

## REHABILITATING SELF: A RETURN TO SOUL

Although we knew what ultimately had to be done when the tests showed knee bones pressed together without intermediary cartilage to cushion its movement, my husband and I waited a decade before scheduling his knee replacement surgery. We waited until the artificial knee technology was at a higher level of development; and my husband's muscle strength improved and age increased, making the rehabilitation easier and the chance of him having to go through this surgery again in his lifetime smaller (the lifespan of the apparatus is 10-15 years).

We thought it through. We researched it well. We got second, third and even fourth opinions over the years. We exercised together, me hoping to lose some weight; my husband determined to build strong muscles to sustain the surgery and assist the arduous rehabilitation process afterwards. After joyfully celebrating my husband's birthday on September 22, we entered the hospital on October 1<sup>st</sup> for surgery scheduled that afternoon.

The new year 2004 has begun. It is six months post surgery. The hard preparatory work paid off. My husband's surgery was a success, and he is now walking three miles several times a week without pain, minus the extreme arthritic bow previously in his leg, and without his knee unpredictability buckling underneath him whenever he walked. My husband elected to have this procedure, prepared himself for it, was utterly committed to his rehabilitation program, and came out stronger on the other side of surgery. We were blessed. This is not always true.

To engage in medical surgery to cut out disease, to be involved with medical insurance to cover expenses, to depend on a hospital and rehabilitation system to reclaim optimal functioning, to deal with the side effects of anesthesia and medication is no easy matter. Medical surgery (while often miraculous), is still an arduous undertaking requiring much care, vigilant hospital supervision, and prolonged rehabilitation

As witness, wife, caregiver, recovery supervisor, cheerleader, caterer, procedural overseer, chauffeur, wheel chair pusher, and personal groomer, I was horrified at the truth of our medical care system (even though I know it's one of the best in the world). Mistakes were made; medicines were mismanaged (I would never recommend leaving anyone you love in a hospital unattended... without someone supervising the double checking of everything); doctors were often hard to reach for answers to medical queries; hospital food is counterproductive to the healing process; licensed physical therapists do intake interviews while students assist the actual therapy; and no preparation or support is offered to manage the regression, depression and extreme vulnerability for the patient post surgery. Rehabilitation was a long, hard, constant daily battle, fought on many, many fronts.

It was during this recovery period that I went to one of my favorite yoga classes and surprised myself with the words that flew out of my mouth in response to a classmate's inquiry about my husband's progress. The woman asking was an ex-physical therapist, who (I later found out), opted out of the managed care system because of its inequities and unfair practices. I heard myself say

out loud that when my husband got back on his feet and returned to work, that I was going to design my own Body/Mind/Spirit rehabilitation program before I had a serious medical diagnosis. These words remained imprinted for days, which turned into weeks, which turned into months. I am currently fulfilling that declaration.

After much contemplation as to what I wanted to rehabilitate (i.e. exhaustion, body/mind/spirit balance, weight gain, emotional eating, low energy, etc.), I decided that a health spa in a warm weather with a doctor on staff, and a yoga/meditation/weight loss/educational focus would be the best gift I could give myself. A google search on the internet, plus a friend's recommendation helped expedite the process. My friend recommended Dr. Frank Sabatino, whose nutritional healing work she was familiar with for over twenty years. With my husband's blessing (it was his idea that if rehabilitation of self was truly my intention, I need at least three weeks). I left for the Regency House Natural Health Spa in Florida on December 21, 2004. As soon as the taxi driver turned into the Regency driveway, I knew I would love it. A low, squat building, recessed from the street, facing the ocean, surrounded on three sides by tall sentinel buildings, this spa looked like a safe, homey, somewhat rundown, happy place ( a metaphor for my self). My experience here was as it looked to me on that very first day... and more... much more.

I arrived at this spa feeling (like most New Yorkers in mid-winter) tired, stressed, "blue", low in energy, light-deprived, overweight and struggling "to get it all in." Being a "gung ho" kind of N.Y. woman, I wanted to juice fast (a spa option) the first three days

after arrival. A rule of the spa, however, is that fasts of any kind must be supervised by the staff doctor. My first appointment with Dr. Sabatino was prescheduled for the day after my arrival, so I was “forced” to eat the spa cuisine. It was fabulous!

