

TWO DARK YEARS AND THREE BLESSINGS

How Bob, Walking and a
Support Group Helped Me

“ Whatever you have to do
to be healthy with diabetes,
I will do, too. ”

Someone asked me when was the happiest time in my life. Now! No doubt, I am the happiest I've ever been. I am more honest, more compassionate, more aware of every blessing in my life.

The second happiest time in my life was twelve years before I got diabetes. I was working at the Bishop library, surrounded by books, a great love of mine. It was a dream job.

I was married to my wonderful husband, Bob. We did normal things. We went fishing. We went to pow-wows. We fixed up our house.



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I have fond memories of the days we spent digging a path to lay pipe for the plumbing. Bob was literally “in the trenches,” digging and tossing up shovels of dirt and stones. I brought Bob picks, pipe sections, glasses of water. My father sat on the side of the trench, giving us advice from a lawn chair. Who would think that laying pipe would be a fond memory? For this Paiute/Dinè girl, those were good times!

Before the years of taking care of my mother and father, I was a bright, happy person. People described me as energetic, quick to laugh, kind, generous, cheerful, purposeful and optimistic.



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Fast forward twelve years, and I was a different person. A dozen years of taking care of my beloved mother and father had taken a toll. The first few months after I found out I had diabetes, I described myself with very different words: confused, anxious, anti-social, scared, resentful, angry, burdened, really sad and not in control.

These words describe the person who had to learn all about blood sugar testing, the person who had to muster up some self-discipline to exercise and change eating habits.

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BLOOD SUGAR UPS AND DOWNS

To make it even more difficult, the doctor was trying to get me on the right medication. Every person responds to diabetes medicine differently. That meant my blood sugar was going up and down, and so were my emotions. Many times I felt hot, like I had a fever. When my blood sugar was low, I felt clumsy and confused. I became paranoid. My life looked bleak and hopeless. I always felt like crying and often did. I didn't want to be around my family or friends. At times, my body felt like eating, but for some strange reason, just the thought of food made me feel sick.

I wanted to quit taking my diabetes pills. Or I wanted to use my mother's “pick and choose method” and just take a few of them when I felt like it.

I was a mess.

STUCK IN A COCOON

If I could speak to myself back then, I would say this: “Barbara, don't worry. That's not the real you. That's not the permanent you. That is you in a cocoon, all wrapped up by worry and uncertainty. There is something on the other side of the cocoon. A beautiful being. It will happen. But it will take much energy and turmoil for you to change and be able to bust out of the cocoon. It will not be easy, and it may take some time. But it will happen.”

I am all busted out of my cocoon now! It took two years. With super-woman eyesight, I can see the three things that kept me moving, the three things that brought me back to myself.

The first was my husband Bob.

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THE MOST PERFECT WORDS

People react to you having diabetes in a million different ways. Some pretend you don't have it. Others might think of the impact your having diabetes has on them. Bob didn't react that way. When he drove me back home from the clinic he said simply, "Whatever you have to do to be healthy with diabetes, I will do too."

When we got home, he immediately went to the kitchen, opened the cupboards, and threw away every sugary food.

There were days I couldn't get out of bed. After Bob went to work, I pulled the blankets over my head. I cried, stopped crying, then cried some more. At noon when he came home, there I was, still in bed. He could have been scared, or impatient, or even angry. But he was not. He said, "It's okay. I'm here. I'll help you. Everything is going to be okay."

THE COMPLEX THING OF WALKING

The clinic staff showed me another thing that helped me a lot and still helps me. They suggested that I test my blood sugar one day, then the next day walk and test my blood sugar again. The first day my blood sugar was 145, which was normal for me. The next day I walked near my home for 30 minutes in the morning. In the evening, I did the same thing.

*I tested my blood sugar.
It was 112! Just by walking,
I had lowered my blood sugar
by 30 points!*

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Then I tested my blood sugar. It was 112! Just by walking, I had lowered my blood sugar by over 30 points!

