

wellbeing

walking

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the talk

{Living a balanced life}

On Monday 20 September 1999, just five days after my 37th birthday, I was told I might never walk again. Lying on my back in Hong Kong's Canossa Hospital, I was recovering from a laminectomy – a common surgical procedure to relieve pressure on the spinal cord. I'd been rushed into hospital just three days earlier, completely unable to sit, stand or walk.

Two days after the operation, I was still lying in my hospital bed, but hunched over my laptop worrying about the advertising seminar I was organising in Singapore the following month. Though I hadn't yet been introduced to what the doctors referred to as the 'Rolls Royce of Zimmer Frames' (think geriatric walker with a built-in seat), health was still clearly not at the top of my list. I was far more worried about a business event that could make my career.

The orthopedic surgeon himself had given me the terrifying news that there was no guarantee that I would walk again. The MRI and surgery had gone well, but it wasn't until he reviewed the images after surgery that the complications became clear. He "had never seen anything like it" and the standard 20-minute surgery had taken nearly two hours to complete.

Incredibly, despite this graphic medical emergency and wake-up call, it wasn't until years later, looking back on the experience, that I realised there was something seriously out of balance in my life. My focus was still on my work, my career, my reputation and creating another successful event for the regional broadcasting industry.

We would have the answer to my future mobility by Thursday when we attempted to get me out of bed. Until then, I had to remain as still as possible to allow the spinal patch to heal.

Life had seemed to be going well for me back then. Only a week before, I had celebrated my birthday with 20 friends at a favourite Lan Kwai Fong restaurant. The party had disbanded early as Typhoon York prepared to batter Hong Kong with force 10 winds. Could the barometric pressure been a factor?

Tuesday's birthday present was a clean bill of health from the chiropractor, who had been treating my lower back pain regularly for six months. On Wednesday afternoon my back felt uncomfortable and I thought it was just because I had risked wearing heels for my party. I woke on Thursday morning unable to get out of bed. Friday evening I was admitted to hospital, placed in traction with weights hanging from my ankles, and administered monster pain injections every four hours. On Saturday, I was taken out of traction because it wasn't making any difference. There was no change in sight. The pain relief was lasting only minutes and the nurses were running out of places to jab.

The specialist said that we would have to contemplate surgery. He was reluctant, however, and puzzled that someone my age was not responding to treatment. He was used to seeing senior executives schedule a quick surgery, return to their old ways and eventually need another operation. He acknowledged my desire to heal and left the decision to me. The next afternoon, my decision was made and I told him to "cut me", and preparations were made immediately.

Post-op I vaguely recall waking in the middle of the night and fighting to convince myself that it was okay to press the call button to ask for help with the pain – deciding that I was actually doing the nurses a favour by calling them so they wouldn't have to check on me so often. The following morning, as I battled with a reaction to the general anesthetic in the form of green vomit, Dr. Hsu's first words to me were, "young lady, you have a very high pain threshold."

He proceeded to describe the multiple complications and the plan for the days ahead. Once inside my spine, he had made the discovery that my spinal nerve was three times the normal size. The spinal disc had herniated (bulged) after years of uneven pressure, the result of a less than ballet-like posture and a lack of core strength exercise. The spinal nerve had twisted itself around the protruding disk and had to be carefully untangled and the bulging piece of the disc removed in tiny flakes. Permanent damage to the spinal nerve was a clear possibility. A mild case of Spina Bifida – incomplete development of the spinal cord – was also discovered during the procedure and a nick in the spinal covering (not uncommon in this surgery) needed a patch.

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THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

The medical crisis was a primary, but not the only factor in the life-changing incidents that lay ahead.

On my first day back from medical leave, after waiting hours for a meeting with my boss, I was handed a letter informing me that my job was being terminated. I was "not suitable for the position" and I was to leave immediately. I had been performing my duties for nearly a year and no one had complained. However, Hong Kong's Labour law required no notice period. I was officially on my own. I could barely work part time by standing up at my computer – sitting was out of the question. With my savings exhausted, it was time to leave the corporate rat race and set my own course.

Having arrived in Hong Kong in 1992, I had established my place in the corporate world. From a PR firm to restaurant marketing, then sales director and broadcasting, back to marketing, then membership director, all in major positions, I found I loved the industries, the people and my work. Early mornings, late nights, working weekends and long hours were just rules of the game that everyone played. I wasn't paying attention to the affect this lifestyle was having on my life. I worked hard and I played hard and that was balance enough for me. My life was wrapped up in my world of work and the Hong Kong social scene provided a welcome distraction when I needed escape. I was my job.

