

The Faith of a Neurologist

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Author Biography

Dr. Darriet received her MD from the University of Bordeaux in 1974. After neurological studies in Bordeaux, she received her doctoral d'état des Sciences from Bordeaux, 1982. Her specialties have been in biochemistry and neurology; her post-doctoral research, in biochemistry and memory. In 1984 and 1985, she was commissioned by the French government to Saint Louis for research in the Division of Radiation Sciences at the Washington University School of Medicine. After seven years work at the Laboratoire de Psychophysiologie in Talence, she resigned her position to become the primary care physician for severe head-injured patients at a small hospital near the northern coast of France. Dr. Darriet is a long-term member of ITEST. The following is the text of a lecture, delivered at The Newman Center, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.



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I am French, and a single woman. I work in a rehabilitation unit of a private hospital in a small town of 14,000 inhabitants, in the North of France. It is a center for severe head-injured patients. Most of them had accidents (car accidents), some had vascular diseases, or encephalitis, or tumor, or had attempted suicide, but all of them had been comatose for at least several days and have brain damage. They usually arrive in the center immediately after discharge from intensive care unit. All of them are in bad condition and if you never saw this kind of person I must tell you something about them.

Just imagine that one day you wake up in a place you do not know, with all kinds of probes at different parts of your body, surrounded by people you do not know, in a really strange place with light, noise and white, everybody clothed in white, or green when you are in intensive care. And you understand nothing and your body is so strange and you cannot move and you cannot speak.

Where am I? Why am I here? What happened? Who are they? No answers to these questions, no possibilities to ask them, even no real awareness of these questions. And then begins the struggle to come back to a self governing life. Some of them will never do it and die. Some of them will stop here and remain in a persistent vegetative state. Some of them will improve with more or fewer handicaps.

My work is to accompany this process of recovery from the state of awakening to independent life. This work is done with a staff of nurses and a lot of different therapists and everyone has a unique and necessary role in this process of recovery. It is also done with the family, the only link with the patient's previous life; they will have to welcome back someone different from what he used to be.

It is a humble work because, at the time of the injury, no one is able to predict what the outcome is going to be like several years in the future. It is a humble work because no drug or technique is going to allow a brain to grow and reconstruct the parts which have been destroyed. It is a humble work because we have to teach everything again to people who forgot a lot and do not know anymore how to use what is left.

But it is also a wonderful work of close and intense relationship with very poor people who have lost their most precious wealth, their health and who even, at times, do not know that they have lost everything. It is a wonderful work when you see within one year someone who was completely dependent for every act of the most basic daily life going out walking and talking again. It is wonderful to be a witness of this extraordinary strength of a human being. It is a wonderful work when you see all the sacrifices that a family or a friend is able to do for his sick relative. Even the most apparently rude professional can be moved to tears when he sees small progress in someone he washed for days and months.

I like this kind of true and even crude relationship. At this level, there is little room left for masks or lies, there is almost no more ability of control. You can see all the range of human behavior. It can also be very difficult when nothing happens or when the behavior is out of control or when there is a complication... but isn't it the same everywhere?

Thus, I like my work at this stage of my life. However, I have been doing it for 16 months. And the questions is: "How did I arrive here?" This may be my journey of faith.

I was born in a small village in the southwest of France. My infancy was very happy. But this innocence did not last long and I soon became aware that I wanted to be loved and that I had to work to achieve something in my life. Yes, as everyone else, I wanted to be loved and I soon began to behave according to peoples expectations. I went very far in this way. It even led me to St. Louis 13 years ago. However, I did not want to be loved by just anyone and I used to exercise some kind of discernment in my choice of the people whom I wanted to please. They had to have some importance in my eyes (but, this judgment of importance highly changed with the passing of years). When I was a child, it was necessarily my school teacher and I was a good pupil; and it led me to become aware that I had a brain, a mind. And I learnt very early that we do not all have the same capacities.

For, at the same time, I also became aware of my physical limits. I was born with a heart abnormality and I had surgery when I was 14. It was almost my first encounter with the medical world and it shaped my choice of my professional life. I admired all the physicians and nurses who were giving their lives to help others. Yes, I was a little dreaming, unrealistic, but, then, I did not know that the world could be a kind of hell. The pain, the suffering that I was experiencing was normal. I mean that I never had any questions about that. I had the grace to just accept and even welcome it. Is it the way that children face suffering? I do not know. I guess it can be. The kind of question, “Why does it happen to me?” never crossed my mind. But the questions were to come later...

I wanted to become a nurse, but someone told me that it would be better to be a physician. I went to medical school in Bordeaux. I became a physician. Then, one day, a professor of neurology whom I greatly admired offered me a place in his department and asked me to begin some research work. Of course I did and I began to work in biochemistry. For some years, I was almost living a dream. First, I was a physician really working in a hospital, and this position had been given to me. Second, I was beginning to do research and through this research I would someday contribute to discover something to save people. Third, I had a real career ahead of me, as I was combining medical practice and research. I was acquiring this so appreciated double training in science and medicine. I was not conscious that there was a huge difference between the two first points and the third one. To be a physician, to do research, could be an answer to my desire to help, to serve, to save people. To get a position was an answer to my pride and remember, at that time, everything was offered to me. Even the president of the university supported me. Of course, among all these external demands, many questions were already emerging about my true self, but I tried to wipe them away. I lived four very intense years of work, almost without leisure, I had no time. Four very intense years during which I believed that I was going to become someone. Four very intense years in answer to the previous question, “Who am I?”. Even more, I then met someone who had a very high position in the French CNRS (the National Center of Scientific Research) and I became a researcher paid by the government: a position for my entire life which gave a complete financial security, a security of employment, a way to earn my living without any anxiety for tomorrow.