I can't say that walking every day was an easy thing for me. It wasn't the physical part of walking that was difficult. It was the mental thought of walking. I had seen non-Indian women walking near our reservation, doing the race walk that makes a person look like a duck. I always thought, "Who are these people? Don't they have something purposeful to do? Are there no pow-wow outfits they should be making?"



Then another thought materialized in my mind as my mother's voice. "Barbara! You can't go out and play until your chores are done!" Walking was play. When everything was hunky-dory, when my chores were done and all the pow-wow outfits were made and hanging side-by-side in my closet, I could go walking.

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And one more thought about walking: It was for people who could not afford cars. People who did not have the money to buy cars were the ones who walked. If you saw people walking on the side of the road, you felt sorry for them. You offered them a ride.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I WALKED

But there I was, walking on the side of the road, maybe looking like a duck. The blood sugar reading of 112 was stuck in my mind. Walking would make my blood sugar go down. This thought overpowered my mother's voice. (But it did not erase her voice!)

As I suspected, people stopped and offered me rides. "Oh, no! It's too cold to walk! It's too windy! Get in! Let me give you a ride!" I blamed the bad fortune of my having to walk on the side of the road on my doctor: "My doctor told me I have to walk."

Bob walked with me. What precious memories! I saw Mount Tom, our spiritual mountain, covered with snow. Bob kept talking to me, telling me it was nearing the time to gather wild tobacco and sage.



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Walking helped my mind start to clear. It was like my eyes opened. I had been thinking I would stay inside my house, and close myself off to take care of my diabetes. But the act of walking, of getting outside, put a different thought in my head: *The world is still the same. The world is still beautiful and has the same things to offer. I can still have them if I want them.*

THE GROUP WITH NO LOOPHOLE

The third thing that helped get me out of my dark days was going to a diabetes support group. At first I went there looking for a loophole. The deep down thought inside of me was, “If there is any way to fix diabetes, I am going to fix it.” (I’m a fixer, a problem solver, a person who can save the day.)

I looked around the room at the other people who had diabetes. “I am not like them,” I thought. “I will be a really good diabetes patient, and that’s how I will find a way to get rid of my diabetes.”

I kept going to the support groups and slowly realized diabetes was permanent. I looked around the room. I was no longer a different person, a person who would find a miracle way out of diabetes. I was like the other people in the room. They had diabetes. I had diabetes. I really saw them. They were okay and normal. They didn’t have to say the words, but I heard the words: “It’s okay. You don’t have to be scared.”

BUSTING OUT

Climbing out of the dark days didn’t happen in an instant. I had endured grief for twelve years before diabetes. Looking back, I think it is amazing that I emerged from my dark days in only two years. Through those two years,

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I kept testing my blood sugar. I took my medication. I went to support groups. I walked. I was held up, pushed, led, and embraced by my husband.

As my blood sugar got under control, and my head cleared from walking, my depression lifted. It didn’t happen in an instant. I didn’t wake up and say, “Cheerful Barbara is back!” But week by week, I started regaining my true self. I started beading and making beautiful things. I started going to pow-wows. I started taking part in ceremonies.

I remember the first spring I was not depressed. It was like stepping out of my mind, out of the tightness of worry. I was walking, and I was no longer wrapped up inside my worried mind. I was experiencing the moment! I was aware of my breathing! I noticed the snow felt different, like it was making a last-ditch effort to cover up the warming earth. I noticed the wild locust trees, still gray from the winter. But on the very top branches were tiny buds. Overhead there was a constant chatter of the red-winged blackbirds, heading north. I could hear them! I saw willow branches, imagined the fuzziness of their tips. They were waiting for me to gather them, waiting to be made into baskets.

Like the busting out of the springtime buds, I was busting out of my cocoon. I was changed, a different person. But I was beautiful, and I was alive.



Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

**When was the last time I was
happy, feeling peaceful?
What words describe myself
at that time?**

**What are words that describe
myself now?
Why might that be?**

**Can I see that I can return to my
happy self? What are the little,
daily steps I can take to return
to my happy self?**

**What can help me?
Who can help me?**

