

September, 2010

Volume 10, No. 3

Remarkable Recovery from a Severe Spinal Injury

Jill Raiguel

Abstract:

Remarkable recovery is possible. That is my experience and that is my purpose in writing my story of a remarkable recovery from a severe cervical spinal injury with resultant weakness in my hands. It is not to WOW you with a miraculous story or impress you with what a super-human person I am. Rather, it is to empower you to call on your own inner resources, the talents of others and the spiritual help that is always available. In writing this piece I discovered for myself what I believe are the ingredients of a remarkable recovery: 1) Bringing forth determination to get well, 2) Finding skilled practitioners or team of skilled practitioners, 3) Being willing to give up being victimized, and 4) Asking for and listen to your inner spiritual help.

Key words: remarkable recoveries, remarkable recovery, spinal injury, neurology, chiropractic, shamanism, soul retrieval

I have a broad background in holistic health modalities and maintain a private practice where my primary therapy modality is shamanism and other alternative techniques. I also practice psychotherapy at Kohut Psychiatric Medical Group in California.

A therapist and healer for over 30 years, I have been the Wellness Manager at the East/West Holistic Health Center in New York City, and was formerly an adjunct professor of education at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, as well as a high school English teacher.

My life skills inventory and workbook have helped thousands of abuse and addiction survivors learn emotional skills such as managing anger appropriately, not letting people use them, not over helping, having fun, overcoming blind spots, and expressing needs they missed because they came from dysfunctional families. I am committed to empowering people not just to survive but to heal themselves.

The bad news

Before I had my car accident I had been a high school English teacher seeing thousands of students and a psychotherapist treating thousands of adult survivors of abuse, alcohol and trauma over a period of 25 years. I had observed that certain students and clients were more committed to their

success, while others were committed to their hopelessness and felt like permanent failures. I learned to call forth people's commitment to themselves. I taught students they could earn A's and taught adults to change their lives.

I told one student: "I know you have an 'A' inside you." She answered, "Yes, I know I do, but I can't find her."

When I asked one client if she wanted to be in charge of her life or was she going to let her father control her life, this client who had been abused for much of her childhood, said, "My father controlled the first half of my life; I'm going to control the rest of my life."

In order to have my own remarkable recovery, I had to become a student of my own lessons. I had to believe in my own ability to heal even when professionals told me I would not.

My remarkable recovery story starts in 1996 with a well-known doctor stating: "Ms. Raiguel, you have permanent nerve damage in both your arms." I gasped. "Your MRI shows a herniated disc at cervical vertebrae four; and your nerve conductivity test shows nerve damage down both arms, with the right arm sustaining far more damage. You will never work again. Go home and rest." The man had ice in his veins. This head of University of California at Irvine's Neurology Department declared the truth about me as he saw it. As I sank into the leather chair in this prestigious doctor's office, I felt like I had been punched in the stomach that afternoon in 1998.

Back in the neurologist's office, I got angry. I gathered myself and blasted him back: "That's not good enough." I didn't know how but I was determined I would find a way to heal myself.

Two months earlier I had seen my X-rays in my chiropractor's office. He explained that the force of the impact in my auto accident had shoved my spine up under my skull. It was no longer straight and was now at a slight angle. He then explained that I would need to go on medical leave; find a therapist and a good lawyer.

"I'm fine," I said not willing to admit the gravity of my injuries. But my chiropractor was right. Over the next months my physical health and emotional stability began to deteriorate. I was not sleeping. I was crying easily. I had lost my sense of humor.

The neurology report had convinced me that my chiropractor was right. I had survived the car accident. I had sustained a herniated disc and whiplash in my neck leaving my arms limp, weak and nearly useless, my body was in terrible pain. I had been turning in to my Southern California driveway just as I always did around 5 pm one afternoon and a truck changed lanes without looking to see if my car was there. He rear-ended me going 45 mph. As my car bolted into on-coming traffic, everything went into slow motion, and I had all the time I needed to get back into my own lane. In real time that was probably about 1/2 second. If I had not had the benefit of the "time stretch," I would have been killed and would have killed six to eight people with me.

