



A Whole New Life

On March 5, 2001 I was operated on for the removal of a very large frontal lobe bilateral meningioma tumor. At that time I was a wife, a mother to a 5 year old boy, Ian, and simultaneously developing 2 careers-teaching yoga/ meditation mind-body stress reduction techniques and producing and selling my sculptures. My husband, Phil, was a gifted, hardworking carpenter/contractor.

About a year before I had collapsed from an undiagnosed brain tumor. I had begun experiencing terrible headaches that were causing visual disturbances, coordination and balance problems. During the next year my symptoms worsened as I visited several doctors who failed to diagnose the source of my debilitating symptoms.

Finally one day I was unable to walk and began losing some vision. At the Emergency Room an attending physician ordered a CT scan. I then met my neurosurgeon who informed me that I had a very large frontal lobe bi-lateral meningioma brain tumor and I was immediately transferred to Maine Medical Center to prepare for emergency surgery within a few days. After studying the results of my MRI and cerebral angiogram my neurosurgeon informed me that the tumor was slightly bigger than a lemon and intersected a main artery in 3 locations. The surgery could be long and complicated.

In the precious little time I had to adjust to the diagnosis-possible death by one or more strokes in the surgery-and the knowledge that the structural and cognitive changes that would happen to my brain as a result of the surgery could be permanent. As I was facing the possibility of my own death, I was also thinking "what's it going to be like if I live? Isn't brain intelligence everything, what we rely on, what we know?" I settled my affairs in the event of my death and I made an assessment of my whole life. I decided I hadn't loved enough and I hadn't live to my fullest potential. I prayed that I be allowed to live, to get a second chance for a whole new life! Many people who knew me prayed for me.

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Early Recovery

The surgery was very successful. My neurosurgeon completed the surgery in five and a half hours instead of ten to twelve. My neurosurgeon removed as much of the non-malignant tumor as he could, stopping at the molecular level, not wanting to take out neural tissue and leave me partially paralyzed in the right leg.

However, nothing could have prepared me for the debilitation of brain recovery. I had turned into an adult baby overnight. I faced many physical and cognitive challenges. In the physical I had coordination/balance problems that were further complicated by seizures caused by a hematoma at the tumor site which left me unable to walk. It took three months to learn to walk on my own again. I had to learn how to coordinate my arms and hands to reach and grasp objects. In acute recovery there was the constant pain as the ear to ear incision and neural tissue healed, drug side effects, dizziness, sleeplessness, and fatigue to cope with. Attention deficit, short-term memory loss, speech and language difficulties, and impulse control were my cognitive challenges.

During these difficult days I had two heroes. When I thought, "Will I ever be able to pick up that piece of paper on the floor?"—I had Christopher Reeves to inspire me. As I struggled with the cognitive problems I had the fictitious character, Forrest Gump as my inspiration. He lived a life that was based on values we associate with the heart—he loved and cared about

himself and the people around him, and just did the best he could whatever the circumstances! The intelligence of love, care, appreciation, compassion and understanding for myself could help me heal. Although I didn't know to what degree I would recover, I did know that I wanted to live permanently in this state of awareness for the rest of my life, regardless of what kind of recovery I got.

My early recovery was done at home with my "team" of healthcare professionals- a physical therapist, occupational therapist and a nurse specialist - coming to my bedside. Two weeks after surgery I suffered from seizures which required me to take seizure medication for ten months. I chose to wean myself off of the medications with the approval, support and compassion of my neurosurgeon.

I learned about the value of receiving love and mercy from others. When my self-employed husband stopped working to care for me during my acute recovery, relatives donated their money and time. A local church community, who I did not know prior to my surgery, helped with therapy, errands, laundry and transportation. My son's school community provided food, rides and child care. I now value interdependence instead of independence!

I did not need chemo. For the benefit of my brain function, I don't drink alcohol, monitor my caffeine intake, eat a well balanced diet, drink lots of water and get adequate sleep. When I was strong enough I returned to a regular gentle yoga practice and lots of walking. With the benefit of rehabilitative care and the support of caring family, friends and community, I essentially realized I had to take my rehabilitation into my own hands.

Long Term Recovery

Since 1986, I have been involved with research & practice of mind/body stress reduction techniques to enhance the connection between the mind, body and spirit. After all those years of intensive study and practice of various types of meditation, breathing techniques and yoga, I learned that love is an intelligent force of creation in the universe and that it had a connection to our physical heart in some way.

In 1998 I attended a lecture by a well-known neuroscientist and educator, Joseph Chilton Pierce. He talked about some exciting research in stress reduction from the Institute of HeartMath regarding the role of the physical heart in balancing the nervous system and affecting brain function; and how the HeartMath folks had developed heart based stress reduction tools. Many

people in case studies were showing significant improvements in their health, well-being and quality of life. Although I was thrilled at the new possibility and direction this could take me in my practice and teaching, I realized that it was not the right time for me to pursue this further because of other commitments.

