

Reflections

I Am Alive Because of a Miracle**Hammad Aslam, MD***Physiatrist, Northside Glancy Rehabilitation Center
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Being a physician had been a dream of mine. Being a patient, however, had not. It turns out, being a patient was the best thing to happen to me.

I was twenty-two years old when my life completely changed. I had lived a very active lifestyle and I had just finished undergraduate studies at the University of Georgia. I was to start medical school at the Medical College of Georgia and was looking for housing with my family when we were involved in a car accident. Our vehicle swerved off the road, hit a tree and the tree crushed my corner of the vehicle. Thankfully, my parents and siblings were okay.

I woke up a few weeks later in the traumatic brain injury unit of the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, Georgia. I was unaware of the extent of my injuries and did not believe that this was permanent. I was told I had suffered a severe traumatic brain injury and a complete spinal cord injury at the T2 level which paralyzed me from below my armpits, but initially I was unable to accept this fate. I was young and had so much I wanted to accomplish in my life, and it was difficult for me to accept that things were now unlike anything I had ever imagined.

After a few months of therapy, I returned home to live with my parents. I was able to postpone starting medical school for one year and I used that time to try and adapt to life in a wheelchair, though I still believed it was just temporary. A year after my injury, I moved into my own apartment in a different city and started medical school. In addition to the challenges of medical school, I was dealing with this new life with a brain injury and a spinal cord injury.

There were times when I studied and studied but still did not excel in the way I was previously able prior to my injury. I was anxious and always comparing myself to my classmates who did not seem to have the same struggles through which I was going. I felt like everyone else was on a level playing field while I was trying to accomplish the same things with crippling disadvantages.



I had to come to terms with the fact that I was not the same. My brain and body were different. Despite being one way for twenty-two years of my life, the rest of my life would be completely different than anyone else's I knew. Initially after my injury, I had hoped and prayed that I would be fully healed. When it became clear that that would never happen, I hoped and prayed for the strength to accept my disabilities and live life the best I could, with both my strengths and weaknesses embraced as a part of me. I realized everything was exactly the way it was supposed to be. I stopped resisting and began accepting.

By shifting my mindset and accepting my disabilities,

I was able to accomplish goals that at times seemed out of my reach. I may have lost many things in my life, but I would not allow myself to lose more. I had wanted to become a physician prior to my accident, so I knew I had to hold on to that. A character flaw of mine is that I am stubborn, but in this case it helped. I told everyone that I still would become a physician. I would just be one in a wheelchair and who did things differently.

While I received much support from my family, friends, and attending physicians, not everyone was supportive. Because of the strong stereotypes that society holds against people with disabilities, I was treated differently by many. In medical school, I used a specialized wheelchair that could stand me up vertically in order to assist with the physical examination and allowed me to perform things on patients on the operating table during surgeries. It made me look very different and it slowed me down. I struggled during my surgery rotation and at the end of it, the attending physician told me I should consider a different career choice rather than becoming a physician. This was devastating for me to hear. I knew I could not do everything, but there are some things in which I could excel. God may have taken my ability to ever walk again, but I still had the use of my mind and arms. I have always believed that we are all given certain unique qualities and it is our duty to use them to the best of our abilities.

In medical school, several of the attending physicians and I noticed how the demeanor of patients changed when I entered the room. Some patients were known to be difficult or onerous with other medical staff, but with me they were much more calm and willing to cooperate. I found that by being in a wheelchair, I had become much more approachable than others. We all have weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but mine are easily visible. Patients can sense this and when they are sick or injured or in pain, my disability creates an empathetic bond with them and their struggles.

I completed medical school and passed all my board exams. It was only after accepting my new life that I was able to decide upon the specialty of physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R). After completing my residency in this specialty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, I completed a fellowship in spinal cord injury medicine at Stanford University.

I now work in a hospital close to where I was raised and care for others who have had spinal cord injuries, brain injuries, strokes, amputations, and other life-altering injuries or medical conditions. I am able to look each of my patients in the eyes and know exactly

what it is like to be them.

Life for me now looks much different than before. As I always tell my patients who are trying to adapt to a life with new circumstances, *different* does not mean *worse*. I start my day by taking our two-year-old son out of his crib and putting him on my lap. He enjoys sitting or standing there as I roll around the house because it gives him easy access to drawers that are usually out of his reach. I then drive to the hospital in a vehicle modified with hand controls that allow me to use my hands instead of my feet to accelerate and brake. My first two vehicles after my injury were cars that required me to take the wheels off my wheelchair and set everything in the passenger seat next to me, but now I drive a minivan with a ramp that allows me to just roll in while keeping my wheelchair intact. Instead of slowing me down, my wheelchair and the adaptations I have made allow me to be efficient in my work and the minivan allows me to travel as a consultant to multiple hospitals sometimes all in one day.

Before my accident, I enjoyed weightlifting, running, swimming, and other physical activities during my spare time. When I was in the hospital in 2009, I treated my physical therapy like I was working out at the gym again. After I returned home, my brother started taking me to the same gym close to my parents' home where I used to go prior to my accident. I had suffered nerve damage in my right arm that initially prevented me from lifting it, but I worked hard to get it stronger in the months after my accident because I wanted to be as independent as possible. After I met my wife and we got married, I discovered new activities I could do with her including kayaking, rock climbing, and tennis.

The nurses I work with sometimes tell patients about me and the things I do now to show them that despite life-altering circumstances, one can still live a fulfilling life.

The evening before I wrote this, I met with one young patient who was also involved in a motor vehicle accident. She is the same age I was when I had my accident twelve years ago. We talked for some time about the fragility of life and I explained to her the next steps in her rehabilitation process. Now, she too is ready to work hard to make her life the best it can be with what she has left.

Anyone with medical knowledge can provide care, but it takes someone who understands struggle to establish a connection with a patient in which there is trust. I would not be the doctor I am if not for the life-altering injuries I sustained in 2009, and for this I am ever grateful.