

What I Learned from Falling Down the Stairs

By Patti Wood MA, CSP

The day after Thanksgiving, I wake up with a stomach ache. I lie in bed, thinking I shouldn't have eaten that third turkey sandwich. My stomach burns. It's the middle of the night and the house is dark. I definitely need an antacid and need to go downstairs to get one. I get up out of bed. I consider turning on the lights, but leave them off, knowing that once I turn on lights I won't be able to go back to sleep. The ambient light from the city shining through the windows should be enough. On the second stair, I trip. I tumble over head first, feel a horrible pain and fall the rest of the way down the stairs, landing sprawled half way into the kitchen.

The pain is so excruciating that I start to pass out, but I force myself to stay conscious. My dog, Bo, appears in front of me, and for the first time without a doggie biscuit inducement he goes into a perfect sit. I am amused, but I don't think the dog whisperer will ever use the falling-down-stairs-means-sit technique. I try to get up, but a wave of pain and nausea hits me again. Oh my god, I think, I have fallen and I can't get UP! I crawl on my knees and one elbow towards the phone. Moving inch by inch, I reach it. My right hand is hanging twisted and limp like a rag doll as I dial 911 with my left finger. The phone rings and rings, but nobody answers. I am afraid I will pass out before anyone picks up. Then I remember that my neighbor is a doctor. My frequent casseroles delivered to his bachelor pad prompted him to say if I ever needed him to call. I need him, but I don't know his number. Since I am close to the kitchen door, I manage to reach up, open it and crawl outside and across the lawn to his house.

This is the beginning of my falling down the stairs adventure – an adventure, because in the same way an explorer climbing Mt. Everest learns so much about himself, about what makes living important from *climbing up a mountain* I learned so much about my self, about what makes living important from *falling down the stairs*.

I know many people would see my tumble as a mere bump in life, really not much of anything at all compared other injuries and life threatening illnesses. But learning takes place when you are ready to learn and this adventure, small as it was, took place after I had spent two years of the most intensive traveling in my 25-year career. And the accident's resultant injuries caused a forced stillness and a lack of ability to work at my frantic pace. The injuries from the accident were minor: a broken wrist, torn ligaments and tendons, in both wrists, and left ankle, a bruised hip and irritated vertebra in my neck. But they made it painfully difficult to even take care of myself in the same way. So this adventure was my learning time.

It seems odd that not being able to use one hand and having limited use of the other could make everything so hard. But those minor injuries meant I had to learn to open my dog's dinner cans with my left elbow and chin. I was also unable to eat anything frozen or packaged in plastic that required a knife or scissors. Unless I could open it with my teeth! Until my left hand got strong enough, I could not eat any food that had to be cut up. Every thing took time, focused effort and something I didn't know I had: enormous patience. Instead of talking on the phone to family or friends while fixing dinner, unloading the

dishwasher and having part of my mind occupied with my massive list of to do's I could only cook. Instead of rushing through a meal, I would slowly struggle with a fork or spoon in my left hand. Each bite was an awkward and frustrating chore.

When I finally could get on the computer, it was to type very slowly and very badly with one finger. Just answering emails took hours and the emails became so cryptic that I am sure clients wished for secret decoder rings to decipher them. I showered slowly with one arm held up in a plastic baggie. To dry my hair, I set the dryer on the toilet and sat on the floor aiming my head towards it. I couldn't hold a book and turn the pages. It even hurt to change the channels on TV channel changer, so I watched a single show all the way through! By the end of the day the effort to do simple things left me bathed in sweat. But there was a gift in this.

Everything slowed down and became a meditation. After three weeks of doing things slowly one at a time, without being able to drive, only leaving the house for speaking engagements, I felt calmer and more centered and strangely happier than I have been in a long time. This was my first lesson.

When life is frantic and faced paced, resist the urge to do many things quickly. Do one thing at time and do it slowly and thoughtfully.

This not only gave me yoga serenity, but I lost 12 pounds!

