

When the Story Changes

In a matter of days Chelsea's life turned upside down. Here, she shares her story and some of the lessons she's learnt that hold true in the dark.

If you had asked me a few years ago, "What's your story? How did you get here?" I would have shared a story that seemed to make sense, a story in which each chapter built on the one before. God had led me in progressive steps of faith and I was serving with a Christian organisation supporting remote communities in the Pacific. I was surrounded by an amazing team of people, gathered from all around the world, and each using the gifts that God had given. I had a confidence and peace that I was in the right place.

Then my story changed.

I was overseas when it became hard to focus my eyes. Simple enough, I thought, and I planned to have my glasses checked once I returned home. A few days later, my colleague, a doctor, said to me with care, "I don't think you need to see an optometrist. I think you need to see a neurologist."

I flew home shortly after, and by the end of the following week my eyelids were so weak that I could barely open

my eyes at all. I could only see my feet and a small, fading circle around them.

I moved around my house with my hands on the walls and furniture. Outside, I walked a step behind a friend and I froze still the instant I lost sight of her heels, suddenly unaware of where I was within the darkness. It was entirely disorientating.

I clearly remember the confusion of such a sudden, shocking change. Like it was bright daylight and then, without warning, night had fallen. What just happened?

As I paused at the entrance of the first of many clinics, a friend's simple text arrived: You are not alone.

For the next two years, my story seemed to change continually. I would become used to one situation – a new medication, a new symptom, a new side effect, new care needs – and then it would change again. There were times when I struggled to see, speak, walk or even breathe, as my muscles lost their strength. Initially just my eyelids and then my whole body. I broke bones simply by putting on a jumper and bending to sit on a chair.

There were moments when the pain or fear or exhaustion was overwhelming and almost impossible

to see beyond. Like walking suddenly into the dark, without any context of my surroundings. But even then, whether or not it was in my conscious awareness, my friend's words were true. I was not alone.

More recently, life has changed again. My health and function has improved and I am thankful for every step towards greater independence.

There are many things I've learnt over this time. Like how to score a single room in hospital, and what not to say to someone experiencing health challenges ("What did you do to yourself?" as if I had control over the situation!), and others that I reflect on more deeply. Here are a few:

Keep coming back to the basics

In the midst of all the change and uncertainty, it was not the time for details. I chose to keep returning to foundational truths, like anchors in the waves. God is here, with me. He is faithful. His plans and purposes are good.

Rend Collective sings the line, "What's true in the light is still true in the dark". The things which hold true in the dark – those are the things worth holding onto.

God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.

Productivity looks different in different seasons (and that's OK)

Actually, 'productivity' in itself is not the main game. "So here's what I want you to do", Paul writes to the Romans, "God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering." Romans 12:1 (MSG)

My 'everyday, ordinary life' looks totally different today than it did last year and looks different again to the years before that. But whatever my life is like today, whatever tasks I do today – and whether or not I feel like I have achieved anything at all – I can choose to place them as an offering before God. Even if some days it was, almost literally, just sleeping and eating!

Hold things lightly

Letting go of my work role and responsibilities was a hard part of this journey, in amongst the loss or change of many other things. I've learnt, and am learning, to hold things securely while they are mine to hold, realising the significance of what's been given to me for a time, and simultaneously to hold them lightly, knowing that I am the steward and not the owner.

The story will change, again

It will change again in ways that I can't see or imagine from where I stand now. Although I can't prepare for these unknown changes specifically, I can intentionally build foundations, as a house on a rock that will not be shaken when the next storms come. And the experience of God's presence and faithfulness in past seasons is a testimony that can help strengthen my foundations for the future.

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So now, if you asked me, "What's your story?", my answer would be less direct and more winding, like the path that I have been on to get here. **But throughout it all, without question, are the threads of God's faithfulness and grace that have been there from the very beginning.**