

One of Life's Great Lessons By Joyce Leonard

I have always considered myself to be a physically strong person – our whole family believes this way. “Good German stock”, we would call ourselves. Growing up, anytime any of us were sick, we were called “sicky” in a teasing manner. It felt like a shunning, and I soon associated being sick with being weak. And being weak was not a positive attribute in our family.

Throughout my life, I have rarely been sick. Oh, I got my once-yearly cold, but not the flu, and never strep throat or bronchitis. I don't have any allergies, don't take any medications, rarely have infections of any kind. I've never been hospitalized, except to have my tonsils out when I was young, and I've never broken a bone. I didn't even have acne! I was, indeed, physically strong.

Ten days before my 50th birthday, I came down with Rheumatoid Arthritis. 85% of my joints were affected. My Rheumatologist said he had never seen someone so impacted with RA. The most I could hope to do on any given day was to take a shower and get dressed. Every movement brought pain and frustration. For several months, no medication alleviated the swelling and pain. I had to (gasp) rely on my husband for just about everything. Housework, grocery shopping, errand running, cooking—even making the bed—were too much for me.

The most frustrating part was when my husband had to bail me out when I overdid things. Like the time I hosted a luncheon for my birthday and he had to cook the entire meal—I couldn't even stir the batter for the cake. Or the time I insisted on walking around Stowe Lake in San Francisco and he had to run back and get the car to pick me up when the pain was too great for me to take another step. Once we visited a friend a few hours away by car. I slept the entire drive there, had to take a nap an hour or so after we arrived, then slept the entire way home. I had never been so...*weak*.

Ten months later, my symptoms were completely gone, thanks to the miracles of modern medicine, and I was actively working on getting my strength and endurance back. My days were spent trimming bushes, clearing brush, raking leaves, and mulching. I would come into the house hot, sweaty, and exhausted. It all felt so good. Each day I could do just a bit more. I was reclaiming my status as a physically strong person.

I came down with shingles three months later. There is strong evidence that shingles are brought on by emotional or physical stress and a compromised immune

system. My RA medicine was certainly suppressing my immune system and, yes, I was pushing my body—wasn't that what I was supposed to do now that I was feeling so much better? So here I was again, faced with not being able to use my strong body. Physical activity, to the point of sweating, worsened the pain of shingles, and it was summertime, where just being outside would cause me to perspire.

That's when the anger came. If I can't depend on my body for a little (laugh) yard work, then what good is it? How can I do all the things I want to do in my lifetime if I don't have a strong body? Who will I become? I watch my elders as they age. They used to be able to do everything, and now their legs are weak and their balance shaky. They go to bed early and rise late. They don't want to do as much or go anywhere. I saw myself starting to disrespect them – why aren't they pushing their bodies? Why aren't they trying to slow down the aging process? I began to wonder who they were, now that their bodies were weak.

And then it hit me. All my life, I have pinned my successes on my body—I have used its strength and endurance to propel me forward in many aspects of my life. Because I could push my body when it was tired to make it stronger, I had the confidence to push my mind to learn new things, to push my shyness to interact with strangers, to push my spirit to be more compassionate. My body was the impetus for me to go above and beyond what I thought I was capable of in life.

Now my body has an incurable disease that I cannot seem to overcome. Thankfully, I have finally accepted this. It has only been in this acceptance that I have noticed that it has not been my physical strength that has been propelling me all these years. Rather, it is my spirit—my love of life, my passion for growth and learning, my love of connection, my compassion, my love of love. My body may have launched me on this journey, but it is my spirit that has been and will continue to be my catalyst for the rest of my days.

I think that is the blessing and lesson of chronic diseases and of growing old. When our bodies weaken, it is an opportunity to re-look at how we see ourselves and others. When I put my own fears about aging aside, I can clearly see the spirit of my elders. The physicality of the person is diminishing while their essence is shining brighter. As my own body starts to weaken by illness and age, embracing my true essence and spirit is becoming one of the great lessons of my life.