You might have noticed that I said I left the house for speaking engagements. It may seem odd. If you're a speaker, or indeed a workaholic working under such circumstances, it probably doesn't surprise you. Speakers have a "The show must go on!" mentality. Like every speaker out there I have spoken under horrible circumstances. I knew I could deal with that part of me that wanted to cry, take a pain pill, lie down and have a pity party. In fact I knew that some of the most incredible, heart-opening speaking experiences of my career occurred when I was suffering internally, but the audience didn't know it and we created an incredible connection.

I went off to each speech my little blonde smiling, arm-in-a-cast, limping self, and waited to see what happened. Not only didn't it matter to them, but they expected me to be in charge. Heck, they still let me carry my stuff, put my materials on the walls and move tables and chairs! And by the way, I could have used some help moving the tables with one hand! I learned my second lesson.

People will treat you like a victim only if you choose to act like a victim.

At the beginning of my recovery, some of my friends were so very kind. One took me to the store; another gave me a ride home from a speech; one brought over Chinese; another brought bags of comfort food; another came over to open jars and empty the trash and one, went above and beyond taking me to the emergency room (my second trip) at three in the morning. Other friends were busy with their lives and some busy with their own pain. Each time someone was kind, stranger or friend, I asked myself how many times I had been kind to others. I felt so good remembering because I knew now how good getting kindness felt. But each time someone was rude or didn't take the time to care, I asked myself how many

times I had been rude or had been too busy with my pain to show a little care and kindness. As I remembered I was ashamed. I learned a third lesson.

Notice the opportunity for a little act of kindness. No matter how busy or troubled your life is – what you give out good or bad will be returned to you.

I had a neighbor come over to cut the sleeves out of some sweatshirts for me so I had something to wear the night after the accident. (Yes, the accident also gave me the gift of a new and stylish cut up sweat shirt wardrobe.) My neighbor started to talk to me about how she knew that small acts of kindness mattered. They had mattered to her when other people helped her through her husband's slow and painful long-term illness and death. She said, "That's a long story..." and I, with my arm propped up on pillows and the dog sitting on my feet, said, "I have all the time in the world." So she sat down and told me her story, and we hugged and cried when she was through. It was a wonderfully close and intimate moment.

As time passed I had so many people share their accident stories with me. I had learned at other times in my life that your pain can make others open up to you. It happened in college when my dad died and the year my best friend was dying. I knew that when you are at your most vulnerable, people feel safe making themselves vulnerable to you. But this time I listened differently. I was not so caught up in my pain that I couldn't hear their need. This time I reveled in it. I saw the gift that vulnerability gives you. I reveled in the opportunity to see through the protective bravado to someone's very heart. This was my favorite lesson.

When you are vulnerable people have the chance to open their hearts to you. Enjoy the view. Enjoy the gift of intimacy that pain can bring into your life.

Little by little, I am gaining back my abilities. The day I could put on my favorite post earrings after weeks of naked ears, I called my sister and said, "I am now fully accessorized!" Just before I got in the car to drive for the first time, I called to thank my friend who had installed the knob on the steering wheel so I could drive with one hand. And I smiled the whole traffic-filled ride to the store. When the cast came off and my arms were strong enough to hold a dryer and a brush, I looked in the mirror glad to finally have a good hair day. At physical therapy last week I actually yelled, "Hurray!" when I could bend down my forefinger and make it touch my thumb in an "OK" sign. Recently, when my little ten year godchild Morgan saw me struggle with my dinner and asked, "Do you want me to cut that up for you?" I laughed with joy, grateful I could now hold a knife. And this week I can type two handed for short periods of time. I am so grateful to be able to write and communicate these thoughts to you. The last lesson:

Be grateful for the smallest things you can do. Be grateful for all your capabilities.

I have a feeling that very few people will take the time to read this whole article. There is so much to do and so little time....But I am grateful to those of you who did. I had a little adventure, and it was a good one, and I am so very grateful for it.