NOW WHAT?

Help and hope for life's struggles

About the Author

Dr. Marian Fritzemeier, Ed.D. has been published in *Kids with a Mission*, *Pockets*, *The Lookout*, *Power for Living*, and other publications. She has written a book under a pen name, *Through the Tears: Caring for the Sexually Abused Child* (Broadman & Holman). Dr. Fritzemeier lives in Modesto, CA.

THE FORGOTTEN GARDEN

Does God really know what’s going on in our crises?

by Dr. Marian Fritzemeier, Ed.D.

This will be good news, I hope, I say to myself, answering the long-awaited call. It’s the nurse from the neurologist’s office. “The doctor has reviewed all your records. He’s referring you to Stanford Neurology,” she reports.

Flashback

Stanford. Five years ago. My mind flashes back automatically to grand mal seizures that started at, of all places, McDonald’s in East Palo Alto. Aren’t they supposed to serve Happy Meals there?

Next, the terrifying ambulance ride to Stanford Hospital’s emergency room. Between seizures, I weakly pled, “Can you make them stop?”

Seizures

Now the nurse on the phone interrupts my thoughts. “Ma’am . . . Ma’am, are you there?”

“Yes . . . I’m here,” I reply, while silently questioning, *God, are You there?*

I’m physically on the phone, but my mind recalls my body seizing over and over for three more hours on a narrow hospital bed, shoved somewhere along the ER’s neglected hallway. I softly implored, “Why can’t they make them stop?”

My husband shook his head while gently holding my hand. Then my body forcefully thrashed again.

Questions for God

Jolting me to the present, the nurse rattles off more information. “Do you have any questions?” she finally asks.

“No . . . no questions,” I whisper.

I hit End on my cell phone. Did I really just answer, “No questions”? Yeah, I’ve got questions, but not for the nurse. *God, are You serious? Stanford? I can’t go back there. Don’t You remember how traumatic it was?*

Answer from God

Recently, I asked God, “Should I continue pursuing medical options or accept the reality of my brain impairment?” God’s answer: *Go to Stanford’s Neurology and Epilepsy Department.*

Stanford is the last place I'd choose for medical treatment. Maybe I should've made more specific prayer requests, like "Should I continue homeopathy treatments? What about acupuncture? Continue supplements?"

But Stanford? Last time I was dismissed from there like a crazy woman voluntarily producing seizures.

Frustrating battle

I can't force that horrendous day from my thoughts or the radiology tech who inquired, "Can you make the seizures stop long enough for a CT scan?"

Could I make them stop? For hours my voice begged anyone who vaguely looked associated with the hospital, "Please, please stop my seizures."

Shaking my head no, I grumbled to the tech, "I can't make them stop."

Finally, a kind soul pushed medicine through my IV. The seizures stopped within seconds. My body was quiet and still, almost lifeless. As it relaxed, calmness returned. Someone directed, "Your CT scan is normal. Sign these papers, and you can go home."

Details of treatment

Another phone call and a second nurse's voice draws me back. "We've scheduled you to arrive at the Stanford Neurology and Epilepsy Center on October 15. You'll be staying with us for up to a week," she explains. "We'll be monitoring your brain 24/7 and videotaping you. Do you have any questions?"

Questions? How many can I list? The questions I asked God over five years ago are still unanswered. But the question I asked Him a few months ago is now answered — but not in a way I expected nor desired.

Today He answers in a clear, calm, reassuring voice. *I'm here. I'm sending you to Stanford.*

Observation

Six weeks later, I'm admitted to Stanford. Two technicians take over an hour to connect countless wires to my head. Then it's covered with gauze. Shortly after I'm hooked up, I push the red Call button that sounds an alarm, indicating I'm starting a seizure.

All medical personnel run to my bedside, asking questions and monitoring me briefly. Then they leave as quickly as they arrived. When my seizure ends, I push the button again. The first seizure is over two hours. I have two more that day, each longer than the first.

I'm exhausted. The nurse gives me something to stop the seizures during the night. All the while, a technician monitors and videotapes me 24 hours a day.

Gathering information

I wake up the next day, and the seizure routine begins again. I had asked people to pray that I would have seizures so that the doctors could see what's going on.

