

Discovering Dependence

Category: Crying

written by Susan Greenberg | June 3, 2018

I am an independent woman, used to taking care of myself and others. But that self-image was dashed five years ago, when I fell and shattered my elbow.

I tried to gather my dropped purse and Chinese takeout but didn't realize I couldn't even gather my body until a stranger knelt beside me and said, "Let me stabilize your arm. The ambulance is on the way."

From that moment on, for the next year and a half, I experienced the generosity of strangers, friends, and family as they first cared for me, then encouraged me to care for myself, and finally gave me the confidence to once again care for others.

The ambulance attendant said, "We've got you, just lie back."

The x-ray tech was quietly sympathetic.

The ER staff cocooned me in a temporary cast.

The orthopedic surgeon explained that it would take a few days to order the parts and put the surgical team together.

My hospital roommate kindly buzzed for help when I couldn't open the containers of coffee and cereal on my breakfast tray.

My life partner heeded every word of the postop instructions ("keep the elbow elevated to prevent infection," etc.).

For the first time in my memory, I needed help with personal care. One friend asked, "What do you want done that you think is too silly to ask?" She put some faded flowers on the compost heap and made a new arrangement from a few still-bright blossoms. Another friend brought fruit salad for lunch and, without comment, cut the pieces into manageable size.

Alone one night, I broke down crying. My aloof cat leapt onto the bed and nuzzled me, inch by inch, toe to knee to shoulder to head, then curled up beside my cast, purring.

Hope crept back slowly. Once the cast was removed, I started swimming. I began physical therapy, thanks to round trip rides from my life partner. Occupational therapy was farther from home, but soon I could drive myself. My yoga instructor helped me modify poses. When I now look at x-rays of my metal parts, I feel gratitude for the skill and patience of my surgeons, nurses, and physical therapists, who collectively put me back together.

There are still things I can't do—ride a bicycle, fasten a necklace.

But I am still an independent woman. And now I better understand my place in the universe: our need for others and others' need for us. I knew it before, but I have experienced it now.

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