



Physical Resilience: A Case Study Of A Woman Struck By Lightning In Wyoming

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Citation: Nisha Daphne J (2024), Physical Resilience: A Case Study Of A Woman Struck By Lightning In Wyoming, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5), 7956 - 7960
Doi: 10.53555/kuev.v30i5.4283

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

“A Match to The Heart: One Woman’s Story Struck By Lightning” is Gretel Ehrlich's true account of being struck by lightning in Wyoming the two-year journey of rehabilitation, and many episodes of slipping backward in the recovery. In this book, she explores the space between living and dying as she met it with physical resilience. While still slithering towards death in a hospital, she as an individual, commenced a challenging and forward-thinking expedition towards the realm of the living. Accompanied by an exceptional cardiologist and her cherished dog Sam, she enthusiastically delves into the realms of nature and spirituality in search of answers. Alongside personal reflections, Ehrlich shares stories of others affected by lightning strikes and delves into the phenomenon itself. Through her introspective journey, Ehrlich invites readers to contemplate the transformative power of near-death experiences and how they can deepen one's appreciation for life.

Keywords: Lightening, Electrical injuries, Trauma, Physical resilience, Rehabilitation, Recovery.

I. Introduction

Gretel Ehrlich, the author of “A Match to The Heart: One Woman's Story Struck By Lightning”, provides an account of her traumatic experience of being struck by lightning in Wyoming. The book takes its readers on a two-year journey of recovery, where Ehrlich shares her struggle to reclaim her health, despite several setbacks along the way. Through her memoir, Ehrlich offers an intimate and detailed insight into the human anatomy - the concealed world within an individual's body.

II. Theory of resilience

Resilience theory suggests that the way we deal with adversities and difficulties is more important than their nature. The concept of resilience is multifaceted and unique to each individual, as it necessitates a blend of internal fortitude and external support. This attribute enables us to bounce back, persevere, and flourish in the face of adversity. Specifically, physical resilience refers to the body's capacity to adjust to various obstacles, sustain stamina and vigor, and promptly recuperate from ailments, mishaps, or any physical exertions it encounters. Developing physical resilience involves improving physiological processes, such as cellular repair mechanisms, immune system function, and stress response pathways. It also requires regular physical activity, adequate nutrition, and healthy lifestyle choices. Ultimately, physical resilience enables a person to function and recover despite physical challenges and demands, promoting overall well-being and quality of life.

III. Overview of the text

A Match to the Heart (1994), is a document of survival; where Ehrlich confronted near death, experience of herself. Struck down by lightning outside her Wyoming ranch, Ehrlich awakes, bleeding, barely able to walk, and not sure what has happened. Alone except for her animals, Ehrlich manages to make her way back to the ranch and call 911 before losing consciousness. Her struggle back to the house, lifting her legs with her hands

in an attempt to move them forward, begins a two-year journey, away from her land of open spaces. Ehrlich's flight out of Wyoming is the first route on her journey of survival. Unable to find a doctor who will offer treatment or even take her condition seriously, Ehrlich calls her parents in California for help. Within a matter of hours, she is flying toward coastal California with her father, too weak to feel regret at leaving her beloved Wyoming. Coming under the care of a specialist, Ehrlich begins to receive the medical treatment of an expert, a doctor who becomes both a friend and a mentor. After her release from the hospital, Ehrlich becomes a disciple of the body, seeking to understand its complexities much in the way she had previously explored the complexities of Wyoming's cultural and physical environment. In much of this text, she explores the inner workings of the heart, brain, and central nervous system, describing them in the same detail she had presented the cowboys, animals, and seasons of Wyoming. Her fascination with the exterior workings of the earth is now transferred to human interiors.

IV. Author's physical experience by lightning

Ehrlich's narrative begins with the moment of regaining consciousness after the lightning strikes her as a dream, which she describes in the opening paragraph she states that in the depths of the vast ocean, she found herself suspended in a state of absolute stillness. The surrounding water took on a somber shade of gray, creating an eerie ambiance. With her arms outstretched in a cruciform position, her body remained motionless, while her head and legs dangled lifelessly. When she regains enough of her senses to rise to her feet, she feels as if the earth is distorted, under her feet resembling a peach that had ruptured at its center, one side ascended while the other descended, causing her legs to lose their synchronicity. She adds the process of assembling fragments proved to be challenging for her. Subsequently, she realized that her brain was damaged, by the presence of blood. The electricity from the lightning resulted in "ventricular fibrillation" or cardiac arrest.

