

# Plasticity Insights!

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“My speech therapy, diary, voice memos, and Wiki notes were all therapeutic activities regardless of whether they were directed by others or self-directed. Everything I used to help myself “get better” was therapeutic by nature. I have always wondered what would have happened if I had not documented my work since the stroke. What would have happened therapeutically if I had not done the additional accidental therapies? Did my work contribute, or not at all contribute, to my ultimate recovery? It must have helped, given the immense learning energy that went into it.”

**Broussard Jr., T. G., *Stroke Diary, A Primer for Aphasia Therapy (Vol I)*. Stroke Educator, Inc. St. Augustine, Florida, 2015, pp. 322.**

Aphasia Nation, Inc. is committed to educating the wider public about stroke and aphasia and the “*Aim High for Aphasia!*” international Aphasia Awareness campaign.

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## Tom Broussard: *Johnny Appleseed of Aphasia Awareness- Sharing 10 Years of Learning, Recovery & a Gift for All.*

*By Tom Broussard, Ph.D.*

My name is Tom Broussard, and in the aphasia community, I am often referred to as the Johnny Appleseed of Aphasia Awareness. I had my first stroke and aphasia on September 26, 2011. I was an associate dean at The Heller School at Brandeis University when I fell down on Main Street, Waltham, MA. I lost my language and could not read, write or speak well.

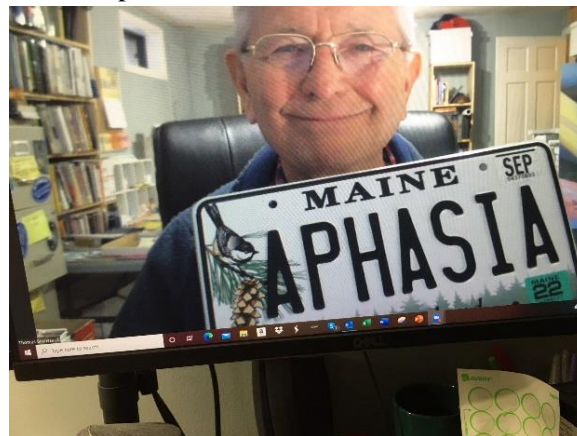
I got a research Ph.D. late in life, and graduated at the Heller School, Brandeis University in 2006 when I was 54 years old. My research ‘expertise’ for my dissertation was working with people with disabilities in the search of employment. I had my stroke five years later, lost my job, became disabled, and eventually started looking for work.

My recovery was accidental in many ways. The habits of my pre-stroke living continued after my stroke without me knowing that those same habits were then considered to be ‘therapeutic’ as well. I had no idea that the same type of “lifelong learning” activities (keeping a diary, reading, writing, speaking, recording, taking pictures, joining social groups, family activities, exercise, etc.) are now considered “therapeutic” activities and are the core of aphasia therapy and recovery.

I did everything that my speech therapist asked me to do and more during the therapy sessions and homework following my stroke. I just wished that we had been told about the *reason* for doing it: “It is needed from the

start, to start building a *long-term* therapeutic structure to begin the marathon of personal learning and therapy to be used after formal (and *short-term*) therapy ends.”

About a month after my stroke, I started speech therapy and at the same time started, what turns out to be, a 500-page diary using text, graphs, charts and metaphorical drawings. Though my writing in the diary had improved along the way, I was



**Thomas G. Broussard, Jr.**  
**b: January 25, 1952**

unaware of the improvement until I felt a 'click' in my head and thought that something was 'off'. I read my first entry again (8/13/2012), pointed at it and said, "Who wrote THAT?" It was awful and it was the first time that I became aware of what I had been doing for 11 months.

