

FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE

Karen Law, Queensland



It was the day before the Overcoming MS retreat in August last year. I remember I was sitting on my hotel bed with its crisp unfriendly white sheets when the phone rang.

My husband David and our three young children were calling to see how I was getting on, making sure I'd found the hotel okay, that the flight from Brisbane had been a good one. I talked to the kids for a while. Murray, who was nine at the time, wanted to know if I could see the MCG from my hotel room window. Not quite, I told him, but it was just across the road. Roanna, who was five, needed to be sure that the teddy bear she'd lent me for company was tucked up in my bed. I promised her it was and said nothing about the sheets being unfriendly.

Then seven-year-old Hazel came on the phone. 'Mummy,' she said, 'what are you actually going to be doing on this retreat?' I explained as best I could about groups and learning and meditation and healthy food, and then she said, 'so in a way it's like going to school and being given homework that you have to do for the rest of your life.'

I'd started some of the homework in advance. I'd changed my diet completely and boosted my Vitamin D levels almost off the scale. But I was still very scared. I needed to meet George Jelinek to see and hear firsthand that it really is possible to stay well after a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. And I needed to learn to meditate.

When I found out that stress can trigger relapses I actually got quite confused. My worst symptoms (numbness in both legs and arms, and fatigue) came on immediately after flying to England for my Dad's funeral. I could see the link quite clearly and I was desperate to stop it happening again, but I remember saying to a friend in genuine anguish, 'but I can't stop people dying!'

The benefits of meditation crept up on me during the week of the retreat and are still creeping up on me now. They crept up quietly and made me more open to all the wonderful people who shared that time with me, made me less frightened, more giving, more able to ask for and accept help. That new way of interacting has become my homework too.

I cried many tears that week – not all of them in sadness – and I discovered that I need to be kind to myself.

Through it all I resolved to give my body a chance to heal without pharmaceutical drugs, a decision I'd been struggling with since diagnosis a few months earlier. I also started to acknowledge the spiritual side of my nature. Until then I'd put aside many of the 'big questions' in life believing they could easily wait until later. So long as I led a good life, I reckoned, that would be enough.

Now I decided that was not enough, and I could see that my definition of a 'good life' was almost certainly going to change as time went on.

Towards the end of the retreat there was one unforgettable moment when I realised I'd spent most of my life in struggle, and that having 'coped' with a diagnosis as devastating as MS, I was about to put on my battle gear and head straight back into the struggle again.

In that moment I saw I had a choice – living that choice has been the hardest homework of all.

I left the Yarra Valley with a feeling of peace in my life, a wonderful presence that I was determined to hold on to. I also left with a little terracotta candle holder, a gift from the closing ceremony to carry with me back into my other life.

When the plane landed in Brisbane, I came round the corner to be greeted with a delighted scream of 'Mummy' and a five year old's bear hug being hurled at me from a running jump. Roanna was very pleased to see me. Hazel hung back, waiting to proudly give me the gift she'd bought with her own money. It was a beautiful little candle. As I unwrapped it I realised it was exactly the right size for the meditation candle holder and the gift took on a special meaning – for both of us.

Big brother Murray didn't come to the airport but the next morning he came into my bedroom and said 'Mummy, here's your present' and gave me the most amazing cuddle.

It is now nine months since leaving the retreat and I'm feeling well. No pharmaceutical drugs, lots of flaxseed oil. I still have some symptoms and I still get scared sometimes but I also have a lot of hope for the future.

Every day I strive to be grateful for all that I have, for my wonderful kids and for David, who has been ready to share this unexpected next stage in our journey together.

I'm also deeply grateful to George and the whole Gawler team for giving me such thoughtful guidance when I needed it most. And because I want to live differently from now on, and because I want to give myself the best possible chance of recovery, I'm going to do my homework every single day.

For the rest of my life.

24 Jan MS and the latest research

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/ms/3789476>

24 Jan A Sprinkle of hope

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/a-sprinkle-of-hope/3759878>

31 Jan karen Law

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/karen-law/3800938>

Feb 7 Sprinkle of hope 3

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/sprinkle-of-hope-233/3813856>