

The Woman Who Changed Her Brain: How I Left My Learning Disability Behind and Other Stories of Cognitive Transformation

By Barbara Arrowsmith-Young

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A bestseller in Canada and Australia, this is the incredible story of a woman who struggled with severe learning disabilities, built herself a better brain, and started a program that has helped thousands of others do the same.

Barbara Arrowsmith-Young was born with severe learning disabilities. As a child, she read and wrote everything backward, struggled to comprehend language, and was continually getting lost. But by relying on her formidable memory, she made her way to graduate school, where she chanced upon research that inspired her to invent cognitive exercises to “fix” her own brain. *The Woman Who Changed Her Brain* interweaves her personal tale with riveting case histories from more than thirty years of her work with both children and adults.

People with learning disorders have long been told that such difficulties are a lifelong condition. In clear and lucid writing, *The Woman Who Changed Her Brain* refutes that message, demonstrating with fascinating anecdotes that anyone with a learning disability can be radically transformed: Arrowsmith-Young is a living example. She founded the Arrowsmith School in Toronto in 1980 and then the Arrowsmith Program to train teachers to implement this effective methodology in schools all over North America.

This remarkable book by a brilliant pioneer deepens our understanding of how the brain works. Our brain shapes us, and this book offers clear and hopeful evidence of the corollary: that we can shape our brains.

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INTRODUCTION

March 2, 1943, Vyazma, Western Russia

On this sunny, almost warm but damp day, the soldiers are chilled, their army-issue felt boots soaked. Lieutenant Lyova Zazetsky, just twenty-three years old, commands a platoon of flame-throwers—part of a contingent pushing back against the German invaders who are dug in atop the steep and rocky banks of the frozen Vorya River.

Comrade Zazetsky looks west, where they will soon be headed. He talks to his men, encouraging them while they all wait impatiently in the stillness, as they have for the past two days. Finally, the order comes to advance, and the only sound he hears now is the clank and screech of armor stirring. In a low crouch, Zazetsky moves across the river ice at a pace between walking and running when the enemy begins to fire. As he hears machine-gun bullets whizzing over his head, he drops down instinctively under the hail of artillery. Then he rises and presses on. Then nothing.

Zazetsky's next memory is of coming to "in a tent blazing with light. . . . All I can remember is that the doctors and aides were holding me down. . . . I was screaming, gasping for breath. . . . Warm, sticky blood was running down my ears and neck. . . . My mouth and lips had a salty taste." A bullet has penetrated his helmet, then his skull, and has done massive damage to the left occipito-parietal region of his brain, leading to a prolonged coma and severely affecting his ability to reason. With damage to this area, the world of making connections and understanding relationships is lost. Even after hours of patient explanation, Zazetsky cannot fathom that an elephant is bigger than a fly (he knows that one is big and one small but cannot grasp the relationship between the two; the words *bigger* and *smaller* confound him).

Later he is shown photos of variously colored cats and asked to state which is bigger and which smaller. This too is beyond him.

"Since I was wounded," Zazetsky writes, "I've only been able to compare one word with another—one idea. And here there were so many different ideas that I got awfully confused." Unable to see the relationships between things, he sees the world as separate parts. Even something as simple as connecting the big and little hand on a clock is now impossible. He no longer understands logic, cause and effect, grammar, or dialogue in a film. For Zazetsky, the words in a movie come too quickly. "Before I've had a chance to figure out what the actors are saying," he writes, "a new scene begins."

Zazetsky, a gifted student with three years of study in a polytechnical institute behind him, takes months to grasp a basic element of geometry, only to have that hard-won knowledge vanish hours later.

The bullet had damaged the part of Zazetsky's brain that receives and processes input necessary for understanding the world. He could perceive properly with his eyes but could not deploy his brain to link perceptions or ideas, so he lived with disconnected elements. As Zazetsky put it in his diary, "I'm in a kind of fog all the time. . . . All that flashes through my mind are images, hazy visions that suddenly appear and disappear. . . . I simply can't understand what these mean."

He nevertheless writes a remarkable 3,000-page journal, gathered over the course of twenty-five painstaking years, in thick oilskin-covered notebooks. On some days, a sentence or two is all he can manage. "My memory's a blank," he writes. "I can't think of a single word. . . . Whatever I do remember is scattered, broken down into disconnected bits and pieces."

The damage to Zazetsky's brain is widespread and by no means confined to the area of the wound itself. His memory for information, for example, is severely damaged. Gone are the names of his mother and sisters and

his address. He is unable to follow what he hears on the radio and gets lost on walks in the town where he was raised. Six years of studying German and three of English, advanced classes in chemistry: all utterly gone.