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It was a devastating blow to have both my physical health and flourishing career explode simultaneously. A local bank had just approved a personal loan, so my financial life was simply another casualty. My medical insurance coverage provided insufficient support for doctor-approved physiotherapy so I used my credit card to sign up at a five-star hotel health club and walked in the pool every day. Thus began the credit-card juggling that would lead to debt-collectors calling me at all hours and banging on my apartment door. I was living in a foreign country without family support, and a network of colleagues in place of intimate friendships. My domestic helper insisted on continuing her employment even though I couldn't pay her. Could life get worse?

It didn't. I set up my own businesses and when I started looking for work, doors opened wide. Companies had the benefit of my expertise without the expense of a full-time employee and I had all the flexibility I could ask for. Why, then, with all this freedom, was I still working like before? The work pattern that had established itself over years continued and I was completely unaware of the forces driving me forward in no particular direction.

GOING NATURAL

Then something happened. I had my very first session with an astrologer and we discovered our shared Saskatchewan roots. We made plans to meet up and he invited me to join a group meditation he was leading. I was not at all interested in meditating, but curious, I accepted. As I was leaving, I was approached by a woman who asked if I would be joining her on a trip she was organizing to Costa Rica and Machu Picchu. Though I heard the word "yes" come out of me, I had no idea where it came from or how I would afford the trip.

This was my first experience of trusting the process of life – something very new to me. On this spiritual journey, I experienced a love and acceptance I was missing from my childhood. My fellow travellers remarked on a softer side of me that emerged through a romantic encounter on the trip, and I returned to Hong Kong hungry to experience more of this new peace and a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Months later, I met a healer who was looking for a place to stay. I was going to be away in Bali for a wedding the following week so I offered my flat and he accepted. By way of thanks, he invited me to attend his course as a guest. Though I had never heard of energy healing, I had nothing to lose, and soon became a qualified energy healer and teacher.

I began investing all of my time reading self-help books, attending every group meditation going and volunteering my skills to help organise workshops for international speakers. A self-confessed seminar junkie, I was on a crash course, uncovering the links between my own physical and emotional health and discovering many natural options available.

While the information was new to me, my experience in the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu confirmed there was actually nothing new about what I was learning. And a surprising aspect of the many discoveries I was making about auras and chakras, meridians and modalities, mantras and meditation, energy and community was an all-pervading familiar feeling. There was an air of remembering rather than studying, and in fact they made more sense than the 'conventional' reliance of the modern world on the often-addictive synthetic chemicals and quick fixes.

A relaxing massage became an opportunity to reconnect with my physical body. Yoga and meditation taught me the practice of paying attention to the messages delivered in the form of pain and discomfort. I began interpreting my body's signals and trusting my own intuition – the process used by trained masters in treating their clients. When I started hiking again after six months, the exercise was as much to clear my mind as to build strength. I plugged into sunshine at every opportunity to recharge my batteries. Changes to my physical activities led to a change in my appetite and I started enjoying fresh whole food prepared by me for me, and indulging in sweet treats less frequently. NSA (Network Spinal Analysis) introduced a connection between my spine, my emotions and my spirit as I gently released toxic energies in entrainment sessions. Eventually, my desire to smoke – a bad habit that had never been completely extinguished since high school – fell away entirely as old escape tactics lost their effectiveness. Recognising toxic energy in relationships and making conscious choices left me feeling more healthy and strong with each passing day. I learned how to be less hard on myself for slipping up as in my previous search for perfection. I had been constantly beating down my own self-esteem and losing sight of my valuable contributions in my world.

LISTEN TO YOUR HEARTBEAT

Eventually, word got out that if you wanted to know what's what or what's on in Hong Kong's spiritual community, I was the person to ask. Sending an email to a group became easier than answering each individual message and my publishing business was born. I created a weekly email newsletter that grew into a website that grew into a printed directory for an antidote to life in the fast lane. My passion for heartbeat, as the business was eventually named, took the place of the more practical need for tim eoff, and also for revenues. Before long, my landlord who had been lenient me during my medical trauma, reached the end of his patience.

And then my life changed again.

One morning the phone rang in my new flat, and when I turned to pick it up something happened. The pain that gripped my entire body was déjà vu. I knew immediately what was happening. I screamed at the top of my lungs, "I get it!" and made a deal with the universe that if I wasn't better by Monday, I would seek medical treatment. I was determined to avoid a repeat performance. Five years had passed since the surgery and it was time to review my life on a deeper level. For the rest of the weekend, I journaled and reflected on the choices I had been making. The answer came: I still wasn't supporting myself enough and my body was showing me what that felt like.

A medical practitioner confirmed that the pain was occurring at the disc next to the one which had been treated surgically. I stepped up my efforts and began practicing yoga twice every week and my body slowly rejuvenated. I accepted every offer of free acupuncture, Chinese medicine and homeopathic remedies available. I re-arranged my workstation for greater comfort. I started taking regular breaks to relieve my neck, back, shoulders and wrists of the stress that comes from long hours at the computer. Finally, I left the city altogether and relocated to a quiet village near the beach where working from home made perfect sense. Meeting Hong Kong clients required a few trips into town each week.



