The Backbone of My Life

Twisted. Crooked. Abnormal. Disfigured. My spine. My body was in revolt and there was no explanation as to why. I did not know why. My parents could not tell me why. And the doctors weren’t any the wiser either. We never even saw it coming…

I think most suffering in life comes as a shock and a surprise to us. We never prepare ourselves for illness, disease and disability. In fact, sometimes we do not even notice the early signs of it, surreptitiously beginning to take over our bodies and control us, like a demon harbored within. It is a whole other force working within us and we are helplessly left at its mercy. This is how it was for me. I had no idea what I was going to face, but I suppose this is the reality of life. It is unpredictable and fragile. Yet, it is this unpredictable nature that challenges us and makes us who we are. Illness is unpredictable too and never knowing when we are going to be struck down by it should make us take the time to value and appreciate moments of health and happiness.

With hindsight, I now appreciate that there were early signs about my condition but I do not blame anyone for not taking full notice or consideration of them. Like most growing young teenagers, I was acutely observant of my changing body and, for a long time, I was aware that one of my hips was higher than the other. Mum noticed it too but we never thought anything of it; we had no reason to. It was just a small imperfection. We all have one ear higher than the other or one foot longer than the other, right? I thought that my slightly wonky hips were surely no different. And we are also often told that, as we grow, these imperfections and slight differences will sort themselves out in time, so we never fear the worst. But, as the months went on, something else became more prominent. My Mum and Dad constantly nagged me about my posture. “Sit up straight,” “Tuck your tummy in,” “Hold your head up high,” and “Pull your shoulders back.” I thought I wastrying to do these things*.* It seemed no matter how much I tried, I never stood or sat straight and tall, and instead I looked slouched and hunched. But again, I never thought much of it. Then, one day, my Mum and Granny noticed something. All I did was bend down and what they saw shocked them. My back was raised at one side, my ribs splayed, and one of my shoulders was higher than the other. They said my spine was twisted and humped. I didn’t want to believe them. A knot of fear lodged itself inside me, created by the uncertainty of what was to come.

Before I knew it, I had been referred by my GP to a Scoliosis Specialist in the Orthopaedics Department of a Sick Children’s hospital. It was then that the bomb was dropped. Fear and danger suddenly engulfed the friendly and colourful children’s hospital consultation room. The fairytale fantasy of Disney characters and Winnie the Pooh on the walls became a dark nightmare. The words, “You have scoliosis and will need an operation,” made me uncontrollably resent the doctor. Moments earlier I had been admiring his kindness, compassion and calming influence. But, in an instant, this all changed. And it was not his fault. It was not anybody’s fault but I was angry and distraught. I did not want an operation. There had to be another way. Therapy? Braces? Physiotherapy? I wanted to just stay as I was. There had been no clues signaling that this was going to happen to me, and I was still the same person that had managed and coped in my life so far. I wanted to just accept my scoliosis as a condition that was going to be part of my life and I tried to ignore the intensifying pain. But, with each appointment and x-ray, the curve was progressively worsening by a considerable number of degrees.

Eventually, I agreed to the operation. My decision was not based on aesthetics but on something much more important: my own health. Having been warned that my internal organs would soon be affected by the pressure of a curved spine, coupled with increased breathlessness and the pain I was experiencing, which was only likely to get worse as the curve increased, I could no longer ignore the fact that surgery was my only option.

The initial offer of surgery had me wondering why I - why anyone - would go through the enormous physical and emotional ordeal of a major operation for appearance. But of course, this is not what it was about, and I soon realised this. Anyway, we should not be defined by our looks. Beauty comes from within. The condition of my spine is unique and personal to me. If the surgery had not been necessary because of the effect my spine would have on my organs, then I may not have had the operation at all. The type of person we are, our personality and strength of character, comes at an emotional level, not a physical one. I think I experienced this for myself first-hand. We all say that looks do not matter and are not everything. But, how many of us really mean that or think about it when we are saying it? Because our looks are in fact how, at first glance, we are identified and recognised. Most people have probably never had to experience a significant change in their physical appearance but, because I have, I know that as a person I was no different.

The operation itself was not the quick fix I thought it would be. I had to have neurosurgery before my spinal surgery could take place. Of course, all of this was a lot for my fifteen-year-old self to take in and deal with. I wondered why it had happened to me. What had I done wrong to cause this to happen? I was distraught. Not so much at how I looked but at what I was going to have to go through and the pain and stress of it all – not only on me but my family too. They were there to support me through it all but I constantly felt sorry for them and frustrated that they were worried and that me and my back were the cause of their anxiety. But, it is this struggle that has shaped my personality, and my foreseeable future. Along the way, I faced many challenges but I know that these were all placed ahead of me for a reason: to make me stronger and more confident. My curved spine became not only a physical twist in my body shape, but a twist in my life too. It changed my course and I constantly find myself wondering whether I would be the same person now if I had not been through the scoliosis diagnosis and surgery. Ultimately, I will never know if it was my fate or destiny, but it seems to feel as if it was not just an accident.

