

Silver Linings



“These lesions here and here pretty much confirm the diagnosis of MS,” the neuroradiologist said, pointing to fuzzy white spots on my MRI.

I stood there in the dark room, staring at the MRI films. I didn’t know how to read an MRI, but I could see the spots he was talking about. I couldn’t believe it. Maybe these weren’t my MRI films. Maybe the machine was broken. He had to be wrong. He had made a mistake.

But, of course, he wasn’t wrong. And in the weeks after my MRI, back in 2009, my diagnosis was verified with a spinal tap and consultation with an MS specialist. I had constant dizziness, intermittent double vision and taste changes. Worst of all, I faced a sense of dread that nothing would ever be the same. My future had been stolen.

I couldn’t imagine at the time—and even for many years after—that anything good could come from this terrible diagnosis. And I still wish I didn’t have to live with a weird chronic disease that burdens me with an extra big dose of uncertainty.

But I’ve also learned to look for the silver linings. At the time of my diagnosis, I was enormously grateful for the friends and family who reached out with offers of help, meals, cards and well-wishes. I felt a sense of connection and support I never would have experienced without MS. In the years since, I have been humbled by the calls and emails from some of those same people sharing their own health challenges, or linking me with friends who have been diagnosed with MS. I’ve met and befriended dozens of other MS Warriors, including many through my involvement with the National MS Society.

MS has been my teacher, and I like to think I'm wiser for it. It's taught me humility but also resilience. It's helped me prioritize with a sharper focus. It's helped me be a more compassionate physician.

I now look for the bright-side—sometimes well-hidden—with all sorts of more minor events that at first seem unlucky. The departure of a valued colleague led me to hire a talented person to replace her with fresh ideas and a different skill set. A series of rejections of my book proposal prompted me to seek out and find the editor of my dreams.

Even some aspects of the coronavirus pandemic have been welcome: more time at home with my teenage daughters, less travel for meetings that can now be accomplished on Zoom, formation of a walking group with friends I rarely saw before COVID-19. The little bit of good often doesn't outweigh the bad, but recognizing it can help us move on from a loss or setback.

A diagnosis of any serious illness is life changing. In the first several months after my diagnosis, I never thought I would recover. I struggled to think about anything else, to feel any joy. But even though I still face MS symptoms, treatment challenges, and the possibility of relapses and disability, MS no longer occupies my every thought—far from it. And when something else happens that throws me off-track, I can look back to that experience with MS and know that I am stronger because of it and can tackle the latest disappointment.