Katie Dodson

Blessing or a Curse

My parents always told me that the challenges in life were what made us stronger. I never truly comprehended the truth behind those words until I endured a perplexing journey of my own. For as long as I can remember, I was a dreamer. I had high hopes and beautifully strong passions in life. In my naivety, I never thought that anything could possibly shake my life’s aspirations.

However, the golden road of life, despite its beauty, had bumps in its path. For me, that bump was epilepsy. I was diagnosed at a rather young age and went through a life changing adventure that I thought would destroy me at some points, but in the end, it encouraged me to do the unthinkable.

Epilepsy entered my life back in elementary school. I was sitting at my little gray desk in my teacher’s Winnie the Pooh themed, first grade classroom. We were learning how to pronounce word syllables in class that day, and I did not feel any different than any other day with the exception of my lingering fatigue. I was six years old at the time, so the most I was concerned with was having fun with my friends on the playground. As the usual first grade schedule goes, we learned how to say new words and do basic math, we had our snack, and then we went out to play. While we were all outside, I noticed my teacher and her assistant eyeing me, but I did not think anything of it. I simply smiled and proceeded to skip over to play ball with my friends. After about thirty minutes, we all went back inside the icy building that smelled of Expo markers to study and later eat lunch.

Shortly thereafter, my parents came to pick me up, but instead of them saying their usual goodbyes to my teacher and leaving, they stayed for a while. Apparently my teacher wanted to discuss some matters that she had observed over the past few weeks. I sat on the tiled floor of the hallway, while my parents spoke with her. Due to my youth, I did not understand most any of the words being exchanged between the adults, so to occupy my time, I counted the spotted squares on the ceiling. Eventually, the conversation came to its end, and my family and I left. Before we exited the
building, though, my teacher rushed over to me and captured me in her warm and comforting embrace followed by her telling me that I would be in her prayers. She was a very kind woman, so I thought it was just her reassuring me that she was there for me. I was appreciative, but I thought nothing of it.

When we got in the car that day, my parents were looking at me and questioning me. I went along with it, despite my lack of understanding, and after around twenty minutes of being interrogated like a convict, we finally pulled into our driveway. I went to my room, and my parents went to theirs. They were having a private discussion, which always implied that something was up. I was exhausted from the day of skeptical glances, so I managed to ignore my raging curiosity and went to sleep. The next couple of weeks went by. I was receiving the same troubled stares and was being asked the same questions, and my parents were having the same little talks. I underwent another day of school, enduring the same routine until my parents came and picked my sister and me up. I hopped in my car seat, expecting to head home, but when the time came to get on the interstate, my dad went the opposite direction. We drove for quite some time before pulling into the parking lot of a tall brick building. My parents were taking me to see a neurologist. That day I was diagnosed with epilepsy. I was having seizures that were provoked by light, fatigue, and stress. I did not have a single clue as to what any of that meant. Apparently, whenever I was having the seizures, I did not notice them; I was hopelessly confused. However, I did understand that my doctors said I would grow out of it as time went on, so I was not distressed. The doctors did tell my parents that until I grew out of the disease they did not want me to drive when I got older or be around bright lights. For me, that was the most troubling part, because I had always loved performing. Their list of not to do’s meant no more performing until I was cured. My heart was in music and theatre, but I had to put my dreams on hold for a period of time. That was only the beginning of my journey.
After my diagnosis, things only got more challenging. My supportive family took me back to the tall building with the train tracks in the back to see the doctors again about possible treatments. Unfortunately, I was allergic to every medication they recommended for me. From irritating rashes and hives to emotional changes, I endured every side effect one could think of.

After my family’s perilous struggles with medications, my parents decided to look up natural cures such as vitamins. For several years, I took a multivitamin, since the epilepsy was causing a vitamin deficiency in my body. Years passed and I was finally entering my freshman year of high school. Based on what my doctors had told me, I was expecting to be seizure free by then, but I was not.

The time was coming for me to get my driving permit, but I could do no such thing until I got my seizures under control. Realizing the dilemma, my parents decided to take me to a neurological specialist whose forte was epilepsy.

I anxiously entered the UNC Chapel Hill neurological ward that smelled of rubbing alcohol and hospital food. Before bringing me to see the specialist, a nurse’s aide took me back for a physical. She tested my vital signs and then proceeded to take me back to a dull room with a rubber bed covered with medical paper. Ten minutes passed before the specialist finally came in and introduced herself. She was a very frank woman, and after she reviewed my medical records and had me answer a few questions, she told me that I had been misdiagnosed. Instead of growing out of the disease, I was going to have to be medicated for the rest of my days. Everything after that appointment was trial and error. I went in for EEG’s and sleeping tests only to find out that my fatigue was caused by having seizures in my sleep. I tested more medicines and vitamins, and I once again was allergic to most of the prescriptions. A few excruciating months passed before my specialist finally found the perfect combination of medicines to help me. After a few months of being medicated, my seizures disappeared and have been gone ever since. Throughout my whole
expedition, my family was right by my side, always encouraging me to still pursue my dreams. However, it was not just my family that pushed me. My epilepsy journey in general encouraged me.

While the entire voyage to my cure was relentless, it was also influential. There was always a reason to smile and be grateful. I would not change a thing that happened, because it did influence who I was as a person. Epilepsy taught me to appreciate the miniscule parts of life and to never take a second for granted. Also, I learned to appreciate and love people more, because so many people were there with me throughout my journey. The entire endeavor drew my family and friends closer together, and it brought me closer to God. Despite what the doctors said, God always found ways of opening doors for me to still chase my dreams. I worked through the bright lights, was able to be a part of many different theatrical performances, and was blessed with the opportunity to work on a film set. I was able to produce my own music and perform. In addition to all of that, I spent more time outside in the sun than my doctors would have preferred when I ran cross country in high school. To top that, I was recently allowed to get my license. My journey encouraged me to march through my challenges, not be dragged through them. Epilepsy gave me an internal change, a change in my heart that gave me strength and a closer relationship with the one who got me through it all, God.

Some would look back and consider having epilepsy a curse, and for a while, I did too. However, looking back now, I realize how great that challenge was to me. It has given me a powerful testimony that I can use to encourage others. From the day I was diagnosed, to the decade long journey, to the day I was cured, epilepsy has brought me so close to many beautiful people that I could never possibly thank God enough for. It was a tough challenge, but it made me the happy person that I am, and I would not change it for the world. I could never explain in words how blessed I am from the experience. The challenges in life are what make us stronger.