

ILLNESS AS OPPORTUNITY: LEARNING FROM CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME

The experiences of my child and young adulthood provided the landscape for my healing journey. Learning to forgive and move feelings of failure into the realm of challenges was the beginning of a discovery process that continues to change my life. The lessons that emerge as I learn from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome are personal affirmations and gentle reminders to myself and others that health is precious, life is sacred, and the potential for change is infinite.

By Fay L. Loomis

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CRISES ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

Most people live...in a very restrictive circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness, and of their soul's resources in general.

... Great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed.

William James

If anyone had told me that crises are opportunities for growth at the onset of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), I would have said they were crazy. I now know differently.

RELEASE THE PAST, FORGIVE

I grew up as the middle child in an unstable and violent family of seven children (six girls, one boy). As the good child I unknowingly took on the responsibility for much that happened. I developed several means of escape—spending time in the mystical outdoors, walking or riding my horse and reading everything I could lay my hands on. In the two towns I lived in, I read every book in the library's children's section and was frequently reprimanded for reading adult books. I became a high achiever and graduated from college magna cum laude, Phi Beta Phi and Phi Beta Kappa. I became a people pleaser and learned to stuff my emotions, especially anger. Stuffing emotions and anger were probably the greatest contributors attracting CFS.

Around the age of 30, I came to understand that my parents gave me the best they were capable of. They, too, were needy and didn't know how to nurture themselves, let alone a passle of children. I forgave them to the best of my ability. During the illness, my sister Barbara suggested that I write down the qualities my parents gave to me, I then began a greater healing. I remembered



that our mother was caring, our father fiercely independent, and both loved learning and were curious about life. I am learning to accept the words of White Eagle: "Do not look behind you. Do not regret mistakes but be thankful for every experience, however painful, which has helped you to gain a clearer understanding."

THE ONLY FAILURE IS TO FAIL TO LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE

Having married my high school sweetheart shortly before my 20th birthday, I became a mother a year-and-a-half later, much to the surprise of both of us. After my first year of college, I had dropped out so my husband could finish his senior year, with plans that I would return the following year. Actually, it was a few years later when I began taking one class a semester, finally graduating in 1973 and receiving a master's degree in 1975.

We began to draw away from each other as I began working. At first, I held several government research contracts, and later developed the Outdoor Sculpture in Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and Lansing (Michigan) Project; which resulted in authoring three guidebooks, developing a traveling photographic exhibition and holding public forums in each of the cities. It was a heady project, and I look back, wondering how I had done it. The fact of the matter, I was too green to know that I couldn't do it.

Tension in our life had reached an unbearable point, and I suggested counseling. After five months, our counselor suggested

we give up meeting with him, and I, too, gave up on our 24-year marriage, feeling like a failure. Today, I understand that as we change, we either move toward or away from others, because life and relationships are dynamic. Two full-time jobs later, my sense of failure had increased. Fired from the first when the bosses' research contract ran out, I was exhausted in the second from dealing with 39 trustee-bosses. It has taken time for me to understand that the only failure we make is to fail to learn from experience.

FEEL THE FEAR AND DO IT ANYWAY

It was definitely time for a change, and after careful research, I moved to California, in spite of advice that I couldn't possibly do it and succeed. I'm glad I felt the fear and did it anyway, a paraphrase from *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Dr. Susan Jeffers. I risked what was comfortable for me, although not for my friends who could not conceive of giving up the familiar for the unknown.

