

Jordan Simons

“I Still Dream of Running.”

Interviewer: Jordan Simons (JS)

Interviewee: Maureen Simons (MS)

I am interviewing my mother, Maureen Simons. She has Hemochromatosis, a disease that causes an abnormally large amount of iron in the blood. The excess iron accumulates in the patient's organs, which can severely damage them. In my mother's case, Hemochromatosis caused her need for two hip replacements, which occurred on separate occasions.

JS- What 'crisis event' triggered your crisis of meaning?

MS- I would not say it was a particular event. I believe it was the gradual loss of my motor skills, the intense pain I suffered before my hip operations, and the general changes that caused in my life. The crisis for me has been a loss of independence, in a lot of little ways.

JS- Could you talk more about your loss of independence, and what that means to you?

MS- I prided myself on being independent, and rarely needing other people to help me. I did not need people like I do now. I often used to run and jog, but that's gone now. It's been a slow and gradual process, but there was a point in my life when I realized I would never be the same because of my illness, and it was something I had to adapt to.

JS- How did Hemochromatosis affect you physically and mentally?

MS- Physically, it attacked my bones and joints, and made me lose my teeth. Losing my teeth was a huge impact on my self-esteem. I was always known for my smile, but within six months my smile was gone. I had one hip replaced, and the constant pain before that sucked the life out of me. Everyday things, I could no longer do. I had a lot of guilt, as my ten year old son had to assume a lot of household responsibilities that I was no longer capable of. There was a lot of guilt, and there still is.

JS- Could you tell me more about these feelings?

MS- It changed who I was, and I felt helpless. When my other hip's health started deteriorating, I knew what I was in for. Before my very eyes, my body was breaking down. I'm young, in the grand scheme of things, and I never imagined I'd have to go through something like this. Things I couldn't do, and wanted to do, haunted me. I've had a constant feeling of letting my son down and I feel withdrawn from my own life.

When I was diagnosed, and knew I needed the second hip done. That was the same time my teeth began to fall out, and I knew my body was severely damaged. The psychological damage stems from things I knew I could not do anymore. I still dream of running, but that is just not a reality anymore. I was so used to being in charge and independent, the hardest part was losing that feeling. Asking others for help was one of the most difficult things for me to do.

JS- What effects did your illness and need of surgery have on you, and how did you cope with them?

MS- The biggest effect was the fear of surgery, and how long recovery would be. The most profound effects have been on me psychologically. Physically, I feel better, but knowing that I will live my life in constant pain depresses me, though I'm used to it. After my second surgery I fell into a serious depression, and my mental state today is still not what it used to be. The hardest thing was knowing that I had no control over anything; that loss of control took over my thinking.

JS- Could you talk a bit more about those feelings of uncertainty?

MS- I still have those feelings, I am still waiting to go into more surgery and that frightens me. The fact that I may never be pain free is still difficult to cope with. I'm scared to think about what my condition will be in 20 or 30 years. Though I have gotten much better, I am still searching for answers and need to find a way that I can live my life in the independent way I want to.

JS- What were your thoughts while waiting for a prolonged time to get the help you needed?

MS- Fear, depression, and hope simultaneously flooded into me. I hoped that after my surgery I would be back to my old self, yet feared I wouldn't be. Additionally, I felt some sentiments of acceptance that I will never be completely the same. I am trying to find the middle ground between my old self and my current self that I can live with.

JS- How long were you facing the peak of the effects from your illness and surgeries? What were they like?

MS- I think the lowest point was five years ago, when the illness majorly affected my heart. This gave me several physical complications, including a stroke. I went from being healthy as a horse, to suddenly being on six bottles of pills. It all happened shortly after my diagnosis. This period of shock lasted for about two years, and then I had my first surgery. After that, I felt like I was finally doing something towards recovery. The first two years were the shock of depression. Eventually I begrudgingly accepted my situation and began my long-term search for answers.

JS- What were the social and financial effects this had on you? How did this change your way of thinking?

