2011 Presidential Address
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Thank you, Randy for the kind words. Randy Smith is the person who got me started in the Western by inviting me to my first meeting in 1999. He also was instrumental in promoting me through the ranks to scientific program chairman and secretary-treasurer. But most importantly, he announced at a WNS banquet that my wife, Darla and I would be getting married, even before we knew it would happen! He has been a good friend and advisor, and typifies the type of person that makes the Western such a great Society to belong to.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to have been your president this year and I would like to thank all of you for attending this meeting. The program has been excellent and the camaraderie even better. I want to thank John Jane and Volker Sonntag for being my honored guests. This sounds a bit like an Academy awards acceptance speech!

Randy has been thorough in researching my background, but I would like to elaborate on a few points to flesh out the title of my talk. A path less taken: Lunacy or Illumination.

I grew up on the east coast of Canada, on a somewhat desolate island called Newfoundland. It is very provincial and old-fashioned. I was educated by the Irish Christian Brothers and after completing high school, I joined the order, which was a society of teachers. You see, it was the late 60's and since as a Canadian, I could not join the Peace Corps, I elected to travel the world as a monk. I thought they said vacation, not vocation! I spent seven happy years as a teaching monk and do not regret any of it. However, I eventually decided to leave the security of a monastery and venture into the "real world". I landed up in Toronto as a taxi driver for several years and eventually made it into medical school, where neurosurgery seemed the most difficult thing I could do—so I did it! My undergraduate degree was in theoretical physics, but since I didn't want to continue on to become a rocket scientist, I decided that brain surgery was the next best thing!

Let us now take a look at how some others have ended up arriving at their career destinations by different routes.

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972), an American composer and arranger, arranged Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, originally written by Gershwin for two pianos, into the orchestral piece with which we are all familiar. He left home at age 14. He worked as a milkman, truck driver, usher, newsboy, elevator operator, helper in a book bindery, iron factory worker, and piano player in a bar. Grofé was 17 when he wrote his first commissioned work.

He visited the Grand Canyon, like most of us have, and came away not only in awe, like most of us, but turned the sights and sounds of the Canyon into an orchestral suite, unlike the rest of us who came away with some pictures. Listen to his depiction of a desert thunderstorm we may have experienced but couldn't photograph.

George Carlin (1937-2008), an American stand-up comic of some renown, looked at the same world the rest of us are all in, and saw things a little bit differently than we do. He had dropped out of high school, was a radar technician in the air force, and while there became a disc jockey at station KJOE. He was discharged from the air force because he was an "unproductive airman"

His view of the world, this country, our politicians and our beliefs was just a few degrees off center and he ran that few degrees into a career many, if not most of us, enjoyed.

Now, we expect folks like Grofé and Carlin to be different, to think outside the norm, to astound us with what we know but in a way we did not think of. We tend to admire these types of people as rare and as entertainers and would not be surprised if it is shown they use different parts of their brains differently that most of the rest of us.

Let me present a question to you and please note how you answer. You are participating in a race. You overtake the last person. What position are you in? If you answered that you are second to last, then you're wrong. It's impossible to overtake the last person. Now how many answered second to last? How many got the right answer? As you can see, brains work differently. I am not sure which answer the creative individuals among us gave, but one might suspect them of being more inclined to give one answer over the other.

Now comes the huge majority of humanity, not so creative and much more inclined to hew to a productive line of thinking within the box, as it were. Here we have our educators, history majors, mathematicians, engineers, business folks and so on. It would not be fair to say there is no novel creation among this group as examples like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, J.K. Rowling,

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Wright brothers, Tom Clancey and Henry Ford abound. But most folks in these fields learn the rules, competently apply the rules and turn out a reasonably solid work product and the world goes 'round and 'round.

There doesn't seem to be much ambidexterity, if I can use that word, between the creative and the crass. There apparently are no George Carlins who also labor in theoretical physics. We don't seem to have Ferde Grofés who also create miniature hearing aids. Stephen Hawking is a great mind but he doesn't also turn out symphonies.

