

MS at dusk



A poet's perspective after decades with the disease and a fruitful career



Cynthia Huntington

When Cynthia Huntington started having sudden muscle stiffness on the right side of her body at 35, she knew even before her doctor confirmed it that, like her mother, she had multiple sclerosis. And even though her adolescence in western Pennsylvania had been marked by her mom's MS, Huntington refused to consider her own diagnosis a disaster.

"I wasn't afraid of it," she says. She knew her life would change, but also believed that she would be mostly fine. Medical understanding of the disease had come a long way since it evoked images of people who were bedridden.

Now at a turning point, Huntington, 72, an award-winning poet, is philosophical and even humorous as she looks back at the effects of MS on her quality of life and her career of almost four decades as an English professor. She's enthusiastic about her two new books and her retirement from Dartmouth. A COVID romance brings her new joy, her daily walks in the woods of Vermont inspire her and the freedom and insight of her later years grant her peace.

"I'd rather not have to deal with it," she says of her MS. "But, you know, my best friend has Parkinson's. My other best friend just lost her husband. I'm feeling like it's just another one of those damned things. I could not begin to tell myself what my life would have been like if I hadn't had it. I've had it for over 36 years. So, it's just a fact of life, you know? It seems like everybody's got something."

Huntington has relapsing-remitting MS, which among other symptoms causes her pain and fatigue, but hasn't been active in the past decade. Early in her career, when her diagnosis was recent and she was particularly curious about her experience with the disease, she wrote poems about it in "The Radiant." Her writing now focuses on her current stage in life.

A Guggenheim Award winner, former New Hampshire poet laureate and National Book Award finalist for "Heavenly Bodies," Huntington is the author of several other books of poetry and prose. Her works include "The Salt House," a memoir of the idyllic summers she spent as a young woman with her new husband, an artist, in a remote Cape Cod shack before her MS diagnosis as well as a follow-up, "Fire Muse."

Last fall, she returned to the classroom after a break to teach two classes to Ivy League students she describes as sweet and brilliant, though stressed out. For her, the experience was both gratifying and hard. Along the way, she decided it was time to quit. But the choice didn't come without qualms.

In fact, one day last fall, after having coffee with a student, she started to rethink her decision to retire.

" 'Oh, Cynthia, you don't have to stay retired. You could do a course here and there,' " she told herself as she walked in downtown Hanover, New Hampshire. "I knew it was wrong. And then there's this store going out of business on the corner, with big letters in red on three different windows saying, 'It's time to retire.' You don't ignore a signal like that, right?"

Bittersweet times

Huntington first noticed changes in the right side of her body and her vision soon after giving birth to her son. It was 1986 and she had just started a rewarding teaching stint at the University of California at Irvine.

"It was hard because I had a brand-new job in a brand-new place with a brand-new baby," she says. "It was a time when I wanted to be at my best and when so many good things were happening. I did a lot of pretending in those first two years because I was new and trying to

act like I felt better than I did.”

At a particularly vulnerable time in her life, she had periods when she tired easily and noticed on her right side the effects of her brain lesions: pins and needles on her arm or numbness and weakness in her leg. Then came remissions, when she says she’d wipe out all thinking about MS, perhaps out of denial.

“My problem became not monitoring myself well enough,” she says. “It’s hard to balance. You don’t want to live your whole life thinking every time you get a twitch, you need to go to the doctor. But also, you don’t want to ignore things and make it worse.”

She describes her teaching years in California and later in New Hampshire as privileged, given the many advantages her profession offered: She had summers off, and during the school year, she could do a lot of work, like preparing for class and grading, on her own schedule and alone.

Showtime

But the effects of the disease, she says, sometimes showed up as she stood in front of the classroom struggling to find words. During the pauses, her students probably thought that she was absentminded or was having a brilliant idea that she wouldn’t share, she adds. “You get away with so much as an English professor.”

Her MS was also evident at times when she would write the wrong words. For instance, “cat” would come out as “velocity.”

Fatigue also got in the way. “If I’d had a 9-to-5 job, I probably wouldn’t have been able to hold it just because my energy was so erratic,” she says.

But she taught, published, and raised her son, all while getting recognized nationally for her work.

By the time she was 50, Huntington says, she was the healthiest one in her circle of friends, an ironic twist in which she takes no pleasure.

“I was as sick as I’d ever been, but other people around me were starting to get the things that people get,” she says. “I stayed at kind of the same place.”

Two decades later, she realized she’d lived longer than her parents and felt that she was “good to go.”

But age has begun to show up in mental workarounds that no longer work, the need for a hearing aid and sharp headaches that wear her out and make her grumpy. And Vermont summers, despite being temperate, bring her more pain and fatigue.

“As my most recent neurologist said, ‘The disease is no longer progressing. The problem is

you're deteriorating,' " she says with a smile.

Last hurrah

Huntington says her last semester at Dartmouth went well, with plenty of moments in which she felt a satisfying connection with her students. But it was taxing.

"I wasn't crotchety yet, but I could feel it coming," she says.

She noticed the age gap between her students had become more obvious.

"They thought I was adorable," she says. "This ancient woman comes toddling in and still says smart things. I would say something fairly insightful, I'd think, and they'd look at each other like, 'She's cool!,' as I'd never got before. I do think it had to do with being older than their grandmother."

Time for herself

"I think it's always best to quit before you start messing up, right?" says Huntington, who finds retirement rewarding. Now divorced, she lives next door to her brother and his wife in rural Vermont.

In addition to lifting weights and practicing yoga when she's in the mood, she walks in the woods a couple of miles every morning with her dog Roscoe, whom she calls her "personal trainer." To feed her writing, she carries a notebook with her during her hikes and tries to leave a lot of space in her days for thought, inspiration and reading.

"I'll get a hold of something and I'll be obsessed with it," she says. "And then I have periods of time when everything's just on the back burner."

Huntington recently completed "Civil Twilight," a poetry book named after the time of the day when it's not quite dark yet and you can still make out objects. She's also been working on "Ocean of Dark: Night, Sleep, Dream, Death and the Darkness of Space," which includes poems and prose.

She enjoys traveling and a new relationship with a former colleague, a friend of over 30 years with whom she spoke often on the phone during the pandemic.

She wishes she could see her son, Sam, a stand-up comedian in Taiwan, more often, but overall, she says, she's content.

"I don't have any quibbles with my life," she says. "I wouldn't change it now, even when I look at the things that were terrible. I look back like it is a story and 'Oh, that was a bad chapter, fine.' I might be in just super, super, super denial. If so, I recommend it."

Learn more about "[MS through the Ages](#)."

Multiple Sclerosis, a poem by Cynthia Huntington

For ten years I would not say the name.

I said: episode. Said: setback, incident,

exacerbation—anything but be specific

in the way this is specific, not a theory

or description, but a diagnosis.

I said: muscle, weakness, numbness, fatigue.

I said vertigo, neuritis, lesion, spasm.

Remission. Progression. Recurrence. Deficit.

But the name, the ugly sound of it, I refused.

There are two words. The last one means: scarring.

It means what grows hard, and cannot be repaired.

The first one means: repeating, or myriad,

consisting of many parts, increasing in number,

happening over and over, without end.

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