

A Disembodied Adventurer

Richard Gelwick

ABSTRACT Key words: James Hall, Patton Howell, Jungian psychology, pontine stroke, locked-in syndrome, mind-body relationship, Michael Polanyi's theory of knowledge, ethical care for stroke victims, life of the mind without body.

This review introduces the account of Polanyi Society member James Hall's rare survival of a pontine stroke. With the help of Patton Howell, the story leads to the clinical and philosophical meaning of a life virtually without body experience yet rich in intellectual and spiritual activity.

Patton Howell and James Hall. *Locked Into Life*. Boise, Idaho: Tea Road Press, 2002. Pp 213. ISBN 0-9708666-2-3. \$28.95, hardcover.

Introduction

On April 11, 1991, James Hall, Jungian psychiatrist, was on his way to give a paper at a Polanyi centennial conference that was being held at Kent State University.¹ En route he suffered a pontine stroke, an event from which 1 in 10 survive. *Locked Into Life* is a joint account by a forensic psychophysicologist, Patton Howell, and James Hall. Howell was foremost in saving Hall from being terminated by his medical attendants and in rehabilitating Hall's capacity to live and to tell the adventure of living as virtually a mind without a body.

Hall is among the early followers of Polanyi's work on theory of knowledge. He was a medical student at Duke University when Polanyi gave the Duke Lectures (1964), and he saw a connection between Polanyi's subsidiary and focal awareness that contributed to Hall's understanding of Jung's use of the concepts conscious and unconscious. Over the years, Hall pursued this insight, and he participated from time to time in meetings of the Polanyi Society.

From Locked-In to Breakout

The account of Hall's stroke and surviving to experience a new way of being is startling. In story form, Patton Howell begins by taking the reader into a world unknown and dreaded by most humans. Hall's injury is not an illness to be cured. The pons is a cerebral bridge of communication between our lower brain and our higher brain. The trauma of the stroke has destroyed part of Hall's mid-brain. The lower brain that allows the body to continue functioning is still working but the higher brain is cut off from communication with it. The body is basically paralyzed from the neck down while the eyes connected to the higher brain still move though with little control if any. Normal measurements for brain death could not tell whether Hall had cognitive function. This condition is known as the locked-in syndrome. It presents one of the most difficult challenges to caregivers and to personal relations of the victim. How do we know whether the person is conscious or is vegetating on the intravenous feeding?

On the way to the Polanyi conference, Hall was experiencing disorienting symptoms as he drove from the airport. In Akron, he sought the address of a hospital, but he could not find it. He was found leaning on the blaring horn of his rental car parked on the side of the road. After receiving emergency care, Hall was flown

to Dallas, his home city. There Hall was given standard care for persons in his condition, which left open the question as to whether James Hall was really there.

For a number of years, Hall, Patton Howell, and Bill Moore – a psychiatrist, had formed a special fraternity of their own sharing regularly professional experience and speculations on the relations of their specific fields. Confronted with Hall’s condition and as friends of Hall’s wife, Susanne, they were confident that Hall’s intellectual strength might save his mind from breaking down as he suffered the isolation of the locked-in syndrome. In direct opposition to medical staff opinions, Howell and Moore set about to discover the existing mind of Hall. They used what Polanyians would recognize as “indwelling” to put them into the mind of Hall. They remembered their times together, thought of the mind of Hall as within them, and they talked to Hall out of this framework.

One day after a therapist had tested Hall for visual response with letters on plastic cards, the therapist concluded there was no cognitive activity. After the therapist left, Moore and Howell did their own experiment with their own cards that were larger and set further apart making them easier for Hall to indicate, if he could. They had to observe very carefully for a contextually long stare compared to the usual involuntary eye blinks. With patience much greater than Hall’s caregivers, they found that Hall was conscious and able to communicate through a spellboard. This breakthrough led to enhancement of Hall’s ability to communicate by having a specially designed computer that reacted to his eyes. As Hall grew in strength of mind through his interactions with Powell, Moore, and Mrs. Hall, his mind also began to organize and to recall his thoughts from the time of his stroke. Hall also became more creative in his use of his mind to communicate. He found that in his state, he was free of the burdens and confusions of the body. He could now think twenty-four hours a day. The mind never sleeps, he says. The mind is either awake or dreaming.

