**My Journey With Crohn’s: Healing, Curing, and Finding Peace**

“Do you believe everyone is chosen?”

“Of course,” I responded. “We just tend to wrap ourselves up in old stories and fears time and time again. We are all chosen; we are just at different stages of realizing it.”

December 1, 2008, 1:00AM. My eyes shot open as I awoke in a cold sweat that coated me, soaking through my sheets as I lay curled up in a ball. The pain was beyond anything I had ever known, searing through my body, burning me from the inside out. There was no position that could lessen the pain; I could barely move. Slowly I inched my way over to the side of the bed, my hand fumbling around for my cell phone. I called my parents and, appropriately enough for the time, their first question was if I had too much to drink the night before. Not really wanting to go the ER, we decided to wait until the morning to see if the pain went away.

That first night was the longest of my life and one that many with Crohn’s know all too well. While my diagnosis was rapid, it would be 6 months until the doctors could figure out how to suppress the flares.

Over the course of the next several hours the pain finally subsided and sleep managed to come. I had set my alarm for 2 hours later; I needed to know what had happened, what the experience of that night was. Come 7:00 I put on a pair of sweats and hobbled half-awake across campus to the doctor while my dad drove from home to meet me. Before enrolling at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) I had lived in Columbia, MD nearly all my life and the drive up was only thirty minutes. I still remember the doctor’s words: “Your appendix might have ruptured overnight; you need to get yourself to an ER.” There was also some warning about if I did not, I might die. Given that I had no idea what sort of time frame the doctor was talking about nor any idea really what an appendix was, I panicked, then went stoic; shoving my feelings deep down inside as I put on my calm, cool, and collected persona.

“Sounds good, thanks.” I walked outside to where my dad was waiting. “Dad, we need to go to the ER, my appendix might have burst.”

Throughout the drive and my time in the ER I hardly said a word, fearful that my persona would shatter into emotional chaos. Based on the CT I did not have a burst appendix and combined with blood tests, there did not seem to be much wrong with me. It was probably bad indigestion or a stomach bug. Some Percocet would do and I was sent home later that day with a few antibiotics.

While this was the verbal message provided to me upon discharge, the medical notes I later obtained read, “Findings of acute terminal ileitis or possible Crohn’s disease.” When I saw my first doctor as an outpatient his notes read, “These findings would be suggestive of Crohn disease; however, without any prior history of gastrointestinal issues, this would be an unusual presentation. Also consider an infectious etiology.” Discharge diagnosis: terminal ileitis meaning inflammation of the ileum, a part of the small intestine, which may be caused by Crohn’s or an array of other factors. I assume I was not told this directly because they wanted to rule out all other possible causes of my inflammation.

In retrospect, the logical thing to do would have been to go to the ER that night and not have tried to wait out the pain. But, I was a Nachman. I came from a family where, when my dad was young and broke his arm rolling on a log; his father’s first words were “Are you sure?” Following in my dad’s spirit, when I broke my tibia and fibula doing jujitsu on 7/7/07, I called my family who was on vacation in California and said “Listen, I broke my leg, but don’t worry I’m ok. Enjoy the rest of your vacation.” To their credit, they ended up coming home.

That was one of many injuries I had the opportunity to learn from over the course of a few years; although I had always been, and still was, a driven child. Everything had to be done perfectly. Sports were not about having fun, they were about winning. Academics were not just about learning, they were about learning everything and life was about taking on everything. I had to be right; wrong was not an option. If I could not see it, it did not exist. In college I dabbled in theater, pre-med, and mathematics, eventually landing in applied physics as my BS of choice. My reasoning at the time was that nothing else really stimulated my brain and this was, in part, true. It was also in part that theatre brought out my sensitive side that I was far from ready to accept, and pre-med would force me to look at my own body, something else I was not yet ready to do.

After my leg fracture, I had attempted to continuing swimming during my junior year from 2007 - 2008. Realizing I had no chance of being an asset to the team and experiencing what many long-time athletes know as ‘burn out’, at the end of my junior year at UMBC I quit. This was the first part of my life which had to die. Gaining an extra 20+ hours back in my week also resulted in down time, a clear and present danger to my fast paced lifestyle and eager to fill it, I had landed myself a job at Starbucks.

