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WEEKEND BREAK

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Choosing to live as though I have nothing to lose

By **JOAN HERMAN**
For *The Daily Astorian*

For some 16 hours a day, my “home” of sorts is my cherry-red power wheelchair.

It is a feat of technology, a beast of a chair that navigates even Astoria’s steepest grades. It can tilt far back and extend my legs straight out, almost to the point of inversion to relieve chronic swelling in my lower limbs. And no matter where I go, I always have a seat.

And yet ...

I often find myself consumed, at least momentarily, if not longer, by envy and resentment, even (or especially) of those I love. A part of me dreads seeing the travel pictures of exotic places around the world, posted on Facebook by friends I truly am happy for. I dreamed of traveling in retirement, and even earlier. Now, logistically and financially, I don’t see that, nor many other activities I would love to do, happening.

I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 19 years ago after experiencing an increasingly floppy left foot when I ran. Gradually, my mobility has become further restricted, to the point that I am now in a wheelchair full-time. Many people with MS never experience significant disability — and some of us do.

Eight years ago, when I was considerably more mobile, a physical therapist I was working with warned me never to allow myself to start using a wheelchair because once someone starts, there’s no turning back. I distinctly remember assuring her that I would not allow that to happen. Was it denial or arrogance that made me assume I could predict or stop the course of the disease?

I surrendered to using a wheelchair in the spring of 2014. I was falling at least daily and struggling mightily simply to get ready for the day. The wheelchair was a means to keep working at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Washington.

I took great pride in working, particularly as an English instructor at a community college. I was a tenured faculty member, a coveted position which I had worked hard to achieve. I was not about to lightly give it up.

Some three years later, with the luxury of hindsight, I realize that I really didn’t have a choice.

In my weaker moments, I admit to feeling sorry for myself, to feeling as though I drew the short straw.

And yet ... I am not writing these words to garner pity or even compassion. As much as I hate this disease, I am acutely aware that I am far from alone on this planet in my suffering. In fact, my ordeal, as hard as it is, is far less than that of millions — if not billions — of my fellow humans in the world.

None of us is guaranteed anything. None of us gets out unscathed. What is true is that I am alive today. And, perhaps surprisingly, most of the time I am happy.

I have much to be grateful for, not the least of which is the chance to retire early — because of my disability. I’m still young, relatively speaking, with energy and a desire to contribute.

Although there are so many activities I would love to do but can’t — the recent bridge run comes to mind, driving to see my sister in Seattle, another — there is still so much that I can.

So I have jumped head-first into volunteering in the community: as a cruise host greeting passengers from around the world who disembark from the mammoth ships that dock at the port; as a member of the grassroots progressive organization Indivisible North Coast Oregon; and as a part-time receptionist for Coast Community Radio, where I also have my own public affairs program.

I love radio for many reasons, not the least of which is its invisibility. Listeners judge me only by my voice and my words, not my appearance. They cannot feel sorry for me sitting in my wheelchair because they cannot see me.

I think of the late Apple co-founder Steve Jobs’ words: “Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.”

I am choosing to live with that spirit in mind.



Courtesy Joan Herman

Joan Herman, far right, in the studio for an interview at Coast Community Radio. From left: Tessa James Scheller, LaNicia Williams and Andy Marshall.

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Courtesy Joan Herman

Joan Herman, in purple, participates in an Indivisible North Coast Oregon rally in downtown Astoria earlier this year.



Photo by Bill Wagner/The Daily News

Joan Herman teaching persuasive writing at Lower Columbia College in Longview, Washington, circa 2010.



Courtesy Joan Herman

Herman, right, at her final graduation as a faculty member at Lower Columbia College, with her friend and former teaching partner, Dr. Courtney Shah.