

## **LIFE PASSES US BY – BUT ONLY IF WE LET IT!**

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Joan Albuquerque was an exceptional person who did not let life pass her by. Yes, she faced tremendous odds to live it as she did for the past thirty five years; first becoming a paraplegic as a young graduate at nineteen, and later totally bedridden, hooked on to a breathing apparatus for the final thirteen. All this a result of an illness called GB syndrome. She passed on in April 2011, leaving a message to respect and fully utilize life, irrespective of our circumstances...

Joan I were 'phone' friends, 'connected' too by our common visitor friend Marlene, and through a family marriage. I'd met Joan at that wedding three decades ago, but I was a busy banker then, with my own social agenda, and not more than a fleeting greeting and an insensitive wave of sympathy perhaps for this young wheelchair confined damsel. It was thus only a few years ago that I particularly sought out her friendship, when I heard of the remarkable life she'd led since. By this time chronic illness had gripped me as well, and tempered my blasé approach to life. Even though at sixty one, I've borne painful and joint degenerative Rheumatoid Arthritis for twenty six years, what I suffer pales before Joan's plight. Nevertheless, I needed to share Joan's positive approach to life together with a determination to use her remaining abilities, mostly the mind (as with me) to the fullest, and as ally, NOT enemy?! This, coupled with a gutsy entrepreneurship through various business ventures like floral decoration and plant sales, video library and cable operation, in between bouts of hospitalization, won my total admiration. These were aimed also to tackle her enormous medical related expenses. Joan, in return I guess felt a camaraderie at my efforts to be involved in volunteer support for arthritics and those with disability, and graciously reciprocated my friendship. Fortunately neither of us dwelled on our illnesses – they'd become so much part of our lives...instead we'd chat about other matters of common interest. The luxury of a phone pow-wow was sadly limited both in frequency and length to the condition of Joan's throat and lungs at the call. A garrulous me had to consciously sense when a spunky Joan was tiring, and restrain her from struggling in a long conversation. Complementing these calls, were visits from Marlene, who was the bearer of Joan's news and views on many subjects, including spicy jokes at times, which showed just how alive and 'with it' Joan was, despite being confined to bed. She would share her stock market tips, send goodies on special occasions, prepared under her instructions and so elegantly gift wrapped, along with an affectionate note. Joan was so present in my life, and so much of an inspiration to me to 'keep going' when surgeries followed in succession, when I started getting epilepsy seizures - and I realize how many positive vibes I received from her...

Encountering a person like Joan, has led me to often wonder, "What gave this young twenty year old the incentive to live after being on a ventilator machine for 13 months after being first stricken? Was it because she had crossed stage one of survival, she could now attempt stage two of recovery? But sadly, when this did not happen and she became permanently paraplegic and fell prey to infection and hospitalization repeatedly, each time returning with one less ability and more medical protocol to deal with – **what kept her alive and what kept alive her interest in life itself - what?**

Joan found the time and patience for her large family and circle of friends; from bed she was care giver and consoler of sorts to many of them, starting with her 90 year old mother and aged aunt. She followed their 'doings', involved herself in preparations for occasions, even supervised the domestic scene down to the daily menu, capably supported in all this by Bobby, who she had also meticulously trained to manage her health care. **Why and How? What did Joan have that you and I don't?** To my mind, the answer is **nothing different...**

Then why do we cave in so easily to any little misery and give up the fight? Even if supported like Joan, by encouraging family and friends? No answer? Yes, there is! Maybe not to the reason why the misery has befallen us. So, let's not waste time searching as it's rarely to be found, especially in the case of auto immune illness or natural tragedies and accidents. There is an Almighty to deal with that, I figure. Let's instead begin to look to ourselves and our own **ATTITUDE** in searching for a solution, when we have to face up to a challenge. Let's learn to accept the **REALITY** that this is **HAPPENING to ME!** The biggest enemy is our **DENIAL**, leading often to alcohol, drugs, suicide even... It's tough to cross this first hurdle, but when it's done, dealing with what follows is much easier. Perhaps that was Joan's secret. She **ACCEPTED** the re-gift of life after the first thirteen months on the ventilator and just moved forward thereafter, **learning to live with what life doled out to her**, ably supported by those around.

