

The Light Others Carry

By Nancy Huggett

Smack dab in the middle of our fridge door is a large magnet with a Pema Chodron quote, a directive: “Abandon Hope.” Capital A, capital H, period. Abandon hope. This is what saved me.

Trained to be hopeful and schooled in positivity, my natural enthusiasm as a child bloomed into adult optimism. But battered by circumstance—my mother’s sudden death, our daughter Jessie’s strokes, living inside medical systems and disinfected hallways that stretched into some unknown future—hope began to look pointless. A Pollyanna pointing at the moon, a mere reflection of light from somewhere else with no pull in my universe.

While Jessie’s strokes initially stranded her without memory, language, or the ability to initiate movement, these were manageable, if heartbreaking, outcomes that we knew would change slowly over time with therapy and practice. But the frontal lobes, where her watershed strokes occurred, also control inhibition and the ability to regulate emotion. And my husband and I were not prepared for the onslaught of aggression and violence that invaded our house and curled up on the couch to stay.

“Aggression,” I write. One word to cover a world of destruction, the frenzy of punches, knocks, swipes, kicks, jabs, and howling profanities. One word for the ferocious, berserk soul that would erupt and overflow the bounds of the couch, the chair, the dining room, the house. One word for the screams of rage and flurry of fists that would pound our backs, drop us to the floor.

Sometimes it slept. Sometimes it exploded and scattered all the pieces of our lives across the living room floor and out into the hallway. My husband and I were too frightened to look into each other’s eyes and ask the real question. What if this is it?

He left for work each morning. I stayed and constructed a day delicately balanced on the thin filament of what healed and held her. Friends, but only one at a time; a walk, but not if it’s windy. Any sensory overwhelm—from sun or wind to an unexpected siren or minor frustration—triggered the eruption of violence: a table flipped, a water bottle hurled, a hairbrush pitched, a pummeling of fists, an elbow to the jaw. I learned to retreat calmly, carefully. Any precipitous response only escalated the violence as she acted from her amygdala mind. Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Her only response ever was to fight. Fight. Fight.

It takes eight minutes. Eight minutes for the brain to settle back into a kind of homeostasis, a calm state of being. I held the number in my head as I breathed in and out. Proof. Science. That there was something that made sense, that was predictable in this unpredictable minefield.

People held out hope for us. Some prayed. Some said: "It will get better with time." "At least she is still alive." "I know a woman who...." Trained in a certain kind of hope, they insisted on silver linings and storms passing.

But that kind of hope did not help. A body battered daily cannot survive on the belief that the future will be different from the present. I knew my only salvation would be in my ability to renounce the hope that this experience would change. I needed to sit still with each moment: the violence, the fists, the pounding heart, the yell for help, the fear of another stroke, the isolation, the beauty of walking by the river, the stolen moments of affection and laughter with my husband, the charming Jessie, the instants of tenderness while brushing her hair. I needed to sit with each of these moments and embrace them all. And only then could life be lived, savored, and rescued from this fresh hell.

And so, I practiced breathing. In and out. Practiced saying: "Right now, it's like this." I practiced sleeping; I practiced walking; I practiced holding my broken heart, my fear, my exhaustion in my arms and promised that I would care for them, care for me (and my daughter and my family) as we walked into the ever-unknown present.

As I breathed in and out and held on to letting go, as I abandoned hope, packages arrived at our door. Turkey casseroles. A full spaghetti meal. Frozen cinnamon buns. Hemmed pants. Hairbands. Tintin books. A quilt—sewn, stitched, and tied by friends, family, and the church community. Packages that sustained our bodies and cared for our souls through the wasteland that I was learning to embrace. Packages that held just enough for the next meal, the next day, the next meltdown.

Perhaps then, hope is a casserole or a quilt. Baked or sewn carefully and lovingly by a community of hands reaching out to take the scraps of a life and make it wholesome, whole. Perhaps hope is pieced together by others and offered as a banquet, a blanket, or a balm. Something tactile to be pulled out and wrapped around your body, your child's body, to warm and hold and flannel the skin. Something so real and present there is no need for naming. Perhaps hope is how others hold you until you are ready to reclaim the present fully. How you come to know you are never alone, even in the darkness. Perhaps hope is a light others carry, if we let them.

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