



## LEARNING HOPE

For many years my idea of hope was small. Tiny, actually. It was about wanting something. More specifically, it was about wanting something to be my way.

Then guess what happened? Things did not go my way and there was nothing I could do about that. My life took a turn I did not want. It took on a structure no one would ever hope for. That was when I started to learn a bigger idea of hope.

Surviving a critical illness and years of living with a disability put me in the ring with hope. We battled it out round after round. Who do you think won?

Round one took place in the hospital. I was unable to move my body. I was unable to see out of my eyes. My brain was barely functioning. I couldn't understand anything. At some murky, subconscious level I knew something was very wrong, but that was all. I was terrified, so I did what any helpless, terrified person might do. I screamed. I screamed a lot.

Eventually I got well enough to be transferred to a rehab hospital. I could move a little. I could see a little. I could understand what the doctor wanted when he held up a box two feet from my face and said, "What does this say, Sally?" Of course I knew what he wanted, so I looked intently at the fuzzy shapes he was pointing to on the box and took my best shot. Very triumphantly I said "Kleenex!" So what if they were Scotties Tissues. At least I knew what the object was.

I still screamed a lot. When I left the hospital I was given a parting lecture about how screaming was not going to be tolerated in rehab. I remember fingers being wagged and stern voices saying, "You can't do that anymore."

So wouldn't you know it, my very first night there I got woken up by a nurse. Bewildered as to why she was looking so concerned and quizzing me incessantly as to whether or not I was alright, I asked her what was going on. "You were screaming blue murder," she informed me. I was surprised to hear this. My screaming had always been a daytime activity.

I will never forget that incident because it speaks volumes. She had awoken me from dreaming. In my dream there was no surrounding chaos. There was me. Just me, crying out two words. "Help me!" In the dream the words were very clear and concise. In reality, there was a translation. There was one long, bloodcurdling scream that was loud enough to wake half the floor.

When adversity came crashing into my life, hope was at first frenzied and desperate. I wanted help, any kind of help that would make everything right again. Could I have one order of magic please?

Round two took place a couple of months later. I was lying on my bed when the neurologist who had foiled my Kleenex caper came in to check my progress. I knew he wasn't going to find much, and, he didn't. Steady improvement had slowed to a halt. No one had ever dared make any definite statements about prognosis, and now there was no need to. He knew, and so did I, that something was wrong. It didn't look good.

I remember clear as a bell looking right at him and posing one direct question. "Is there any reason to hope?" I asked. I wanted to know, because at that point I couldn't find one.

He was standing at the foot of my bed facing me. He didn't answer for what seemed like too long. He looked away from my eyes and placed his gaze somewhere upon the ceiling. Maybe he was asking for help, too. I think he might have looked at me again when he answered, but I don't remember. I was preoccupied with the fact that he wasn't going to say what I wanted him to say.

I heard the words he finally chose. I thought they went in one ear and out the other but obviously I was wrong. I have never forgotten them. "You always have to have hope," he said. I thought it was a nothing answer. Now I understand it was the only answer.

Eventually I went home from rehab, and I took his answer with me. When the crisis was over and my life began resettling into a new structure, hope became reminiscent and called back to the past to see what it could reclaim. I kept all my high heels because I wanted to wear them again. I told my mother not to sell my bike because I wanted to ride it again. My jogging shoes stayed in my closet for years because I wanted to do my run along the seawall again. I joined an organization that was searching for a cure for spinal cord injury. I listened to people who were involved in alternative healing therapies. I even tried some of what they had to offer. I did have hope. I hoped I would get what I wanted.

Round two went on for a long time.

I can't say when round three started. In a gradual process, round two transitioned into round three. During this time I gave all my shoes away. I saw my seized up old bike against the wall one day and asked my mother why she hadn't gotten rid of it. It quietly disappeared shortly thereafter. My crusty old jogging shoes had a long overdue appointment with the trashcan. Somewhere along the line I let my membership to the spinal cord group lapse. I still have an interest in the therapeutic benefits of alternative healing therapies but my curiosity about their miraculous curative power has become fleeting at best.

I finally recognized that for each thing let go, life had provided something new, not to replace what was gone, but to occupy the space it took. For each thing I wanted and didn't get, life had offered other choices. That was when I realized hope is not about wanting things to be my way. That was when I realized I'd been in the ring with myself all that time. That was when I took off my gloves.

Sometime during round two/three I reached a point where I'd let go of enough of the past that the present outsized it. In the vibrancy of the present moment, I was able to see hope in another form. Hope floats and waits to see where you will anchor it. The whole time I was in the ring with myself, it was floating everywhere in this arena called my life. That realization concluded round three. The fight was over.

Life scatters seeds of hope continuously. These are the sparks that ignite the brilliance of the human heart and mind. Every idea, every inspiration, every innovation that contributes in a spirit of genuine goodwill to the betterment of our world is a hope seedling. Hope is not just about wanting something. It is about giving something. It is about creating.

Hope is a living thing. It roots in the heart and is fertilized by the mind. It may appear to fade away when the sad heart darkens the mind. Hope grows in the light of love, compassion and care. It thrives in warmth. It is never false. It never dies.

Hope, I've learned, is so much bigger than wanting to walk around in high heel shoes.

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