He holds a needle and thread in his hands and has a vague idea of their workings, but he can no longer summon the names of these and many other things. He urgently needs a bedpan, but he cannot summon that word. What comes to him instead are the words *duck* and *bird*, and he cannot decipher which is which.

Zazetsky has a handsome open face, with a strong nose and rugged black eyebrows, and at first glance he seems unscathed. But looks deceive. He can neither see nor imagine the right side of his body. Although he regains the ability to write (after six months of intensive schooling), the process is tortuous and slow, and he can neither read nor remember what he writes. He can speak, but only with great difficulty.

Worst of all, perhaps, is that Zazetsky is fully aware of his neurological deficits and is powerless to do anything other than to write about them in his own painful yet eloquent way.

“This strange illness I have,” he writes, “is like living without a brain.”

Late May 1943, Moscow

Zazetsky comes under the care of Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, a forty-one-year-old psychologist and a physician not long out of medical school. Luria heads a research team at a Russian army hospital looking at ways to help brain-damaged soldiers compensate for their neurological dysfunctions. In his new doctor, Zazetsky has two bits of good fortune. First, Luria’s special and lifelong interest is aphasia—the difficulty speaking, reading, and writing that sometimes follows stroke or traumatic brain injury. Second, his brilliance is complemented by a rare compassion. Long after Zazetsky leaves the hospital, he and Luria remain close. They stay in touch for thirty years, meeting or speaking almost every week. A black-and-white photo of the two men shows them comfortably close together, each smiling at the other, Luria holding the fingers of Zazetsky’s left hand ever so delicately in his own.

The writing of Zazetsky (a pseudonym) finds its way into a book that Luria writes in 1972, *The Man with a Shattered World: The History of a Brain Wound.* Zazetsky wants to call his writing *I’ll Fight On,* and the title is a measure of the fierce resolve of this brain-damaged man to put the thoughts that come to him randomly into cohesive form. Zazetsky’s writing is a desperate search for meaning, undertaken in the hope that his probing will help both himself and others—scientists studying the brain and those in circumstances like his own.

Each man helps the other. Had Zazetsky not crossed paths with Luria and been encouraged by him (the latter called his patient’s writing “a triumph”), it’s almost certain he would never have written his astonishing journal.

Luria is fascinated all his life by the brain (today he is considered a pioneer in neurology and the father of neuropsychology), and Zazetsky furthers his knowledge. Luria writes, “Precise knowledge was rarely to be found in the textbooks, which were filled with vague suppositions and fantastic conjectures that made maps of the brain scarcely more reliable than medieval geographers’ maps of the world.”

“His [Zazetsky’s] description is exceptionally clear and detailed,” writes Luria, and “if we follow him step by step, we may unravel some of the mysteries of the human brain.” Through Zazetsky, Luria learned the geography and function of specific brain areas and made a major contribution to our understanding of the brain. The book you are now reading would never have been written had I not chanced across *The Man with a Shattered World* in 1977, the year Luria died. I shared Luria’s intellectual curiosity and Zazetsky’s

reasoning deficit, as well as his determination. Zazetsky's drive led him to labor all that time writing a journal as he strove to understand the "strange illness" that had suddenly and catastrophically befallen him, leaving him with a loss of meaning in his world. My own drive compelled me to search for a solution to the same neurological deficit that had robbed me of meaning since birth.

Our shared determination, I would later understand, was actually a shared strength in frontal lobe functioning, that part of the brain critical for planning and seeking solutions. A hallmark of good functioning in this region of the brain is driven determination in pursuit of a goal.

Peterborough, Ontario, 1957

Six years old, I hear an exchange that fills me with a quiet horror. I have accompanied my mother to an after-school parent-teacher meeting to discuss the teacher's concerns about my slow progress.

"Barbara," the teacher is explaining to my mother, "has a mental block." As children do, I understood this truth quite literally. Evidently there was a chunk of wood lodged in my brain, and it would have to be removed.

The teacher was almost right. The word *block* missed the mark, but *blockage* was pretty close. For the first twenty-six years of my life, and I am fifty-nine years old as I write this, I lived in a dense fog not unlike Zazetsky's.

I too could make no sense of the relationship between the big and little hands of an analogue clock. Asked to perform the simple addition of a two-digit column of numbers, I would randomly choose numbers from the left or right side. The logic of basic math, the concept of telling time, the ability to truly comprehend what I was hearing or reading: all eluded me. On the playground, I couldn't follow conversations or the rules of simple games.

Depending on which question was asked on a test, I might get a grade of 29 or 92. What allowed me to progress through primary school...

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