

MY HAPPINESS

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When Mrs. Henry explained the laws of life essay to us, there was but one thing that popped into my head. Now of course, I can name quite a few of the values that govern my life, but nothing else has so deeply affected my life than this. More than just that it made me realize how to be happy, and now that is the most important law I live by. I must warn you that this will not be short, and this will not be simple, because this thing that has shaped me is not a single event or a specific incident. This curse, and this blessing, will follow me until the day I die. And though my mind screams you will never understand, my heart whispers you have to. This is my life.

My youngest days were always full of bliss, some adventure, and plenty of fun. I remember the sun's warmth on my face, the cool grass under my feet. I remember climbing the apple tree in the back yard, picking the flowers and letting the petals float through the light breeze like summer snow. I also, remember falling out of that tree. I remember eating lunch, spaghetti, or peanut butter and jelly with neighborhood friends. I remember eating berries, raspberries, or black raspberries, fresh from the bush when I *should* have been eating lunch. I remember my friend Katie and me chasing her terrified brother Niko around the back yard with a toad. I remember watching "Blue Clues" until my daddy came home. And I remember, despite all the trouble I might have been during the day, saying goodnight and putting myself to bed. Then, I remember moving to a new home, my current home. But overall, I remember happiness.

I remember when the pain started to come. At first I ignored it. Like any child, I assumed if it happened to me, it probably happened to everyone, like when your foot fell asleep. After all, I didn't appear different than anyone else. But gradually it increased, and I began to complain to my mom. She recognized what I described as something much like a disease she had been diagnosed with that had been triggered when she was sick with 5th disease – just a common childhood disease- which I had also gotten.

At six years old I was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis. Later, they found out it was a rarer disease called Myositis. Now, when I explain this to people, I give them the dictionary definition. I tell usually them "Myositis is an auto-immune disease in which the immune system attacks healthy muscle tissue". I don't expect them to understand. But you can call it what you like, fancy names don't make any difference. In the end, all it is is pain.

I soon learned what having Myositis meant. It meant sometimes, randomly, some part of my body would throb with pain. It meant that if I walked or ran for a long distance, my feet and ankles would get sore. It meant if I played outside too long, that I would get very tired. It meant that I had to take medicine, and have special papers in the school office saying I had a "medical condition". It meant that I wasn't like other kids, that I was different: while they could go on playing gym class. I had to sit out. But I was naïve. I didn't think it would matter, I was sure people could understand. So unashamed, I would tell my friends. Then one day, at gym, a friend approached me and asked me why I was sitting out. I told her, and she replied "Oh yeah, that

thing, but that's just an excuse right? You're so lucky!" and she ran off. It made me sad. I knew other kids thought I was spoiled, sometimes I even though I was, but a lair? I wasn't one of those. Gradually I stopped telling other kids. I learned that they couldn't understand something they couldn't see.

While all that was happening, my mom was fighting battles with the school system. Many teachers would not believe that a little girl like me had a medical condition. When they saw me go from happy one moment, tears the next, they dismissed it as "attention problems". The principal of the school was the worst, and sometimes if you passed the office, you could just hear the fights between him and my mom from outside the door. My mom was around the school so much that other kids thought she was bribing the music teacher Mrs. Trigoni to put me in all the school music productions. Of course there were few teachers who believed I had a medical condition. For example, the school librarians who would kindly smuggle me into the library where I would help them put away books so I didn't have to go outside on cold winter days. There was also my 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Heiman, who gave me the gift of simply accepting it and she would never question when I came to school late, or had to go down to the nurses office for medicine.

For some time the only thing I could think of this thing was as a curse. I thought "This isn't fair! Why me?" My mother and other adults would always comment on how "unfortunate" It was, and my dislike for being different was only nurtured by those thoughts. But soon, I became sick of it. I was sick of being the pitiful kid in the corner, of sitting out, and of giving up. I started doing things I loved anyway. I would still play in gym class and at recess, and I wouldn't stop until the pain became unbearable. I told myself I would prove them wrong, and that I could be happy, that Myositis wasn't that bad. Then the strangest thing happened- I found, it really wasn't bad at all. Once again, I was enjoying life. Now of course, I would still sit out if it wasn't quite a fun game in gym and I didn't feel like killing myself over something not fun, but other than that, I didn't back down. I found happiness was possible- and if you knew me back then, you would probably agree that I was one happy little girl. I was on the swim team for 5 years, quitting only when I had blown out both rotator cuffs. Often, I would spend my time outside, playing in the neighborhood. When the neighborhood kids gathered together to play capture the flag, I would play too. We would play for hours, and I wouldn't even notice the pain. Finally, when it was too dark to play or time for dinner (whichever came first) I would go home. Only then would I notice how sore and swollen my ankles were, how much my body ached or how exhausted I was. I loved to climb trees, calling out to passing people and having giggle fits when they would look all around and not see me until they thought to look up. I would go to school, and actually enjoy it. I had good grades, but I think my favorite things about school were that there were people, recesses, and food (more specifically the cookies) at lunch.

I found what happiness was. Happiness is loving, and knowing that your loved back. Happiness was doing what you loved. It's both succeeding and failing, and the fun you have between. It's seeing the smiles on friends and family member's faces and knowing that you were the one who put them there. I found that happiness doesn't mean you have to be perfect, but just accepting that you are imperfect. Most importantly, I found that despite my troubles I was happy.

I still live with Myositis today. It has actually been improving, and in fact, I'm so busy being happy that half the time I forget to take my medicine, but I do okay. I don't usually tell people about my problems, because physiologically the human mind never wants to hear things that makes them feel sad or guilty. If they do care then they may pity me and that's the worst thing of all. I don't want your pity. It may seem sad at times, but I don't want my life, my story,

to be a sad one. I want it to be filled with joy. And in the end, from my curse, I've learned that I am blessed because having Myositis has made me a stronger person. I've always been a happy person, whether I became like that growing up or was born with it in my heart, and I know that I will always be happy no matter what troubles me. I see that as a blessing many people don't have. I think if more people could just see how easy it is to be happy and stop complaining then the world could be a better place. I know that I will never be able to end wars, stop world hunger, cure cancer, or anything big like that, but if only I could show people how to be happy, if only a few, then I could die in peace knowing I made an impact on this world. So my law of life is to be happy, and spread happiness, and show people that happiness is available to all.