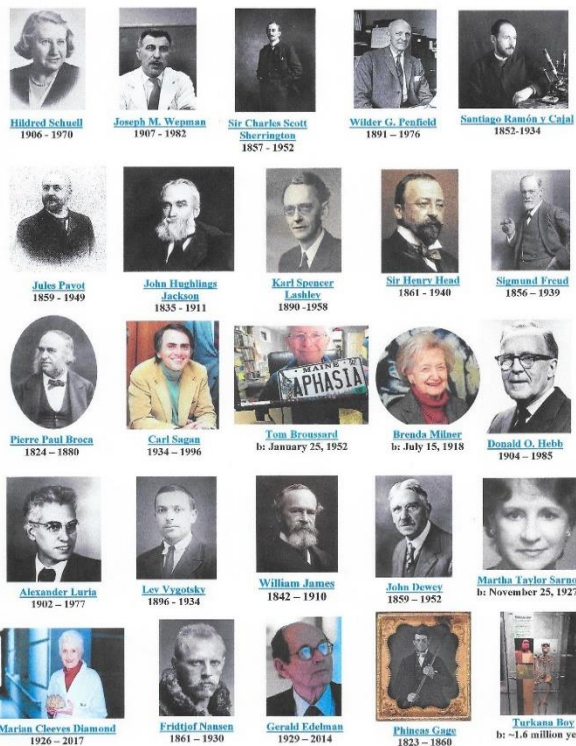
At that point, I wrote three pages in my diary, as fast as I could to keep from forgetting it, including, *"I thought (or I used to think I had done better on my sentences) but until now seeing as my sentences then thinking then that I was doing well ... I cannot tell (then) how terrible my sentences were until now (about then)"* *"So, my 'new eyes' can get older faster (and that is a good thing) as my grammar acclimated to this new altitude and my 'eyes' become new (almost) every day (Diary entries, 8/13/2012)"* (Broussard, 2015).

Becoming fully aware of my deficits was a big step towards recovery but it didn't materialize out of thin air. Awareness appeared based on new brain matter and *that* came after months and months of persistent and repetitive learning/therapeutic activities that were building, connecting and rewiring the broken neural circuits.

In my case, that was the beginning of my recovery. The brain and its thinking cells (neurons) convert thought and cognitive activities into new brain matter using *experience-dependent neural plasticity*. It is the foundation of all learning and recovery that underpins every single act of "[mental gymnastics](#)".

Since then, I have written five books about stroke and aphasia, hundreds of articles, and 800 presentations to 20,000 people across 40 states and many countries around the world. At the beginning, my initial thrust was simply to share my story with the public about recovery and inspiration as did many of my friends with aphasia who shared their inspirational stories too.

#### Science & Scientists ~ The Brain & Plasticity ~ Tom Broussard, 2024



However, last year I wrote a 24-article series about the brain, stroke, aphasia, plasticity, learning and recovery to go beyond inspiration and to educate stroke survivors, people with aphasia, speech therapists, and the wider public about how the brain works, learns and recovers.

**This entire series is combined into a one-page PDF with the names of each of the 24 scientists hyperlinked to each article on my websites.**

**It is my gift to the aphasia community on behalf of Aphasia Nation's annual Facebook fundraising event on my 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, January 25, 2024.**

Thank you for reading my articles over the years, with many more to come! Please donate to Aphasia Nation, Inc. again this year. In addition to the ongoing Aphasia Awareness Campaign (40 states so far!), our nationwide survey of stroke-centered

hospitals and aphasia awareness will continue this year as well. We have surveyed 17% of those hospitals to date and hope to get to 25% this year!

I will spend the next year or two studying the works and books of scientists and educators including Piaget, Bain, Mills, Hume, Huxley, Darwin, Romanes, Galton, Locke, Dewey, Montessori and many more with a renewed focus on plasticity as the basis of all learning that powers education of all kinds.

*Signed: Johnny Appleseed of Aphasia Awareness*

The author is a three-time stroke survivor and has aphasia as a result of the strokes. His language skills continue to improve.

He is Founder and President, Aphasia Nation, Inc., a non-profit organization whose mission is educating the wider public, national and international, about aphasia and plasticity, the foundation of all learning.

Broussard Jr., T. G., *Stroke Diary, A Primer for Aphasia Therapy (Vol I)*. Stroke Educator, Inc. St. Augustine, Florida, 2015.

Ramon y Cajal, April 2023 Vol 5 Issue 07, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, *The Father of Modern Neuroscience*, 4-25-2023