Hall now lives at home. Therapy has helped him to be able to swallow, to have some movement of his arms and of his body. Advanced computer technology has also enabled him to peck at a computer keyboard so that he is not limited to the earlier eye-sensitive spellboard. He even receives visitors and does interpretations of their dreams. For him, his new existence is primarily a world of the wonderful reality of mind.

Personal Knowledge and Medicine

There are many potent implications in Hall’s case, and one of them is the significance of Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge for medicine. Hall’s case is typical of the mistaken fallacy of detached and impersonal knowing as being the most objective knowing and the best medicine. Hall’s official caregivers were prisoners of this fallacy, and they nearly executed Hall in their prison. Patton Howell and Bill Moore are qualified health professionals, but they also were inclined to consider the truth of their total experience. Their work and earlier discussions had already prepared them to consider that human minds are more than brains. They knew Hall well and believe that his active and intelligent mind would fight, if it could. Their belief led them to look for ways to get in contact with Hall’s mind, and they found that their belief was true. Underlying this specific case is the general need for medicine and health care to keep the patient as person at the center of practice.

Hall’s case demonstrates a number of good practices for medical care. One is relating to the presence of the patient personally. Powell and Moore noticed that the care team treated Hall the same way that normal cats treat a decorticated cat, a cat that has its cortex separated from its higher brain. Exposed to a decorticated cat, other cats ignore it and regard it as dead even when the decorticated cat is stimulated to snarl, show its fangs

and to claw. Caregivers spoke over and around Hall as if he were not there. Significantly, the first sentence that Hall spelled answered his caregivers: “I demand to live asshole.”²² It is standard training for caregivers to speak with awareness that hearing is one of the last senses to go, yet the attitude of scientific detachment so pervades the medical culture that this training is often forgotten.

Another important medical lesson in this case is the hope for stroke victims shown by Patton Howell. It is clear as you read the book that Howell has worked with other stroke victims, and he is battling society and the established medical culture to give better care for these persons. He even goes so far as to point out that with the technological advances of medicine it is now less costly to maintain a person like James Hall than an average American going about their normal affairs. Howell dares to speculate that in the future with the advantages of longer life, we could have a large population of persons still enjoying life through their minds even though they have had strokes.

Finally, the great Hippocratic ethical precept “to do no harm” is seen as Howell and Moore contend with the medical staff. While this standard is normative in medicine, borderline cases do not always receive its protection. Howell points out that each stroke case is unique and related to the person’s whole life development. One of Hall’s attending psychiatrists says before Hall’s breakthrough that it is too much of a burden on family and friends and Hall might live in this condition indefinitely. Howell appeals to “the great philosopher of the nineties, Michael Polanyi” who “has pointed out that if we cannot escape the habit of relying on observers then let us at least rely on good observers who are trained to report their experiences as objectively as possible.”²³ Howell’s point here was about the importance of taking seriously in science and in philosophy Hall’s post locked-in reports of his experience. But the point applies again to the danger of medicine’s doing harm because of its mistaken paradigm of objective scientific knowledge that tends to discount the specific evidence in front of them.

The Mind According to Hall and to Howell

One of the principal and strongest claims of Hall and of Howell is that this is “not a story about physical tragedy but about the ability of the mind to exist without body.”²⁴ The mind-body issue is woven throughout the story and the appendices as Hall and Howell learn what existence without a normal body connection between brain and mind means. One meaning is that a person can have a high level of cognitive function with fewer brain cells than we normally have. When Howell and Moore were contending for the quality of Hall’s mental life after the spellboard breakthrough, chief hospital staff still doubted the significance of it. Then Howell gave Hall the Weschler Adult Intelligence Quota test with some adaptation in timing of responses due to Hall’s having to use the spellboard. Hall was timed according to his signal that he had an answer. Then he was given time to spell it out. On this measurement, Hall scored 135, the same score he had made when he was a medical student.

