



# Now I Can See the Trees, the Flowers, the Birds, the Sky, and the Rain

*As told by  
Charlene Pell*

**About six years ago my life changed dramatically when I was severely burned in an airplane crash, which also resulted in the death of my fiancé.** When I woke from a coma after nearly three months, I was in a place that was completely foreign to me, surrounded by monitors, machines, medical equipment, and covered from head to toe in sterile bandages. I was unable to speak or move.

For the first time in my life I felt like I was on a journey for which I had none of the tools that I needed. Having been a person who led others; managed so many things; had strategies, plans, procedures, information, data—well I didn't have any of that anymore. I realized I was embarking on an incredible expedition that would be the most important of my life. . . if I survived.

I was frightened and uneasy having everything out of my control and being totally at the mercy of others. The only source of security and reassurance in my world was the sight of my mother and my sister by my bed. Whenever they were in the room with me I never had to worry about my health care, because I knew everything would be fine if they were with me. While I was in a coma for all those nights, they were my eyes, voice, and ears, taking care of everything. Even though I don't remember when I left the Intensive Care Unit, my mother and sister shared with me stories about the many highly skilled, competent, compassionate, and dedicated caregivers who enabled me to get to the place to be able to leave the hospital and go to the rehab center.

I recall many glowing examples of healing relationships, even though they are somewhat fuzzy in my memory. One of my caregivers on the third shift was a burly, heavysset nurse. My family had shared my love of music and jazz with him, so he would either bring a cassette to listen to or play something my family had left for me. And he talked with me.

One nurse somehow picked up on the fact that I had been studying Spanish for many years. Her name was Maria and she would speak to me in Spanish, even though I didn't understand half of what she said. Even so, I could feel her care and concern for me

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when she talked about her family and children. She complimented me whenever I tried to speak in her native tongue.

After I left the burn unit, many of the occupational and physical therapists went beyond the norm to care for me. They took the time to share with me their lives and what mattered to them. I actually lived vicariously through them for at least nine months because I was unable to be out in the world, to walk on my own, needing to regain use of my muscles. It took many operations just to be able to speak normally. The caregivers that really affected my outcome were always the ones who took an interest in me, who made me feel that my life mattered, that I wasn't just a burn patient in room 121. They embraced me.

After my hospitalization, I spent five-and-a-half months at Health South Sunrise Rehabilitation Center in Plantation, Florida. On the ride from the hospital to the rehab center, I was on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance. I recall my anxiety, but also the comfort I felt looking out the window and seeing my mother and sister in my car right behind us. Knowing that they were there was so important, because this was an enormous step to be leaving the security of the hospital and the care of providers that I had become accustomed to and trusted. Now I was on my way to yet another new place where I would encounter new doctors, nurses, and therapists.

When we arrived, I was introduced to a number of professionals who would be taking care of me, then they took me to my private room. For the first time in four months, I could see outside my window. I love nature and the outdoors. Now I could see the trees, the flowers, the birds, the sky, and the rain.

In the room there was nothing other than a bed, a chair, a little bureau, and of course lots of medical equipment and supplies. It was very cold and very sterile. I asked for a lamp that they put on my little dresser. Every night with the lamp on I felt a source of security, so much so that one of the first things I drew in recreational therapy was a picture of this little lamp.

Once I realized I was on morphine, I immediately mandated that my caregivers get me off it as quickly as possible. I knew that the only thing I had left in my life was my mind and I needed to get control of it immediately so that I could become an active participant in my healing. It was a very painful and terrifying experience going through withdrawal. I thought people were trying to kill me. Many times, I thought I had died. I recall once being surrounded by 20 caregivers and I thought they were all there because I was dying.

One of the most important people at that time was my psychotherapist who came nearly every day and pushed my wheelchair down to his office. I loved his office, even though it was cluttered, looking like he had tons of work to complete. But there were pictures on the wall, scenes of Greece, and live plants, and he loved, like I do, jazz and new age music. The lighting was subdued and there were all kinds of books about assisting people through crisis and trauma. That first day we met I had a sense of who he was as soon as I went into his office—an extraordinarily compassionate psychotherapist. Because he was so young, at first I wondered if he had the experience to really help me, but I wanted to give him every opportunity.

I so looked forward to my time with him every day because it was the time I could say honestly, genuinely, anything and everything that was on my mind. In a sense, my family had just lost the sister and the daughter that they knew, loved, and adored. As

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much as I loved and adored them, I empathized with their suffering and didn't want to contribute to the pain they were already experiencing. So being with Dr. Mick was the time for me to charter this new life that I was going to lead and to discover new meaning. I felt that I had lost everything that mattered to me except for my mother and my sister. But I also learned a very important lesson in that sterile, cold, empty room—all the material things didn't matter and I never needed all of those things. I came to see that they could be taken away from you in a second through no means of your own, but the love of my family, my friends, and my faith are eternal. It didn't matter what I looked like, what physical challenges I might have, as long as I had family, friends, and hope. Everything else would follow.

One Friday afternoon before he went home, Dr. Mick came to my room and brought me a couple of music cassettes. He had taken the time to go through many CDs and records looking for music that he thought I might like. I was incredibly touched by his insight: he knew that music was going to comfort me, and that I would enjoy it. It's hard to explain what a profound meaning music has in my life. I treasure those tapes, and even though it has been seven years since my accident, every time I hear the music I think of Dr. Mick, his care, his compassion, and how he helped me to recover the things that matter most in my life.

Another important caregiver who comes to mind was my physiatrist Dr. Eddie. He always smiled when he entered my room, and he was very soft spoken. Most of the time he gently touched either my arm or my hand when he began to speak with me. He carefully listened to any concern that I might have or any difficulty I might be experiencing. Frequently he would do groundbreaking things to ensure my comfort. For example, during the seven months since the accident, I hadn't been touched other than to have someone change a dressing, to take my pulse or temperature, or tend a wound. Of course, people were afraid to touch me because I was in such a fragile condition, but I had one little spot on the back of my neck that wasn't burned. I asked Dr. Eddie if we could have a massage therapist come in and work with me, even though I knew there was just a small portion of my skin that could be massaged. He arranged a session to try it. Prior to the accident, massage had given me a lot of comfort, but there had never been a massage therapist allowed to come into this institution.

I will never forget the afternoon when a very tall gentleman with very curly hair like a giant teddy bear and a big friendly smile came into my life. His name was Howard, and he spoke very softly. Howard started to massage the tiny spot on the back of my neck and we began to talk. I told Howard that that was the first time I had been touched in six months and how very special it was to me. From that point on, Howard came back a couple of times a week. Massage really helped and continues to be one of the greatest methods of pain management for me today.

I was blessed to have so many extraordinary caregivers who were competent, dedicated, caring, and honest. I truly believe that I would not be where I am today without them, and I will be eternally grateful to each and every one of them. I have also realized that one of the biggest contributions to my healing has been my family and friends encouraging, calling, writing, cheering me on, and surrounding me with enduring, abundant love.

*Charlene Pell is a national speaker, consultant, and writer who serves on the advisory board of The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, Inc. and the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center.*