By the time I had collapsed from an undiagnosed brain tumor I had long forgotten the calling. During the spiritual illumination of acute recovery I realized my personal vocation was to help others learn to use their heart's energy to manage stress and bring care into their life.

In September (8 months into recovery) I returned to teaching part time and indirectly was guided to the work of HeartMath®. Ten months into recovery I began using techniques that are part of the HeartMath System — a comprehensive program that uses scientifically validated tools and technologies to prevent, manage and reverse the effects of stress.

Research conducted by the non-profit Institute of HeartMath [www.heartmath.org] has demonstrated that emotions are reflected in our heart rhythm patterns. These patterns are transmitted from the heart to the higher brain centers through a complex biological process and have profound effects on the way the brain processes information. Feelings like frustration and anxiety cause the heart rhythms to become disordered and irregular, which inhibits the higher brain centers, causing energy drains, insecurities, and glitches in our decision making functions.

Intentionally generated feelings of love, appreciation, on the other hand, progressively increase our ratio of access to clear and effective thinking, problem-solving, discernment, memory recall, emotional stability and an increased connection to our core values for quality of life.

The tools of the HeartMath System, use techniques that combine intentional heart focus, breath, and sustained positive feelings to create a balanced physiology that is referred to as 'heart coherence'.

By learning to send feelings of love and appreciation into my body while breathing through my heart, I was able to gain control of my physiology. I learned to produce more ordered and coherent (balanced) heart rhythms which reduces the nervous system chaos and facilitates brain function.

It was easy to practice and made me feel good right away. Anything that made me feel good that was non drug related was especially appealing to me. This had

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a positive effect on the ongoing physical and cognitive fatigue issues of recovery.

Revitalizing my nervous system and feeling calm, peaceful in the moment helped me to sustain my energy levels to perform daily activities. In my own healing process I strived to maintain gratitude for even the smallest baby steps in recovery and to build on them.

The HeartMath stress intervention tools proved to be highly effective when applied to my rehabilitation strategies! The first month into my heart tools practice I noticed cognitive improvement in my ability to stay focused and remember incoming information. Another wonderful benefit to me with this practice has been in the area of pain control. Within five months I was able to wean myself off pain medications.

Energy Management = Self Care

In living with a brain injury we only have so much energy to spend in our daily activities! It is most important that we replenish and not deplete our energy reserves,

Negative thoughts and feelings such as anger, resentment, frustration, and judgment, are energy deficits that inhibit the brain and immune system function. These emotions are normal and they're not bad feelings to have. Most people who have a chronic or significant health challenge experience all of these emotions. However, if left unmanaged these emotions can be debilitating and slow the healing process.

By learning how to engage the power of my heart I was able to freeze, or pause any negative state of my mind that would come up. This enabled me to step outside myself to see things more objectively. The tools that I learned from HeartMath helped me significantly. I developed the self-awareness to eavesdrop on my thoughts and feelings.

Thoughts like; I can't do this. This is hard. I'm not making progress. All of these thoughts and feelings have been shared by other brain injury survivors. It's a natural part of recovery. However, as I became more aware of the negative inner dialogue I realized these thoughts were actually draining me mentally and emotionally.

By learning to intentionally focus on a positive heart feeling such as care, love, compassion and appreciation was able to gain a, healthy, balanced, caring perspective and to act on it. For example when I feel tired I know it is because I'm healing. Instead of focusing on the frustration about having significantly less energy now than before my injury, I focus on feeling care. I try to treat myself with the same care I would give to someone else.

As I grew in self-awareness and ability to practice, I gained control over my cognitive issues: attention deficit, impulse control, and short term memory loss. I was learning to use a different kind of intelligence to help heal my brain and rebuild a whole new life.

My practice of the HeartMath tools also helped me cope emotionally and psychologically through the stages of brain recovery. I learned to release lingering feelings of grief, regret, self judgment, frustration and resentment. I've made peace with my past and my present brain injured condition.

My cognitive recovery has been most profound and successful. I have been able to stay off seizure and migraine meds. The main challenge I have now is with performance fatigue. It's important that I, every day, manage and renew my energy with my practices.

With affectionate humor, I think of my life as a Forrest Gump kind of life! Every day I tell myself, keep it simple. Brain recovery has been my greatest challenge and my greatest gift! I place no ceiling on my recovery. I have a much more rewarding and fulfilling life now than I did before my brain injury. ☆

Find out how the *POWER of Your Heart* can improve **clarity, emotional balance, learning, memory**, while reducing the pain associated with the stress of brain injury.

Scientifically validated heart based stress management

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