The impact of the strike propelled her to a considerable distance, resulting in multiple injuries. These include fractured ribs, a potential fracture in the jaw, and cuts above the eye. Additionally, she experiences temporary paralysis in her lower body, chest, and throat area. Furthermore, her entire body is covered in fern-like burns known as "arborescent erythema." In the following days, the strike, symptoms worsened. While lying on her back and elevating her feet, darkness enveloped her surroundings, and an overwhelming sense of exhaustion immobilized her, rendering her unable to make any physical or verbal movements. Throughout the night, she experienced a combination of intense and penetrating chest pains, accompanied by the typical indicators of a heart attack, such as perspiration, difficulty breathing, and persistent discomfort on the left side of her body, which prevented her from getting any rest.

V. Quest for a healing landscape

As she lay dying in her Wyoming ranch house, Ehrlich decided to move back to her childhood home in California. This was just the first of many moves she would make in her memoir, as she searched for healing landscapes at different stages of her recovery. Medicines with names like "Norpace" and "Florinef" regulate her irregular heartbeat and help her body retain water and thus raise her blood pressure, which had plummeted after the lightning strike. Ehrlich adopts an even-handed inquisitiveness about each type of medicine. A synthetic drug such as Norpace performs its promised benefit (regulation of erratic heartbeat) but produces side effects like blurred vision. A Chinese acupuncturist shows Ehrlich a pressure point on her little finger that when stimulated will help prevent blackouts (54).

VI. Interplay between nature and the human body

In her written work, Ehrlich addresses the interplay between nature, the human body, and the external environments in which individuals exist. Beyond the therapeutic benefits of medicine, she advocates for the healing power of natural landscapes, where she finds solace and rejuvenation. Ehrlich's power of resilience is set on these landscapes for a sense of revitalization speaks to the importance of our connection with the natural world and its ability to promote wellness. "Then things began to interest me again. After all, it was spring" (110). In a clinical tone, to know the traumatic experience of alike victims, she goes to North Carolina, where she attends the Third Annual Lightning Strike and Electric Shock Conference. Ehrlich relates how lightning has dramatically changed the lives of people from all areas of the United States. One young man explains how his post-strike life has been complicated by depression. Another woman explains how she now feels estranged from her body: "My body doesn't belong to me anymore," she says. Doctors explain the psychological effects of lightning strikes and electric shock, including "post electrocution syndrome," which is symptomatic of "depression, anxiety, panic, memory deficits, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, profound fatigue, restlessness, insomnia, impotence, night terrors" (155). On one level, Ehrlich shares with readers the fascinating information she discovers about the workings of the brain, heart, and the "geography of our psyche" (73).

VII. Post-recovery reflection

Ehrlich's post-recovery reflection meditates upon her estrangement from her body. In her motel room facing the Smoky Mountains, she opens the windows wide, sees moonlight on patches of dogwood, and meditates upon her uncertain future: As she reflected on those who had undergone a profound awakening after being

struck by lightning, she considered the direction of her own life. Marked by physical injuries and a failed marriage, she wondered about the possibilities for her future, feeling as though she was navigating a maze of dead ends in this fresh chapter of her existence.

VIII. Concept of Bardo

In her later discussion, she explores the notion of bardo, a term found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead that signifies the transitional state between life and death, bewilderment and enlightenment, as well as neurosis and sanity. This state exists when the past has just transpired, and the future is yet to unfold. Within the bardo of the human realm, we perceive our physical form as illusory. Our connection with our existence and nonexistence is tepid, lacking intensity. The bardo state is not limited to the moment of death or the moments preceding it, but rather permeates throughout our entire lives; it represents the uncertainty and lack of stability that we often encounter. Illness can be considered a form of bardo, as it can disrupt one's perception of time as a linear progression. When one is unwell, the passing of days becomes disordered and disjointed, resembling empty vessels scattered without order. The experience of being sick involves a pause, a break from the usual rhythm of daily life, a period in which one is immobilized and suspended in stillness.

IX. Mysteries of the healing process

Ehrlich says feelings change the chemistry of the body as surely as physical traumas do. We blush, we faint at the sight of blood. Ehrlich admits the mysteries of the healing process. While there is no hard scientific evidence proving the healing power of particular external landscapes, Ehrlich believes certain places help her recuperate at different points of her sickness. Likewise, she admits the spiritual elements of healing, such as in the dynamics of the patient/physician relationship. Contemplating her years living on a Wyoming ranch, where she and other ranch hands successfully tended sick animals through a minimum of professional medicine, but with intimacy—talking with them, touching them, keeping their beds layered with fresh straw, playing Mozart in the sun sheds.

X. Mystical elements of healing

Ehrlich vows to know more about the uncharted mystical elements of healing. Ehrlich begins to revise her ideas of "the chemistry of healing." She realizes that the body has an ecology of its own, with myriad interactive checks and balances, as does the ocean. Gretel comprehends, that the human body possesses a remarkable level of dynamism, comparable to the ever-changing nature of the ocean. Its various systems, including the circulatory, nervous, immune, and endocrine systems, interact with great vigor, mirroring the intricate workings of the mind. From head to soul, comprehensive intelligence is at play, orchestrating the harmonious functioning of the body.