I guess you realize that there is a mystery in how so many people I met at key points in my life influenced my journey. Who sent them into my life? This question did not even cross my mind. I was in a materialistic world and I believed in the saving power of science. I had a real faith in science.

But, these four very intense years turned out to be, instead of the expected answers, the ground of much deeper questions, disturbing questions, existential questions. These questions came as soon as I began to work almost full time in a lab. I had only four hours left to see patients in general neurology. I experienced a great distress and I was not able to name it. I continued to work because it was just impossible for me to abandon something which was not finished. I did not have my PhD yet. And I still believed that the best was to come after some time of adjustment. But it was never the case and I remained for years with the questions about the meaning of life? My place? What I was made for? What is the meaning of freedom? Of love? All the abstract words were completely mysterious to me. And it was impossible for me to accept my not being able to understand. These questions continued to haunt me. All my readings failed to bring me any answer. All my discussions did not help. Some even said that I was depressed. Maybe... Hopefully I remained with my painful questions and did not look for help in psychiatry or pills. Very simply, my acts and my desires were not in agreement, but I did not know it then.

In the midst of this turmoil, I once visited a church. And I met a priest. He is presently a missionary in Africa. And, I was led to remember that I was raised in the catholic faith. Until I was around 15, religion, practice, was easy and even pleasant for me. But soon, it became a burden and, as many other people, I made the mistake of equating religion and morality. A morality consisting only of interdictions. In short, religion became a way that prevented me from living what I now call a *Hitler-like* image of God: “If you do not do what I tell you to do I am going to kill you”. I could not psychologically function this way. I stopped going to church. But I was still attracted by spiritual matters, building my own ethic, my own spirituality...

At the same time, the diving into pleasure or materialism did not bring me any happiness and still no answer to my unending questions. And when I first met this priest, my first request was to learn something about my religion. I already had some academic degrees and yet I knew nothing about my religion. It was a question of honesty. This man, by God's grace, was a very clever priest who did not send me to some school of theology but who just asked me to read the Bible and he lent me some books. I used to see him every month and we talked about my readings in the Bible. And one day, I asked for the sacrament of reconciliation. It was at the beginning of 1982. And the search began... "Quit your country..." said God to Abram (Gen 12: 1).

I first saw God as a creator and all the discoveries of science were telling me of the wonders of creation in a wide sense. I then thought that my feeling of distress came from the fact that I was doing basic research too far removed from medicine and that I missed neurology. Another opportunity came through a man who offered me (again) to work with the PET (Positron Emission Tomography - the most sophisticated technical device to study the metabolism of a living human brain). This PET was to be built in Lyon (another city in France). I went to Lyon. It seemed very interesting to me. I thought I could do clinical work and research at the same time on the brain. More training was needed. I went to Paris where there was already a PET and I learnt some basics about it. Then I arrived in St. Louis, at Washington University, at Barnes hospital, for two years.

With these different moves to Lyon, Paris, I already left a lot of things familiar to me, friends... French people are not used to moving as easily as you Americans do. I was free but I experienced loneliness and I still did not know what the word freedom could mean. I went to church. I continued to read the Gospels. I began to see some differences between my way of life and what was said in the sermon on the mount. But I was not yet able to apply them in my life. God was taking a larger place, but my spiritual life was on one side and my professional life on the other side. I was in search of unity, in search of myself, I wanted to be known.

I arrived in St. Louis in January 1984 and the snow lasted until March. On Palm Sunday, I talked to a priest. I met him almost every week during the time I spent here. He sent me to make a one week solitary retreat in a Cenacle retreat house. It is the greatest experience I ever had. I am still living with it, on it. I made many other retreats since that time, but all were very different from that initial encounter. This priest was a real gift for me. He is the first that I really saw as a gift from God. I then began to realize that all other encounters had also been God's gifts.

In Barnes hospital, I was doing only research. I found very kind people, but I quickly realized that the work with PET was not the answer to my quest for unity between medicine and science. I realized that I could not spend my life working with machines. And, after all, even if I knew everything about the brain, would I be a better human? Moreover, what I was doing was exactly the reverse of what I wanted to do. The patients were used to serve the PET and not the PET to serve the patients. The patients served to increase knowledge which in turn was supposed --- maybe one day? --- to improve patients. But it appears to me that all discoveries are found in what is not expected.

I was looking for knowledge when I first opened a Bible but I found Someone. God, whom I first saw as a creator was becoming a Father. A Father who knows me better than I will ever know myself. A Father who loves me, although He knows all the good and the evil parts of myself. An all-forgiving Father who always receives His children and gives them the best. I felt a real shock when I read that the father of the prodigal son kissed him --- before --- he could apologize.