Over the course of the next 6 months from December through May 2009 I learned to live with the flares which continued like clockwork every 2 weeks. I would either wake up in the night in a cold sweat or would not go to sleep at all, the pain keeping me in a half-awake, numb and catatonic state. Most times I would take my candy, Percocet, holding off the pain until I could make it to the ER where I was provided with Dilaudid.

March, 2009. My first flare up that was too much for Percocet’s to quell; I needed more. Dilaudid by default had become my hospital drug of choice and, although I did not realize it at the time, I was becoming addicted. I had started to carry my bottle of Percocet everywhere with me while my bottle of Dilaudid was kept in my room for the real emergencies and other moments of high stress. My level of stress between working and upper-level physics classes combined with the knowledge of how carefree taking the pill would make me feel meant popping pills was all too easy.

The TV series *House* had been a favorite of mine during years prior and while I was recovering from my leg fracture, I had decided to use the same cane that Dr. House had on the show; black with flame decals on the bottom. During this addiction period, I thought of myself as being like the TV character of Dr. House. This time though I could do more than just carry my cane around the apartment for fun; I could do it while taking a pill. When I realized I was smart enough to get mostly A’s doing physics while on Percocet, it wasn’t long before I found a tennis ball and used that to think while doing my homework, sitting in front of my desk, popping a pill. In my mind for a short few months, I was the Dr. House of physics; complete with the attitude which cost me several friends.

Fortunately, and with little surprise, my pill-popping, arrogant lifestyle was not conducive to my well-being. On May 17, 2009 I was hospitalized due to a Crohn’s flare for the final time. I believe every story should have a heroine and mine was my nurse at Howard County General Hospital on this visit. Not that I knew it at the time. Most prior visits went along the lines of my insisting it was not my appendix, a CT scan to check and make sure my appendix was not burst, drugs, and a discharge hours later when the pain was gone. This nurse however refused to discharge me. Passing over my scathing words, she insisted I stay for further evaluation, certain something more was going on. It was largely thanks to this nurse, whose name I cannot recall, that I was put on track to have surgery.

For the next 5 days I continued on an IV without food and was transferred to the University of Maryland Medical Center until it was decided that, in order to reduce inflammation and minimize the risk of needing a colostomy bag, I would be fed by total parenteral nutrition (TPN) rather than having surgery immediately. For the next month I was fed through a tube called a Hickman line, a device inserted into the central vein which for me ran just around the collar bone area, bypassing my digestive system.

While being rotated onto TPN, I missed finals and elected to study in my hospital room. It was also during this rotation that I got to meet my first dietician. She was a very nice person who spent approximately 5 minutes talking to me. From that 5 minute conversation, my entire nutritional needs were somehow decided upon. While I know she was just doing her job, as a practicing nutritionist I am still to this day perplexed as to how anyone can think 5 minutes is enough to create an entire nutrient breakdown that ultimately served as the original contents of my TPN bag.

The first day I came home after being fully rotated on to a 12 hour feeding cycle, I was discharged with a Fentanyl patch on my arm. The entire car ride home I was dizzy, nauseous, and felt like I was about to pass out. Thinking this was due to the patch; I ripped it off as soon as I got home and did feel slightly better. I went upstairs and lay down on my bed, head spinning, and exhaustion taking over. That afternoon my feeding equipment arrived in 3 boxes and the nurse was set to arrive later that evening to teach me how to use it all. For the next few hours I lay curled up in a ball as the pain got progressively worse. In between the pain I managed to drive to campus to take my last physics final and back again. When the nurse finally arrived, she took my blood glucose level which was at 35. Low blood sugar is considered below 72 although that range varies. Given that I could not have anything by mouth, she informed me I needed to go back to the emergency room.

