed beyond present objects, were it not for the assistance of our memories. (1689)

Capturing her rehabilitation was not only helpful for her creative, filmmaking self, but it also helped her recover. Without the ability to go back and re-watch footage of herself, it's likely that Sodderland's recovery would have been a longer and more difficult process.

Filmmaking was one thing Sodderland still remembered how to do. She took that as an opportunity to record her rehabilitation and make sense of it all. She said, "A really, really, important part of this story has been this film. The film was something that was absolutely born of necessity. It's created a way for me to understand something that's extremely complex, and it's created a structure. A narrative structure for me to understand my own story." Providing narrative structure after brain injury is recognized as being extremely helpful for the patient. "According to some authors, narratives are our identities (McAdams, 1999; Schechtman, 1996); self-identity is created through the stories we tell, and it is through narratives that one's life gains meaning and direction" (qtd. in Thomas, 2014). The process of filming and editing *My Beautiful Broken Brain* provided a necessary narrative structure that helped Sodderland find the lost parts of herself. She was able to self-reflect throughout making the film while also expressing her life altering experience. "Narratives have been described as a tool for self-reflection and for expression of self-identity to others (Mattingly, 1998), and therefore can be used as a therapeutic technique for identity reconstruction (Hogan, 1999)" (qtd. in Thomas, 2014). The entire production process of *My Beautiful Broken Brain* was essential to Sodderland's recovery because it allowed her to deconstruct and understand what she had lost.

This film didn't just help Sodderland with her recovery. It also helped viewers who were experiencing similar loss of self. "The intensely personal nature of (recovery) suggests that

watching real people describing it in different ways on a screen might be more effective than reading about it in a book” (Carson, 2012). People who are also struggling with self-identity can gain by viewing others’ rehabilitation processes via documentary films. Visual effects, as well as seeing the raw emotions of the recovering person, can churn up emotional responses inside of the viewer. They can relate, sympathize, and even compare and contrast their experiences with those of the subject of the film.

In *My Beautiful Broken Brain*, the reflexive and self-reflexive nature of the film allows viewers to feel as though they are also a part of Sodderland’s recovery process. They’re able to feel that they are right there with her when she speaks into the camera lens. They’re able to understand the specifics of what she’s experiencing as well as realize that some of her symptoms they can’t understand because they’ve never gone through it. Watching someone else’s recovery process can help some viewers recognize what abilities they do have. Comparing their loss of ability or function to another recovering person can provide encouragement and make them realize that it could be worse. It can also provide hope and reassurance that progress can always be made and that life will continue regardless. Dolly, one mental health patient said:

Recovery is learning to live a new life, and so in that way it is a re-birth and you realize that recovery is a chance to recreate your life and it’s a chance to kind of, make your song, your personality, the way you want it to be. . .The more hope I have about how things will get better, the more I recover. (Carson, 2012)

Films centered around loss of self, especially documentary films, can help those dealing with a loss of self-identity. Recovering people can relate as they compare their traumas with those shown in films, which can be incredibly therapeutic.

Many aspects of *My Beautiful Broken Brain* were therapeutic for Sodderland and the film’s viewers. The video and audio effects allowed the audience to experience, in part, what Lotje was experiencing. The effects also allowed Lotje Sodderland to describe what was going on in her head with the use of images and sound so she was better understood. The filmmaking process itself was rehabilitative for her because it allowed her to vent, capture memories, and reflect. Finally, the entire film offered comfort and hope to audience members who might be experiencing similar loss. Film, in this case, specifically documentary film centered around rehabilitation after loss, can not only help the person creating and experiencing the film but can also contribute to the recovery of those who view it.



An image of Sodderland

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