PERSPECTIVES

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Dance Redemption

Dance helps restore what Parkinson's disease has stolen from Patricia Needle.

By Patricia Needle

I have an incurable, chronic, progressive neurological disorder: Parkinson's. First, the good news: now my friends let me pick the movie, sit in the front seat and get the first martini. Is this what people mean when they say "when one door closes, another opens?"

The "closed door" of my journey began before my diagnosis. I had with some success sought help for depression. Once diagnosed with Parkinson's, I thought, "What will I look like in a year? Is it time to quit being a nurse, and get help myself? Once I go public, will I stop being me, and instead be That Person With Parkinson's?"

Back to that "open door." After my diagnosis, I went to a dance class with a group of strangers. They too had Parkinson's. Some, like myself, took medications that provided symptomatic relief for the myriad betrayals of early PD. My right leg tremor was masked, and my right arm swung freely, not flexed and stiff. I had pills for GI upset, insomnia and pain from involuntary cramping. Dancers with more advanced disease, slowed and hunched, grappled with imbalance and falls on the dance floor. Caregivers sat by the wheelchair bound. For the first time, I spoke to somebody who responded in a slurred whisper from a frozen face.

But I got it. We all got it. Music, rhythm and communal movement created a warm wave of welcome that buoyed our spirits and surrounded us all.

A year later, I was part of a dance performance. I channeled my inner kelp as I moved through a metaphoric underwater garden awash with young dancers. Their assured supple movements were in sharp contrast to my decades older, hesitant and stiff Parkinson's body. I was deliriously happy.

I am awed by the power of dance to transform and alleviate pain. Despite the steady advance of Parkinson's, we show up. We move. We laugh. We share our best selves.

With a Perspective, I'm Patricia Needle.