MS- Socially, it stopped me from doing a lot of the things I used to do, like going out. I kept my close circle of friends, but I lost everyone beyond that. Financially, this devastated and bankrupted me. I have not recovered financially, and I don't know if I ever will. This ties back to independence, because I feel like I have lost financial stability in my life. I am tired, in that regard.

JS- What did you do to get through this? What aided in your recovery from this crisis?

MS- What aided me was my friends, family, and son. Especially my son. You find out who the people are that really care about you, and I realized that not everyone does. I learned who I can

lean on. Material things did not mean as much anymore, but I realized how much my closest friends helped me. I knew that I could count on all of you, and that is what has gotten me through everything. The good to come out of it is that I realized I have people that care about me whom I can trust, and I cherish that. I have learned that it is okay to depend on people, and the help from my friends is what really has gotten me through everything.

JS- What was recovering from your most recent major surgery like?

MS- It was more depressing than the first, because my body was still in a lot of pain that I thought I would be rid of. Now I am reaching a point in my life where I feel I am searching for a way I can meaningfully live. I am now trying to find a living that is not active; I need to do something less physical than being a waitress. Everything is changing, but I am accepting of that change.

JS- What point do you feel marked the beginning of your recovery from this crisis? Could you describe that process?

MS- The first point was going back to work on my own terms, and the realization I am still capable of doing so. I began accepting that I do have to change some aspects about my life, but was no longer terrified by that. Looking for answers has brought acceptance with the search of what the next chapter in my life will be. I now feel at peace with relinquishing some control in my life, and that's okay.

JS- How do you feel you have changed mentally after experiencing this crisis of meaning? What do you feel about yourself is different from how you were before?

MS- I feel that I accept myself more than ever, and I feel that I have learned acceptance for things outside of my control, such as aging. I have accepted that this is who I am. I know that I'm not perfect, but I have grown to like myself. The hardest part was the quickness in which I went from young, beautiful, and strong, to older, dependent, and sickly. I realized that even with my imperfections I am still worthy as a person as I ever was, if not more so. I feel very grateful for my family and close friends. Needing to depend on these people made me realize how lucky I am to have them. Though this period in my life was terrible, I have grown to appreciate several things I once took for granted. I never knew how strong I was.

Comments:

JS- Hearing my mothers' feelings on her recent experiences gave me an opportunity to further understand her, for which I am grateful. Some of Maureen's ways of thinking connect to different philosophies. Though Maureen is not free of physical or mental pain, she has come to terms with its presence in her life. This connects with the Buddhist idea that "although there is suffering in life, a Buddhist should not be gloomy over it, should not be angry or impatient at it" (Rahula, 28). Maureen has accepted the suffering in her life, but also views the positive aspects that have come from it. Her life is not endless suffering, and she has gone from

detesting the loss of control in her life to accepting the changes in her life that stem from her illness. Her situation and overall life has improved, paving a bright and happier future. The first noble truth in Buddhism is that life is both suffering and pain. However, this idea of inevitable suffering does not deny the happiness in the world. Maureen has grown to accept the suffering stemming from her illness, and focuses on her search for answers. While coming to terms and coping with her inevitable suffering, Maureen also recognizes the happiness in her life. Buddhism is practical; it focuses on the state of things and the cure. Maureen recognizes the state of her life because of her illness, and looks for a “cure” through her search for a way of life she feels is meaningful.

While Maureen’s outlook on her suffering connects with Buddhism, her ideas about friendship reflect Humanist philosophies. The Humanists believe that true friendship is extremely important and that “loving friendship is able to endure everything: it refuses no burden” (Petrarca). Though Maureen did lose several acquaintances, her true friends stayed with her throughout her illness. The loving friendship Maureen shares with her closest friends is able to endure the impact her illness has on her life. Maureen also came to appreciate the friendships she has after she accepted her need to rely on others. This appreciation connects with the importance Humanism places on friendship. Though completely unintentionally, Maureen’s way of thinking on certain subjects resonate with diverse philosophies.