

**Reminders About What Really Matters:
Life Lessons Out Of Personal Tragedy**

August 6, 2011 is the one year anniversary of the loss of my wife, Chris. She died following a heartbreaking battle with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. This article is offered both as a memorial to Chris and as an encouragement to myself and others.

ALS is a dreadful disease. For unknown reasons, the body begins destroying motor neurons that control the voluntary muscles. Despite being identified for over 100 years, ALS has no known cause or cure. There are approximately 6,000 new cases diagnosed in the US annually and 2/3 of these are men. The average lifespan is 3 years following diagnosis.

Chris had what is known as a bulbar onset. This means that the disease begins its destructive process in the brainstem rather than the lower spinal column which is more typical. As a result, the first muscle affected was her tongue. She experienced symptoms for more than a year before ALS was diagnosed in June of 2009. It is not unusual for the disease to be misdiagnosed for some time. This is especially true when the individual is in great physical condition, as Chris was. In these cases, the neuromuscular system actually creates bypasses of the affected area. At the time of the diagnosis, they estimated that she may have had the disease for two years or more.

*ALS Article
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Following the diagnosis, the disease progressed rapidly. Chris totally lost her ability to speak, swallow, and support her head. Her respiratory functional levels declined and supporting life became an increasing struggle for her. I can't describe the heartbreak and suffering we experienced daily. It was as if a beast had grabbed her by the throat and relentlessly kept tightening its grip.

In my simple view there are two ways that people manage ALS: those who are heroic and seem to be able to overcome the fear. Steven Hawking appears to be an example of this. The other is courageous, where the fear continues to dominate but they courageously live each day. Chris was in the courageous group.

Throughout the period of caring for her, I had lots of quiet time and tried to understand "what is the great truth in all of this suffering?" I think I figured it out ...

You know all of those seemingly trite sayings about life that we have all heard ... you can easily make your own list, there are so many of them. The great truth is, they are all great truths. Here's my list:

- Your health is your most important possession.
- The importance of maintaining balance.
- We have considerably less control than we think ... don't kid yourself.
- Don't put off something that is important (especially in your marriage).
- If someone loves you, appreciate what a precious gift that is.

- If you love someone, tell them in lots of ways ... as often as you can.
- Don't sweat the small stuff ... focus on what matters.
- It is never a mistake to be thoughtful.

I think it would give meaning to Chris' suffering if each of us would pick one of those truths that we need to improve, and starting right now and for the rest of our lives – do better. I hope you'll do that for Chris and for yourself. I am.

In remembering Chris, I offer the following quote:

God saw she was getting tired
And a cure was not to be.
So he put his arms around her
And whispered, "Come with Me."

With tearful eyes we watched her suffer
And saw her fade away.
Although we loved her dearly,
We could not make her stay.

A golden heart stopped beating,
Hard working hands to rest.
God broke our hearts, but reminded us
He'd given us his best.

Unknown Author