I was forced to take a medical leave of absence from my job as an English teacher. Little did I know that this seeming tragedy would initiate my remarkable recovery, give me a new career and put me on a spiritual path that changed my life.

Determination: Essential Ingredient #1

When had my determination started? Where had my anger at this fancy doctor come from?

When I was ten years old I fell off a horse and landed squarely on my right knee. That knee took the full weight of the fall. Not even my hands were dirty. On the way to the doctor, my knee swelled up like a basketball. Nothing was broken but over the next few days it turned all shades of purple, blue and yellow.

I hobbled around on crutches for a week. At another visit to the doctor, he said if you don't straighten out that knee, I'll force it straight in a cast. Being a "good little girl" I didn't say anything, but inside I said, "**NO WAY AM I GOING TO HAVE A CAST.**" So for the next week I sat the crutches in the corner and slowly pushed my heel down as tears ran down my face. One week later, I was walking normally and did not need a cast. The most important part of this was that I had to call on my dogged determination, or what I have come to call my "rageful commitment" to get well.

After leaving the neurologist's office, I drove the 25 miles to my home wishing I had taken a friend to commiserate with. Then I remembered Dr. Bernie Siegel's work with people he called "exceptional patients" (Siegel, 1990, p. 161). Working with people who had terminal cancer, he found that a small percentage of them made remarkable recoveries. As he investigated their recoveries, he observed that they were doggedly determined to get well.

My lesson: Determination is one of the essential ingredients in having a Remarkable Recovery.

Find a team of compatible practitioners: Essential Ingredient #2

Back to the present time, I began my quest for healing and healers who could help me. I did yoga and took herbs. I explored acupuncture, chiropractic and bodywork. All produced some success. The Yoga relaxed me. My nutritionist recommended yucca and butcher's broom for my swollen and painful hands and joints. I saw an acupuncturist three times a week, and the feeling began to come back into my hands and arms. My chiropractor did very gentle adjustments that gave me more mobility and began the long process of straightening out my spine. My body worker stretched and relaxed my spasming muscles and tendons. They all felt that with enough time I would heal.

My lesson: Find practitioners who believe you can recover and have had experience healing your condition.

Be willing to give up being a victim: Essential Ingredient #3

Despite my good start on the road to recovery, I continued to be furious at that truck driver who had hit me, and I extended my anger to the doctor who had pronounced me "incurable." After months of venting to anyone who would listen, one friend simply said, "You are being a victim." I responded with considerable venom, "You're darn right I am. He hit ME and ruined my life." She said back, "Yes, you were the victim of a terrible accident, but you have been clinging to your victim attitude. You are so righteous about him hitting you and being the cause of your problems that it's keeping you stuck. And, those stuck emotions stay in your body. Let them all go and you'll get better."

In that moment I resisted her. I wanted to defend myself. I had had this conversation with thousands of clients who were victims of abuse of all kinds. I even wrote about it in my own book (Raiguel, 1999, p. 40). I was a bit humiliated on being confronted with my own victim act but I knew my friend was right. Later on I thanked her. I had read Dr. Candace Pert's *Molecules of Emotion* (1997), in which she discusses the scientific evidence that proves when we hold on to hate, anger, fear or sadness, our body stops working. Conversely, when we fill our bodies with love, joy, and peace, our bodies get

healthier and thrive. I realized I had to let go of my anger and hurt and even forgive the stranger who wrecked my car and broken my body.

Over the next week or so, I wrote him a letter that I never mailed in which I cataloged all my feelings. With the Kleenex handy, I cried out my grief and even yelled how mad I was. I had to let all those negative emotions go. Finally I felt complete. As I ripped it up I let go of all my negative feelings toward him. I felt lighter and free.

My lesson: To recover, one must release the victim role. Being a victim is disempowering and blocks healing.

Ask and listen to your inner spiritual help: Essential Ingredient #4

Despite all of these efforts, I still had pain in my back, arms, joints, neck and feet; I still slept poorly; and I still was depressed. Then I signed up for a shamanic healing workshop.