And this Father had a son, Jesus, who did not succeed, who could not be admired at a human level. Why did He seem so attractive to me? His acts and deeds are in total agreement, He never changes according to fashion...

But nothing is ever easy and I had another question. Did I want a father who puts his son on a cross? But God said that "everything He made was very good" (Gen 1:3 1). Then, even a cross is good? Too hard for me! And I could point out plenty of other difficulties. But, if I accept them as God's words, it is the truth and I have to

conform my beliefs to it and not the reverse. My views are truly not God's views. I have to adjust. And Jesus? How did He accept the will of His Father?... And Job had heard of God. He was an upright man. He wanted to understand evil. But when he saw God he accepted and rejoiced in suffering. From knowledge to life, it is a long way. A way we all travel by one self. And, yet, we are not alone on this journey. He is always with us whether we acknowledge Him or not.

By the way, there is another image of God, often given by the present society, that I do not like. In my words it is a *Gandhi-like* image of God. As if God was saying to us, "Do what I tell you to do or I will kill myself". No. Jesus for me is very simply telling us, "Do you want to live? Then, follow me; do what I say."

And I guess to say yes or no to this invitation is real freedom. And I guess to help someone in his own choice, even if we do not share the same view, with absolutely nothing in return, is real love. St. Augustine says, "Love and do what you want".

But I was still in St. Louis, working with PET, aware of God's protection and I wondered, "If God brought me here it is what I have to do." And my mind became my cross. I had to use it to serve my God. But by that time, I had already lost my faith in science. Some time later, I was to understand clearly that the world was already saved, that there was only one savior, that it was not the product of a human mind, not even the product of the minds of all humanity, but that it was a man, my God, Jesus.

And I went back to France. The PET was not yet built in Lyon. So, I did not have to make a choice to work there. I went back to Bordeaux, to my previous lab. I no longer wanted to do basic biochemistry. I still thought I could manage to do some kind of medical research and I went into neuro-psychology and I began to work on memory. As a physician, I could meet patients and I saw amnesiac patients to study memory. What is it? How is it organized? Which parts of the brain are involved in learning, memory, recall and so on. But I did not want to use a human being as a rat. So, my research was bad. If I had an experiment to do with someone and if I then felt that this patient was not ready to do it because he was tired or for any other reason, I did not do the experiment. Moreover, I could not use the people for the sake of science since I did not believe in science anymore and I rapidly tried to find ways to improve my patients' broken memory. It is the way I began to work in rehabilitation. To my eyes, it was no longer research. I was not finding anything exciting and I was unmotivated to write what I was doing. But, then I was in great conflict. On a personal level I was feeling bad because I was not doing what I was being paid for. At that time I was helped by the CNRS who asked me to choose between medicine and research. A difficult choice. But "no man can serve two masters" (Mat 6:24). I had a position in research. I had nothing in medicine. In France, it is almost impossible to go from one field to the other. But I liked the work I was doing with the patients. The patients seemed to be happy with it. Then, I chose medicine. I was ready to go into private practice as a neurologist to work with cognitive impaired persons, when a friend of mine told me that a job was available in a rehabilitation center. One month later I was working there. It is in Berck, where I live now.

During these ten years in Bordeaux, I looked for a spiritual director without success but I continued to read: St. Augustine (a giant for me), St. Francois de Sales (a doctor of love), Ste Therese de Lisieux (the smile of Jesus), the Bible. I attended some activities in the church. I tried to join some groups to share my faith without great success. I never studied theology. I met with some groups of students at the college and at the university.

I moved to Berck. I left everything. My life of prayer is extremely poor. I spend about 10 hours every day, except Saturdays and Sundays in the hospital. I have a lot of work. Once again I am alone but I do not experience loneliness anymore. Since I made the choice of medicine, I do not miss research. The existential questions left me. Does it mean that I am in the right place? Once again, I do believe that God led me there.

And I am in charge of thirty brain-patients. I have always been fascinated by the brain. It is amazing to see how a brain lesion can alter the behavior of a person. But, as a handicapped woman said, "This body is the envelope,

do not stop with looking at the outside; read the letter inside.”

Five of the patients are in a vegetative state and we can find no way to open the envelope and yet, there is someone here. Five of them are in a low awareness state. For these ten patients, the great suffering is for the family. How can we deal with their affliction? And I wonder “What is the meaning of this kind of life?” Some of the patients are still dependent but try to communicate whether with language or signs and their first attempts to communicate are often very clumsy. Finally the others begin to regain independence and their cognitive impairments are really striking. It is terribly difficult to deal with the disturbing and painful symptoms of people who have brain damage. But are they not symptoms of the limitations we all share? So, the patients show me who I am.

We can never eliminate the Cross.

But, as a profoundly brain damaged patient recently wrote, “The critical mission of a healer is to ease our crosses a little when they burden our shoulders too much” (Jean-Dominique Bauby, *le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, 1997). To be translated soon: *The Bubble (diving suit) and the Butterfly* .