

Resurrection

by Sheila Grether-Marion

FIVE YEARS AGO MY LIFE CHANGED FOREVER.

My husband, Mark and I had traveled to Africa on safari. We were in Zambia when I decided to take a canoe ride on the Zambezi river which, while beautiful, was extremely perilous.



Throughout my life I have embraced adventure. I've enjoyed white water rafting, kayaking, downhill skiing, parasailing, snow boarding, rock climbing, horseback riding and body building. I've also had my share of close calls. My husband and I endured a force 5 hurricane in Antarctica; I went over a waterfall after falling off a white water raft in Sacramento; and I survived a major car crash that gave me amnesia in 1979 and led to chronic problems with my neck.

The Zambezi river is full of apex predators; crocodiles, elephants, hippos, and tiger fish, which are essentially large piranha fish with razor-sharp teeth. Against the good advice of my husband, who took the land route, I embarked on a fateful journey during which my canoe was mock-charged by two bull elephants. Two hours in, as the approaching twilight signaled the end of our canoe ride, an enormous crocodile slithered into the river, quickly approaching my canoe. My rear end had fallen asleep, as I was not used to canoe rides, and I struggled to get out of the unstable canoe and onto the shore. My guide, a large, strong Australian, panicked, and full of adrenaline, he yanked me out of the canoe by my right hand with such force that he broke my neck! I did not immediately realize the severity of my injury, and continued on with the safari — landing in small planes on beaches, climbing in caves, riding down sand dunes in Namibia - until the pain became intolerable, and an MRI revealed a break at the base of my neck.



After an 18-hour trip home, I awaited neck surgery. This was not the first time. That was back in 2006, the result of deterioration since my auto accident in '79.

On November 16, 2013 I was released from Huntington Memorial Hospital after a cervical laminectomy (essentially a bridge built over the cervical vertebrae). My prognosis was good until I awoke at home that first night, got out of bed, bent over a drawer to get a change of pjs and faltered. I struggled to regain my footing, but was



unsuccessful and fell over a low couch to the tile floor. I lay there, able to breathe, but completely paralyzed. Mercifully, I passed out.

When I awoke I was in the ER, being rushed into surgery. The doctors widened my spinal cord and placed me in the head brace I would live in for 6 months. Two surgeries and 4 months of life in the hospital followed.

After my surgery, I made a conscious decision to be an inspiration to others facing similar challenges. Complaining never results in anything positive. We all live on the cusp of

death; we are all inter-connected. Our deeds – good or bad – ripple outward. We can choose how we respond to adversity; we can become a beacon of hope or we can complain. I chose the former, and it inspired me, as well.

While strangers asked me how I could smile when they saw me struggling to maneuver in my head-brace, friends would watch me wiggle my forefinger – the only part of my body I could move – and share my excitement in knowing I would one day walk again. I know friends and family members cried about my condition, but they never shared anything negative with me.

My good friend Lena Kennedy and my husband, Mark, organized communication and visitation so I would not be overwhelmed with visitors, or exposed to any viruses, as I might not have survived one. This community of loved ones and friends sustained me and made me want to make them proud, and put their minds at ease about my recovery.



Doctors have marveled at my come-back. Sadly, they report that bad attitudes and an unwillingness to endure the pain of rehabilitation are the norm after this kind of trauma. I understand. My recovery has not been easy. In spite of the strides I've made, I will experience pain for the remainder of my life. But the good news is: my husband and I can travel again; I swam in the ocean this summer; and soon I will be able to drive and be fully independent again.

So here's the bottom line: Be a beacon of hope to others. Keep your sense of humor and your positive attitude. Practice gratitude. Sing your song. Make your art. Write your truth. Make sure your risks are well-calculated. And a piece of well-earned advice: Rivers full of crocodiles and tiger fish should only be traveled on a large boat with a drink holder!