Nothing had prepared me for my first visioning experience in that drumming circle, nearly eleven years ago. That began the spiritual part of my remarkable recovery. At that workshop in San Diego, California, I lay down on a mat very close to a huge drum the size of living room chair. I have since learned that the regular drone of a drum or rattle facilitates very deep visioning experiences or what in shamanism are called 'journeys.' The monotonous beat mimics the theta brainwave state during which deep visioning occurs. Traditional peoples realized this long before technical equipment was invented to measure the theta brainwave state that drumming evokes (Wesselman, 2003).

In my vision, I sat naked on a stone with my eyes closed. After what seemed like hours of continuous drumming, I felt as if my body was beating inside a giant drum. A crackling fire of early evening had dwindled to hot coals. Although the fire warmed my face, the rest of my body remained cool. I knew in my vision that three shamans near me were about to work on me. I sensed a large group of people behind them. I'd been in constant pain for so many years that the discomfort and embarrassment of the moment seemed minimal. I knew the ceremony was about to start. My job was to be still, be open.

I'd caught glimpse of the sand painting that the healers had made on my behalf – black, red, blue and yellow sacred designs. As I had been instructed I breathed in the energy of the painting. I took a step into the hole in the dirt and sat down a small ledge carved into the side so my feet naturally touched the bottom.

Then the shamans began their chanting. Invisible hands began filling the hole up with sand. When the sand reached my neck, the hands gently but firmly patted it place and moved away. *The healing is done*, someone said.

With that, many hands began digging. They were singing clapping and joking. Hands helped me out and began dusting off my sandy body. A group of women with large jars of warm water rinsed me off. I stood naked in the middle of the group of people I somehow knew. But more startling than that I realized something else: for the first time in many years I had no pain. My face didn't ache, my joints did not throb. I could feel each finger on both my hands, and my neck moved freely with no twinges. I felt an inner peace I had never experienced. I was thrilled.

Suddenly, another drum began far away but was getting closer all the time. Without even thinking, I was being pulled toward a beat that was growing faster and faster. A voice said, "Now feel the mat under you and begin to open your eyes." My hands felt my sweat pants; my cheeks were wet with

tears; my mind was still lingering in the visioned experience. A woman leader of the shamanism workshop asked, "Would you like to share?" I was so altered by the experience that I couldn't even find words to speak, let alone explain what it just transpired. I flexed my fingers and toes. I had no pain in my hands. I was dumbfounded.

Back in the drumming circle at the workshop, while other people reported brief visions of seeing squirrels, sharing a moment with a favorite grandfather or riding dolphins, I had had a mini-series of healing visions. I knew something powerful had happened, but I felt very vulnerable. I learned later that sometimes shamanism takes the form of healing visions like this one. There was far more for me to discover about this and other journeys, but that would not happen for several years. This experience shifted my healing process into high gear.

While driving the 100 miles home from the workshop, I kept flexing my joints, still disbelieving I had been healed. During a subsequent drive in my car, as I reflected back on my vision, I practiced turning my neck and looking over my shoulder to change lanes, and was delighted to be able to do so without wincing from pain. I had been driving over an hour, and my feet were not falling asleep. I pulled into a gas station, stepped out of the car to stretch, and my hips and back were not stiff. I had experienced one of the basic principles of visioning work: change your inner life, change your outer life.

My lesson: Accept the wonder and possibility that visions have the power to heal. This is based on the principle of 'change your inner reality, change your outer life.'

My own soul loss and retrieval

After the drumming circle vision, I did not think that much had happened. But, to my amazement, my body seemed to be healing much more rapidly. However, I had some major setbacks. A few months later my mother died. Ten days after that my uncle passed away. Fifteen months later my dad died after heart surgery. The multiple emotional losses overwhelmed me. My arms and hands were going numb again.

Although these losses were not physical, I felt like I had had the stuffing knocked out of me. After the deaths of both my parents, I was grieving and I was definitely not my peppy, fun-loving self. I felt apathetic, I had lost enthusiasm and sense of humor, and I was not ME. A friend told me that these were symptoms of what traditional medicine men and women call "soul loss." In Western psychological terms, professionals would say I had dissociated. Many times after a trauma, car accident, surgery or severe loss, part of our life essence leaves or dissociates as a coping mechanism for avoiding feeling the severe pain.