In the stillness of rural life, I started to recognise when I was running around in circles, feeling like a ticking stress-bomb ready to detonate at any moment. There was no one to blame for the stressful environment I was creating and I began to take responsibility for myself.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Life came full circle late last year when I attended a Digital Marketing Conference. I had lived on the corporate fringe for a while and was finally ready to step back in. As a primarily digital effort, heartbeat was gaining popularity and I wanted to get back in touch with the latest technologies. The result was as unexpected as it was welcomed and I found myself once again in the media industry. This time, the choice was conscious and I continue to ask myself, "How does this support me," rather than "How can I prove myself." The results so far have been nothing short of astounding.

The balance that has always been there for me is now showing up in my life in real terms. Trusting my intuition, I recognise opportunities and follow leads and, most importantly, know when to say, "no" when the work is not a fit or my time is not valued appropriately. I am learning to function in the world – not just the corporate world – on my own terms.

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back pain 101

Four out of every five adults will experience back pain at some point in their life. Discs become more vulnerable as they degenerate naturally as we age. While the pain often occurs suddenly and might be triggered by a simple movement, the underlying causes have likely been building over time. While some injuries are the result of accidents, more frequently, inactivity and the wrong sort of movement are usually at the root of simple back pain:

- Slouching in chairs and standing badly
- Lifting incorrectly
- Sleeping on a sagging mattress
- Being generally unfit and overdoing it
- Wearing high heels

The easy solution is to get moving. Prevention occurs naturally with a balanced lifestyle – exercise, rest and healthy eating. Any exercise that strengthens the muscles is beneficial. If you have back pain, you can learn easy stretches that can be completed in less than five minutes each morning. Swimming is an excellent discipline because being weightless removes pressure. Yoga can be helpful for building core strength, and if you practice, be sure to inform your teacher if you have experienced back problems and modify the positions accordingly. Dehydration can affect the disc directly so pay attention to the amount of water you drink and remember that caffeine and alcohol cause your body to lose water.

A disc can bulge when the muscles around the back bone are not strong enough to support it. Pain results when the disc bulges and causes pressure on the spinal nerve. Treatment options like bed-rest, spinal adjustments and traction, aim to relieve the pressure. The bulged portion of the disc will either move back into place or break free and dissolve over time.

Surgery should be your last resort. A laminectomy is the surgical procedure for treating spinal injury by removing the lamina or disc which has “herniated” or bulged or slipped and is pressing on the spinal nerve. In extreme cases, vertebrae are fused together.

laminectomies

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Discs or ‘lamina’ act as shock absorbers between the spinal bones or ‘vertebrate’ above and below them and provide movement and flexibility. Discs become more vulnerable as they degenerate naturally with aging.

A disc can bulge when the muscles around the back bone are not strong enough to support the spine in an accident, during heavy lifting or weight-bearing exercise or any jolting movement like jogging on pavement. Another common cause is prolonged poor posture leading to uneven pressure from distorted vertebrae when wearing high heels and/or slouching for long periods at an office desk.

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learning my life balance

Life is not brain surgery – no one will die if I make one small mistake.

Living in balance is always a matter of personal choice. Time spent doing nothing, like on holiday or in spiritual practice like meditation, allows for reflection and I return to my life with the benefit of new perspective.

Occasional late work nights deliver remarkable results. Regular long hours are counter-productive and I lose my creative edge. Recharging at the end of a big project is essential.

I need to be attracted by exercise or it becomes one more reason to punish myself when I realise I’m not getting enough. The reward for regular physical activity is a desire for more. Too much, and it can easily become a distraction or obsession, canceling out any health benefits.

Chocolate cake and champagne are excellent celebration treats that I wouldn’t indulge in every day. Each week, I plan a Super-Saturday where I have permission to eat and do whatever I feel like.

Friendship is vital – not optional. I need to let down my guard and feel safe to be myself without judgment or criticism – only acceptance, creating a profoundly healing space.

When I feel a need to take a break, I really need to take that break, regardless how short.

Music is a great motivator to shift gears and move my body and remember the importance of play.

When I have trouble sleeping, it’s usually because I’ve not been getting enough.

One of the easiest remedies for pain is to drink lots of water. It’s easy to get dehydrated and this is when the vulnerable parts of my body speak the loudest.

Some situations call for my masculine (doing) energies and some require my feminine (nurturing) touch. I am learning the difference and recognising when either will be most efficient.

No amount of money or career success or fame can replace the parts of my spine that were removed in surgery. Remembering this simple truth helps me make sensible life/work choices. 🌿