How I learned that swearing can be good for the soul

by Elizabeth Jameson

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I was once a cautious curser, but living with multiple sclerosis taught me that it can be freeing to be foul-mouthed.

When I still had the use of my hands, I used to load up my paintbrush and hurl a glob of paint against my studio wall, as a way of releasing frustrations. I didn’t ask permission. I just did it.

When I lost the use of my hands — not to mention the rest of my body — because of the progression of multiple sclerosis, even that release was gone. Then one day, after I’d gone to work out at a rehabilitation center for people with spinal cord injuries, and was sitting and waiting for my caregiver to get the car, I stumbled upon another welcome release. One I could use even in my quadriplegic body: swearing.

Living with multiple sclerosis has meant that my life is perpetually governed and controlled by people who make decisions on my behalf. I desperately need these people, and I deeply appreciate them. But it’s still sometimes frustrating that I need someone else to do just about anything.

I cannot drive my own wheelchair or hold a cup of coffee.
I can’t scratch the itch on my nose or quench my thirst unless someone lifts a cup and straw to my mouth. I have to be fed by others, who don’t necessarily know to offer up the right thing at the right time. Words only go so far, and I don’t want to seem too difficult. If crumbs fall while I’m being fed, I’ll often just resign myself to the mess. Would it be nice if someone noticed and intervened? Sure. Is it worth having to make yet another dreaded ask? Probably not.

It has taken a long time, but I have found ways to use my voice beyond everyday requests and niceties: cursing with abandon.

Elizabeth Jameson

Some time ago, I was waiting for my ride at the rehabilitation center. A man I had seen a few times before rolled up in his wheelchair to wait alongside me. He genially asked my name, and I told him.

“Hi, I’m Ted,” he said. Then, with a huge grin, he added, “I don’t mean to offend you, but f—you, Elizabeth!”

To someone else it might have been unnerving. But the way Ted was smiling at me, it seemed less like an insult than an invitation — to play, perhaps? To be defiant? To not have to be on my best behavior, for once?

“Well, f—you too, Ted!” I beamed.

It was a deliverance from my overly controlled life. It was freedom, a fresh breath of air. That experience came back to me one day at Stanford University’s Medicine X, an academic medical conference I’ve attended for years as an advocate and patient. There I would often have lunch with people with all sorts of disabilities and compare insights. It was a community of problem solvers, and I regularly found joy in learning from and sharing with people of diverse disabilities and backgrounds. None of us complained about our lot in life. It was more like: “Oh you have diabetes? I can’t imagine what that is like. Tell me about it.”
My realization about the resonance — maybe even the healing effect — of wild profanity snuck up on me one day at the conference. We were going around the table talking about our lives when I exclaimed, “F— you!” to no one and everyone. (I said the word, of course. I just can’t repeat it in a family newspaper.) I don’t know why — it just came out of me. At first I was ashamed, a lingering product perhaps of my Catholic upbringing in Rochester, N.Y., back when my great aspiration was to become a nun and serve the poor. Instead I had become a public-interest lawyer, before my disease took that from me, and had allowed myself to cuss occasionally, but this was a real departure. Looking around the table, I was relieved to see that everyone was laughing and smiling. Other people even started chiming in.

The swearing wasn’t about our disabilities, exactly. It was bigger, less specific. It felt less like a rational response to anything and more like a kind of teenage defiance. As if we were all saying some variation of, “I may have cancer, but f— you,” to no one in particular. It felt good to say it. And it made us smile. It even made a lot of other people smile. What are you defying when you are a defiant teenager? Control. The control over your freedom and agency.

It became almost like a chorus we could all riff on — and we didn’t do it for just one lunch. We became casually known to other conference-goers as the “F— You Club.” And as one might imagine, it became very popular.

The Stanford conference reaffirmed my sense that finding relief in swearing was not just my own weird quirk, and reminded me that it can open doors to honest expression, particularly in difficult situations. A few months later, I was visiting my longtime friend Phil, who was nearing the end of his life after a difficult battle with cancer. Phil’s transformation from the last time I had seen him was shocking: He was pale and emaciated, with hollow cheeks and a gaping mouth that wouldn’t close. I had been in denial of his terminal cancer for a long time, but his appearance that day made me face reality.

As Phil sat in his chair, I couldn’t help but stare. I was trying not to cry when I told him, “I don’t want you to die.” He rolled his eyes at me, annoyed, and said, “I’m not dying right now, I’m living!”

Phil was a man who enjoyed living. He enjoyed it so much, he refused to wait for a funeral he couldn’t attend — his funeral — and instead threw himself a huge party before his cremation. “Roast me before they toast me,” he called it.

He was sick of people saying, “Oh Phil, I’m so sorry that you have cancer.” That kind of thing really bored and annoyed him. He didn’t want to be talked to that way. “Talk to me like that when I’m dead,” he would say.

But I, too, had a way I wanted to be talked to. I wanted a deep connection with my dear friend. I wanted Phil to discuss his feelings about approaching death. I had fantasized that we
would have a profound conversation about the meaning of life, but Phil was not interested in my expectations. His version of living involved humor, not gravitas.

I was desperate to talk about big things, but he wouldn’t budge. Without tears or pity, I blurted out, “Okay, well, f— you, Phil!” A giant smile transformed his face, and he exploded into laughter. “Thank you for saying that!” He seemed deeply relieved. “F— you too.”

Those words, both funny and intimate, satisfied both of us. Phil was still in the land of the living, his spirit and personality whole and present. If he had had the energy, I believe we would have volleyed cuss words back and forth for some time.

Through the simple act of swearing we celebrated life by breaking the rules of how one should act, especially when sick and preparing to die. We had an understanding.

A number of studies have shown that swearing in stressful circumstances can have positive physiological effects, such as increased tolerance to pain and improved stamina. I wonder now whether trading profanities could be used more widely and with therapeutic intention within the disabled community, and even beyond.

I’ve begun asking friends — particularly those living with disease or disability — what they think of embracing this kind of uncensored expression. While some can’t relate, others understand intuitively what it’s taken me decades of living with MS. to fully articulate: that words can pierce the suffocating social pressure, that they can blunt the pains of a difficult daily existence. For me, they are something to help ease my grief over a body that is failing me.

There is no instruction manual or guidebook to navigate this journey of living with illness and death. But I’ve found that it helps to occasionally rage at my broken body and the progression of my illness, while sharing a moment of exasperation with a friend.

I used to hurl paint at a wall, bright colors laced with my frustration and anger flying through the air. Now I simply hurl words of every flavor under the sun. Sometimes, on a good day, there’s someone to hurl them back. I particularly like the salty ones.

Elizabeth Jameson is an artist and writer who explores what it means to live in an imperfect body. In 2021 she created MS Confidential, a monthly web series about the chaos of daily life for people living with multiple sclerosis.