

VISUALLY UNIMPAIRED

By Cari Biamonte

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To look at me is to think I am the picture of good health. I am a 45-year-old Caucasian woman, five feet three inches tall, 103 pounds with an athletic build. I don't drink, smoke, or do recreational drugs. I go to church regularly, work out at the gym, and floss my teeth before bedtime. I thought I was in control of my ever-challenging health issues. You see, I have a long history of health issues, none of which include heart disease, high cholesterol, diabetes, or obesity. Most people assume I am a runner. Indeed I am, or was, and will be again. I have no outward physical defects that say, "Look at me I'm a stroke victim," but I am, or was, and NEVER want to be again.

Other diseases tested my character: childhood nephritis, ulcerative colitis, steroid induced osteoporosis, vertebral compression fractures, and chronic fatigue. Stroke was a word I was unprepared to hear. I have no family history of it, nor do I fit the profile for such a condition.

Apparently the onset of my stroke was blurred vision. Who knew? My eyesight went from focused to double to unconscious to enlightened. I guess you could say, "I was blind and now I see." This is my story.

My eyes were closed and my body frozen in fear to the bed. I remember the doctor at the foot of my hospital bed talking into his voice recorder about my condition. He described me as one would an unremarkable specimen. I distinctly remember him saying that they wouldn't know anything for three days. Three days? I opened my eyes and saw my mother. "GOD!" My insides screamed. "Not again. Holy Mother of God!" I thought. "My mother has seen me fall countless times before. Surely you must know the fear and pain she is feeling, for you too have watched your Son fall, suffer, and die. I just can't put her through this anymore. I can't stand to see her frightened. I want to live and take care of my parents, not have them continue to babysit me into adulthood." That's when it happened. That's when things changed for me. There was this sudden awareness that all is well. And indeed it was. My recovery was complete. Short of a three-week headache, neck and shoulder pain, fear of being alone and uncontrollable emotions, I was on my way to a new and exciting life!

What I didn't know was how this sudden "relationship" with God would change my life and existing relationships. Suddenly I was struck with a conviction of all I did that wasn't so "good." My religion just flew out the window and my relationship with God was a sharp reality. The fact is my relationship was lost behind the trappings of religion. I didn't have a relationship with God. In order to have a relationship, you need to spend time with someone. If I only spent one hour a week with my spouse, we would have a less than happy marriage, and so it goes with our Creator. I had a lot of work to do and a lot of forgiveness to seek.

For what purpose had I received such grace? I was feeling a tremendous amount of gratitude and responsibility to fulfill God's will in my life. My sole focus quickly became just that. After all, I was spared from any visible impairment or death—it's the least I could do. I felt oddly encouraged about the future, yet misunderstood by my fiancé. A faithless man, a scarred and bitter man, an alcoholic who was wounded by the Vietnam War. Visually unimpaired like me, yet damaged goods still the same. What a team we make. Oil and water.

It took a great deal of soul searching and much needed prayer before I felt at peace with my decision to marry this man and thus, began exploring the new me, as did my loved ones. I could see both wonder and confusion in the faces of those who have known me. In less than two years, I had lost my job that I held for 13 years, suffered a stroke, got married, and moved 140 miles from my home. Perhaps it was unfair of me to expect anyone to understand what it was I had been feeling. How do you explain a spiritual rebirth? A sudden wisdom into other's circumstances, a deep familiar empathy with strangers, an unconditional love for those who've wronged you, and an "ooohhhh I get it now" when reading the word of God. Finding that every waking moment is spent in constant prayer. Wanting nothing but solitude. Having nothing in common with the things of this earth any longer. Who can blame my husband for feeling left out and confused?

What my husband does have is a wonderful gift for providing for and protecting me. It was as if God placed him right there to physically catch me when I stroked. That's when the Lord began his work in me. This new and different life of mine has given me the opportunity to seek the presence of God, discover who I am, and to focus on using my talents for the sake of others. Interesting stuff. Scary stuff too.

So I suffered a stroke. Others have suffered more, some less, each one differently. No one goes through this life unscathed. What matters most is not what we learn in the midst of our suffering, but that we persevere through the suffering learning to trust and believe in the greater good that is to be revealed. This is a very abstract concept for those with no faith, for faith itself is believing in what is not seen.

I come away from this experience with this advice. When faced with unbearable pain and burdens, get up in the morning, get dressed and get out of the house. If physically possible, walk to a coffee shop or restaurant where you could meet people, read and reflect. Spend time acknowledging your circumstances, accept what cannot be immediately changed, develop a strategy for recovery, and most importantly remain hopeful in things yet to come. Do not fear.

Examples of possible recovery strategies:

Physical—join a fitness center, take up walking daily, yoga, massage therapy, water therapy

Emotional—support groups, book clubs at your local library, bookstores or church

Spiritual—find a church family, bible study groups, daily meditation, and prayer partners

Financial—explore your talents and freelance if unable to get back to work, network-network-network

Many of these activities are social in nature also. Meet people. Encourage others.

Live, love, laugh and give Glory to God in the Highest! You survived—share your story.

