

Choosing To Be Fit

CHAPTER ONE: DENIAL IS NOT A VIABLE STRATEGY

Life is what happens while you're making plans. John Lennon

In retrospect, I find it interesting that I was taken by surprise by my big Fitness Wake-up Call, that moment when I really got on a gut level that my health and well-being were truly in jeopardy. I mean, obviously I had not lost my stamina, strength, and energy overnight, right?

I wondered if other people experienced this same phenomenon. I asked some friends and did some research to learn what others said about this, and it turned out many of them had the same experience. They said they didn't have any idea how badly off they really were until they had their own, often dramatic, wake-up call.

This raised a very important question in my mind. What signs did I ignore and how long did I ignore them? How could I not have seen the train wreck coming? What could I do differently in the future?

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Of course, these were not the first questions that popped into my mind when I found myself stuck on my butt in my garden, unable to stand up because I didn't have the balance or the strength in my legs to do so.

My first question was, "How the hell am I going to get out of this mess? I don't want to spend the rest of my days watching my health decline like I'm on a runaway sled hurtling down a steep icy hill." I grew up sledding in Alaska, so when I get scared this metaphor often comes to mind.

I felt sorry for myself. *This is not fair. Greg and I have been through four really tough years and I've been doing the best I can.* My whining was not really helping me, so after a few days, I began to turn my runaway sled toward a level

slope where I could assess the damage and figure out what to do. I started looking for people to help me put together my plan to become physically, mentally and spiritually fit.

Some months into my new fitness program, when I decided to write this book, I became more curious about how I had gotten to the train wreck stage without knowing it was coming. As I had learned from others, most of us don't just lose our fitness overnight, by misplacing it on the nightstand and having the cat knock it under the bed. It happens over time.

### **So where did my health go, and how did this happen?**

I began thinking about the past year, before our most recent move, and started writing down some of the events. The fact that much of it was a blur was my first clue. Obviously there was a lot of difficult stuff I didn't want to remember. I could see that during the past year I was already functioning at a sub-optimal level, so I realized I needed to go back further.

I decided to go back to that day in 2007 when our lives changed so dramatically, and then reconstruct the events during the four years leading to my wake-up call, to see if I could gain a better understanding of what had happened to my health. I wanted to see if there were lessons I might have used during those years -- lessons that would serve me moving forward.

I wrote down as much as I could remember. As I wrote about some of the events, details began coming back. While it was terribly painful, I learned it was not going to kill me to remember the details – in fact quite the opposite happened. When I stopped pushing the memories away, when I stopped deliberately blurring them because I didn't think I could handle them, and instead looked for the details – I found myself taking on the role of the observer.

I continued making notes, filling in more details where I could, but the time frame wasn't making sense to me. Then I found all my old calendars and could sequence the events of those four years using notes I made on each day in the calendar. Hooray -- I had found the breadcrumbs!

I began writing as fast as I could in longhand on a paper pad each morning when I woke up, taking a particular event or time period and writing down everything that came to me about it. Then after breakfast I would enter my written notes into the computer. This routine allowed me to dive deep into painful events and write from my heart. Sometimes I would sob so much as I wrote in longhand that the page would be wet. It became a form of therapy for me – with me as the client and my observing self as the therapist.

I ended up with thirty pages of notes and a number of completely detailed events. As I read through these pages I was stunned at how much had occurred, the string of traumatic events, the actions I had taken to keep moving forward each time, and the support that I hadn't remembered was there when it was most needed. In fact, as I kept working with this material, I realized that I had done many things well, that I was not helpless, that I persevered no matter how bleak the circumstances. I was amazed at how resilient I was.

But I also saw where I could have been more forgiving, more supportive of myself, where I could have asked for help. My harsh inner critic was my biggest enemy, and I suspected it had helped destroy my health more than the external circumstances. The external stress was chronic and horrific, but the stress generated and prolonged by my own self-criticism, guilt, and shame was even worse.

