Finding Purpose and Meaning Through Life With MS

by DEBRA ROBERT

Finding Purpose After Diagnosis

Over a decade ago, I ended a volatile relationship that took up all of my 20s and most of my 30s. I never felt good in this relationship; I found myself trapped into marriage in spite of the awful, foreboding feelings, because I'd made a promise. I hadn't the maturity or ability beyond gripping fear to see any real way out.

I was, on all counts, an isolated survivor trapped by a completely unpredictable and violent person. When the marriage became life threatening, I no longer felt obligated to my vow. I escaped the only way of life I had ever known.

As soon as the marriage ended, I realized I had no idea who I really was as an unencumbered, freethinking person. What made matters almost unbearable was the fact that I could not fathom what possible purpose all those lost, wasted years had meant.

Having no children or real reason for getting up in the morning, I had no idea what to do or why I was even on the planet.

Starting Over for the First Time

My new independence felt like trying to wear a shoe two sizes too big. Nothing I did felt secure. Even the simple things I did every day felt awkward and unnatural to me.

I'd lived fighting against my own grain for so long, in order to survive, that I'd lost all connection to the nature of my own spirit.

Instinctively, I recognized I'd been living on a sort of autopilot. I needed to start learning to exist for myself and figure out who I was, and I needed to do it now. For reasons I still do not know, I decided to leave my home in Florida and move to a rented flat in London.

I threw myself into a life amongst strangers in an unknown place, living a completely different way of life. Luckily, I had the forethought to at least choose a country that spoke the same language.

Living day to day, devoid of any patterns of my former life, jump-started me into getting to know and like my true self. I learned that I enjoyed learning to cook, loved listening to classical music and that I rolled my toothpaste from the bottom edge, instead of squeezing the tube. These are things that were unheard of in my old household.

The inner strength I'd exhausted from surviving a twisted relationship was returning. The moral compass I knew I always had now guided me and I listened to it.

Returning home months later was a bit terrifying, but I embraced the road ahead.

I felt like the same person I'd always been, yet I had a new set of tools to work with. I'd gained a fresh and deeply authentic code to live by and I was eager to begin my new life path.

Life after London was far from perfect, but I loved it. I worked like crazy, got into peak physical condition. After seven years, I was to marry the man of my dreams.

All those wasted years of struggle and abuse actually started to feel like they meant something. I felt they prepared me for this new, happy life ahead. I knew I would never take this good fortune for granted.

It was at this time I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS).

Here We Go Again

So here I was again, thrust into another awful, shocking and life-altering situation. This time, no bitter divorce or move to a foreign land would shake away the attachment to a toxic life-partner.

Like a dog trying to run away from its own tail, I was in an impossible situation. I could not escape the danger this time.

I wondered how I could possibly find and meaning or purpose for this life again, especially when my diagnosis and future seemed so dismal.

I found myself living back to what was a zombie-like existence, returning to autopilot, just trying to survive each day again, with a foreboding sense of fear. Any attempt to find meaning in all this seemed a cosmic joke.

Next page: 'I did it once, I can do it again.'

I Did It Once, I Can Do It Again

Eventually I got over the initial shock of what it means to be an MSer. As a survivor of abuse, I became determined to not let anything, not even this disease, take me down.

The problem was, no matter how willing I was to fight, the exercises that led to success in overcoming my abusive past did not work in my fighting against MS. I was getting nowhere.

I decided to stop the madness. I let go of any and all expectations. I became silent, retreating from the world a bit. I did this to find any kind of new perspective to help me out of this very deep and confusing rut.

I began to seek that intuitive pang that led me to London years back. I put myself in a vulnerable place and released all expectations, seeking what some might call a miracle or answer to prayer.

The answer became clear over the next few weeks.

I'd never again find happiness, fighting against something that I would always have. I accepted, going against my rather egotistical and rational self, that MS was not the problem.

Starting Over for the Second Time

So what was the issue? What was blocking me from a happy life?

The answer was a simple one: I needed to begin shedding the patterns of my pre-MS life that were too difficult or that no longer served, in order to break through to the life I could have. I began to think about the big and small things I did or expected of myself each day that no longer worked in the scope of life with MS.

I desperately wanted to find purpose and meaning for the life I was living. My mind and days were becoming more and more cluttered as MS piled on more responsibility and made my routines more and more difficult.

Here is where I staked my claim. It was time to do inventory. It was time to move into the foreign land known as life with MS.

I did not need throw out my entire mode of being — far from it. What I did need to do was take a gently paced and thorough look around and within. I needed to plan for this life with MS starting today and then looking forward.

Back to Basics

My job now was to embrace life change. I needed to write a new script for myself and find a way to look forward to each day ahead.

I had fallen out of phase with the part of me I had come to trust and follow when I felt lost or unsure so many years ago. I'd disconnected from the spirit and sense of right I'd worked so hard to reclaim.

Surely, if I had found my footing before, I could reconnect to it again. In order to do this, I'd need to be brutally honest with where I was at.

Preliminary Inventory

I decided to begin by accounting for things I wanted to keep and things I could let go of.

I listed the things in life I wanted. I went through my internal toolbox, considering what I could do, what I needed help with, and what things I could no longer do or could do without.

My goal was to get in touch with the hidden layer of me waiting to grow and express itself throughout life as an MSer. I knew in taking on this inventory, I would begin to open space and make room.

Another New Set of Tools

Finding purpose through strife and a seemingly dismal outlook can become a grand journey. In my next article I shall pick up on where this leaves off. I shall write about the series of steps I took to get through a place of reflection and into a life of purposeful and satisfying readjustment.

I Am Who I Am With or Without MS — and So Are You

We all have our ways to cope with MS. Many of us thrive with it. We all, from time to time, slip into periods of imbalance and frustration.

Through it all, I know we can live lives with perhaps an even deeper meaning and more purpose than ever before. I have found some keys to coping with MS I look forward to continuing to share.

I am an MSer and I am at peace with that. This is not to say I don't shake the rafters from time to time, but that is yet another story.