

Rebirth: Finding My Health, Happiness and Destiny

By Priya Chawathe

We all face challenges as we move through the story of our life and it is our cumulative experiences that make us who we are. Each day brings a new lesson and a new teaching.

Sometimes the learnings are obscure and the struggle overwhelming. When we are burdened on a constant basis it wears us down and robs us of happiness. Ironically, it is the most challenging moments – the ones that threaten to destroy us – that also have the power to transform our lives.

I've witnessed this first-hand. I have endured many dark and stormy days – days that I thought would never end – skies that I thought would never clear. Ultimately, I survived the bad times and today my life is full of joy, direction and purpose.

Like a rainbow after the rain, my stormy days resulted in the brightest and most luminous Silver Lining imaginable.

Let's start at the beginning.

I grew up in India during the 1980's and 90's where family expectations are customarily high. Young women are expected to excel in academia, keep themselves physically beautiful and show exceptional talent in extra-curricular activities. Perfectionism and obedience are highly valued. At school, the pressure to predominate and outshine peers is considerable. I desperately wanted to impress my elders and friends, because I thought this would bring me recognition and love. However, excelling at school was a tall order for me.

I was a terrible fit for the typical style of education that was common in India at the time. Rote learning was the norm and the vast majority of our lessons focused on cramming and regurgitating. Instruction was delivered in a dictatorial fashion. Bored with the tedious, mundane lessons in school, I was more concerned with the deep whys of life. Why was I here? What was my purpose? I yearned to be of use to the world even at that young age.

Unfortunately, these thoughts didn't translate to academic excellence. I grew increasingly nervous and fearful of disappointing my parents and teachers with my average grades. Exhibiting classic avoidance behaviors, I began spending more time with my friends and less time on my studies.

In a society where performance was equated with self-worth I was walking a thin line. Anything less than stellar was rebuked or went unrecognized, leading to deep feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. By the time I entered adolescence my self-esteem was all but eradicated. I habitually suffered from anxiety and depression.

In India – as in many other places – mental health issues carry a stigma. My depression was an embarrassment that was never spoken of or recognized as a legitimate illness. As a result of the prevailing attitude, both in the medical field and by my parents, I too believed my depression to be a choice rather than an illness. Blaming myself, I believed I was simply lazy and spoiled, without direction or ambition and a complete disappointment to my parents.

Recognizing that a square peg could not be forced into a round hole, my parents sent me to America at the age of sixteen to experience a more student-centered, cooperative style of learning. Despite the fact that I was miserably lonely and terrified of letting my parents down because of the huge financial investment in foreign education – it was still a better life for me. Instead of being judged and reminded repeatedly of all my shortcomings, I was now encouraged, stimulated and treated with respect and kindness. This gave me hope and momentarily boosted my self-confidence.

However, this period of my life continued to be plagued by anxiety and depression. Due to severely limited financial resources, I had to live on a very stringent budget. The meager funds I was able to earn from my campus job didn't allow for luxuries. I rarely spoke to my parents or travelled home to spend time with my family. I felt isolated and alone and I felt guilty. I saw myself as a huge financial strain on my family and this resulted in feelings of guilt and low self-esteem.

I felt empty and disconnected – from myself. Connecting with others – even fictional characters on television made me feel alive.

I preferred to spend time socializing rather than studying – it helped relieve the stress that seemed constant and pervasive in my college years. I was living vicariously through others to escape the feeling of hopelessness within me. Unfortunately, perfectionism and procrastination cannot co-exist. As a result I lived in constant conflict and chronic stress. My conflicted behavior meant that I was continually attempting to deliver exemplary work in unrealistic time-frames. Most of my stress was self-inflicted. I was my own worst enemy.

These different sources of stress perpetuated my depression. Functioning on a daily basis became almost impossible. I spent my worst days in bed feeling sorry for myself and drowning in self-loathing, self-criticism and self-hatred. I hid from my friends, too embarrassed to let them see me in my depressed state. On these days I wanted out – the emotional turmoil was unbearable, the fatigue unfathomable. My thinking was foggy and I often wished that I was dead. It was a very dark time.

But even though my body and mind were failing me, my soul was fighting very hard to survive.