A colleague told me about soul retrieval. Recognizing I had had several soul parts that were probably lost, I registered in Hank Wesselman's training at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (Wesselman, internet ref.). I had known about Esalen for 20 years and had longed to go there. After the winding, spectacular drive up from Southern California, I stood on the Big Sur cliffs watching the crashing surf and gliding sea gulls. As I inhaled the salt air, I let the land and sea start to minister to me.

I had a soul retrieval during one of the sessions. As a part of the workshop, I began by saying to myself: "I want myself back," which is the coaching I now give anyone who thinks they have had a soul loss. During the workshop we did daily journeys or inner visioning to connect to our spiritual helpers, to remove energy blocks and to bring back lost soul parts. With the safety and support of the group and the expert guidance of Dr. Wesselman, I was encouraged to develop that natural ability we all have, the ability to vision. I was instructed on how to use my visioning and journeying to help others as well as myself. But first I needed to get myself well again.

Following the workshop, I felt joyous and deeply grateful but I truly did not expect to see anything change in my life. However, a few days later I was once again singing in the shower. A longtime friend said, "You are so excited, I haven't heard that excitement in your voice in years." For no apparent reason, I started losing the weight I'd gained from being so sedentary after the accident. That was the most surprising because I had been dieting for a couple of years but the scale would not go down. Soul retrieval did not re-grow the nerves in my arms and hands, but soul retrieval removed emotional barriers that were blocking my body from healing. When the soul parts from the various losses in my life were returned, the acupuncture, the chiropractic and other healing modalities could do their work.

Soul Retrieval

Soul retrieval is a specific shamanic technique that uses spiritual help to bring back those energetic and vital parts of the self that stepped aside during a loss, accident or trauma. Although the term soul has many meanings and is loaded with religious connotations, Webster defines soul as the essence or consciousness of a person. I use the word in this way, not as a religious term. Soul retrieval, an aspect of shamanic work, is an ancient process that allows the "self" parts or "soul parts" to return. This process, that is usually just a few sessions, provides a method for bringing spiritually "missing pieces" back, for healing the dissociation from shocking loss, an accident, divorce, abuse or any other issue that is stuck.

Dr. Hank Wesselman, teacher of shamanism and author, explains that shamanic practitioners work with a "spiritual team," often including animals and master teachers on the inner plane (Wesselman and Kuykendall, 2004). Traditional people call this inner realm the "non-ordinary reality;" Carl Jung called it the collective unconscious. They believe that we are all connected energetically, and that trained healers can tune in to those connections in the service of others or the community. When the shamanic practitioner is doing a session, he or she goes into a light trance and into the non-ordinary reality with spirit helpers and brings back self or soul parts.

Why soul loss occurs

We naturally dissociate in order to survive or to cope with trauma, shock or emotional or physical pain. It is a natural survival strategy to dissociate or "leave the body," and thereby numb feelings and emotions. Mainstream Western culture does not have good strategies for getting the self back when such crises are over. Some indications of soul loss can be being apathy, long-standing depression, addictions, suicidal thinking, despair, long-term negativity, or chronic procrastination. When people say things like: "I have never been the same since she died," "Something died in me when I had the accident," or "I've never been the same since the surgery," those comments could point to the possibility of a soul loss. According to traditional peoples, soul loss is one of the most severe causes of illness.

The results of soul loss can be dramatic, but, as with any healing process, the results vary from person to person. Still they can be life-changing. One woman from my own subsequent soul retrieval practice who had suffered lifelong depression told me after a session, "I have a chuckle in my heart now."

Unable to work for three years, after soul retrieval I began to recover more quickly, and I saw the possibility that I could work again. I began asking for new meaningful work. Could practicing shamanism be that work? Nine years later it has been that and much more. Before, I had only been

able to walk to the mailbox; after soul retrieval I was walking a mile pain free after three months. Five years later, I am able to work out three times a week, swim and walk and I have a full practice and a psychotherapist and shamanic practitioner. Now, I have no evidence of nerve damage.