Given that I was already three months into my fitness journey, I could see that some of this pattern was repeating itself. *I began to understand that the need for fitness of mind, body and spirit was more important than I had realized. I needed to learn how to change my self-defeating behaviors to stop them from derailing my fitness journey.*

Now I could see that the particular details about what happened during those four years were not as important as learning that I had the strength to examine my story, hold it up to the light, turn it around, and view it from different angles. *This is how I would find my power -- the power of facing the past and transforming it into a tool for learning how to do my life differently.*

My plan had been to write about the details of these four years, but I see now that the details were really only important for my own learning, so I won't burden you with all of them. I'll share some of the major events and provide a map, a journal of what happened to me as the result of four years of prolonged, chronic stress.

*I know now from personal experience that chronic stress is the most significant factor that makes all of us at risk for losing our health in today's stressful 24/7 world. If we are to gain and maintain our personal fitness of body, mind, and spirit, we must learn how to help ourselves during prolonged periods of chronic stress.*

### **My four years of chronic stress began on September 7, 2007**

My partner Greg and I had created what we believed was a well thought out and well constructed plan for how we would navigate the treacherous financial sea looming on the horizon in 2007. Greg was getting the necessary major repairs completed on his house so he could put it on the market in July. I was finishing my book *Choosing To Be: Lessons in Living from a Feline Zen Master*, while simultaneously sorting through years of accumulated belongings and having some repairs done to my house so I could put it on the market the same time Greg put his on the market.

We planned to put the money from the sale of our houses in the bank and move to Flagstaff AZ where we would rent a house, watch what happened during the next few years, and continue to develop our businesses from there. Flagstaff had a great little airport very close to where we would live, so Greg could travel for his consulting business when needed. We could easily find people in Flagstaff to do administrative work for our direct mail business if we decided to continue it. The work I was doing on *Choosing To Be* and my other projects were done on the computer and the Internet, with occasional trips to attend conferences.

Back in the spring of 2006, my Maine Coon cat Catzenbear, the inspirational kitten in *Choosing To Be*, had a feline sarcoma tumor removed from his hip. My vet said he had gotten it all and was optimistic that it might not return, but

cautioned me that this type of tumor was very aggressive. Catz recovered quickly and was back at work two days later helping me write the book. His older brother Poohbear, the Feline Zen Master, had left us in 2005, and I had promised Pooh that I would finish the book and get it published. Catz and I were keeping that promise.

Unfortunately in June of 2007 Catzenbear's tumor came back. The vet said we could try surgery one more time but also told me that it probably would come back again. After the operation he was cautiously optimistic, saying once again that he got it all. And once again, Catz recovered like a champ and was back at work with me in a few days.



Greg and I were focused, optimistic, and healthy. Both of us ate well and took time to walk every day, swim, and do weights. While we had a lot going on, we were energetic and excited about the future. One of my biggest concerns about our move to Flagstaff and living in the same house for the first time was whether our cats would get along. Catzenbear was sixteen years old and had mellowed

with age, while Greg's young Lincoln was a bundle of energy and a bit of a terror. We decided to bring Lincoln over a few times to test the waters, and they seemed to pretty much ignore each other so I decided that boded well for the future.

My birthday was coming up on September 11<sup>th</sup>. We would be busy that day, so we decided to have a nice dinner out on Friday the 7<sup>th</sup> at our favorite outdoor patio restaurant in downtown Ojai. Greg came by to pick me up, his hair still wet from swimming laps.

He had been moving as quickly as possible on the repairs to get his house on the market in July. However, the repairs turned out to be much more complicated than he expected, and it was taking longer than we thought it would. He was dealing with new problems at his house almost every day, but he would still manage to jump in the pool and do some laps each afternoon to help with the stress of keeping so many balls in the air.

Our planned date of July for selling our houses hadn't happened, so now we were shooting for the end of September. The noise about the coming financial crisis was getting louder, but most people still didn't believe it would really happen. We knew differently, and we were more concerned with every week we were delayed at this point. But – we were on target now for late September.

