

The Power of Perspective in Overcoming Life-Altering Challenges

by Laura Gabayan, MD

“You are still you.” This quote in the recent documentary, “Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story,” from his wife is what reminded Reeves that he wasn’t defined by his physical limitations. Despite the accident that led him to become a quadriplegic, he still remained Christopher.

I, too, have experienced a life-altering physical impediment. As my body started to deteriorate, it was the reminder by my daughter that I’m “still Mommy” that has helped me get through my difficulties. My physical limitations and visible challenges are part of my story and, similar to Christopher Reeves, don’t define me.

Instead, my physical condition allowed me to question the medical establishment that I’d been part of and look to people who view life through a wider lens — people I consider “wise.” In an unusual way, my condition was a gift. I lost most of the control of my body but was still able to create a research project to study how we go about attaining wisdom (The Wisdom Research Project). I set out to scientifically define wisdom by interviewing 60 wise adults, and uncovered its eight intrinsic elements — resilience, kindness, positivity, spirituality, tolerance, creativity, and curiosity. I then wrote a book, *Common Wisdom*, about my findings.

My situation highlighted the importance of mindset and perspective. It allowed me to



not only reroute my life’s path, but change my priorities and outlook. Throughout this process I’ve learned that four convictions enabled me to maintain perspective and persevere. They’re worth sharing:

1. I’m a warrior, not a victim

As you go through life, have a warrior mentality. Avoid any sense of victimhood. Our society often rewards victims. For example, if people look like they’re suffering, they get more attention. Or if someone says they have an urgent need, they get quicker medical care. While it takes more effort to be a warrior, it will empower you to overcome obstacles.

The first step in being a warrior is acceptance. Accept that life isn’t fair, but know that things will work out. Live in faith and not fear. As Helen Keller once said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it’s also full of overcoming it.” Accepting the notion that life isn’t fair puts us at peace and prepares us to fight. It’s not that we’re on high alert all the time, but we have the confidence to take on the obstacle head-on. Instead of avoiding the obstacle or running away from it, we think to ourselves, “Bring it on.” It’s a knowing that what you stand for and who you are is more valuable than the situation you encounter.

2. Things are happening for me and not to me

When things seem to be going wrong and you encounter great turbulence in your life, look for the bigger picture. You may not “see” why something is happening or what it will lead to, but know that you’re only experiencing a piece of the puzzle. All obstacles are actually opportunities — gifts you are given to move forward in your life.

When my body started to deteriorate in 2013 all I could immediately focus on was the difficulty I was having seeing patients and how my career as a clinician was becoming more limited. I never imagined I would broaden my perspective and author a book.

3. “Why not me?”

Instead of thinking “Why me?” think, “Why not me?” This question will remind you that you can handle any situation. It will

also remind you that the divine feels that you can overcome this challenge or else you wouldn’t have been given such an obstacle. It will make you stronger and not break you.

This doesn’t mean that you’re excited to suffer and experience pain, but it does mean that your experience will increase your resilience and wisdom.

4. There’s much to be grateful for

The ability to be thankful and show appreciation through gratitude does much to improve one’s mindset and perspective. In many ways it’s forced appreciation that’s key. It helps you to recognize the parts of life for which to be grateful that aren’t always obvious. For example, gratitude for the challenge or learning opportunity puts the ball in your court. It gives you a sense of control.

When you face extraordinary obstacles, all you can do is be grateful for the good parts of your life. A stroke patient that has lost the function of half of their body can be grateful for the parts of the body that do function. Even though a majority of my muscles don’t work and I can’t walk, my functional upper body and arms, as well as my continued

cognitive ability, allowed me to conduct research on wisdom and write my book.

As I think about the power of perspective, I remember Christopher Reeves. While emotionally devastating, the accident allowed him to do so much for others. He was a celebrity with great power and influence. He not only gave people hope that there’s a brighter tomorrow, but he encouraged people devastated from spinal cord injuries to live better lives. He also strengthened the voice of the disabled community.

Similar to the 60 wise interviewees I spoke with, Reeves didn’t give up on life when things became hard. He kept fighting and reminding himself that he “can do it” — a wise choice to be certain. ✨

*Dr. Laura Gabayan is a world-renowned physician and expert in research. Through her Wisdom Research Project, she interviewed 60 wise adults across North America and defined the 8 fundamental elements of wisdom. She describes her findings in her new book, **Common Wisdom: 8 Scientific Elements of a Meaningful Life** (Redwood Publishing, 2024). For more information, visit thewisdomresearchproject.com.*

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