

# LOSSES AND GAINS

by Joy Ray

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Stunned, I dropped back into the chair where I had been sitting. My right leg wouldn't move! Two friends helped me transfer myself into the wheelchair they had brought when they realized something was wrong.

"What is happening to me?" I thought. "First my right arm and hand aren't responding. Now my right leg is useless."

I had worked that morning as a radiation therapist in the Radiation Oncology Department and had gone to the hospital cafeteria to have a quiet lunch, preferring solitude to chit-chat. There would be enough chit-chat back in the department in the afternoon. As my two friends were pushing me to the Emergency Department, I was progressively getting worse. I was barely able to tell the ED staff who to contact in case of emergency before I lost all speech.

Losses - loss of the use of my right arm and hand, loss of the use of my right leg, loss of all speech. Anyone who has experienced the devastation of a stroke knows the sense of the complete loss I felt that day in April, 1986. But these were just the physical losses. I was still to experience a different yet deeper sense of loss - the emotional loss.

I was unable to return to work as a radiation therapist which I loved. The work was too physically demanding. With the loss of my arm and hand I couldn't sew which I also loved. I was a professional seamstress. But the loss that was most difficult for me to handle was the loss of my running. Running was my passion, logging 15-20 miles a week. In the past year, I had entered three 5K races, placing in all of them and coming in first in my age category in the last race on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1986 nine days before the stroke. I had signed up to enter my first 10K race in June at the Rose Bowl. I was even planning to begin training for the 1987 LA Marathon.

Friends came to visit me in the rehab hospital. One friend said he knew I would be running in six months. I grabbed hold of that prediction. So in physical therapy, I worked very hard on getting my leg to move again. Eventually I was able to stand, then take little steps. But I did not give up on the prediction even when I was fitted for a brace.

Then the six month prediction came and went. I was no closer to running than I was on the first day after my stroke. Oh, I was slowly walking by that point. But running? That was when reality hit me in the face. I was never going to be able to run again. I put thoughts of a marathon out of my mind completely. Deep depression set in. Why should I bother doing anything anymore?

A year after my stroke, I started seeing a counselor. By this time I was driving again and working in a different capacity at the hospital, but that still did not alleviate the depression. The counselor realized that to get beyond my despondency I had to grieve the losses caused by the stroke especially the loss of my running.

I knew that to work through my grief of never running again, I had to look at the people who were running, not look in the other direction as I had done in the past. The first time I had the courage to look, I was in the car driving. I burst into tears, sobbing so hard I could barely manage to pull onto a side street and park. The grief, pain, and despair were overwhelming. But that was the first needed step in the healing process.

Cheers from the crowd. Tears running down my face, I crossed the finish line! The accomplishment I experienced was beyond words! Sixteen years after my stroke, I had completed the Vancouver International Half-Marathon. I walked a total of 13.1 miles in 5 \_ hours. Through perseverance and dogged determination, I had trained for and participated in a marathon. There was no other participant there that day who was more satisfied than I with their place in the race at the finish line. Physically I may have been in last place, but emotionally I came in first.

Gains - gains in my speaking ability, walking, driving, etc. Yet more than these, gains in my emotional well-being through the grieving process and coming out the other side much stronger. Now many years after my stroke, I can look at runners with no sense of loss.

Those of us who have experienced a stroke know we have to modify so much of what we do daily. By modifying my goals, I accomplished what I had thought was unattainable and gained so much emotionally. Completing a half marathon or a marathon may not be a goal of others with a stroke. But modification will allow them to accomplish their own goals.

Losses and gains. They are a part of life and there is life after stroke.