

Grace Valentine – May 2022

I used to call myself the poster child for Arachnoiditis. A cautionary tale for why NOT to get a labor and delivery epidural. Now, sixteen years later, I am leaning in. I am learning to claim myself as a poster child for neuroplasticity, and of healing. This shift in perspective, from the hard-won vantage point of the witness, is both liberating and exhilarating as it is daunting. To proclaim my healing is often a slippery slope. One step forward can be followed by a giant leap back-nevertheless, healing progress is being made. The path of a healer who sets out to heal oneself, let alone simultaneously putting forth effort to heal others, is a monumental mountain to climb. I guess it is fortuitous that I just so happen to be a Capricorn and a Licensed Martial and Family Therapist.

As I read the Tennant Foundation's recent bulletin where they published "A Story Worth Telling" from an arachnoiditis survivor, a female physician with multiple sclerosis who discovered her condition as a resident in training, I was inspired to give voice to my story. To survive feels short sighted, I aim to thrive. So, I found myself pushing toward the fullest life imaginable, not merely the fullest life possible. What this push has brought me to is to be cut off from my disability benefits. To receive a declaration from the Social Security Administration that I had exceeded their threshold for substantial earnings. This invisible ceiling it turns out, is a mere 1,380.00 per month as a single mother raising two teenagers. This news and the subsequent termination of the monthly support deposits sent me reeling backwards into a flareup of post-traumatic stress disorder to when I first became disabled as a direct result of a twice misplaced labor epidural that temporarily paralyzed me from the shoulders down and resulted in a six-day hospital stay following the birth of my second child, born with an Apgar of 2. Thankfully, the paralysis slowly receded, yet little did I know, that underneath the insidious proliferation of Arachnoiditis had begun.

Sixteen years have passed since my condition began to take central command over my life and livelihood. I had been a recognized and decorated mental health professional at the local, county, and state level. Once arachnoiditis and my journey to heal through PTSD commandeered my life, everything changed. My 20-year marriage ended, as I have learned that nearly 75% of patients with this painful disabling condition statically do. I was incredibly grateful for the years of Social Security Disability Income and court awarded child support to keep a roof over my children's and my head. For our very survival, I am eternally grateful. But this is an essay of triumph and a success story of celebration. So, I lean in and shift my focus, dear reader to my story of healing through neuroplasticity and meditation. For I wholeheartedly believe in the healing power of the creative arts and on learning to train one's mind to focus upon beauty and the undulating healing power that resides with each and every breath.

Neuroplasticity is defined as "the ability of the brain to change through growth and reorganization, whereby individual neurons create new connections and pathways. Circuits and network changes can result from learning a new activity, environmental influences and practices that lower psychological stress."

Meditation and Mindful Breathing can be described as learning or training oneself to pay attention to the natural flow and rhythm of one's breathing, tuning into the way it feels with each inhale and exhale." It is often paired with one's goal of following the breath until there is a sense of relaxation within the body. What I have learned along this journey is that painting, prose, and poetry are powerful medicine. The effect of calming one's nervous system is palpable and prolific. The very act of giving voice to a poem can serve to entrain the mind, the breath, the heart, and our entire nervous system causing all to come into harmony and alignment. Our very cells recalibrate as these new neural pathways are created like the thoughtful conscious decision of a well-trained city planner to design and construct additional on and off ramps along our freeways, highways, and byways. We are like streams and tributaries, all carving our own pathway towards the ocean. We are so very capable of learning new activities and hobbies that bring us joy and challenge our minds and bodies optimally into states of flow. From this commitment to practice, we acquire insulation encapsulating these formerly burning, electrically zapping, and shock emitting damaged nerve bundles with healing, cascading cranial waters. These healing waters flow over, around, above, and between every inch of our spinal cord. As the poet Rumi so eloquently described "we are both the pitcher and the water that it pours," we are both pain and what heals the pain. By actively committing to a life practice that engenders the stimulation of neuroplasticity we can achieve new heights of healing. As Rumi revealed, we can at once be healer, healing, and healed, lover, loving, and loved. A committed practice to try new activities and to train our thoughts and our very breath, is an act of self-love.

