

THE NIGHTMARE YOU CAN WAKE UP FROM

By Sandra Mueller

© November, 2005

In an instant, life as we know it can end. A stroke suddenly and forever changes every aspect of a person's life and the lives of those who love them. Physical limitations are obvious, but the major battle is invisible and fought in the mind. My story begins one evening when my husband and I were discussing how well things were going for us. We were happy together and about to go to Hawaii for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The next morning when I got up to get ready for work, I fell on the floor. My husband tried to pick me up, but I couldn't stand. My eyes were looking in different directions, the left side of my face was drooping, and my words were slurred. I lost consciousness by the time the paramedics arrived. When they looked under my eyelids, they just shook their heads and took me to the hospital. After lying in a drug-induced coma on life-support for four days and not improving, a nurse told my husband that if he didn't get me out of there, I would die. A neurologist at another hospital took my case and performed surgery to relieve the pressure on my brain. They had trouble waking me up from the surgery, and then I couldn't breathe on my own without a ventilator. I was given the last rites. Once the breathing tube was out, I was talking hoarsely and couldn't swallow. They put in a feeding tube and I was confined to bed. I couldn't have anything to eat or drink, not even ice chips. I didn't get hungry, but the thirst was unbearable. I tried to suck the water out of the wet sponge they gave me to moisten my lips. After one month, I had lost forty-two pounds. With speech therapy, I eventually passed my swallow test and could eat again. The left side of my body was paralyzed and I couldn't walk. I was very afraid to sit in a wheelchair for the first time, but it got me out of bed and around the hospital to therapy. Then the doctors discovered a hole in my heart which required another surgery for repair. But the most difficult problem was probably the seizures. They were sudden, violent and very frightening.

I remember thinking that it would have been better if I hadn't survived. I wanted to wake up from this bad dream and have it be over. I was desperate and thought of ways that I could end it all. I didn't want to live disabled. I couldn't go on, but I couldn't make it stop either. I wanted to be healthy and have my life back. I knew that I was in big trouble and needed supernatural help. I called out to God and my journey began. I visualized, meditated, read, prayed and worked hard at recovery. I cried when I needed to and laughed when I could. I found out for myself that there is a God and I surrendered my life to Him. He gave me strength and healing and peace in the middle of my storm. Then I realized all of the things I could still do and counted my blessings. I realized what a miracle my life really was, as are the lives of all stroke survivors.

This stroke has been a remarkable learning experience. It stripped me of the things I thought were important and showed me who I REALLY am, who my friends are, and who God is. My appearance and physical capabilities were vital to my self-esteem and sense of identity. In addition to our professions, our bodies are how we identify ourselves (and I had neither). I was in an identity crisis until I found the real me physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

This experience showed me that my body is only the visible aspect of the person who lies within it. My healthy body became a shell so quickly that it helped me to be less superficial and understand that what is really important are the virtues inside that can't be seen. I realized that none of us are perfect or self-sufficient. I looked into my eyes in a mirror and I wasn't inside looking back. The light was gone. I continued to recover at home and eventually I found myself back inside looking out. I'm not really sure if the old me came back or if it was the birth of the new me. It didn't matter. I could go on now. Two of my true friends stood by me when I needed them and my husband remained dedicated to me even though I wasn't the healthy girl he had married. Talk about for better or worse, in sickness and in health!

My entire side was paralyzed, so I hesitated to go out in public. I was embarrassed, humiliated and afraid of what people would say or think about the way I looked and walked. I felt crippled not only physically, but mentally as well. Eventually I began to accept the way I looked and it didn't matter what others thought or said anymore. What became more important to me was not what they thought, but what I thought. It took time to realize that my body was only the visible aspect of who I am inside, and I began to accept myself regardless of anyone else's opinions. I also explored the other traits that made me who I am - aspects of my heart, mind, body and soul where no one could see. Good or bad, this is the hand I was dealt in life.

Your nightmare can become a blessing if you let it. The key is love. Time has passed. I am better now and I'm thankful every day for my precious life. I'm still recovering, but the sting is gone. My message is: "Don't give up". God loves you too and He can lift you up. No matter how bad the situation may get, don't throw the fight. Keep getting back up.

Today I can walk without a cane. I've mourned the losses, celebrated the blessings and learned quite a bit about a lot of things. I learned not to say, "I can't" and if your physical ability is compromised, it helps to be more clever and imaginative at doing things. It's been a time to reinvent myself. I'm not broken, empty, sad or in pain now. I've changed from a caterpillar into a butterfly. Growth from a crisis is sometimes painful to remember. But it is so important to keep the faith, be courageous and not panic. We are right where we are supposed to be. If you can tap into that supernatural power and invite it into your life, God will be waiting for you.