

Remarkable friends I look up to

Even chronic illness comes with its own gifts

by Terri Reinhart

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Not long after I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, I stopped in to see my friend, Carolyn.

She greeted me and immediately asked how I was doing. “Bill told me about your Parkinson’s,” she said. “That is so awful. How are you feeling? How is Chris taking this? I can’t believe you drove all the way up here just to see us.”

She then asked about our kids and wanted to know all the news. She expressed her concerns for how we were doing financially and said she’d pray my disability benefits would be approved right away. I responded to Carolyn as I try to respond to everyone. It’s hard to explain, I say, but my Parkinson’s has really been a gift to me as much as anything else. Carolyn got it. She looked at me and said, “I know what you mean. People look at Bill and I and think that our situation is awful. But they don’t know the blessings we have every day.”

Old times new times

The next day I went to see my good friend, Mike. He greeted me with a smile and a hug, made sure I had something to drink, and then we sat and talked. As we were in elementary school together, a lot of our chatting is about “old times,” people and places we knew when we were younger.

We both enjoy music and sometimes we sing the old songs together, remembering the Beatles, Herman’s Hermits, Gordon Lightfoot, and others. We talk about movies and laugh about our favorite humorous scenes. More than anything else, we laugh together. While we were visiting that day, Mike turned to me and said, out of the blue, “I am so lucky!” And indeed, he seems happier and more content with his life than most people I know.

I thought about these two friends of mine later as I prepared even more paperwork for my disability files and pondered this rather daunting experience of applying for benefits. It took me a long time to feel okay about doing this and it was only after my doctor insisted I needed to start this process that I actually made my appointment with social security.

I certainly wasn’t helped by the lawyer who let me know that he’d “eat his revolver” if anyone told him he had something like Parkinson’s disease.

More time for others

It’s been almost five years since I was diagnosed. Some days when I’m down and wonder if I can ever do anything worthwhile. The reality of having a progressive illness is scary. I will admit that! But I have learned that even illness comes with its own gifts. It’s not so hard for me to see the gifts of my Parkinson’s. Life is slower. I have more time for people. It’s easy to let go of things that don’t really matter anyway. And my friends?

Carolyn is paralyzed, a quadriplegic from having polio at age six. She is totally dependent on others for all of her physical care. When I came to see her, she had been confined to bed for over a week because her electric “sip and puff” wheelchair was broken down and the repairman had been delayed. When she is back up and ready to go, I know she’ll again be taking care of the other residents in the apartment complex she lives in. She’ll be ordering groceries for one client and arranging transportation for another. She’ll be up at her table, working on her computer and painting beautiful pictures, holding a paint brush in her mouth. And she’ll be much more concerned about the welfare of others than in her own challenges.

Her partner, Bill, also uses a wheelchair, has cerebral palsy and is developmentally disabled. He cooks for Carolyn, manages a small store, and takes care of his garden.

Totally dependent on others, yet caring for others

Mike was a fireman and paramedic before an accident left him paralyzed on his right side and with a brain injury. His short-term memory is impaired. He cannot sit up unaided and it is hard for him to hold his head up for any length of time. Speaking is difficult and even such things as breathing and swallowing are not to be taken for granted. He, too, is totally dependent on others to care for him.

When I grow up . . .

But I have never left his house without feeling like I was the one who was taken care of. I have seen Carolyn go through devastating health crises when she wouldn’t be expected to live through the night. I look at photos of Mike from before the accident and feel that I have suddenly been punched in the stomach. If I could change what happened to them, I would do it in a heartbeat. But I can’t.

I live with a very particular struggle, although I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, it is only because of their disabilities that I have had the opportunity to get to know them now. And I can’t imagine not having them in my life.

When I grow up, I want to be like Mike and Carolyn.