Inner Healing

After attending Wesselman's workshop I visualized, journeyed and prayed for healing regularly. I had several very powerful experiences which may sound crazy to the reader and which sounded pretty crazy to me as well. But they left me renewed and empowered.

I believe many people are tapping into their natural ability to have healing visions but most do not understand what is happening and may even be frightened by them. Each of my experiences left me with a renewed feeling that I was indeed healing and that I had spiritual help from known and unknown sources. I share two of those experiences here.

I felt very joyful and comfortable with the first. One night I felt moved to put my left hand on my right shoulder. Asking for healing I felt the presence of Jesus. I heard his voice say, "I will heal you." I felt an incredible warmth flow down my right arm and in my mind's eye I saw blue light flowing down my arm. I heard Jesus say, "You will be well again." After some time of feeling very grateful I feel asleep filled with the wonder of what had happened.

After this experience the acupuncture treatments I received three times a week that restored feeling in my arms for an hour or so began to last longer. My chiropractic adjustments held for a week and not just a few days.

Another experience was not as easy to understand, a bit disturbing, and even downright weird. One afternoon I slipped into meditation easily:

A wise woman appeared wearing only a raffia skirt. She was naked from the waist up with flat withered breasts, not a person I would normally meet in my everyday life. Dancing and singing around me, her singsong chant was unlike anything I'd ever heard. Her thin white hair flew out all directions while her coal black eyes were fierce with vitality. If I met her on the street, I would have thought her insane. But I felt strangely safe. Her rhythmic song felt soothing.

Then, whack! She cut off my hands at the wrists. She was dancing with them as rattles. What now? I checked my physical self. I'm OK. Whack! With my arms as rattles she danced even more wildly.

Time passed, hours, days. Then she began carefully reattaching them softly chanting. As she sewed my shoulders sprouted like tree branches. Smaller branches and leaves spontaneously grew out my fingers. *Ha! Ho!* she said *and she* disappeared.

I'd opened my eyes and felt up and down my arms. Yes, I had two arms, two hands and all ten fingers. I wasn't exactly alarmed, but every healer I'd ever met physically or inwardly was gentle, never violent. I had never experienced anything like this. I quickly called a healer friend and relate my spontaneous journey.

"That's great! That's very good! That's a dismemberment experience," my friend told me. "It's good, it's a kind of spiritual initiation. Traditional peoples have a ceremony that dismembers the old spiritual body cleansing it, then re-membering it new and healed."

I have since participated in several dismemberment journeys and learned more about them from Sandra Ingerman's and Hank Wesselman's (2010) new book.

I was startled and grateful and excited all at once. Was it all those herbs and treatments? Had this experience healed me? Was it both? I wasn't sure. But shortly thereafter I began to work again. About two months later, I took a part-time teaching job at a local junior college. I wrote on the whiteboard in short bursts, I graded paper slowly and carefully, I was standing for four hours straight. I took plenty of time to stretch and rest, but I was teaching again.

Fourteen years later I am well and functioning. I see patients in my clinical practice three days a week, maintain a private practice and train other professionals. I travel and sing and enjoy a full life. I can hug and hold and lift and carry. No one would know I spent three years lying on my couch – afraid, in pain, and depressed.

I take very good care of myself. I practice yoga, I do moderate exercise, I drink alkaline water, I watch my diet, I have a wonderful personal relationship and community of friends, and I talk to my spiritual helpers regularly. I have some mild arthritis in my hands and neck, and I do not lift heavy groceries and luggage. I know that my self-care program helps me maintain my body so I can do the things I love.

George McClellan, DC notes (email of August 18, 2010):

"I examined and treated Jill Raiguel after her April, 1996, car accident. As I recall her X-rays showed that her spine was no longer up-right but shoved to the left and up under her skull. Her MRI showed a herniated disc at C4; and her nerve conductivity test revealed nerve damage down both arms but predominately down the right arm."

Jane Lake, DC, the chiropractor who helped me further along (with additional techniques), states the following, summarizing her findings starting in 1999 when I first sought her out for treatment:

"I have seen Jill Raiguel as a patient since June, 1999. At the time she had reached a point of extreme exacerbation with her pain limiting her ability to work. The physical aspects of teaching caused by the gripping of a pen or pencil, or writing on the board, or simply standing gave her extreme agony. A few minutes of grading papers caused numbness in her right hand and her right arm and deep aching up her right arm that was intolerable. Walking to her mailbox, 30 feet, caused her right foot pain and set off spasms in her mid-back.

