

Al-Oboudi's facility, like a fun house for kids, was lined with mirrors and filled with colored balls, bands, low-to-the-floor trampolines, tubes, and tunnels. Though a child would have been at home there, much of the equipment was new to me, including the bosu, a rubber half-ball meant to create an unstable standing surface and thus to challenge one's ability to balance.

Al-Oboudi immediately started by asking me to step up onto the wobbly bosu surface. The flat surface of the bosu was face-down on the ground, which meant I'd have to step on the ball side, which was soft, unsteady rubber. Balance was still difficult for me when "walking" on regular or flat surfaces, so this would be a challenge. But wasn't that why I was there? To get better, I had to keep challenging myself and to have others challenge me.

As I stepped up onto the soft rounded half-ball, I pitched forward and then backward before falling off to the side. This happened time after time until I managed to attain some degree of balance while standing on the bosu. Even then it was like standing on the edge of a boat without any rails in choppy water. As time passed, Waleed and I made small talk and got to know each other. He was a highly educated Iraqi-American with dark hair, olive skin, and a light accent. He had practiced physical, occupational, and rehabilitative therapy for many years in North America and Europe, and though we did not discuss it I suspect that he emigrated from Iraq around the time that Saddam Hussein's Baath party came to power.

As that first day progressed, Oboudi ran me through one exercise after another. Although these exercises would have been simple for me several months before, under the changed circumstances, they were incredibly challenging.

Eventually I was able to stand on the bosu, however unsteadily. Oboudi then began to toss balls to me while I stood there wavering back and forth on the unstable surface. He also had me stretch taut, relatively thick exercise bands with my weakened and still quasi-lifeless arm and hand and then navigate on all fours through tunnels. I tried to walk on a tube that twisted and turned beneath the weight of my body.

Whenever I attained some degree of stability in a given exercise, Oboudi would change things, always pushing me to the next level. He'd put light weights in my hand and ask me to do the same activity I'd finally managed to do without weight, or he'd have me transfer a skill to an increasingly uneven surface. There was constant emphasis on balance.

With each exercise, I could tell that I was growing more steady, stronger, and more confident. When I had arrived in Southern California to work with Oboudi, I had regained about half of my lost weight. Quite quickly during our work that week, I could sense my muscles and tone starting to come back.

"Muscle memory is an extraordinary thing," Oboudi explained. "You were in good shape for much of your life, Omer, and your muscle memory from that time will be of immense help during your recovery process. You are already beginning to gain weight and definition. I can see it. What we've got to do is really emphasize that. It can be done, but if you don't work hard to redevelop those muscles, they will be lost to you forever."

Thus, I learned from Oboudi that it's not just the brain that has memory—other parts of the body have memory too. Before the aneurysm, my muscles were accustomed to a certain environment, and they strived to get back there again. With some help, I believed they could and would.

One day early on, Oboudi took me out onto a tennis court. He put a racquet in my right hand, and I did my best to grasp it. "Okay," Oboudi said as he walked to the other side of the net. "I'm going to throw a tennis ball underhanded over the net and show you approximately where it's going to go. Watch where it lands and how high it bounces." I did.

“Now, this time, when I throw it over the net, try to hit it back to me,” he said. The first time I tried, I missed.

“That’s alright—that’s what I expected,” Oboudi said.

He continued to throw gentle underhanded tosses to me. On the third one, I softly and clumsily hit it back.

“Okay, I want you to just keep hitting it right there,” Oboudi said, and he continued to throw 30 or 40 more balls to my new “sweet” spot.

“Wow, you’re really doing well, Omer,” Oboudi finally said. “But you want to know something? That’s not life. Right now you know pretty much where the ball is going to land, how high the ball is going to bounce, and what you need to do to get the ball back to me. If we keep this up much longer, you will be slamming those balls back to me. You could probably do so while eating a ham sandwich. But that’s not life—whether it’s tennis, business, or personal relationships. Life isn’t easy and it certainly isn’t predictable. In fact, it’s chaotic. So what we’re going to do is come out here again tomorrow. But the ball is not always going to go to the same side of you. It may go over your head, drop in front of you, or land on the other side of you. You might swat and miss; you might fall down. But you must start the practice of reacting to the unexpected.”

“By God, Oboudi is right – life is chaos,” I thought. I could do the same thing over and over again but that was not going to help me a whole hell of a lot. I needed a body that once again could respond to uncertainty—a body that could handle not knowing what was coming next. So Oboudi and I worked from 9-5 each day that week, and with each and every task that we did, I would be forced to progress from certainty to chaos. That was life after all: messy, untidy, and uncertain. Although I had always known that, Oboudi’s emphasis on it as an integral part of my therapy had a pronounced effect on everything I was thereafter to do during my road to recovery.

Without question, therein would lie one of the secrets to any long-term recovery I might make from my brain aneurysm and stroke. I had to train for chaos. I would have to push past every comfort zone and expose my body to uncertainty in order to trigger my muscle memory and rebuild my physical capacity. Before I could succeed, I had to face extreme vulnerability even if at the risk of falling and suffering injury. By this stage of my life I was certainly no stranger to pushing beyond limits so I was primed and ready for Oboudi’s wisdom. Just as I had been willing to fall out of bed when I first tried to walk, I would now go back to Tahoe and enlist my physical therapists and friends in putting me to the test of chaos in every activity in which I engaged. We would start one place and often end up at another altogether unexpected place. I would take my body to new places until they felt old and familiar again.

As we said goodbye, Oboudi shared these parting words with me: “Your recovery is now up to you, Omer. If you don’t remain determined, whatever minor progress we’ve made this week, you will lose rather quickly. But if you remain determined, you will get there—I’m convinced of it.”

To this day, I consider Waleed Al-Oboudi not just a friend, but an angel.