

Five Things



About nine years ago, I was in a meeting at work and the executive in charge declared:

“Five things. I can only remember five things at one time.”

He said it with a smile, but I understood the larger theme that he was communicating – keep the presentations brief and our recommendations/solutions as clear and concise as possible.

Five things. His words still echo in my thoughts today but for vastly different reasons than what he had originally intended.

I’ve written a lot about the impacts multiple sclerosis has on my physical health. Impaired vision. Extreme fatigue. The shooting pains, constant tingling sensations and limits on my mobility.

But the fall-out from MS stretches beyond just the physical – it also touches upon the mental.

To be clear, this isn’t about having a brain lapse here and there (as getting “older” tends to do).

It’s about going from rivaling Lewis & Clark in my sense of direction, and being told repeatedly by friends that I should have my own show on ESPN showcasing my sports trivia knowledge, to not being able to even remember where I was sitting in a restaurant.

Yep, that happened. Numerous times, actually.

While enjoying a nice meal with my wife, I make a quick trip to the rest room. As I exit the bathroom to head back to our table, my mind goes blank.

I try to focus on landmarks, people, anything that might give a clue to where I was sitting. Near the entrance? The bar? A cold sweat forms. I start imagining everyone is looking... staring... laughing, **this guy can't remember where he was sitting!**

It hasn't happened in a while, but on a few occasions I've actually called my wife and she's helped navigate me back to our table.

In the car, I probably drive her crazy as my mind routinely short circuits trying to remember how to find places that we regularly visit, like a grocery store or a friend's house. Her concern is apparent when she routinely asks, "Do you know where you are?"

Recently, I met a good friend for lunch. It was a destination we used to frequent when we worked together. I arrived early and was stunned that the restaurant was no longer in business and had been replaced by a new one!

I texted my friend the news and he immediately called me - **there is no way the restaurant is closed down, Mike...I'm parked in front of it right now.** The cold sweat started to form again, a nervous feeling overtook my body as I wondered, **where am I?**

I eventually found the restaurant (with the help of Google Maps) but in the process was reminded once again of how expansive the reach of MS can be.

The "brain fog" that MS causes didn't happen overnight. It has been a slow and, at times, painful process. The fog impacts more than just my sense of direction... and I've adapted the best that I can.

When I worked, I blind-copied myself on every email. Every. Single. Email. My co-workers, unaware of my mental struggles, were often surprised that I had a seemingly endless database of our communiques; inadvertently, I was presenting myself as focused and meticulous. **Lemon, meet lemonade!**

I haven't been as lucky in other parts of my life.

I've failed repeatedly to return calls or reply to emails from family and friends. Even as my home office is littered with sticky notes and electronic reminders, I struggle to maintain these communications that are so important to me.

Often, I have a difficult time finding the right words to say. For example, I know a dog is called a dog but I'll probably stumble and bumble my way through describing how the dog looks or how fast it was running.

While conversing with others, I'll forget the story I'm telling while I'm in the process of telling

it... as a result, I've probably told the same story or anecdote to the same person on several occasions (if I have, my apologies!)

I worry that I come across as aloof, uncaring or worse, not a true friend.

Before meeting up with others, I'll frequently ask my wife to remind me of certain particulars: names of children, any important recent news - **those five things** - except, I'm not living the hectic life of an executive that has thousands of employees and meets with hundreds of people each day. When they request brevity for the sake of efficiency (and their sanity,) you can understand why.

Me? I'm just a guy with MS that sometimes can't even remember the name of some of his closest friends.

I'm not backing down from the challenge of the MS "brain fog." I'm routinely working on puzzles or playing games that help stimulate my mind.

I constantly use the aforementioned reminders and my wife serves as my teammate and biggest cheerleader.

And I always go back to the mantra of **Five Things**. For me, it's more of a mindset than a policy.

Life is too precious to worry about things you can't control. Sometimes, while stressing over the minor potholes that life throws our way, we lose sight of the **five things** that truly should matter. What are those **five things** for you?