We had reserved our favorite table on the patio, the one beside the path alongside the lovely green park where we could watch people walking their dogs. Greg had lost all three of his beloved dogs during the past two years, the most difficult being the departure less than a year ago of Roland, the dobie-rot who was Greg's true love. He missed the energy of his dogs so much. He loved watching dogs play, so being able to do that while we ate was always a treat for him.

After we had ordered salads and our favorite salmon dish, I went to the bathroom inside the restaurant to wash my hands. I was still in the process of filling the dumpster outside my house with all the stuff I wanted to get rid of and had taken one last load out before we left. I was really proud of my efforts to downsize – this was my third dumpster, and I was making trips to Goodwill every week.

I looked in the restroom mirror and saw how tired and stressed I looked. Thank goodness we were getting close to the finish line on our house projects. I was getting more and more nervous about getting out of the market in time, but there wasn't anything I could do to speed up the process at this point. Greg was doing everything humanly possible, and the best way I could help was to talk through the possible solutions with him when he hit new problems with leaks and plumbing and permits. "Soon this will all be behind us and we'll be relaxing on the porch in our new home in Flagstaff," I thought, "then we will have time to hike and play golf and ski and enjoy life."

When I walked out on the patio I noticed the actress Bebe Neuwirth sitting at one of tables. I always enjoyed her work and was tempted to tell her so, but interrupting celebrities is not something we do in Ojai, so I just smiled and walked past her to our table.

Greg's back was to me and he had stretched back in his chair with his arms out. I knew his back must be hurting from all the physical labor up at the house and thought that his taking a big stretch like this seemed like a great idea. We were seated at the edge of the patio facing the walkway, so we had a bit of privacy to do things that might seem odd in the center of a restaurant.

Then I reached the table and saw Greg's face. I had been gone less than a few minutes. Greg was unconscious and already turning blue. I screamed at the top of my lungs and ran to him screaming his name, not believing what I was seeing. I just kept screaming.

A woman who was walking her dog next to the patio ran over to us, yelling that she was an Emergency Room nurse. She grabbed Greg, cleared his airway, and began breathing into his mouth, yelling that she needed help to get him up. The maître'd heard us screaming and came racing out. He was a strong young man who could quickly lift Greg up and do the Heimlich maneuver on him. He assumed Greg must have choked on something. I saw that our salads had arrived, but Greg had not touched his fork. He had been waiting for me. I yelled to them that Greg had not eaten anything.

They got him on the ground and the maître'd began pushing on his chest as the nurse worked on his breathing. I saw Bebe Neuwirth calling 911 on her cell phone. The other diners on the patio stood there with horrified expressions on their faces, watching the surreal scene unfold. I was sobbing, not believing this was really happening -- that our reality had changed in the time it took to wash my hands.

The nurse and maître'd managed to get a pulse, but they were having trouble keeping it. The EMTs arrived with the defrib unit within four minutes and were able to get a stronger, constant pulse. They stabilized Greg and loaded him into the ambulance to take him to Ojai Hospital. Greg was in a coma. I held his hand while they were taking him to the ambulance and told him I was there. There wasn't room for me in the ambulance, so the nurse bundled her little dog and me into her car and drove me to the hospital, which was only a few miles away.

When I got to the Emergency Room, I called Greg's son on his cell. He and his brother were driving south on the Ventura freeway to spend time with their grandparents, and fortunately they had not gotten very far. I told them to come back as Greg was unconscious and in the Ojai Hospital, that we didn't know exactly what had happened yet.

Time had no meaning to me during this period so it seemed like the boys appeared almost instantly. We waited in the small Emergency admitting area, and at some point a nurse came out to tell us they had almost lost Greg and had to do some sort of procedure or administer something and that he should be stabilized enough soon to move him to the larger hospital in Ventura soon. I had no idea what she was saying as the rushing sound in my ears was preventing me from hearing anything.

Finally we were allowed in to see him. He was unconscious and very pale, hooked up to so many tubes. I held his hand and told him we were there, that we were all with him and he would be okay. Then the nurse asked us to leave so they could get him ready to transport him to Ventura.



