

RESTORING A SENSE OF SELF

by Robert Conrad

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I am but a shadow of my former self. That is due to the stroke which I had seven years ago. I don't have the ability I used to have. I can't run. I am no longer able to play a good game of tennis. Typing is more difficult, and I make errors frequently. But rather than mourn my losses, I should be thankful for the things I can do. I can sing, walk, do household chores, drive a car, mow the lawn, preach a sermon, conduct the liturgy, teach a class and love my wife, my children and grandchildren. I feel especially blessed by the celebration we just had for our 50th wedding anniversary. My children affirmed the manner in which my wife and I raised them. Members of my wife's family and my family came from Kansas, Georgia and Colorado for the anniversary dinner we had last Saturday night at a local Greek restaurant. It was a very affirming occasion. It demonstrated that we had cast a very long shadow indeed.

But there are things that are not so affirming. My wife insisted on driving to Michigan last Sunday for our time together with our children and grandchildren. She would not let me drive. I didn't like the implication that I was incapable of driving that distance. She doesn't say in so many words that she doesn't trust my driving, but the implication is there. And there are other things about her actions that bother me. She says that I have lost my "executive ability" which means that I cannot make decisions and act on them. However, when she was in Germany for a week recently, I did just fine. I got food from the store, prepared it, washed the dishes, mowed the lawn and put up the screens as well as stained the deck. I demonstrated that I could manage things by myself.

There is one area of my life where I don't feel like I am a shadow of my former self. When I visit stroke patients at a local hospital, I feel empowered to help them realize there is life after stroke. I am a strong and compassionate presence to those stroke patients. That is one of the plusses of being a stroke survivor. Instead of feeling a loss from the stroke, I find new strength and purpose. I always feel empowered by those visits and stroke patients have said that I am an inspiration to them. Perhaps that is a clue to restoring a sense of self. Seek out and act on the opportunities to be of help to others in whatever way possible. Playing tennis and running are not on the same level as service.

In writing this essay, I have learned to be thankful for what I can do and not to mourn the loss of certain abilities. There are many ways to live a full life and cease being a shadow of your former self. Don't have a "pity party" but have a celebration each day of your life.