My spine is not perfectly straight now, it is still slightly curved, but it is much improved. I think what my talented surgeon was able to do with my spine is incredible and fascinating. My before-and-after photographs and x-rays reveal to me the power of science and technology when coupled with expert skills and knowledge. Looking back now, I still find it unbelievable just how much my back changed, and it is these photographs and x-rays that my spinal surgeon was delighted to show me, and my friends and family were desperate to see, once I was well again. I too was astonished and impressed, but at the same time, I think my emotional transformation, which is not visible to the eye, has become of more importance to me, than my physical one. Both my emotional and physical self has been altered. I have a scar from my head to my bottom, and I am not ashamed by it, embarrassed by it or upset by it. I will never be afraid to wear clothes that reveal it. I am not saying that I want to show it off but, I am definitely not afraid of others seeing it. My scar tells a story and is part of who I am now. I firmly believe that our past experiences help to define who we become. I honestly do not think that I would be the same person I am today if I had not been diagnosed with scoliosis. We all have hard times thrown at us for a reason. Life is a complicated mix of good and bad and no one can escape this; we just meet different obstacles along the way. In truth though, it is not what we face, but how we face it and how we come out the other side that really matters. Difficult situations test us and stretch us to our limits. They force us to build confidence, or develop strength; to show more love and compassion towards others; to be selfless and to think of others’ hard times as well as our own. One question that I’m sure we have all asked is, why is there suffering? Some may believe that suffering is placed upon those who have a certain strength of character that will allow them to cope with it, and learn about others and themselves along the way. However some people do not overcome their obstacles and find the suffering in their life to be never ending. Are our lives preordained, with what is to happen to us already portioned out in a way that is out with our control? And if so, why? Many find the answers to such questions in faith and religion, whilst for others, these questions will remain unanswered forever. From my own personal experience, nobody deserves to suffer, but when we do, we often come away from it a better person.

It was not long after my operation that I realised that I should actually be grateful that it had happened to me. It drastically changed me as a person and scarred me for life, both physically and emotionally but, those scars are evidence of my strength and are part of me. I have become more confident in my own abilities and myself. I was always one for hiding away, being shy and keeping myself to myself. I would not say that I am necessarily bounding in outward self-confidence now but there is a certain spark or glimmer that was not there before. I think it is an inner confidence. I know that faced with a physical deformity, two major operations, weeks of complications and months of recovery, I still made it through. This makes me feel like I can take on everything else that life throws at me. I have learned how to be brave. Under testing and difficult circumstances, I have achieved many things. I now have greater resilience and am less of a worrier than ever before and have been given faith that I can overcome things. I have also learned, above all else, that beauty and body image are not fundamental to our life and should not define who we are and how others judge us. There is always far more to a person than what meets the eye. As I move forward in life, journeying into the unknown future, the new people I come across and meet will be unaware of my story and what I have been through, but I will. I will hold it with me forever, and I know that my character will be evidence of this. The way in which my past experience will be hidden to those I meet in my future makes me think about how the many people we are surrounded by in our daily lives, and those across the world we do not know at all, all have their own story of their past behind them to tell, which is not visible to us. How many people are currently going through, or have been through, far more than they give away?

Another one of the most significant outcomes of my scoliosis diagnosis is that it has enlightened me as to what I want to do with the rest of my life. My experience as a patient in hospital has inspired me to study medicine. The excellent quality of care I received and my admiration for what doctors did for me have made me determined to provide the same care to others in the future. I know exactly what it meant to me to be cared for so completely from the start to finish of my treatment. It was not once fully recovered and back at school that I began to think about a career as a doctor, but whilst critically ill in hospital, subconsciously watching all that was taking place around me, that I began to consider medicine as a career. It was especially when one of the junior doctors told me, “because of all that you’ve been through, you’ll make a great doctor,” that I was convinced that medicine was for me and that I could draw on my own patient experience to truly empathise with my own patients in the future. Just as my scoliosis journey had both emotional and physical aspects, my connection with medicine has two sides to it too. I have always had a huge enthusiasm for science, which my exposure to medicine has enhanced. However, emotionally, I desire to connect with and understand people, helping me learn about the human condition.

Not only did my time as a patient in hospital spark and cement my passion for medicine, but it also provided me with strong links to the inspirational people I met, most importantly my surgeon. Just last summer I was given the most wonderful opportunity to shadow him for a week. I think I have really proven my new confidence and bravery to myself, and my friends and family, by being mentally and physically strong enough to watch two other patients undergo the same surgery as me. Seeing it first-hand, and understanding just how major an operation it was, I felt proud of myself. I was also able to admire the medical science behind the procedure. Before my operation I refused to watch small clips of it online, and would never have believed that in less than three years I would be standing beside my surgeon in an operating theatre, throughout the entire duration of the operation, without feeling anxious in the slightest. For some inexplicable reason, I felt calm and at ease. This does not necessarily mean that I want to be a surgeon, but I hope that in the same way my patient experience illuminated medicine to me, the different facets of medicine I experience at medical school will reveal the precise field of medicine I go on to pursue.

If it were not for my condition I would not have been immersed into the world of medicine in the way I have been. I wonder whether this was all chance, just an unusual coincidence, or, if it was predetermined and meant to be. It is fascinating and intriguing to think about whether or not when we are born the rest of our life is already mapped out and planned for us. Are our experiences circumstance based or are they our fate and destiny? Was my scoliosis experience predetermined to lead me into medicine or was it my experience that has lit my spark of interest in the medical field? Regardless of what I, or anyone else, believes in, I think we must all get that feeling every so often that something is just ‘meant to be’. What seemed like an insurmountable obstacle and horrible occurrence in my life has resulted in bringing all of the parts of my life together, mapping out and directing my future. Just as the correction of the curve in my spine has altered my shape, smoothing out my back, it has reshaped my path and given me a clear direction in life too. I will never know how things will work out but, I know that I will forever come out of demanding situations building on what they teach me. I will continue to see and extract the positives.

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