Through all the pain and the hardship, I still yearned to find my identity, my purpose, the “why” of my life. Maybe it was precisely because of the pain and hardship that I needed a “why” to keep going. Whatever the reason, I’m just glad I paid attention and let my intuition guide me.

The decision to listen to my gut wasn’t an easy one. I wasted already scarce financial resources, changing my major several times – as I desperately tried to find my true calling. I had a genuine desire to help people. My passion was so deep and heartfelt that I never stopped searching for a way to do so. This, at least, I was committed to.

It was during these desperate and turbulent times that I met and married my husband.

I was a lonely, depressed nineteen year old in desperate need of rescuing. He was my prince charming, then and now. He knew my shame, my deepest, darkest secret and he loved me anyway. I didn’t know how to love myself yet. When I looked in the mirror I saw an unkempt, lazy, chubby, and good-for-nothing thing. He saw a sweet, pretty girl, with a kind heart who loved deeply and judged no one.

Even though he never truly understood the extent of my grief and anguish, he was always there for me. His love has been my anchor.

Five years into our not-so-perfect but loving marriage we adopted a precious baby girl who brought us change, hope, vitality and a new beginning. My intuition has always helped me make the biggest decisions of my life, both personally and professionally. Choosing and committing to my life-partner so early in life, as well as becoming a mother just felt right. The universe sent me love, when I couldn't love myself. I'm thankful I accepted her grace with open arms.

Being a new mother was an amazing experience for me. I had waited and longed for a child, and the love and joy she brought into my life was tremendous. My baby girl accepted me unconditionally. Slowly but surely I was able to see and cherish the gifts within me through her admiring eyes. I now saw that I was a strong, bright, thoughtful and kind human with a warm-heart, who loved without boundaries and without judgement.

My daughter was my reason to live and to fight for my health.

During the first two years of being a new mother, my will power and utter devotion to my daughter gave me strength, both physically and emotionally. Physically, I was still extremely fatigued and had to heave my body out of bed every single day, even after eight to ten hours of sleep. I often needed to rest mid-day due to sheer exhaustion. Like a tigress who provides for and protects her cub, I dug deep and found the tenacity I needed to properly care for my child.

After the initial surge of adrenaline that came with motherhood, time passed and the euphoria began to fade. Waiting in the wings, depression reared its ugly head once again, this time affecting me even more adversely. I became overly sensitive and began either crying at the drop of a hat or screaming at the top of my lungs and sometimes did both synchronously.

I grew hysterical despite my best efforts to control myself. Trying to restrain these outbursts was futile. I had hit rock bottom. I could no longer dismiss my disabling fatigue, confused emotions and stalled depression. I was overwhelmed by feelings of despair.

I finally realized that I was physically ill. I was able to separate the illness from myself and to see it for what it truly was: a disorder, a malfunction of the body, a true disease. I'd once read a description of clinical depression and it had resonated strongly with me, but I'd almost simultaneously dismissed the feeling because of the shocking stigma associated with it.

Hitting rock bottom forced me pay heed to my intuition yet again. It compelled me to listen to the voice in my head that quietly whispered, "Get help, Priya". I refused to turn a deaf ear. Not this time, this time I heard my guiding angel loud and clear. Being responsible for my daughter sparked a strong desire to get the help I desperately needed. I could no longer live in denial. I would rather die of embarrassment than die. I sought medical help, and was soon diagnosed with Hashimoto's thyroiditis. My lab results were off the charts. In fact, the endocrinologist was shocked that I was still standing.

Being diagnosed with Hashimoto's thyroiditis, and subsequently treated with thyroid replacement hormone was the initial step towards regaining my health.

The medication restored functioning to several body processes, including basic metabolism that had been compromised by an underactive thyroid. Tending to my daily tasks became progressively easier. Within a few weeks, the disturbing emotional outbursts subsided. The worst was now behind me, and even though I didn't know what the future held, I was confident in my ability to make it bright.

As I improved and began to re-engage in life, I became increasingly interested in getting healthy. Depression and fatigue were still significant issues, and I longed to rid myself of the melancholy. New research indicated that a regular exercise routine was as powerful as antidepressants for the treatment of depression. Motivating myself out of the lethargy took effort but I successfully started exercising three to four days a week. The rush of endorphins and general sense of well-being from physical activity was invigorating.

