

Voyage of discovery



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After a few bizarre and seemingly unconnected events over the years, I think I had my first real inkling that there was something wrong with me when I made a simple fuel miscalculation when I was flying in Iraq for the RAF in 2004.

While it was on the safe side of an embarrassing disaster (I calculated we didn't have enough fuel to reach the next refuel location when we had just sufficient) it kept on nagging away at me as to why I had made that mistake. As a pilot flying a helicopter with limited range, you dwell on how much fuel you have, constantly. Despite debriefing myself over the next few days I never could reach a satisfactory conclusion as to why I had made the simple cognitive mistake; I had just got the sums wrong. Eventually, I put it down to simple tiredness. At the same time I had lost all feeling in one of my toes - not a big enough event to alarm me but one that again came under the column marked 'bizarre and seemingly unconnected events'. By then, there was quite a list.

Diagnosis

I thought nothing of these events until I was lying in the hospital bed in October 2005 having lost all (and I mean all) feeling in my legs. The houseman in A&E had prodded me with needles, and tested me with heat and cold but I had no sensation of anything he was doing to me. After a week or so of tests and an MRI scan, I was told, somewhat in passing, that no, it wasn't a tumour on my spine; I wasn't even aware that that was what they were looking for.

My next visitor was the neurologist, who asked me simple stuff like 'have you ever experienced such and such...'. After answering 'Yes' to about 17 of his 20 questions, he told me he knew what 'it' was but that I would need a couple more tests to make absolutely sure and he gave me a temporary diagnosis of post-viral myelitis. I was then infused with steroids over the next three days and, with some feeling returning to my legs, sent home.

Six weeks later, after an MRI scan of my brain and nerve impulse tests, I saw the same neurologist in his consulting room. The brain scan slides were up

on his light board and all I could see were a number of white 'blobs'. Familiar? After a lengthy explanation, of which I listened to and can remember very little, he told me I had multiple sclerosis. In fairness, what I do remember him saying was, 'of all the neurological conditions I would want to tell you you had, it would be multiple sclerosis'. Personally, although my wife may take issue, I'd settle for a mild dose of Tourettes. It was, however, sage advice and some I would pass on to others to help keep things in perspective.

Professionally this was the end of my world. While I suspected that the RAF would stop me flying, I was still a little surprised when they did as it was obvious to the neurologist that I had been suffering from (and flying with) MS for over 10 years. But, with the emphasis on overseas operations, my military medical category also prevented me from undertaking any further operations. I would become what is known in the military as 'self-loading baggage'. With my mind made up to accept the inevitable, I was discharged from the RAF in June 2008. The decision for me was made easier when I was gently nudged by one of the drug company DVDs you're sent when choosing your interferon/glatiramer acetate; in it, one chap with MS basically said, 'change jobs, get a life and enjoy yourself'. More sage advice.



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Monster Ski

By then I had created my own coping strategy, resolving to stick my finger in the eye of MS. This involved flailing myself to raise funds for MS, as this is what the condition needs more than virtually anything else. My brother and I came up with the idea of 'Monster Ski'. In concept, this was a mammoth skiing challenge to ski over 150,000 vertical feet in six days. I thought that if I, as someone with MS, could achieve the challenge, then anybody else could do so too (although knowing how to ski would certainly help!).

After proving the concept, and raising over £27,000, in 2007 we approached the MS Trust to suggest that they take it on as one of their annual fundraisers. They recently completed their third challenge in Whistler in Canada, with 16 people taking part. Monster Ski has raised over £250,000 for the Trust since we started.

For me Monster Ski is as much about raising the profile of MS as it is about raising funds. If there are any 'take aways' from Monster Ski it is that: MS need not hamper your ambition; you need not use MS as an excuse as to 'why not' but can use it as to 'why'; and, that a good way of re-calibrating yourself is to do something for others rather than just focusing on yourself and your condition.

Life with MS

In adjusting to life with MS I have made some discoveries. I feel that MS is not what defines me, but is only part of who I am. I don't think dwelling on MS helps me, so I don't. It lingers, but it doesn't dominate. I have found that my cognition is now not very good and I prefer simple take it or leave it decisions rather than having to make up my mind from a selection. I know this makes me come across as somewhat analogue but...

I've also found that dinner party conversations have a particularly random nature for me. While I see the connections between what has just been talked

about and the stunningly interesting, esoteric and informative point I make, the other guests don't and the conversation doesn't even skip a beat until it's back with their theme. I've learned to accept their sideways glances and hope they're thinking more savant than idiot. Oh yes, I have a few more other symptoms too.

Since diagnosis, I have changed my appreciation of what is important and what is inconsequential - and there is a lot of that. Part of this has been through the voyage of discovery that MS has provided me with. I have learnt as much about myself as I have about the condition and I have been surprised by what I've discovered. What I consider now as having value and worth has changed fundamentally. It has been a refreshing journey and, while having MS is not exactly the best thing that has ever happened to me, it is not a counsel of despair either. While some doors have closed, MS has opened new doors to me and the new experiences I have been able to have, have been life-enhancing. These include deepening friendships, starting new ones and finding that I had and still have more of a contribution to make to other people's lives than I ever realised.

The best advice I ever gave to anyone was 'everyone deserves a second chance'. That person is now the Master of the Household for The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall. He deserved his second chance and you deserve yours. It is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

