

## **I Stopped Complaining the Day I Found Pamela**

*New York Times Magazine* submission: "Lives"

By Patty P. Lundy, November 16, 2011

Walking past the red brick house that was once home to Pamela, a high school acquaintance, I wondered if she was still alive. She had had an unfortunate accident, 40 years ago, that left her a quadriplegic at age 17.

This question about Pamela came to me while visiting my mother in Kentucky, as I walked her dog through the neighborhood that my friend and I shared as high school classmates.

Two days later on Facebook, I had the answer. Pamela was alive, indeed, evident in her friend request. Click. We were connected. Up pops a photo of lovely, sweet-faced Pamela, with her youthful looking mother, Barb. It was not obvious from the photo if Pamela was in a wheelchair, but I suspected as much.

We immediately began a dialog. I started the ball rolling by saying how sorry I was about the accident all those years ago, how I realized that it could have been me in that car leaving school that day, how I wish I had stayed in touch. I asked her if she had regained the use of her limbs, whether she went to college, how she spends her days, whether she has had happy times, despite her situation, and whether she has found peace, love, laughter.

Pamela's response? Appreciation – astonishment, in fact – that I had cut to the chase. Most people she had been in contact with via Facebook, she said, "Either do not remember the fact that I was paralyzed, are afraid they'll hurt my feelings, are uncomfortable mentioning it, or just don't care. It's like the 800-pound gorilla in the room. So thank you for asking."

In our early online conversations, I learned that she has limited upper body movement and can move her arms, but her hands are useless except for her right index finger, with which she uses the keyboard. Our e-mails grew longer. We cracked each other up, questioned each other's beliefs, talked about books and music and movies, and laughed about the crazy habits of our dogs. I learned that Pamela received undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and Religion Education, respectively. She had home-schooled a nephew, converted to Catholicism, had a long-term love affair with a man she adored, mastered all things Internet, expanded her base of knowledge in twenty directions, and, yes, had found peace, love and laughter.

But on the flip side of those happy, productive days was the estrangement from her sisters; the suicide of her best friend; a deep and mournful depression; a double mastectomy, followed by another deep and dark depression; ongoing health challenges; financial stresses and strains that the disabled painfully endure; and an ever-immobile life in bed. Adding insult to injury, literally and figuratively, both of her legs were broken in two places during a trip to attend a niece's wedding, when she was in a wheelchair being transported between airport gates. The pain is unimaginable; she is considering amputation but is afraid she would not survive the surgery. She is also fearful that she would experience "phantom limb pain" that is common after losing limbs.

Pamela and her mother Barb live a modest life and struggle to keep their house, their sanity, and some semblance of normalcy amid economic and physical hardships that were at first unimaginable to me. After visiting Pamela and Barb and seeing the hurdles they encounter, without complaint, on a daily basis, and watching them smile through their fears and their tears, an immeasurable sense of admiration and praise grew inside me.

Before I found Pamela on Facebook, I was a frequent complainer: I am not smart enough, rich enough, thin enough, young enough, pretty enough. Worry and self-doubt were also my constant companions: What if I don't close that deal? What if my husband is unable to find work after yet another layoff? Where will the money for retirement come from? What if I get sick? Oh, and then there were the regrets: I should have pursued an MBA or a law degree, instead of marrying my ex-husband. I should have chosen a more lucrative career path instead of entrepreneurship and its attendant uncertainties. I should have had children after I married my current husband. I should have made more money and spent less.

And it wasn't only me-focused doubts and self-inflicted fears. Big-picture events also drove me to distraction and kept me awake at night: wars, droughts, floods, oil spills, food supply contaminations, injustices, racial unrest, broken economic systems, political hatemongering, intolerance, illiteracy and poverty.

Now, after seeing the world through Pamela's eyes, I have a profound appreciation for all that is good in my life and in the world. Simply waking up in the morning and walking to the bathroom has new meaning. A jog in the park with the dog is more joyful and less tedious. I complete my projects, proposals, and presentations with more gusto and less grouching. Any negative thoughts, emotions, or experiences have been replaced by my new mantras: I have enough. I am enough. Life is good.

My relationship with Pamela grew far deeper than our Facebook friendship. I became her employer. When I learned about her dire financial situation, I hired her as a proofreader. My company produced industry profiles on hundreds of business categories and every report that we produced was tighter, better written, and more readable because of Pamela's editing.

Pamela tells me that I saved her life and gave her the validation she had waited 40 years to receive: "You paid me to think and you listened to my opinions." It was not a full-time job, nor was it much money, but it was enough to cover the cost of a home care nurse, necessary because her mother had grown frail and was no longer able to handle the heavy chores of lifting Pamela. It was not only the work itself and the money that Pamela craved. She was also hungry for photos and stories about my life, my family and friends, my comings and goings, my wins and my losses. She feels more complete, she remarked recently, because I hired her to make my work better, because I am her friend, and because I care enough to share my life stories.

Despite her gratitude, though, this is not Pamela's "you saved me" story. This is the story about how *she* saved *me*. I am now a better person because of Pamela. I do more for other people and I give more of myself to my work and to my world. I also take better care of my health by thinking about my diet, cutting back on the bad stuff, and exercising daily. I am cheerful and optimistic – and I *never* complain.

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