



**TURNING
TRAGEDY
INTO TRIUMPH**

METAHABILITATION: A CONTEMPORARY MODEL OF REHABILITATION

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STAGE THREE TREATMENTS: CONVENTIONAL AND COMPLEMENTARY

Connie was no stranger to sickness. In 1978, when she was only 32, she battled breast cancer and lost her breast. She spent almost 20 years as a social worker, working with individuals struggling and living with developmental and mental disabilities. And her husband John succumbed to multiple sclerosis, leaving her to raise their two children on her own.

The disease turned his body's immune cells against his own nervous system. Inflammation ate away at the protective sheaths around his nerve cells, and the signals that controlled everything from balance to bladder function slowed and eventually stopped. It was a gradual, horrible way to die. Connie was powerless to stop it, just as she was powerless to foresee the event that almost took her life in the blink of an eye.

John's family was rooted in Croatia, and after he died she wanted their son Matt to see it as their daughter Stacey had years before. It was the summer of 2004, and two weeks into the trip they decided to make a detour to the island of Hvar. They rented scooters to tour its coastline, and though she rode for hours, Connie kept saying that something in her vehicle's mechanics didn't feel right.

Rounding the corner, almost back to the rental place, she felt the scooter's engine rev out of control. The power surge sent her flying off the road, over a cliff.

Connie's helmet came off in the air, and she landed 40 feet down, on her head. Unconscious but alive, she had a split skull; most of her teeth were missing; her right eye was blown; and her jaw, hand, arms and ribs were broken. She was covered in blood and splinters of her own bones. Matt was the first to reach her side. With the help of family, some bystanders, and a makeshift stretcher they carried her body up to the top of the mountain.

A helicopter was called and arrived almost immediately. On that particular day for some unknown reason, the crew included a doctor who instantly intubated her. While the emergency responders suggested they drop Connie at the local hospital, the doctor knew that her only chance of survival was to reach the big trauma center in Split. Because of the Yugoslav Wars fought in Croatia in the 1990s, the staff there was trained for high-caliber trauma. A helicopter delivered Connie into their hands.

Matt and Stacey were by her side when she woke up from the coma. She has virtually no memory of the 10 days she spent in that hospital or the long trip back to California to complete her care and recovery. But with crystal clarity, she recalls the conversations she had with her dead husband John, who was also in the room, even though he had been gone for almost a decade. In fact, the day she was discharged was the 9th anniversary of his last day on Earth.

"I remember being with John during that time. I don't remember being in the hospital; I don't remember the circumstances. I just remember being together and being happy and walking and talking and being warm in the sun," she says. While they walked through the space between, John told Connie how proud he was

of their kids and that it wouldn't be fair for her to leave them without a parent. That message went deep, tapping into the spirit that had always defined her. Stacey saw it shining through, even as her mother lay motionless and unconscious. Years later, she expressed the marvel of it in this letter:

What can I say about my Mama and her recovery that would enlighten or inspire? I almost feel as if I needn't say a word. That she is more powerful than words. But since she was there, I will tell you this; the woman I saw in the hospital was physically, spiritually unrecognizable. I don't think I have ever seen anyone hurt so badly in my life, and it was my Mama, my inspiration, my support, the person I love most on this planet. She was struggling to say the least. As we sat with her and watched her and talked to her, beneath all the pain, trauma, wounds and vein injuries, so was the essence, the essence of this wonderful joyous, loving, brilliant woman that shone through. In these moments, no reasonable human being would have even tried to convince us that she was going to be okay. I knew she would. That kind of radiance cannot be extinguished. My mother is powerful beyond her own comprehension or recognition. She will say it was us who brought her back, and that may be true, but only because she sacrificed for us knowing that we need more time to walk in her light. Shine on, my sweet Mama, you are a star. I love you beyond words.

As her husband John reminded her in the dream, she had to come back. And she did. Powerful though she was, Connie went through a phase of complete dependence on those around her. She couldn't drive for eight months. She could barely walk. This was a woman who had climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Whitney, Machu Picchu and the Grand Canyon. She was a runner and avid softball and tennis player. And her life had been devoted to serving those less capable. Now she couldn't get around her own house.

“I have always been like a walking encyclopedia of names, numbers, everything. When I first came home I had sticky notes everywhere. I had to remember to eat; I had to remember to feed the dog; I had to remember to do things that, for the most part, you took very much for granted,” she told me. “I didn’t even know who I was for a while. So people really surrounded me with lots of help and lots of positive energy and lots of strength.”

But asking for help was extremely difficult. She had spent her whole life helping others, always being the rock. Her independence stemmed from the fact that she was adopted when she was just two weeks old. While her adoptive parents were kind and loving, she says, “There was always a sort of missing piece.” It drove her to develop an inner strength, one that both hindered and helped her recovery. At first, she had trouble accepting help. But she came to understand how vital it is.

“To learn to ask for help was very big,” she said. “I was very fortunate to be surrounded by people that were very happy to be givers, and I was able to be a receiver.”

Once the turning point occurs, that choice made to live and move forward, survivors and their families get very involved in seeking treatment—whatever might bring resolution or just reduce the burden. Often, this takes the form of traditional medical treatments and rehabilitation of physical functions and behaviors. It moves you back into life by helping you learn about yourself and your abilities. As time passed and her energy improved, as with Jerry, a continued push to find any and all pathways to recovery - traditional and complementary took precedence. Being open does not mean being foolish. Consultations were a part of the process and making informed decisions was essential. But there was an en-

thusiastic drive to explore options for recovery and healing. It gives the survivor a sense of control and hope, both essential.

Connie had “dark days,” but they were outnumbered by “sunny days” that reminded her how much she wanted to stick around and enjoy life with her loved ones. Just as she had going through cancer and her husband’s long illness, she naturally focused on the positive. She did physical therapy 2-3 times a week for almost a year and yoga a couple times a week. She sought out formal counseling. She faithfully hit the gym. She challenged herself and seized more and more control over her life, reintegrating in whatever ways she could. Some things she learned from therapists, some she was exposed to through interactions with kindred survivors, and some developed through basic trial and error. She listened and took advice but only if it supported her efforts in meaningful recovery. It was a very courageous and productive time, but there was room for grieving. She understood how important it is to reaching the next stage of life, and not just for survivors.

In this stage of MetaHabilitation, thoughts have serious weight—they become actions. “Thoughts become things. Think good ones. Choose good ones,” Connie says. “I do think it is important to go through a grief process, and I think part of that is you get sad, you get angry, you get confused. I think it is important to acknowledge that and to deal with that and to sit with that and then try to move beyond that. ... Don’t think about the things you don’t have but focus on the things that you do have. My life is different, no other way about it. It is different. So I said, ‘Okay, this is the life that I get now, and it’s good.’”

She understood her crisis affected others close to her. “It was as hard on the kids as it was for me, I think, to talk about it, to process it, to put it out there, to go through it. Not relive it, relive it, relive

it, but be able to talk about it. I think you go sort of piece-by-piece, or hurdle-by-hurdle, or rock-by-rock. You get up the path,” Connie says. “Physically, I probably did die. But I think much of me came back. ... I think my essence is still here, and a big part of that is due to Matt and Stacey being there and being with me to help me come back to where I was.”

SAMPLE ONLY