We waited all night at the Ventura hospital, finally getting into the Critical Care Unit to see him, on a breathing tube and in a coma, early in the morning. We were told to wait for the Doctor to come talk to us. The nurse started to give me some trouble about being there, until Greg's son said that I was the same as next of kin, and that I would be the one the Doctors were to talk to. I had never thought of something like this happening to us and what effect not being married might have on our ability to be with and help each other.

The Doctor arrived and told us Greg had an "electrical failure" and that was why his heart stopped. After he came out of the coma and recovered for a few days, he would need to have a defibrillator implanted. He said we wouldn't know about whether his brain had been affected until he came out of the coma, but he was optimistic given how quickly he was brought back.

The boys left to go home and get some sleep. I sat next to Greg and prayed, not wanting to leave him all alone. Finally the nurse suggested that I needed to get home and get some sleep, and that she would call me if anything changed. We had already called Greg's Dad and his family would be coming later in the morning, so I went home to feed Catzenbear and immediately dropped into a deep sleep for the next few hours -- and woke up to the unreality of our new reality.

Greg's family arrived that morning. Greg remained in a coma for two days. I was up most of that first day and night, sitting in a chair next to him, arm wrestling with him much of the time to keep him from pulling the breathing tube out. His sister arrived later that day to stay and help. Her being there was a godsend, as we didn't want to leave him alone for a minute. We were his guardians.

I called Greg's business partner the next morning, and after Marcia arrived at the hospital, I went up to the house to talk to the workers and tell them what was going on. I needed to get money to pay them, so I looked through Greg's desk to find his checkbooks, and told the workers I would get the money for them soon.

After a very long two days, Greg regained consciousness and came back to us, and the good news was that he was okay, his brain had not been affected. He had no memory of what had happened to him.

During the next few days, Marcia stayed with him during the day while I supervised the project up at the house, then I came at the end of the day and spent the night at the hospital. Greg was moved to a regular room, and I brought a check for him to sign so I could pay the workers.

My schedule was to spend the night at the hospital until Greg's sister came to relieve me, go to my house to take a nap and take care of Catzenbear, and then go to Greg's house to manage the project. The plumbing and wall repair inside was done, the outside stucco was done, and the leak problems were fixed and tested, so now we were ready to start painting. This meant I needed to get sixteen years of accumulated stuff out of the house and get the house cleaned so they could paint. I found someone to do the cleaning while I sorted and moved stuff out. I would take a list of things I was planning to get rid of to Greg so he could go through it. Later on Greg told me that he had no memory of what occurred during those first five days in the hospital, so he kept asking about what had happened to the things he said I could give away.

We spent my birthday on September 11<sup>th</sup> in his room. The nurse brought me an extra tray and we sat on his bed eating dinner together. I was so incredibly grateful. It was the best birthday I could remember.

On September 13<sup>th</sup>, Greg was moved to a private room to get a good night's sleep before surgery the next day to implant the defibrillator. I stayed with him that night, sleeping in the recliner next to his bed. We watched old Carol Burnett reruns and actually had a few laughs. I knew we were in for a lengthy recovery period, but I began to believe we were out of the woods.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, Greg went in for the defrib surgery. We held hands in his room and I asked him to stay connected with me, that I would be beside him during the surgery. I told the surgery desk I was going to wait in the Chapel next door. I was there for the hour the doctor said the procedure would take and no

one had come to get me, so I went to the surgery admitting desk. The receptionist told me Greg was out of surgery and had been taken to recovery in another part of hospital. I raced down to recovery and they said he wasn't there. My heart was pounding as I raced back to the Surgery Desk and told her Greg was not in Recovery. She finally went back to find out what was going on. She came back and told me Greg was still struggling to come out of anesthesia so they had kept him in the hallway before taking him to Recovery.

I started screaming that I knew he was trying to tell us something was wrong. I made so much noise that she had to get a nurse to check on Greg. He was *not* struggling to come out of the anesthesia. He was trying to tell them he couldn't breathe. The doctor had nicked his lung during the surgery and the lung had collapsed.