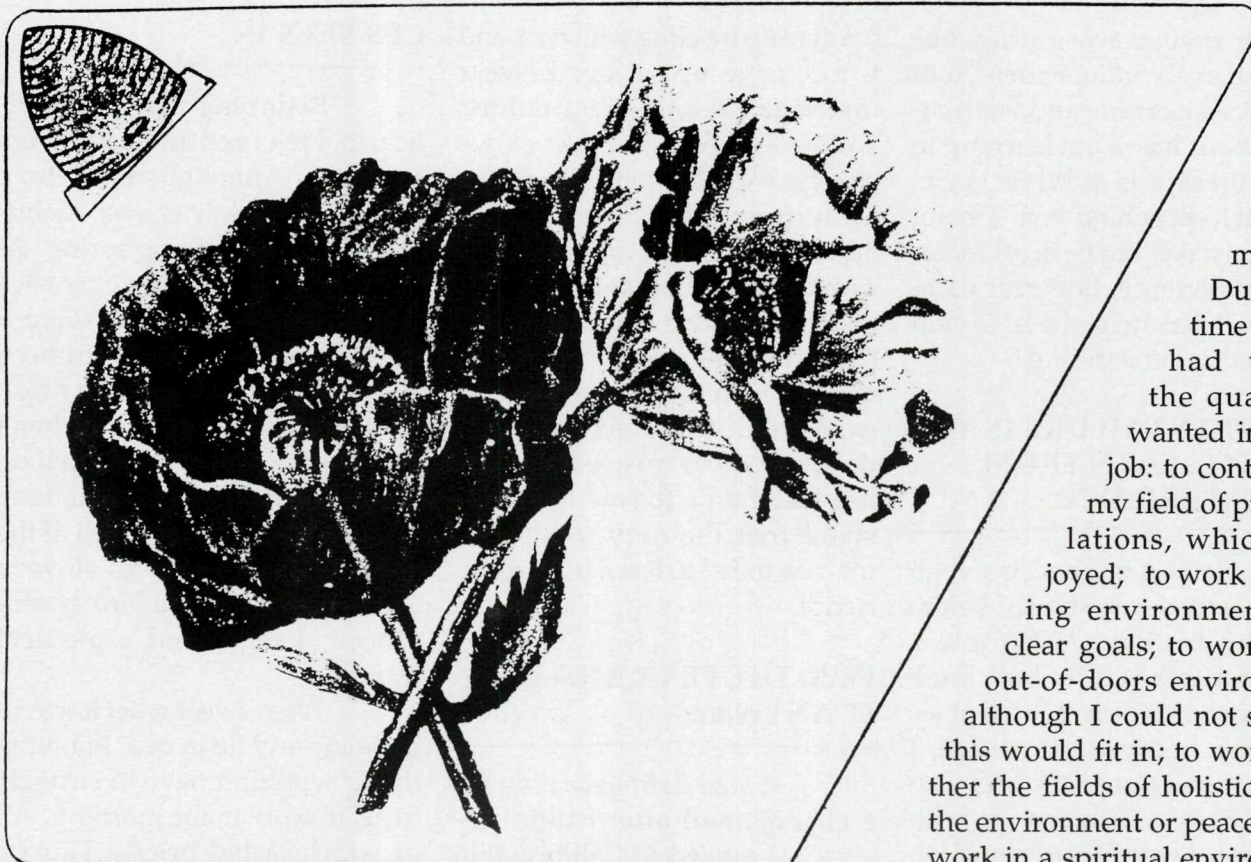
After a brief stint as assistant director for a prestigious museum in San Diego, I was offered the job of public relations director for a college in Orange County, CA a position I held for seven years. A perquisite of this high-stress job was a two-month administrative leave which was granted in 1990. I set off for Indonesia, where I reconnected with my inner child as I wandered through the jungle and played with these beautiful people.

CFS SETS IN

Returning from this idyllic trip, I felt tired and had severe gut pains. Although treated for a parasite, none was ever identified. By the following spring, after two months of treatment for increasing exhaustion, I spent a week at a monastery in Northern California to catch up on my rest. Although I felt a bit better when I returned, I soon found myself on the floor talking to my staff, too weak to stand. Always full of the energy I needed, I was slow to accept that I was sick. Finally convinced, I requested a medical leave.

What sweet relief it was to go home and lie in bed, knowing that I wouldn't have to struggle to get to work in the morning. All of which lasted briefly. Family, friends and colleagues found it difficult to accept that fatigue could be so debilitating, some suggesting that I was a bit nuts.