A second meaning of mind without body is familiar to Polanyians who see in Polanyi’s thought that the mind is not reducible to its material parts. Polanyi not only held that the whole is more than the sum of the constituent parts but also has a reality at another level. For Hall and Howell, this is clearly seen in the fact that Hall’s new way of being is manifesting independence as Hall’s thought remembers, theorizes, contemplates, and addresses not only his wife and friends but also the intellectual world.

This independence of mind that Hall and Howell emphasize is essentially non-dependent upon Hall’s current sensory experience. Hall is thinking and generating freshly from the physical, cultural, professional, and

spiritual background of his life. Hall is not limited to the sensory experience or the ideas in his past. Hall is free to explore and to grow in his new way of living without the body's sensory communication with his brain.

Hall gives an account from major stages of his learning about the meaning of his altered mind-body condition. The first one is that at first he had to contend with the dissolving of his mind, as he was isolated from communication with others. He could hear others talk, and he mentally repeated their conversations and replied to them mentally to keep his mind going. He felt like he was in a "white fuzziness."⁵ Sounds are different because there is no body resonance. He cannot even feel his own breathing. At first, he wondered if he were alive or in the state after death. A second stage occurs as Hall is liberated by the spellboard. In this stage, Hall describes himself as free from the self-centeredness of the body's demands. Even a beautiful woman is not sexually attractive to him, as she would have been before. There is no sense of loss here but instead a feeling of gain as the mind now dominates his existence. The third stage builds on this premise of the mind without the limits and burdens of the body's demands. Hall feels that he is given a new opportunity of redemption and begins to speak of spiritual matters. He now feels that he is able to engage in living spiritually and has the opportunity to bring something beautiful back to the world.⁶ Following Jungian therapist Barbara Hannah, Hall asserts: "Mind constructs an immaterial space of its own."⁷ Over a lifetime, mind creates a soul, which lives beyond the body. Sin is the willful dissolution of the mind. Finally, Hall shares in the appendix seven visions that have come to him as he has lived in his mind or soul for ten years.⁸

The visions from Hall's mind show his creative life. Vision #1 sees the universe from the moment of singularity as a "Big Thought" rather than a "Big Bang." Hall says, "Pure mathematics describes best what was intangibly present at the beginning – intangible thought." Vision # 2 says that the "Great Thought" that was at the beginning is still with us and has become overlaid with physical matter. Vision #3 sees in quantum physics' wave-particle theory an analogy to Hall's experience of mental colors – red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. "This energy is mental flickering between elemental thought and elemental matter."⁹ Vision #4 sees elemental particles overlaid by elemental relationships. Over time, these organize into molecules that in turn are broken down and reformed at random. There is a gradual direction from "a higher command of ideas" that leads to body that has brain and mind. Vision # 5 describes molecular matter and life not as a new creation but as a further development of the immaterial beginning. Vision # 6 has some epigrammatic statements on human beings such as: "Human thought has used matter as a mirror to see its own message." And "...physical matter has become a page upon which to write our thoughts, a mirror in which to see ourselves, "I" the essential human being, is thought."¹⁰ Vision #7 sees human beings as on the beginning of communion with the Great Thought at the beginning of the universe. This standpoint opens for Hall a new understanding of life and his task of redemption.

Scientific and Philosophical Controversy

Locked Into Life, if taken seriously, should produce scientific and philosophical controversy. So far as I can find out, there is not yet a significant response to the findings on mind-body relations discussed by Patton Howell and James Hall or of the importance of Hall's experience as a stroke survivor. One reason may be that the book is done as a popular presentation based perhaps on the assumption that the medical and philosophical establishment will not take it seriously. So why let these traditions bury the story? It may be that Howell and Hall believe adoption of their views will have to come into medicine and philosophy from the outside, not from within. Polanyi certainly saw the way established scientific views are not easily overthrown by direct argument. He did not, however, advocate doing away with the stability of science maintained by a strong tradition of

experiment and of reason subject to scrutiny by the scientific and philosophical community.