I started to sing to myself, listen to loud music, and dance long after leaving my Zumba class. As I started shedding pounds, I loved the way my body looked, and how sensual I felt.

I took care in my appearance for the first time in years. Life quickly became an enticing box of delicious chocolates. I indulged in new hobbies like hiking, reading and traveling – life’s little pleasures that my illness had robbed from me in the past.

Medication and exercise temporarily put the spring back in my step, but unfortunately they weren’t a complete solution to the symptoms of Hashimoto’s that lingered. Both, fatigue and depression, although more manageable, were still severe. It was always an effort to get to the gym and continue on through the rest of the day. Frequently, I only accomplished an hour of exercise and a few “must dos”, spending the rest of the day napping on the couch. Regular workouts were also absolutely essential to keep up my spirits. I badly needed my opiate-like fix to keep the depression at bay.

Approximately half my days were still spent downcast in bed. I often crept back under the covers after my family left the house and only rose in time to fetch my daughter from school.

I accepted my life for what it was at that point in time. It was a slight improvement with some newly added perks. My doctors did not offer a sound, permanent solution either. They only recommended more drugs. I even tried a few antidepressants with little or no relief and instead only troublesome side effects.

Nonetheless, I did have some energy and a keen desire to get well. On a good day, I searched for answers to my symptoms or to the meaning of my life. After graduating with a Masters of Public Health in Epidemiology, I was somewhat disheartened. I was deeply passionate about health; perhaps because it was so sorely missing from my own life, and I really wanted to help people but I didn't enjoy population research. For the most part, it was tedious and cumbersome. I longed to connect with people, to witness change in their lives as I helped guide them to a healthier, happier place; but I didn't know how to make this a reality. Truth be told, I first needed to help myself.

I began to look for alternative solutions to my health concerns. Additional new symptoms, specifically insomnia, hair loss and cystic acne prompted me to look harder and search wider.

I turned to nutrition. My diet was already healthy to keep my weight down, but I decided to experiment. I tried a few specific diets for the skin, thyroid, and even embraced veganism for a brief time. My symptoms pressed on for years and it would have been easy to throw in the towel, but giving up and accepting the symptoms was not an option. Instead, I viewed my illness as a complex puzzle begging a solution and trudged on. Then finally one day, my endurance paid off and a novel book caught my attention. It was “The UltraMind Solution: Fix Your Broken Brain by Healing Your Body First”, written by Dr Mark Hyman, an internationally recognized American family physician, a New York Times best-selling author and pioneer in Functional Medicine.

Although trained in traditional medicine, Dr. Mark Hyman was not afraid to think outside the box. His approach to chronic disease was fresh, intriguing and resonated with me. The book not only confirmed my hunch that nutrition might be the cornerstone in my recovery, but also gave me specific information on how to combat my two most significant issues: depression and chronic fatigue.

Again, my inner-self knew that I had struck gold and this was the direction to follow. Despite the controversy surrounding gluten sensitivity I decided to remove gluten from my diet. Already on a low-carb diet, which helped maintain my weight but nothing more, I now completely slashed even hearty, sprouted wheat bread, artisan whole-grain crackers, whole-wheat pasta, low-sugar, fiber-rich cereal, steel-cut oats, whole-wheat pita-bread and the occasional cookie, tart or piece of cake. I introduced: gluten-free whole grains like buckwheat, quinoa, millet, brown rice and gluten-free treats like no-sugar coconut macaroons and 70 percent dark chocolate.

The transformation I experienced was astonishingly radical. So was the gluten withdrawal.

After four grueling days of extremely low mood, irritability, acute exhaustion and severe headaches, I came out on the other side feeling utterly renewed.

I had shed my old skin in exchange for a healthy, new one. The fatigue disappeared, the depression ebbed and the brain-fog lifted. I had good energy, regular moods and clarity of mind. This was a special moment of victory for me, pivotal in shaping the next three most prime years of my life.

Learning that I was sensitive to gluten led to discovering a sea of nutritional information related to food sensitivities and intolerance. Those specific to Hashimoto's thyroiditis and other autoimmune diseases begged my attention. The new science was fascinating and I devoured books, articles and listened to expert interviews on the subject. My next step was implementing a diet to heal my "leaky gut". This diet works at fixing intestinal permeability or "leaky gut", a controversial condition that many experts believe to be a causative factor in food sensitivities and intolerances. Some doctors believe that healing "leaky gut syndrome" can put autoimmune diseases like Hashimoto's thyroiditis into remission and might even be the answer to many other chronic conditions including stubborn weight-gain or obesity.