My first doctor, having done all he could while I got sicker and sicker, released me, and I began seeing a specialist. Over the next few months, after many tests which showed nothing, I was in his office. As I leaned my head against the examining table, unable to hold it up, I broke out in sweats and chills which had plagued me for months. The fatigue had become so severe that it would sometimes take me up to three hours to talk myself out of bed, and if I took a phone call, that was all the energy I could muster for a whole day. Unable to digest and metabolize food, I lost 25 pounds. Parts of my body covered with large, red welts burned and itched. I felt mentally con-



fused, depressed and without hope. I felt utterly alone.

When I heard him say, "You'll have to go back to work," I was stunned. He didn't believe I was sick, either, and, moreover, the implication was that I was mentally ill. Let me say emphatically, if you aren't crazy with CFS, you soon will be when people tell you it's all in your head, a statement I made at a famous psychiatric hospital in Germany while on a lecture tour in 1993. I learned, in a sense, it really is in your head, because often brain lesions created by viruses associated with CFS affect behavior. I am increasingly impressed with the power of the mind.

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE

Still in shock, I left the office with a growing anger and the determination that from that day forward, I would recover from CFS even though I didn't feel like it and didn't know how I was going to do it. With recovery, I understand the importance of "faking it until you make it" or acting as if." All those months in bed, I worried that I might never get well or work again, and wondered how I would manage financially. Fortunately, I had five months of sick leave and vacation, because now there was no hope of receiving disability benefits.

Even though I hated to let go of my high-paying job and a hard-won retirement plan, on

one level I knew I must. During the time in bed, I had written the qualities I wanted in a new job: to continue in my field of public relations, which I enjoyed; to work in a caring environment with clear goals; to work in an out-of-doors environment, although I could not see how this would fit in; to work in either the fields of holistic health, the environment or peace; and to work in a spiritual environment. The list included what I was tired of having or not having in my life, the medium of the illness being the messenger.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU WANT

To my surprise, I found exactly what I had drawn from my inner core and created in my mind. While spending two weeks at Meadowlark, America's first holistic health retreat, in Hemet, California, I met founder Evarts G. Loomis, MD., the Father of Holistic Medicine. As we talked in our first meeting, I kept getting the feeling that I should tell him that I thought we had some work to do together; I didn't know what it could be and it seemed rather presumptuous. However, our conversation flowed easily and I did tell him. A couple of

months later, he called to say that Meadowlark had closed and asked if I would work with him in booking lectures and editing his writing.

Soon after we began working together, he said I would be lecturing with him, which I absolutely did not believe, and shortly thereafter he proposed. Today, I live on a beautiful ranch, surrounded by mountains, overlooking the San Jacinto valley. Through our professional partnership, we lecture, write, counsel and have a small retreat house for guests who wish to pursue health and growth. I have discovered that it is important to ask for what you want and do it with clarity — for you may get what you ask for!

NOTHING IS CHANCE

My second dose of hope came from Evarts, who believes that there is no incurable disease, and my incredible two weeks at Meadowlark. My first glimmer came from Little Crow, a Dakota/Lakota. A friend called and said that she would like to pick me up and take me to the Gathering held each Sunday morning at the American Indian Unity Church in

Garden Grove, CA. After the service, Little Crow, a big man, walked up to me, put his arms around me and said, "Everything will be o.k." Those four powerful words, linked to his love, finally brought hope to me. When it came time for our marriage in a sacred oak grove here on the ranch, Little Crow and Evarts' longtime friend, New Thought minister J. Sig Paulso participated in our very special wedding ceremony.

HEALTH IS PRECIOUS ; LIFE IS SACRED

Through the long period of healing by fire, I have come to know profoundly that health is precious and life is sacred.

Life is a Process

Partnership has brought a new way of life. I am still discovering how to pace myself in my professional and personal life, so that I can stay in maximum recovery from CFS. Early on, I intuitively began fasting and having colonics, which helped remove body toxins. Careful attention to diet, supplements, exercise (yes, exercise), counseling, , herbs, homeopathy and meditation were also helpful.

Change, however, was the key to my recovery; continuing to discover who I am and embrace all that I am is the key to my wholeness, my healing. I am grateful for the joys, the challenges and the opportunities to learn from CFS and life. As Meister Eckhart said, "If you want to become what you want to be, you must stop being who you are." □



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