XI. Attainment of her quest

Ehrlich admits that the coastal landscape has provided a type of refuge for her recuperation. The night before she departed for Wyoming, Ehrlich lay awake listening to ocean waves and thought the curved shape of the shoreline in this region provided a haven and sustenance for a diverse range of marine animals, such as sharks, humans, and migrating whales. Being located at the boundary between land and sea, the surroundings exuded an atmosphere of eternal tranquility and seclusion. During the calm intervals between waves, there existed an opportunity for renewal and new beginnings. While throughout the memoir she insinuates that certain landscapes are conducive to one's well-being, she does not make an ultimate statement about the landscape's role as an alternative medicine. Pills that regulate her heart, the comfort given by her dog Sam, a good steak with a glass of red wine, walks along the coast, stillness, and motion all play a role in her recovery. But along with that belief in restoration is a constant, tired, disbelief that she is still alive. Plagued with recurring chest pains, vertigo, and lethargy, Ehrlich's embrace of life has been transformed into a daily attempt to get through the difficulties of a limited, "exiled," existence. Yet small inspirations, reminders of her survival, are found along the Californian coastline. For her, the ebb and flow of the tides resembled a rhythmic respiration, while the majestic waves towered above. Amidst this spectacle, her gaze fixated on a solitary strand of seaweed, delicately suspended within iridescent bubbles of emerald hue. As the wave reached its zenith, the seaweed gracefully ascended, its slender form reaching toward the ethereal glow of the sun. Like the bit of seaweed tossed forward by the waves, Ehrlich too has been tossed, and she is still struggling upward, "toward light." Ehrlich finds in the flux of the coastline a reflection of her changing journey, her loss of the past. The constant presence of waves hitting the land reminds her of the permanence of change: "The coastline kept reforming itself— revising drafts of how it should be shaped, how many rocks, how deep the sand" (105). She too is "revising drafts" of her existence, learning that her past body, and past relationships, may no longer play defining roles in her life. As she had earlier found the capacity to revise herself in the open spaces of Wyoming, she now finds this capacity in the vastness and changing nature of the California coastline.

XII. A return to beginnings

According to her, within the coastline's impermanence is a healing wholeness, a return to beginnings, to essence, that she finds comfort in: "A beach is where the rock of the planet is ground down into minutia,

where the general is splintered back into particulars only to become one thing again—a collective body of sands. Our human and animal bodies are mostly water, as is the planet, and water eventually takes everything and is everything" (112-13). As she found unity, and relatedness on islands, Ehrlich surrounded herself with water, the largest and first space, to find wholeness again.

While in most of her text Ehrlich stresses the differences between California and Wyoming, in some ways the ocean provides her the same healing properties that the open spaces of the West had provided earlier. A coastal breeze replaces the ever-present Wyoming wind, and the limitlessness of water has replaced the limitlessness of the land. Waves, birds in flight, dolphins, and seals at play, provide the visual means to her gradual recovery. Her loving, regenerative relationship with her farm animals in Wyoming is temporarily transferred to the more distant, but still significant, relation to her water environment. Through observing the flight of the birds, Ehrlich transforms walking into "flight" - "Walking was my slow-motion flight from and back into civilization, my meditation in action" (111). As she walked the valleys and mountains of Wyoming, she trekked miles across the sands of the ocean. Feeling her movement across the sand becomes the healing motion that helps her toward recovery—the necessary, daily pilgrimage of walking leads her to the road to both physical and spiritual survival. Ehrlich gives herself to the space of the sand and the water, trusting they will somehow help her find her life again. The sea becomes her new solace, and Ehrlich learns again the practice of survival. This time she finds grace, and wholeness, in water, the first space of being. Over two years pass before she is ready to leave the comfort of the water. Yet she ends her text with the start of another journey— this one back to her beloved Wyoming. Nearly destroyed by the uncontrollable force of lightning, Ehrlich must return to the space that both brought her back to life and, later, nearly destroyed it.

XIII. Conclusion

This powerful chronicle of "A Match to The Heart: One Woman's Story Struck By Lightning" by Ehrlich, allows readers access to her exploration of nature and self through her private thoughts, makes the reader think about how the power of resilience helps us bounce back when we face adversity, misfortune, or frustration. Resilience plays a crucial role in our ability to endure, bounce back, and flourish in the aftermath of adversity. However, it encompasses more than just these aspects. It encompasses a blend of internal fortitude and external support, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing resilience. Ehrlich endeavors to comprehend the person she has transformed into, and ultimately concludes that familiarity with mortality empowers humans to appreciate and embrace the beauty of life.

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