The application of this diet has been central to the drastic improvement in all my symptoms of Hashimoto's. Previously, the gluten-free diet ended the chronic fatigue, depression, and brain-fog. The diet to heal my leaky gut markedly reduced my hair loss, acne, and surprisingly also ended monthly PMS and related food cravings. My weight is easily maintained and I enjoy seven to eight hours of sound sleep every night. Living effortlessly in a functioning, healthy body after over twenty years feels extraordinarily delightful.

Methodically changing my diet to restore my broken digestion was a transformative experience. I had successfully reclaimed my body and mind by removing foods that weren't serving me at the time and instead adding healing foods that did nourish me. I learned to appreciate, respect and recognize my body's unique relationship with food. Nutrition soon became an obsession, a fervor I was eager to share with the world. When your desires are strong, the universe creates opportunities that are bigger and better than you can envision. I did not know then that my decision to become a certified Integrative Health Coach, a decision lead by my inner-being; would not only make nutrition my life's work but also show me the path to true health and happiness.

At the Institute for Integrative Nutrition (IIN), I learned about the obvious but understated value of “primary food”: how a person’s career, relationships, exercise habits and spirituality play a significant role in their overall health and well-being. Lifestyle clearly was an integral part of health that could not be neglected. I revamped my life in these and other areas by using new tools and techniques. Most importantly, I committed to changing my life and aligning my behavior with my top priorities: health and happiness. I was instilled with a sense of confidence and self-esteem that had previously been missing from my life. This new approach revolutionized the way I felt about myself, lived my life and interacted with the world around me.

It’s been an incredible journey – living with and slowly overcoming the symptoms associated with Hashimoto’s thyroiditis. I have now found my own health and happiness, and been able to channel my passion into an exciting career as a health coach. My personal experiences and professional knowledge allows me to use an integrated approach that focuses on nutrition, lifestyle, and core beliefs to help clients achieve their optimal health and live their ideal life.

I feel honored every day to be of service while empowering clients to take control of their health and happiness – the way I did mine.

Having suffered from depression and anxiety and being intimately aware of the denial and stigma that prevents one from seeking help, I also want to share my story to inspire other women in similar situations find the care they so desperately need. I don't want other women to suffer in silence like I did for more than half my life.

I am thankful that I had the persistence to solve the mysteries surrounding my health and illness. My intuition always lead the way but it was the strong love for my daughter that fueled the desire to be my own champion. That love, combined with my passion for helping others has led to a life filled with purpose, joy and a definite sense of direction.

According to counseling psychologist and spiritual counselor Zeenat [1] Merchant Sayal, “Life is a choice between fate and destiny. Fate is seen as what happens if you never manifest your potential – never solve the puzzle of who you are. Destiny is seen as what you create if you solve the puzzle and manifest one of the possibilities defined by your potential”.

Today, I am grateful that instead of accepting my fate, I manifested the love, support and opportunities that enabled me to find my destiny. I found my Silver Lining while searching for answers to my personal well-being.

[1] Positive Provocations (blog), Zeenat Merchant Sayal, 30 Jan 2011
<http://positiveprovocations.com/2011/01/30/are-you-accepting-your-fate-or-creating-a-destiny-readers-qa/>



Priya Chawathe is a certified health coach who specializes in weight loss and chronic disease prevention and management. Her unique integrated approach of evidence-based nutrition, lifestyle, and core beliefs has helped clients with

food cravings, PMS, stress, chronic fatigue, depression, digestive issues, joint pain, chronic skin conditions and more. Her coaching empowers clients to achieve optimal health and improve overall quality of life. Priya's passion for health coaching stems from her own battle with Hashimoto's thyroiditis. She believes that successful management of chronic disease requires a health model that includes customized dietary modifications, behavioral change and any necessary medication.

She is a graduate of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. Additionally, she holds a Masters of Public Health in Epidemiology from the University of Texas. She lives in Seattle, Washington with her husband and daughter. Priya practices yoga and meditation and enjoys hiking in the great outdoors of the Pacific Northwest.

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