

# Claiming victory



## Knowing what you are not.

by Cat Stappas



Photo courtesy of Cat Stappas

One of the things I enjoy most about blogging is the interaction with my readers—the exchange of information, experiences and encouragement, along with the reassurance that I am not alone.

It's a two-way street. When I write, no matter the subject, I am always sure to work in a positive spin, not just because I'm writing for an audience, but because I'm often also writing

for myself, to myself.

I'm often told by friends and strangers alike, "Cat, you're so strong." They call me courageous. Brave. But no one has explained to me what it is specifically that makes me appear strong.

People tell me they admire my resilience and my ability to stay optimistic. Are they referring to the self-deprecating jokes I crack about the state of my physical body? Because those do not come from a place of confidence and strength. Quite the opposite, actually.

I make the jokes first, to beat you to them.

Like the fluid ways and timelines in which our symptoms manifest, the way I view myself changes from day to day. Lately—especially after being diagnosed with osteoporosis at 33 and learning that my multiple sclerosis is still not responding well to treatment—when I look at my reflection in the mirror, it almost feels like I'm having an out-of-body experience, looking at someone else. Someone who is not me.



**Cat Stappas performs American tribal belly dancing, which helps her gain confidence and improve her balance.** Photo by Justin Hernandez

I see someone who is broken. Old. Frail. Fragile. Weak. Ugly. Afraid. Lonely.

Now, it is absolutely normal, natural and OK to go through dark periods. It's my right as a human being. But there's a lesson in everything, especially in these times of heightened

distress.

These past few years have been an evolution.

In the beginning, I was convinced I could reverse the disease with positive thinking, and when that wasn't happening, I shut down for a while and I allowed myself to actually become MS: toxic and self-attacking.

A wonderful integrative doctor pointed this out to me, the way my behavior was mimicking the actual disease. And then something changed. I realized that admitting I have MS is not the same as admitting defeat.

I realized that I had the power to make this a victory.

No one awarded me that power and no one can take that power away. I had it all along. All I had to do to harness the power was to decide to let go of what I can't control. Instead of hiding from my fears, I immersed myself in them. I learned as much about the disease as I could. I started a blog in hopes that other people like me might stumble across it on their darkest day and maybe receive a message they needed to hear in that moment.

Now a couple years later, a simple Google search shows that my name is forever synonymous with MS. I never expected to become as involved in the MS community as I have, and it has been proven persistently to be a very real risk to do so—to my relationships and, most of all, to my livelihood.



**Cat Stappas shoots video for her blog at last year's Walk MS event in Milwaukee. (See Walk MS video below).** Photo courtesy of Cat Stappas

People are quick to judge and many times assume I'm a liability or useless. I don't see myself that way or as "disabled," in the literal sense of the word. I do, however, recognize the hurdles in front of me, so maybe "disadvantaged" is a better term. But my hope is if people see how open and vulnerable I make myself, how much I accept this part of my life, others will be more accepting as well. I want people, whether they are disabled or not, to know that Cat Stappas is not MS, but that MS is part of my life. And that's OK. I can handle it. I do not allow it to control me.

And isn't that what a warrior does? Doesn't a warrior know what he or she is up against and charge into battle anyway, without knowing the outcome, all in the name of helping other people?

So I guess the reality is that I am strong, despite waking up every day not knowing what will come next, but being very much aware of what could come next.

I show up.

I am strong. I am a dancer. I am a writer. An advocate. Fierce friend. Lover of animals. Wife, daughter, sister, stepmother. An activist.

But I am not MS.

**Cat Stappas, who was diagnosed with MS in 2013, lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She writes about her experiences in her blog, "It's Only a Bruise," as well as at the Society's [MSconnection.org/blog](https://www.msconnection.org/blog) and other online MS resources. She's active on the It's Only a Bruise Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. She hopes to make the dark corners of the internet a little less scary for both the newly and the longtime diagnosed with some honesty, positivity and a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor.**

See more at Cat Stappas' blog, [It's Only A Bruise](#).