

Interview with Michael Sagel 'I am my own Mentor'

The artist Michael Sagel (aged 60) suffered from a stroke with Locked-in Syndrome more than 20 years ago. Looking back he sees the event as a kind of liberation. This interview is conducted by Dr. Karl-Heinz Pantke (Chair of LIS e.V. and The Christine Kühn Foundation).

I see from your CV that before the stroke you studied Psychology and Social Work for nine semesters, were then retrained as an Industrial clerk, working in this profession for ten years. After the stroke, you started studying again and have been working exclusively within Art since 2013. Why did you start studying again after the stroke ?

At first, I wanted to be able to work again. Over time, however, it became clear to me that I would no longer be as I was before the stroke - and that I didn't necessarily want to be either. However, I didn't want to 'shriveled away' at home either.

One could say that you were unable to work because of great deficits in your (purely physical) abilities. Your intellect, however, was relatively undamaged, and that's why you could start studying again.

You could definitely say that.

You were no longer able to earn a living from your 'manual labour' because of your body motor limitations. But you didn't want to

either. Instead, you turned your hobby into your profession and now you work as an artist. Your relationship survived the stroke, which by no means is a matter of course. Your partner also says in a YouTube interview that she pursues her own interests. Is that part of the secret of your stable relationship?

Yes, think that is very important. don't 'belong' to anyone, but the reverse also means that no one 'belongs' to me. Through various stays in hospital and rehabilitation, I have had to learn to accept that I am a 'transparent' person, and that I also need a lot of help in my private life. However I see this as primarily situational, so it is advisable that outside of that situationality, everyone involved can also pursue their own interests. If there is agreement, that's fine. It cannot be demanded.

In a previous interview you say: "Before the stroke was Part One of my life, and now is Part Two. And I'm much better in Part Two than Part One." The reason you give for this is that you can now devote yourself entirely to Art, as you no longer have to earn money, as you are financially provided for. How long did it take you to evaluate your life after the stroke in this way ? Probably the road to this realisation was rocky?

By no means did we want to become like everyone else, at least I managed that. The 'Eureka' moment is not the rule. Understanding is often the result of many developments. In this respect, I had, and still have, enough time to get used to the fact that my entire future life would be influenced by the stroke. But I wouldn't necessarily call the road exceptionally rocky.





You have answered that you have found the way to a Second Life because you have developed. Could your answer be interpreted in such a way that other people in a comparable situation remain in their First Life because they have not developed further ?

What is special about your path?

No, I wouldn't say that. There is always development. But I do think that some people stick rigidly to their goals once they have been set, or strive for them once again without questioning their current opinions for (not) achieving these goals, and possibly redefining the goals. Then it becomes quite awkward. So basically, the path is nothing special.

How did you redefine your goals?

As I said before - You should consider your options at the time and then define your goals based on that. Specifically: I'm lucky that I am mainly 'only' motor disabled. I can reflect on my situation. It easily takes me a quarter of an hour to file three sheets of paper, and in the beginning I couldn't write at all. So 'normal' work was out of the question, even though I

really wanted it at the beginning - a return to normality. Today a new 'normality' has emerged for me, and my goals now differ from before. Of course, I had the stroke in 1996, and have grown a bit older since then. Goals should be as Real as possible - there you go.!

The stroke has severely disturbed your coordination of movement - Ataxia. In your 'First Life' you painted pictures as an artist. What happened after the stroke when you picked up a brush?

At first, I couldn't hold a brush at all, then I couldn't hold it properly, then I couldn't move it the way I wanted to. In the end, I could paint abstract things, but not specific things, because every now and then, 'my hand slipped'. That still happens to me sometimes. But I got along well with the computer, probably because of the smaller movements, you have more control over them. In addition, the computer has the advantage that you can simply undo steps that went wrong. By



incorporating photography, you can then do more concrete things again, which is very important to me.

Because of your movement disorders after the stroke, you traded the paintbrush for the computer and the camera, in order to continue working as an artist. What exactly do you do on the computer?

I 'paint with photos' i.e. the basis for my pictures are photos, which I then process on the computer according to the basic principles of painting. The basis can be a photo, elements from one woven into another, or several photos intertwined to form a new picture.

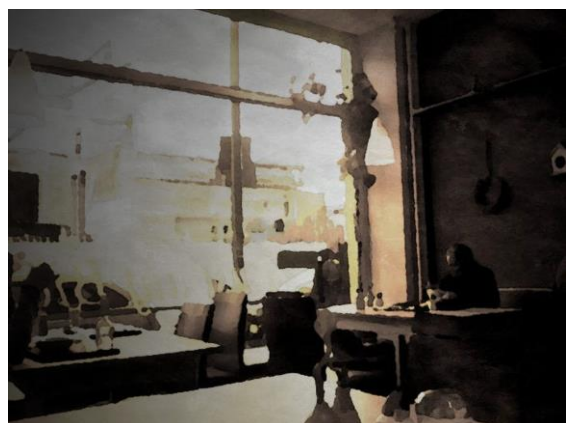
The character 'Segal - The Artist' adapted to the changed conditions caused by the stroke. But how has the rest of the person changed? For example, what was important to you before the stroke, and what is important to you now?

Before the stroke, as a 'young adult', it was more important for me to fulfil the expectations of others - which I then thought were also my own. For example "Boy, you never really finish anything, why don't you get a proper degree first? Get a fresh haircut, smarten up your clothes !" etc. Then there were the ideas of a 'normal structural order', such as a family of one's own, a home and a car, possibly pets and everything else that goes with it. And then the stroke came and that was the cut. However, I did not suddenly realise that everything had been wrong up to then, but that 'Part Two' had developed over time from 'Part One' - the changing conditions and the resulting possibilities. 'Segal - The Man' walked around for 36 years, since then he has been wheeling around, and maybe he will walk again someday.

Before the stroke, you largely fulfilled the expectation of others. That fell away with the stroke. What remains can be attributed to your own existence. But what is that?

I am no longer dependent on any mentor - I am my own mentor, so to speak, and that's very important. Of course, you move within a certain framework and have to make compromise for it, but most of the time it's quite OK. But if you don't like it at all you can try to see if it is really all so rigid, or you can go outside the framework, which sometimes isn't so bad. Your perspective changes and you are confronted by other circumstances. You then notice if and how you can deal with it.

It sounds like the stroke was a kind of liberation? Living through a life threatening



situation reduced your existence to things that are important to you in life. Is it possible to put it that way ?

Yes, you could definitely put it that way. The difficulty is that you can't plan for it. You probably have to take into account your past history, the circumstances surrounding it, and in short, a fair amount of luck. You can think about a hypothecaly situation and how you might react to it - something you usually never do. How the situation actually is, and how you might react to it, is not something you can plan for. Whatever the situation actually is like and how you react to it, or can to it - you will only see when the thing has actually happened.

Finally, a very difficult question: Why do you think it takes a life-threatening stroke for us to become aware of the essential things in life?

I think it takes an extraordinary and, in my opinion, serious incident, to be able to start again from zero, which we normally never can. A serious event, such as a stroke, forces us to do this because it throws us back to our basic abilities. These will probably only be called upon unconsciously at first. Furthermore, it is more or less clear that Life will never (!) be exactly the same as we knew it again.



Translated by Gundula Butthoff, Eva Carter and Yair Meshoulam..

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