A grand total of 8 hours since I was discharged from my week long hospital stay; I was being driven back. Pain permeated my entire being. Speaking was too much of a challenge as I sat in the passenger seat while the spikes in pain seemed to pop up randomly around the dull pain that was the rest of my body. Everything seemed abnormally loud and far away. Waves of nausea came and went, seeming to alternate with a pounding headache that overrode the dull buzz which had become my brain. When we arrived I found the lights and sounds of the ER were beyond what I could bear and I sat curled up in a chair with my hands pressing against either side of my head, covering my ears, eyes closed. I was alone and locked inside my body. Once admitted, the nurse who luckily had worked in a rehab facility prior to coming to UMMC, immediately recognized my symptoms as withdrawal. His diagnosis was verified the instant the first few drops of Dilaudid came through the IV and into my veins as all the pain melted away. After conferring with my doctor, he created a plan to taper me off Dilaudid over the upcoming month. In what seemed to be a theme, the nurse again was my hero; picking up on the elements that the doctors overlooked.

Granted I was fortunate to have some of the best doctors in the business when it came to GI issues including Dr. Gerard Mullin and they all did a lot for me in the time surrounding my disease. However, with a recent study showing that around 40% of hospital physicians report taking on more patients than they can safely handle at least once per month, I am eternally grateful to the nurses who took care of me every time I called.

For the duration of my first week at home, I could hardly function and my parents fought persistently to get my caloric intake per bag upped. Fortunately, I got my increase and was able to function during the day, nibbling on ice chips every few hours. For a treat sometimes, I would have flavored ice chips.

Many nights during the month of June I cried alone in my room before going to bed. The IV line leading from me to the home-sized hospital pole on which my bag was hung was my personal chain. I felt like life had completely abandoned me. No longer a swimmer, I was burned out of physics and burned out of life. Questions passed through my head when I was alone; what had I done to deserve this? What had I done wrong? Why me? Everyone else had eaten the way I did. Everyone else had drunk and lived a lifestyle similar to mine so why was I the only one to collapse? How weak was I really?

July, 2007. It was a warm, sunny afternoon in Laguna Beach, California. There was a light breeze blowing in the outdoor room and the birds were singing while a beautiful Easter egg blue hummingbird buzzed around the flowers in the rafters above. We were in a circular room with a large round wooden column in the center. The outside ring was made of white stone and the roof between the two was an open crisscrossed wood pattern emanating from the central column, letting the sunlight dance through. In the center and throughout the room complementing the light décor of the space were exquisite flowers of all varieties and a podium where the speaker was getting set up. My family from my father’s side, extended family, and their friends were gathered together for this celebration and I was responsible for the music. I stood by the iPod dock as the music played softly in the background while people walked in, greeted each other, and took their seats. Two of the songs playing were Turn! Turn! Turn! by The Byrd’s and Johann Pachelbel’s Kanon in D. As the hellos wound down and people gradually took their seats, I stood alone and off to the back. As we sat, I sat alone on the end of a bench in the back row, separate and stoic on the outside, turbulent and writhing with emotion on the inside. Just a few days prior, my grandmother had died from pancreatic cancer at the age 70 and this was her funeral.

To me, Sue Nachman was Nana. To this day she remains the only relative I have who has understood me for all that I am, without questioning. Our talks ranged from spiritual events, to academic endeavors, competitive sports, and the simplicity and vastness of the ocean that could be seen from her balcony just a few blocks from the beach. Her acceptance and openness never wavered. While she was not naïve, she lived with great love. I would like to think that love is what sustained her for well over a year after her diagnosis told her she had only a few months to live. I think it was that same love which allowed her to hold on to life until her last son showed up at her house in Laguna Beach. As he pulled up they whispered to her, “John is here” and upon hearing those words, she parted from this world.

On the day she parted there were still numerous travel plans on her schedule for the following weeks and months. One thing she was famous for was her lateness; or as I have come to understand it, existing outside of time. Her arriving within 30 minutes of an agreed upon time was best considered on time. Yet, just like our animal friends, she always arrived right on time and somehow as a token to being in the flow, always got the best parking spot. In all aspects, she lived her life fully. I honor just as much how she lived as how she died: with dignity, family fully present, in the house she had lived for over 20 years; in peace. How she lived and how she died has been among the most beautiful of gifts and lessons I have received.