They took him back into surgery to drain the lung. After an hour the doctor came out and said Greg was okay, that this nicked lung thing happens sometimes because the lung is so close to where the wire goes for the defibrillator. I remember asking that if that was the case, why didn't they pay more attention to the fact that he was "struggling" to come out of the anesthesia, but I don't remember the answer.

Finally Greg was sent to recovery, and several hours later he was taken back to his room. He was supposed to be able to leave the hospital the next day, but because of the lung incident we were there for two more days.

Greg was finally released from the hospital on September 16<sup>th</sup>. I brought him home to my house and got him settled in the bedroom. I had already brought some of his things, so we sat and made a list of what else he needed. He was anxious to go up to see his house, but the doctor said he needed to rest for a day or two first. I stayed on the couch in the other room, although sleeping was not really in the cards. I kept waking up every hour to go check on him. I was able to sleep when he was in the hospital, but now that he was home I knew I was the only one checking on him.

Greg was not allowed to drive for at least six weeks, until the doctor was sure there would not be more episodes. I drove him to the doctor and the next day we took a trip up to his house. It broke my heart to watch him try to comprehend what was going on, to see him realize how much his life had changed.

Greg's cat Lincoln had been hiding out ever since Greg left. He had his own way in and out of the house, so the workers and I rarely saw him. Greg and I were standing out by the pool when Lincoln streaked past it and darted up the hill. Greg called to him but he didn't stop. We walked over to the hill and I climbed up to the well, but could see no trace of him. We waited a while, with Greg calling out to him, hoping he would come back. Finally we had to leave, thinking he was probably scared and would come back another time. That turned out to be the last time we ever saw him.

I took Greg back to my house and got him settled on the couch. I said I was going to the backyard to find some flowers, and cried the whole time I was picking them. When I came back to the living room with the vase of flowers, Catzenbear had settled down on the back of the couch to be with Greg, and I almost lost it again.



We were still driven by the idea that we could get the house on the market in time. Every day counted, so I would get up early, make breakfast, and go to the house, checking with Greg on the phone to make sure he was okay. I was only five minutes away and could get home quickly if he needed me.

Our new plan was to get the house on the market by the middle of October -- that gave me a month to complete the project, and according to the plan I laid out and went over with Greg, it was doable.

Then we were hit with yet more more setbacks that pushed us out two more weeks. The roof leaks we had tested and thought were fixed didn't hold during the first big storm of the year, so we had to get yet another expert out and have more work done, after which our painter had to repaint those areas. We re-tested and they held, so we put the house on the market and scheduled the Open House for the realtors the first week of December.

Two days before the Open House a really big storm hit and once again we had leaks which ruined the same walls. Finally, one of our painters sent a friend of his out to look at the house and he came up with an explanation of the problem that we knew was correct. He fixed the problem, the painter repainted again, and we held our breath for the next storm. Our realtor rescheduled the open house for January 13th.

During this period, Catzenbear's tumor came back again. I took him to the vet on December 18th and the vet said there was nothing more to be done except to enjoy our time together until the tumor got too big for him to function. I brought him home where he spent his days in my office while I worked on the book. He was so strong, so courageous, and never complained.

We finally held the Open House on January 13<sup>th</sup>. All the realtors loved it, saying the property, the view, the house, the colors, and the staging were magnificent. They only wished we could have gotten it on the market earlier. The market for houses in this price range was practically nonexistent now. Meanwhile, I was watching the value of my house drop like a rock. Greg and I were both on our way to becoming "upside down" with our houses.



The day of the Open House I received the editorial evaluation of *Choosing To Be* from my publisher. It was very complimentary, and detailed the rewrites that needed to be done to make the book as excellent as I wanted it to be. I knew Catzenbear's time with me was limited, so I wanted to work as fast as I could to finish it before he died. I didn't know how I would be able to do it after he was gone. There was nothing else I could do now but take care of Greg and work on the book -- the house situation was out of our hands.

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To come -- 2008 becomes a test of my resolve, stamina, and resilience.