One of the weaknesses of the book is that while friendly to the general public it is written without sufficient precision to meet scientific and philosophical standards. Talking about mind as separate from body, for example, the book is loose. Hall clearly still relies on some body functions. What happens when Hall's body cannot be nourished or sustained and he dies from secondary infections is not clear. Does Hall's mind persist? Hall and Howell's statements about the immortality of the mind or soul add up at best to intimations of immortality. Further, they discuss these familiar notions without reference to the long debate and history over these topics. It is not clear from Hall's analogy to quantum theory whether he is a metaphysical dualist, monist, or pluralist.

On the issue of metaphysical reality, Hall's notion of God has a not surprising Jungian character. God is experienced as a changing multipersonality in contrast to the traditional unchanging eternal being.¹¹ God seems more interested not in what people thought but why they thought it. This view fits with Hall's pre-stroke outlook that did not accept responsibility or guilt for what he did to others. Howell quotes Hall as saying: "Remember that I don't feel guilty. That's unhealthy."¹² After his stroke, and Hall depends upon his spouse to make him feel safe and loved, Hall never apologizes or repents of his many marital infidelities which were openly and painfully done to her. The view of God as more interested in why you did something rather than what you did seems to amount to a moral inversion that one can do whatever they want so long as they are honest and sincere in their motivation. Oddly, Hall had written about moral inversion in his Polanyi centennial paper describing Polanyi's dynamo-objective coupling as a "repressed moral belief in the service of a presumed objectivity."¹³ God as a supreme psychoanalyst, not judging but trying to bring consciousness to hidden motivations, seems to raise the metaphysical question of whether there is objectively any real God at all that has a moral order.

A more strict account of Hall's experience can lend support to the type of claim made by Polanyi, namely that the mind or any higher comprehensive entity has a domain of reality and of control beyond the parts that constitute it. Hall seems strong on this point as he explores his thoughts and describes his encounters with Bill Moore and Patton Howell as having surprising vitality and reality.¹⁴ The thoughts and work of Hall and of Powell definitely upgrade the evaluation of the life of victims of pontine stroke. Whether this work will be influential remains to be seen.

Their report is also rich with many associations and connections including Taoism. Hall and Howell find in Taoism a way of expressing their belief that our self is a little "i" interacting with others, like a stream of rushing water that changes as it interacts with its course. These interactions become our souls, and when we die they continue to live and change.¹⁵ Persons working on the relations of mind and body will find interesting empirical and philosophical implications in this testimony from Hall and Howell.

Finally, any normal reader of this book is engaged in an usual relationship to the text knowing that the subject, James Hall, lives in a condition radically different from her or him. The achievement of the book itself is amazing. Howell's dedication saved Hall. A person once presumed brain dead is addressing you at a high and creative level. His capable mind is writing through a computer. Whatever the merits of the argument about mind and body, Hall's heroic courage and Howell's compassionate devotion are challenging to our own understanding of what it means to be human.

Endnotes

¹ James Hall, "Polanyi and Psychoanalysis," pp. 896-903, *From Polanyi to the 21st Century, Proceedings of a Centennial Conference, Kent State University, April 11-13, 1991*, Richard Gelwick (ed), The Polanyi Society: University of New England, 1997. Hall's paper was also published in *Tradition & Discovery* 18:2 (1991-1992): 5-9.

² *Locked Into Life*, p. 55.

³ *Ibid.* p. 186.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 126.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 125.

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 165-171.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 167.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 134 – 135.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 48.

¹³ Hall, "Polanyi and Psychoanalysis," p. 899.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 77.

¹⁵ *Locked Into Life*, pp. 142-143.

Polanyi Society Membership

Tradition and Discovery is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally three issues of *TAD* each year.

Annual membership in the Polanyi Society is \$25 (\$10 for students) beginning in the fall of 2002. The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (fax: 816-271-5680, e-mail: mullins@mWSC.edu). Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the card holder's name as it appears on the card, the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be sent to Mullins. New members should provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), e-mail address and/or fax number. Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing. The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and /or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.