John Nowakowski, the spa chef is so much more than a good cook. A living example of the vegan food/exercise/self love program on which the spa is founded, his very presence (and he, like the rest of the spa staff, makes himself very accessible) is both inspirational and motivational. His cooking classes, shopping smart suggestions, and nutritional information was outstanding... second only to his exquisite culinary creativity in his mostly organic vegan kitchen. It was truly amazing to eat what was placed before me... AND lose weight. Food combinations, vegan food substitutions and portion control were challenging new skills to learn. John and his staff made it fun.

Not only did I lose weight (12 ½ lbs. upon departure), but I also came to understand how and with what foods and habits, I put it on. Dr. Frank Sabatino’s brilliance and enthusiasm regarding “The Program” as he calls it, illuminated the entire spa atmosphere. His weekday morning lectures were part of my daily schedule. Informative, interesting, sometimes shocking (what we do to ourselves), inspirational, humorous, personal and enlightening, his morning “sermons”, much like the man himself, served as a steadfast anchor to the process of change. Without his educational/cognitive/compassionate supervision, I’m sure I would have changed (three weeks in any spa facilitates change), but I doubt I would have rehabilitated/transformed myself.

Upon initial consultation, the doctor advised me NOT to juice fast the first week. He suggested eating slowly until full; drinking a lot of water (although not with meals); doing at least two periods of exercise daily; and resting, resting, resting. It took him telling me the latter more than once for me to understand how sleep deprived I really was. Five days later, he allowed me to juice fast which I had never done before. Although the fast didn't greatly impact my weight loss, it did help me to balance my lifelong hypoglycemic symptoms (i.e. headache, nausea, lightheadedness, anxiety), and the associated fear of being without food... thereby overeating. It also helped to detoxify my body and break old eating patterns (especially stress related) and food addictions (i.e. salt, sugar, caffeine, animal products, and refined carbohydrates). Serving as supervisor and coach throughout the fast, Frank monitored my vitals and made himself available for consultation. I always felt safe and well taken care of.

Morning sunrises were magnificent on the nearby Hollywood Beach Boardwalk where we were transported daily at 7 a.m. for a one hour walk and a 15 minute instructor-led stretch before returning to our spa "home" for breakfast and the day's activities. Aquafit, cardio combo, weight training, and yoga/meditation filled my daily "dance card". These, combined with daily journal writing, occasional spa services (great massages and body wraps), and rest, rest, rest consumed my days.

I found it a deep privilege to spend weeks on end by and with myself. (my husband visited for four days over New Years and loved it too!). The quiet of my own company and the pleasure of my

preferences; the privilege of being well taken care of; the healing process of asking myself only one question “What do you want to do now, honey?”; felt like the grace. The results I began to experience (i.e. weight loss, hydration, increased strength, stamina and energy, clear-headedness, slower pace, etc.) were the catalysts to my rehabilitative transformation.

Twenty-one days later, I departed this sanctuary. I left a wiser, thinner, more energetic, more mature (especially about food and health), rested, more committed to change, self-loving woman. I have finally rehabilitated my self image or “set point” as Dr. Sabatino labels it, and broken what I thought were impenetrable inner barriers to change. More in touch with the divinity of my own authentic Self, I am now aware of the most fundamental body-mind/spirit connection... in the food we eat and how we feel.

I feel committed to embrace the nutritional and educational blessings bestowed in my three week spa journey. Previously, a self-declared “bones and shells” (meat & shellfish) kind of girl, I now feel committed to organic, vegetarian (leaning towards vegan) lifestyle. Although I had a walking/yoga meditation practice for years, I now comprehend the mandatory cardio/weight training activities, which I will add to my weekly routine. Learning that “you have to exercise more as you age, not less” (F. Sabatino), I also have come to understand the importance not only of doing what you love in your life, but doing what works best to maintain the body’s optimal health and the soul’s essence.

The whole focus of self-care is, based on self-love and mattering enough to feed yourself the best food you can buy (organic,

whole grains, fruits and veggies), to exercise to keep strength up and disease down, and to balance the effects of stress as much as possible. These, of course are easier to achieve isolated in a health spa with a tremendous support staff, but I intend to bring these principles into my day to day life. My spa journey was only the beginning of my personal rehabilitation. There is more work ahead. Educating the mind and changing the body are first steps. Maintaining personal discipline, sustaining conscious commitment, accepting ongoing challenges, and staying true to my new choices and inner knowing are daily difficulties; yet, they pave the road home... a return to soul. With patience and self love, I hope to more deeply experience that scared Self residing within. Wish me luck!