"Her previous traumatic injuries from a auto accident in 1996 had left her dreading the simplest of everyday tasks. She dreaded both pain and spasm of any movement and the undercurrent of fatigue and soreness that followed her throughout the day and night. By the time she had found me, Jill had already pushed herself through the conventional medical system and a variety of alternative approaches. Her determination absolutely played a crucial role in her discovery of her pathway to wellness. She nourished her inner wellspring of hope as a key resource. Her strength of body and spirit have been intensified by her years of 'heavy lifting' her pain in realms where things can only be re-built in incredibly tiny increments. With such effort over time, Jill has build a new structure for her body and therefore a new life.

"Now, Jill is able to work again. She exercises regularly using resistance machines and circuit training. She bares weight on her feet without wincing. There are no further symptoms of her cervical disc her cervical disk herniation. She is able to use her arms to work for hours at the computer without negative consequences. I rarely even need to adjust her joints or spine for structural misalignment nor do I need to treat her for the painful muscular knots that were a source of daily distress."

She nourished her inner wellspring of hope as a key resource. Her strength of body and spirit have been intensified by her years of 'heavy lifting' her pain in realms where things can only be re-built in incredibly tiny increments. With such effort over time, Jill has built a new structure for her body and therefore a new life." (Lake, 2010)

In summary

Reflecting on this article, I realize I am so completely healed that my remarkable recovery seems light years behind me. This writing has helped me to articulate the lessons I learned. In my private and clinical practices, I apply these lessons:

1. I help people uncover their commitment to their own health.
2. I gently point out if they are being victims and help them shift to being victors.
3. I encourage them to find a team of practitioners who can help them.
4. I assist them in connecting with their spiritual teams.
5. I teach them to journey so they can gain their own answers and information.

This combination makes the work I do with people powerful and effective and therefore very satisfying. Unlike my traditional therapy practice where I regularly burn out and became emotionally overloaded, I am protected, guided and nourished by my own spiritual [growth in the process of helping others to grow, which makes] my job refreshing, empowering and joyful.

References

- Lake, Janet. Interview, June 13, 2010.
- Pert, Candace B. *Molecules of Emotion*. New York: Touchstone, 1997, p. 285-286.
- Raiguel, Jill. *Life Skills: Keys to Effective Living*, Minden, Nevada: Marshall Publishing, 1999, p.40.
- Siegel, Bernie. *Love Medicine and Miracles: Lessons Learned About Self-healing from a Surgeon's Experience with Exceptional Patients*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990, p. 161.
- Wesselman, Hank. www.sharedwisdom.com
- Wesselman, Hank. *The Journey to the Sacred Garden*. Carlsbad, CA. Hay House, 2003, p. 8-9.
- Wesselman, Hank and Kuykendall, Jill. *Spirit Medicine: Healing in the Sacred Realms*. Carlsbad, Ca: Hay House, 2004. p. 85.

Jill Raiguel, formerly a high school English teacher and adjunct education professor at California Polytechnic University in Pomona, California, is a psychotherapist at Kohut Psychiatric Medical Group and in a shamanic private practice in southern California. She has authored four books and conducts shamanic workshops nationwide.

The Raiguel Life Skills Inventory and the exercises and activities to strengthen those skills are available in *Life Skills: Keys to Effective Living*. In addition she has written *You Are Not Your Problem*, and two children's fairy tales: *Tam's Charge* and *Tam's Human*.

www.jillibean.com
jraiguel@verizon.net.



TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading.

We encourage you to share this article with friends and colleagues.

The International Journal of Healing and Caring – On Line

P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099

Phone (609) 714-1885 Fax (519) 265-0746

Email: center@ijhc.org Website: <http://www.ijhc.org>

Copyright © 2010 IJHC. All rights reserved.

DISCLAIMER: <http://www.wholistichealingresearch.com/disclaimer.html>