As I sat there completely numb I could hardly make sense of the words that were being said or any order of events. I don’t remember much from that day. When I close my eyes I have a flash of one rather tall relative who for a moment seemed to weigh no more than a feather as he hugged me in tears and another flash of my father speaking. All that I clearly remember is the promise I made myself while I sat there numb and alone. I promised myself that, like those in the movies, I would one day become powerful enough to stop a loved one from dying. I would not be so weak as to let this happen again. Cliché though it may sound, in that moment, and for the next few years this promise drove me with an insatiable desire to obtain strength and power in whatever forms I could find.

Although I did not know it at that time, that day marked the beginning of my healing journey. As with all new beginnings, there were many endings that needed to occur. In order for my old stories to end, they needed to reach their limit of my ability to live within them; my body and my life needed to shatter. And so, as I went out in search of power, I found myself diving deeper and deeper into my own shadow. Fortunately, it was in those depths that I found my light.

The long days were punctuated by my attempts to work at Starbucks for a few hours which largely consisted of sitting in the back doing dishes and stocking the food cases. As I felt my life caving in, I knew that as soon as surgery was over I would re-double my efforts. I would do everything right. This would never happen to me again. For now, I just had to be tough and push through; be calm, be cool, be collected.

As I awoke the first day home in my bed, I looked down at my stomach. Over where my naval had been was a gauze pad in need of changing. I wondered if I would ever have a belly button again; at the moment it appeared the answer was no.

I went to shower and ate breakfast. This marked the first time in just over a month that I did not have to unplug myself upon waking up and could go downstairs to eat something other than ice chips. I nearly cried. For the next several months I would continue to eat what I thought was a healthy diet and I would continue to inject Humira into my leg every other week. While I had read the potential side effects I had also been very clearly warned that failure to take this medication would result in a flare up within months if I was lucky; weeks if I was not.

My reading spanned scientific papers, popular literature, and varying online sites. By October of 2009, 3 months post-surgery, I had placed myself on a combination of dietary supplements totaling nearly 20 pills per day. After my first visit with the doctor, I was given additional specific gut healing supplements to take, yielding upwards of 30 pills per day. Over the course of the subsequent two years I found myself rotating through diets and dietary supplements, both under the guidance of nutritionists and other times on my own, averaging between 20 and 30 pills per day. While my healing from Crohn’s had begun, I gradually discovered that I had yet again become addicted; this time to nutrition and the concept of a ‘healthy’ lifestyle.

Among the numerous changes I made in the months post-surgery, some of the more common ones included switching to all organic and non-GMO food, installing water filters on both the tap and shower, going gluten, dairy, and soy free, and eliminating all processed foods containing additives, preservatives, artificial sweeteners, and food colorings. As I read, I found eliminating foods to be the easy part; everything seemed to be bad for me and food became both my savior and a mechanism towards social isolation. Extending beyond food, I started rotating through my newest detoxification program every 2-3 months. By constantly detoxing, I could be certain that all the bad stuff for me in the healthiest food I could find was being flushed out.

A year later in May 2010 I completed my undergraduate career with a BS is Physics. Having begun training for triathlons as part of my healthy lifestyle, becoming a personal trainer seemed an appropriate move. Having been rejected from Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and the NSA helped make my decision too and through it all my girlfriend at the time was remarkably accommodating and loving. When I was not training or with my girlfriend, and sometimes when I was with her, I would spend my time on various online news sites. I became certain some vast conspiracy was going on and there was some group of people out there controlling the strings; it was “us vs. them”. However, having isolated myself and not knowing anyone else into my new story, it soon became “me vs. the world”. I believed that through educating myself I could attain freedom and that knowledge was power.

In my quest for power, the more I read, the more trapped I felt. I felt powerless against what I perceived as vast forces beyond my reckoning. Nutrition and exercise simultaneously became my few sources of personal power and control as well as the largest threats to my health if done wrong. As I became more upset and angry at the world, sarcasm punctuated my conversations more and more as the veil around my calm, cool, and collected persona started to thin.

With my soul yearning for an escape, I found myself drawn to a book at Barnes & Noble, a place my girlfriend and I frequented often. Called *Power Up Your Brain*, I read the book in a day and knew I had found something. The following day I booked my first session with a woman and shaman named Chris through The Four Winds.

