

Driving My MS



In early 2009, I decided to buy a new car.

The previous few years had been a whirlwind of events, including the birth of our first child, big career changes, finishing grad school - all sandwiched in with being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

I didn't necessarily consider the car purchase a reward. My previous one was ten years old and becoming unreliable... it was time.

So, in February of that year, I traded in my old ride for a new one.

For over 20 years I'd been driving daily. The long treks to and from college, navigating around Northern Virginia traffic, road trips and then the more genial experience of tooling around San Antonio.

I never saw an abrupt lifestyle change coming down the road.

The stress and fast-pace of my job was contributing to relapses and subsequently more doctor appointments. To ease the burden, I started to regularly work from home three days a week.

On the weekends, most of the driving was now done by my wife.

Within a year, I was no longer working, so the only time I was in my car was driving to a doctor's appointment, or when I ran the seldom errand.

My "new" car began to sit idle in our driveway. As of today, nine years later, it has only

24,000 miles on it.

To put that into perspective, the average car mileage in the U.S. is 14,000 miles **per year**.

So, it was a surprise when one day, it wouldn't start. I called roadside assistance, they came out to jump start my car and I went and had the battery replaced.

About a week went by, I got into my car... and again, it wouldn't start!!

I was stunned.

Again, I called roadside assistance, but this time, I had it towed to the dealer to see what was wrong with it. They called me back to let me know that all their diagnostics came back ok. But what he said next caused me to chuckle with embarrassment.

"Your car... it needs to be driven **more**."

And, with that, the mystery was solved.

Some cars endure so much mileage they quite literally get run into the ground. For mine, the situation was reversed; it was dying a slow death from rarely being used. Basically, **if you don't use it, you lose it**.

My automobile experience, while frustrating and bizarre was also a reflection of the dramatic impact MS has made on my life.

Having my car break down is one thing; but I fear the same happening to my body.

I've already had body parts stop working on me. Optic neuritis caused a myriad of vision problems, some of which have never fully left. Another previous exacerbation makes it difficult to fully grip things with my left hand and anything I touch feels very rough, like it's covered in sand paper.

On most days, my left foot drags behind me, trying to keep up on even a short stroll down the street.

If you don't use it, you'll lose it.

So, I try to stay as active as I can but it's not always easy.

The summer heat is brutal, so walking needs to be done before sunrise and after sunset. Outdoor trips must always include plenty of cold water, cool clothes and many breaks in the shade. The fatigue from MS relegates my default mode to **off**.

And it's not just a physical struggle, it's also mental, too.

If you don't use it, you'll lose it.

There are no more meetings, presentations to give or conferences to attend. The endless hours spent preparing for these events has been a relief... but it's also left a void.

I now worry about cognitive impairment, or "brain fog," from MS. I've already experienced lapses of memory, inability to focus and other cognitive issues associated with the "fog."

As a result, I "work out" my brain regularly by reading, doing jigsaw puzzles and am always looking for other ways to challenge my mind.

Does any of this make a difference? Will I avoid another relapse or slow the progression of my MS?

The answer is... I don't know. But I'm hopeful.

If you don't use it, you'll lose it.

As I watched my car towed away, I realized I couldn't let what happened to my dormant ride happen to me.

I need to keep revving my body and mind, resting and refueling with energy, avoiding the potholes of life and MS, as I continue along my beautiful journey of a life less traveled.