Now if you will grant my thesis so far, just what is going to make a good neurosurgeon? Is it he or she who hews to the mainline of high school, followed directly by college, followed directly by medical school, followed directly by residency and then into practice? Certainly, the huge majority of neurosurgeons fall into this category if one peruses the mini-CV listed for us all on the AANS Web site. How about the person who spends a year or more before, during or after college tasting another culture or vocation? Are such physical or intellectual wanderers playing with less than a fully focused deck? Should they be particularly closely scrutinized if they try to cross the neurosurgical threshold because of their once-upon-a-time trip to never-never land? How about the medical school graduate who gives anesthesiology a try, then switches into neurosurgery?

Nassir Ghaemi, director of the Mood Disorders Program at Tufts, argues that what sets apart some of the world's great leaders is not some splendidly healthy mind but a malfunctioning one. His "inverse law of sanity" holds that mania, depression and related quirks are remarkable predictors of brilliant success such as demonstrated by Mahatma Gandhi, Ted Turner, Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, who were considered hypomanic. Abraham Lincoln was a depressive, Winston Churchill was bipolar, and Robin Williams was recently diagnosed with multiple personalities disorder. So is a touch of a personality or mood disorder a good thing? Might it be a good thing for the creative, but perhaps not for those of us who toil within the confines of a pretty well defined paradigm?

My pathway to becoming a neurosurgeon is far from the norm and might be characterized as a bit crazy as I did branch out a bit, did spend seven years in a monastery after high school, did spend time driving a taxicab in Toronto and did receive some of my neurosurgical training while working as a registrar in England and South Africa. Now I am not in any way suggesting I have the talents of a Grofé or a George Carlin. I'd like to think that my variable background was strength as I moved into and through neurosurgical training. I did a lot of growing up in my travels and learnt a lot about myself and my fellow man. So far it has been a good childhood. However, I clearly am biased and as has been said, *objective self-assessment is an oxymoron.*

We all know of a neurosurgeon who should never have become one. Is this vocational failure rate less, more or the same between the mainliners and what I might call the peripatetic neurosurgeon? The dictionary defines peripatetic as: " Traveling from place to place, especially working or based in various places for relatively short periods" As near as I can discern there is no good way of answering this question by mining data since the success and quality of an individual neurosurgeon is not easily measureable. I don't know of a good way of identifying the failed neurosurgeon much less trying to decide on the cause for failure, but perhaps we can look at some data on the successful in our field to approach an answer.

In response to a simple question posed to the neurosurgical program directors in the states that comprise the catchment area of the Western, 11/17 responded and 2 said they prefer a mainliner (lock-stepper) and 8 said they preferred those with a more varied background (sojourner) while 1 was neutral, preferring to make a case by case decision.

Also, in reviewing the CV's of the same neurosurgical program directors, 8 were of the mainliner variety and only 3 had done other things for a period of time (one was a Rhode's scholar and another a tree-feller for one and a half years)

So, is there any conclusion that can be reached from the above? I would not propose to advise any neurosurgery training program director or chairman as to how to select their residents or new faculty. What I would propose to those contemplating hiring a junior faculty member, or a new partner in a private practice, is that the candidate's CV warrants particular scrutiny and the interview process needs to determine what kind of candidate one has on hand. Do you have a mainliner or a freer spirit? Once that is decided, then perhaps your choice should be made matching the type of person with yourself or your team. I

would guess that if you or your group are all mainliners, a freer spirited person may not mesh as well as another mainliner. If you or your group followed variable paths to neurosurgery, a mainliner may be not the best match.

On the other hand, mixing up the group or hiring your opposite could be healthy and fun. I just don't think so.

And with that, again my sincere thanks for having me as your President. I would like to publically declare my appreciation for having had John Jane as my mentor and friend. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my wife, Darla, who has been such a constant help to me and an invaluable contributor to our society. She has functioned as a behind-the- scenes go-to person for many of us in this Society through the years. She has been my source of comfort and fulfillment for the past 10 years, and I look forward to both of us attending many Western meetings in the future, greeting old friends and making new ones.

Thank you.