“Are you happy?” Thirty minutes into talking, I broke down in tears. As I cried, Chris instructed me to blow everything that was just triggered into a stone she had picked out of her healing bundle in California; I was in my room in Maryland. I had no idea how my blowing into my hands while imagining a stone was in them would help. Yet I did so and when I was done, I lay down on my floor, shaking, with my computer by my side. As I heard her rattling and saying some words in another language, the tears began to subside and I started wondering to myself what in the world I was doing and how her rattling 2000 miles away was going to help solve anything.

I began to twitch. At first my arms would jerk and while it felt a bit uncontrolled I assumed it was just my natural response as I was relaxing. As the twitching got more frequent I realized something was happening and my left linear brain suddenly went silent. I began to cry again and I felt a pain well up in my chest as my entire torso went numb. The numbness spread first up through my head and for a moment I thought I was having a splitting headache before it ran down my legs and arms, permeating my entire being. I felt the numbness continuing, extending above me like a sheet draped over my body. Suddenly I was paralyzed, frozen in placed and stretched out as every muscle tensed up without conscious thought. I heard Chris telling me to let my Nana go and in my head I began talking with her. “I’m so sorry. I love you. I never wanted for you to die. Who will understand me now?” were among the words that passed through my head. After what felt like an eternity I felt myself willing to let her go and gave her permission to leave. As I did so, the paralysis started to subside in my legs and I felt the numbness again as this entity that was my Nana rose up on top of me and started to leave. Gradually as I continued to talk with her, she left through my left hand until all that was left was a residual numb feeling in my fingertips.

I felt a bone deep warmth unlike anything I had every known permeate my entire body; Chris said she was putting in “light”. This is the energy of Spirit from the 8th chakra located just a foot or so above the crown of your head. My eyes were still closed and as I was basking in the warmth, I was yanked out of my body; I was nowhere and everywhere at the same time. I could feel and see the vast emptiness that was the universe. Then, in an instant my entire vision filled with a purple diamond shaped flash before my world went black. As I gradually came back into my body, I felt myself on the floor and my heartbeat deep in my chest as my lungs filled with what felt like new, crisp, fresh air. Tenderly, I sat up and saw Chris smiling back at me from across the country.

The next day I quit triathlons and never looked back. That part of my drive to live a healthy lifestyle had vanished. Yet this was just the tip of the iceberg. It would be numerous more sessions in addition to my first class as a student in the LightBody School before I could say I was officially healed from Crohn’s. During this time all my old stories began to shatter and I gradually started learning how to live in the beautiful mystery that is this lifetime. As my drive lessened I began to face my anger at myself and at life. In time working through my anger gave way to feelings of loneliness and a fear of my own emotions. I feared being seen without my social mask on and for who I truly was: a human being filled with flaws. As each layer continued to be worked and reworked, I discovered new layers of myself and more importantly, started to find peace in my own body.

October 20 – 25, 2011, Joshua Tree, CA.

The plane touched down in Palm Springs airport. I had saved up my money for a 5 day healing intensive with The Four Winds complete with relaxation, supplements, clean food, and shamanic healing. For these next few days, I would have the opportunity to work to fix whatever was going on inside of me. I would also get to meet and work with Chris in person for the first time.

Chris was sitting in her chair as I was sitting on the massage table in the middle of the room. We talked about my intentions for our upcoming sessions which largely focused around my releasing myself of Crohn’s. When the talking was done, Chris asked me to stand in front of one of the white walls of the healing room with my back against the wall. As she started to rattle, I felt waves of energy hit my body and pass through me. After about 5 minutes, she said “ok”.

I have since learned this to be a process known as tracking which allows the practitioner to see beyond the physical level and gain important insight into what is going on inside the client and what is to happen over the course of the sessions.

During our first session I began to break down the wall I had built up internally to protect myself from the outside world. Behind this wall was a raging cyclone which represented much of my life at that moment. Gradually, the cyclone diminished and then vanished until all that was left was some dust on the pavement of mind and a few bricks from where the wall had once stood. My homework for that day was to spend the rest of the day in silence.

My dreams that night were vivid and as I returned the next day we checked in with the place where the wall had once stood. At long last it was gone and grass was starting to populate and take back the pavement. During the day’s session we worked through a past life I had in Egypt. My homework was to go outside and learn to energetically connect with the plant life. To begin to learn how to pull their energy through myself and to dialogue with them. Glad to be talking again, I enjoyed the good company of others who had come for this healing intensive as well.

