

Self-portrait of life with MS



Patricia Lay-Dorsey shares part of her moving series of photos that dig deep into the realities of living with a disability.

Patricia Lay-Dorsey was diagnosed in 1988 with primary-progressive multiple sclerosis. Twenty years later, Lay-Dorsey began taking daily self-portraits with the intention of showing, from the inside, the day-to-day life of a person with a disability. Now, her collection of photographs is available as a book, **Falling into Place**, published by Ffotogallery in Cardiff, Wales. The award-winning project has had solo exhibits at the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester, Mass., Fovea Exhibitions in Beacon, N.Y., and Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Mich.

In addition, to documenting what everyday life with MS looks like, Lay-Dorsey wanted to break away from the way people with disabilities are frequently portrayed. "All too often, non-disabled photographers fall into the trap of presenting their subjects as brave, pitiable or some mix of the two. As a woman living with a disability, I know I am neither brave nor pitiable; I am simply doing my best to live a full life with the hand I have been dealt," she says.

Early in her photographic journey, Lay-Dorsey began to intimately examine her body. It was then that she realized that it was easier for her to show her naked body than to show the reality of what she deals with day to day—moments when she struggles to open a container, or drops an item on the floor. “I particularly dislike being seen when I fall,” she says.

“The challenge is that when I look closely at every moment of my day, the emotional defenses I have built up over the years are stripped away. Feelings of vulnerability and shame surprise me with their ferocity.”

Lay-Dorsey says that even though her work may benefit others, she recognizes the value it brought to her as well. “Taking these self-portraits has helped me see my body for what it is: a warrior, an ally, my best friend. ... Sure, I have to respect its needs and limitations, but in return it gives me the freedom to be myself, my true self. What more can I ask?”

Though Lay-Dorsey began her career as a social worker, armed with a master’s degree from Smith College for Social Work, she later studied fine art at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, and her book brings these two interests together, while documenting her life with MS along the way. Book ordering information can be found on Lay-Dorsey’s website, patricialaydorsey.com. It is also available at the International Center of Photography bookstore in New York City and on Amazon.com.



*Parts of this article have been excerpted from **Visura Magazine**, July 2011.

We want to hear your unique viewpoint on MS. Submit your story or work to editor@nmss.org.

View more works by Lay-Dorsey at patricialaydorsey.com.