

REFLECTIONS ON MY STROKE AND HOW IT HAS CHANGED ME

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My stroke occurred in September, 2000. As I look back on the days preceding it, there were signs that things were not right – fatigue, passing numbness. But then, one morning it hit me, and as I called a friend for help, somehow I knew to tell her it was a stroke. As I progressed through my hospital and rehabilitation treatments, I had resigned myself to being in a wheelchair, semi-confined to life as an invalid. Then one day when feeling low in spirits, my son, Rolland, came to visit me. I was sitting waiting for therapy and I saw him coming towards me. I just was overwhelmed by sadness, and I started to cry. I said that this was the way that I was going to be for the rest of my life: confined to a wheelchair with limited mobility and not being able to take care of myself. Then all of a sudden, I said that you could look at the glass as being half full or half empty. And I decided that my glass was going to be half full. I stopped crying and at that moment, the struggle began. I was ready to take on all the challenges to do whatever I had to do to get as well and functional as possible. My prayer was to be happy no matter what my circumstances. As a Buddhist, I prayed and chanted every day to have faith. I sometimes find it difficult now to look back on those times. A certain sadness comes to me, but I can only be happy with the final results. The journey started then, which was the journey of my life.

Being in rehab was an experience that is unexplainable. It was hard work. It was challenging, but it was also encouraging. When I graduated to outpatient treatment, the therapy really became like a job. I worked very diligently because I wanted to get back to where I was in life before I had a stroke. There is some reasonable doubt in your mind about what you can really accomplish because sometimes it seems like a tedious, long process that does not pay off immediately. But then you know, no pain, no gain.

Now years later, I have gotten to the point in my recovery that I look at life completely different. I appreciate the small things in life, especially regarding my physical ability. There is some impairment that I have learned to live with. I am able to understand that, first of all, your life is the most valuable thing that you have regardless of what condition you may be in. Somehow, you begin to understand and grow in acceptance along with your recovery. You are able to make the best with what you've got.

There have been changes. I would say that most of them are for the betterment of me. I feel more confident with my condition. I gained more of an acceptance of myself once I was able to focus only on me and make the best use of all that was available to me. I have more compassion, understanding, tolerance and love for

my fellow human beings to whom I hadn't paid much attention. Now I am thinking more of others and thinking less of myself. I have learned to share more of me with people. I listen much better now. I'm not just hearing. I am listening. I really feel good about me as a human being, as a person, as a productive individual.

I think recovering to this degree from the stroke has affected my family, my friends and the ones I truly love. They have had to be more tolerant and understanding of me as not being the same. I avoid accepting help as much as possible. Whatever it is, I try to do it on my own first, and then if it seems that I am unable to accomplish it, I graciously accept help from others.

I feel I am fortunate to be a stroke survivor. I have a love in me for everyone and I feel especially close to other stroke survivors. It seems to me to be like a special club and you are almost privileged to be in it. It is not the end of the world. It is just the beginning of a new world for you. I feel that having a disability sometimes can be an enhancement causing you to grow because it is truly a challenge learning how to do the things that you so just took for granted. I am glad that this has added more to my life. It made me realize what I really could accomplish. It has given me the ability to appreciate each day, no matter what happens during the day. Just being in the day, in the moment, in the present is a gift. I am always excited and challenged to help someone else enjoy life more. I am not all that I want to be, and after the stroke, I am certainly not what I used to be. But come to think of it, that's not all that bad!