As the third day finally dawned, I woke with the sun and went to go yoga outside. It was chilly in the morning desert air as a light breeze broke the stillness of the sunrise. That afternoon I went for my third and final healing session. I blew everything into the stone that was still coming up for me emotionally and physically as I lay down on the table.

Chris instructed me to picture myself on a timeline going back through my life. Back to when I was a young boy, an infant, and finally in to the womb. The imagery I saw while my eyes were closed was both surreal and very real all at the same time. Then she pulled me out and I felt and saw myself as a two dimensional purple object moving through a universe of warm emptiness. The comfort felt like heaven and I knew in that moment I would gladly stay out in this place I had only just found and yet somehow known for eternity. From far away I heard Chris’s voice calling me back. Finally, I agreed and, like an eagle descending from high above to its nest, I saw and followed a tunnel of light into the womb where my to be body awaited me.

Sitting in the womb was like being in a warm, sticky haze of red and orange hues. As I sat there Chris’s voice again instructed me to choose my genetic destiny; to find and turn on the genes that would lead to a healthy a long life. As I did so, I saw the inside of my cells rearranging the way iron fillings change in the presence of a magnet. Chris then instructed me to allow myself to be born in to this safe and loving world. As I emerged she quickly carried me up through my youth and my teenage years all the while holding this new bubble of light around me until finally, we both arrived in this moment in the room.

I arched my back and moaned. The pain seared in me and I knew I was having another flare up on the table. After some time the pain gradually started to lessen until finally I was back fully in my body on the massage table in the healing room. Chris had lit several candles and instructed me to lay there for a while, adjusting to my ‘new’ body. As I sat up Chris informed me that we had turned off my genetic affinity for Crohn’s. I would later discover that I had turned off my affinity for many of the numerous allergies I once had too. My homework that day was simply to be.

As I boarded the plane back home I knew that my life would never be the same. As soon as I arrived home I secretly trashed my western medicine: Humira and pain killers. Within that same week my parents mentioned an integrative school in Laurel named Tai Sophia, now called Maryland University of Integrative Health that they had just heard about from a friend. They encouraged me to look in to it and after a brief visit to the campus, I knew it was the right place for me and decided to apply. That January of 2012 I took a leave of absence from my Applied Physics PhD program never to return.

Over the course of 2012 as I learned about the power words carry I refused to say the word Crohn’s in fear that saying the word would bring it back. Due to that or not, Crohn’s did not return. During that winter, for the first time in my life, I did not get sick.

As I gradually came to the realization that I was fully healed, I allowed myself to say the word Crohn’s again in my discussions and for the first time since long before the disease itself had begun, did not feel angry, bitter, or upset about what life had given me. I began to talk about Crohn’s as the biggest gift I was ever given. Yes I had been mad and angry at the time yet that was no longer me; I was physically and psychologically healed.

October 2011 was the last time I used western medicine. Although I continued to experiment with various diets and supplements on a far less frequent basis, this time around my experiments were fueled by personal curiosity as I continued to learn through nutrition related research. From time to time I tested myself on old allergens such as gluten and dairy and always found that they no longer caused a reaction. Even the summer pollen allergies that had been the bane of every summer throughout my youth had vanished! I did however still find that being around more than 2 cats in the summer led to a runny nose within 30 minutes.

As I continued down this path of blending science, nutrition, and spirituality I continued to find joy in meditation. Until the summer of 2013 I exercised nearly every day. Then one day I no longer felt like exercising and ceased all physical activity, with the exception of occasional walks around the local park, until the beginning of 2015. As of early 2015 the urge to move returned and I have since added back in yoga. This time around, I only exercised when my body truly felt like moving.

One of the most frequent questions I have been asked is, “what do I eat now?” While that answer varies depending on the season and what my body wants in any particular moment, the general and consistent answer is: “Mostly plants with some animal products. All from organic sources and local when possible with minimal sugar”.

To this day Crohn’s has never returned. While western medicine, nutrition, and shamanism all helped me along the way, as Chris once told me: “Ultimately, you healed yourself.”