When I hear an alarm, I'm relieved it's not coming from my room. But eventually the alarm comes from my room three more times. I'm exhausted but thankful my brain is providing the doctors with information.

Diagnosis

On the third day, the medical team enters my room. The lead physician announces, "We've been able to determine a diagnosis from the seizure monitoring."

I want a diagnosis, but I'm afraid. I'd been seeing another specialist at a well-known research hospital for five years, with no diagnosis. Maybe I'm going to die.

I look down and grip the stark white sheets. The doctor continues, "The good news is that we've eliminated a large number of very serious impairments. You have what we call Functional Neurological Disorder."

What does that mean? The doctor's kind and calm voice continues his explanations and tells me where I can watch video segments he's produced for patients.

Mixed emotions

The medical team leaves the room. I’m left alone with my rapid thoughts and questions. The tears begin flowing. All is quiet except for the occasional sob. *Lord, will I ever return to the classroom as a college professor? Will my life be normal again? Will my brain be the way it once was?*

I’m overwhelmed with mixed emotions. One minute I’m relieved, the next, fearful.

Depression

My husband comes to visit the following evening. Our heads swim in information and questions. Tears trickle down his cheeks as I begin another seizure. He’s been praying that I’d be one of the patients who never has another seizure once diagnosed, a small but actual possibility. I’m not.

The resident visits us during his evening rounds. “The medical team has determined your diagnosis, but we’re concerned about sending you home. The team believes you are very depressed.” I nod.

“We think you should stay at Stanford in a different unit for an undetermined amount of time. The doctors can help you adjust to your diagnosis and get a handle on the depression before you go home.” My typical inquisitive brain is too exhausted to ask more questions.

New scenery

The next day I’m transferred to a new unit. The garden is the only place where I’m allowed some fresh air, so I make a habit to visit as long as possible every day.

The tomato plants hanging over the grow box creep onto the sidewalk and fall chaotically in my pathway. They look dead. It appears that someone at the Stanford Hospital previously cared for these plants. There’s evidence that tomato cages and stakes supported the plants growing tall and abundant.

Now the cages lean haphazardly with the plants’ heaviness. The plants are left to die during the cool fall days.

Dead life

The dead plants remind me of my life. Because I’ve dealt with undiagnosed brain impairment for the past five years, darkness clouds my former bubbly personality and positive outlook on life.

I’m one of the lucky ones. My diagnosis took only five years, while most people aren’t diagnosed for seven years. Functional Neurological Disorder doesn’t change my disability status. I’m still unable to fulfill my college professor responsibilities.

I feel isolated and lonely, especially since my life no longer centers on hundreds of students and colleagues. “God, are You there?” I mumble.

Survivors

Then I notice that the plants are not quite dead. I discover two tiny green tomatoes. I touch them and wonder how they are surviving amid this tangled and forgotten garden.

My eyes burn and overflow with tears. How will I survive another dark day?

Signs of life

I’m compelled to visit the garden every day to check on the tomatoes. Breathing in the crisp air while observing God’s beauty gives my heart a lift.

The two small tomatoes are still growing among the neglected plants. If these two tiny tomatoes can thrive in this forgotten garden, maybe I can get better too.

Exciting discovery

Today as I approach the plants, they look worse than when I discovered them ten days ago. I hope my adopted tomatoes are still growing.

“They’re red!” I exclaim to no one but myself. “My two green tomatoes are turning red!” I’m so excited, I search through other vines, parting their branches. I discover six tiny tomato buds on the first vine. On another I observe a dozen buds forming in a row. Hundreds of tomato buds hang on the unkempt plants.

Glimpses of red

What appears dead is still growing but unseen by those who pass by. In the same way, I can't always see the buds God is growing in my life. Yet in His time, I see glimpses of red, just like my two adopted red tomatoes. There's life in this forgotten garden.

On this quiet, nippy fall morning, I remember God hasn't forgotten me either. He whispers a resounding answer to my bigger question: *Yes, Marian. I'm here*.

Resources

Functional Neurological Disorder/FND Hops International Facebook group

Overcoming Functional Neurological Symptoms: A Five Areas Approach,
by Christopher Williams, Alan Carson, et al.