Reframing the devastating impact of having one's disability benefits withheld and shifting toward and leaning into this as a celebration of healing, is worthy of being seen as a success story. Though I do not yet earn enough from my return to counseling others who suffer from various types of pain, (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or relational), I am like a baby bird being nudged from this nest. I pray that as I continue to paint my inner experience and offer these abstract paintings to the greater world, and to perform out loud my stream of consciousness poetry to any soul willing to listen, to not only enhance the healing power of my own breath, but also teach these skills to others I serve, that Arachnoiditis will become a gift that can bless not only my life and livelihood, but the lives of all those I come into contact with. So, I offer up my story. May all who read it, and those who view and interact with my paintings, and read and listen to my poetry on healing be blessed. May my story of neuroplasticity through the arts, and learning to mindfully breathe, inspire others who live with chronic pain. In closing, I would offer: Your soul is without limits, may you come to know your breath well enough to transcend the physical plane, may you come to know your consciousness is capable of existing multidimensionally everywhere, as one with everything that is beautiful in this world. Allow curiosity and inspiration to illuminate the path forward for your personal healing. Embrace a committed practice. Come to know yourself as a lifelong learner. Seek out new experiences and fall in love with your very next breath.

With a heart full of gratitude, Grace Valentine, LMF

ADDITION – DECEMBER 2022

Grace Valentine has adhesive arachnoiditis (AA) and one of her complications was a foot drop. This occurs because some of the cauda equina nerve roots that control the ankle and foot become entrapped in the AA inflammatory, adhesive mass. Usually, foot drop never resolves or improves, but Grace describes a treatment and result that needs to be shared.

Forest Tennant

I apologize for my long delay in responding to your quest for additional information on how I perceived improvement on my foot drop symptoms following pool therapy focusing on Neuro “Butler” flossing techniques.

These were a series of repetitive movements involving the toes, feet ankles and lower limbs. After a period of being floated/supported in a suspension chair submerged in 98 degree plus water until my mid to low back muscles released their tense holding pattern, I was better able to find a neutral position for which my low back could rest flat against the side wall of the pool. We began by micro movements raising the toes alternating both feet. Progressively we introduced more and more of various small but repetitive movements up and down with as many ways to floss the joints of the toes, feet, ankles, calves, then raising the quad in a very slow and deliberate manner, then the hip flexor by extending the leg like a pointed dancer toe tapping and eventually I was able to turn towards the wall and very slow and methodically repetitively bring my ankle towards my glute alternating repetitions on both sides of the lower body. This series of micro exercises done with very deliberate slow precision over time (3-6 months if I recall correctly, possibly longer) yielded significant improvement in my ability to climb the steps up to my home and provided greater fluidity in my movement with far less toe stubbing or uneven gate. My foot drop specifically fully resolved. Only when asked to try standing on my tippy toes does the weakness manifest in dropping down, only on bad days does my gate be impacted in a way that stubs or scraps my foot when walking. It is minimal and not often and vastly improved beyond where I started. Eventually I was able to do these exercises outside of the pool without the necessary support and resistance of moving through warm water. I was then given some “slumping” low spine exercises with my feet against the wall that also helped “floss” the spinal area.

I wish I had more descriptive medical terminology to explain exactly why the mechanics of Neuro Butler Flossing pool therapy micro movement exercises helped heal and restore my strength to overcome foot drop but overtime, these exercises, and this therapeutic approach, absolutely did.

I would whole heartedly recommend getting patients experiencing foot drop into a trained physical therapist who specializes in this technique without reservation.

Multiple healing elements all come together to effect measurable change. Did it help that my PT was a very positive yet realistic coach who also made sure I felt seen and heard in all aspects of my pain, yes. Did it benefit me that this PT was absolutely ok and even validated the healing aspect of warm water release resulting some days in tears just flowing down one’s face for no

obvious reason, yes. Never did she pry or ask me to explain why, nor did she look away or shame me by her own embarrassment or discomfort. Did she remind me to keep my eyes focused at the horizon level or higher at all times and not watch my feet shuffle out of fear of falling, yes. Did she encourage me to keep coming back until she felt I had made enough measurable progress to officially graduate from this therapy approach, yes.

Now - my insurance did not cover this 100 percent, but without a doubt Neuro Butler Flossing pool therapy physical therapy specialty approach was worth every penny. I would enthusiastically recommend it as it was a therapeutic tool that made a tremendous impact on my healing journey.

Have a wonderful day! I hope this response was helpful to you and for your patients. As always, thank you for your work in this world.

Grace Valentine