


**Transitions: for FUSIT Sermon, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014:**

 **How I've become useful and therefore "worth something" by doing the most I can with my body in response to life's transitions**

Good morning. As a reportedly inspirational person, I want to start by mentioning three people in this room who inspire & motivate me in a meaningful way.

Linnie Wieselquist, career mom doing it all, who started a running group in 2008 called the Superstars, because, well, we're Superstars.

By now our friendship spans: a run in negative-four degree snowy weather, the

inspiring finish line at a 5K, Pie, salt & vinegar potato chips, a rubber chicken, a filthy dirty CRV, Pie, Linnie trying to push me down the stairs from the Annex. Linnie jumping into action at 6am to save the day at the Cayuga Lake Triathlon. Best. Friend. Ever.

And have I mentioned Pie?

Linnie, your daily enthusiasm and humor are amazing and both your beautiful daughters have inherited a good part of you. Even if they've had to ride in that dirty CRV all their lives.

Jody Kunk-Czaplicki, career-mom-doing-it-all, and launching a runner's life. Jody, you motivated me the day in 2009 when you said you want to run my next marathon with me—your implied belief in my recovery back to running warmed my heart that day and ever since. I look forward to our chosen marathon in the CA Redwoods.

Gretchen Ryan, career mom doing it all, whose own talk, given at Cornell and also here as a sermon here inspired me to know I, too, can keep up hope and live in the body I got.

OK, I just wanted to start there. How we can ALL be an inspiration.

Now onto transitions and how I became useful and "worth something" by doing the most I can with my body in response to life's transitions. When I was asked at my job interview at Ithaca College in Residential Life in 1991 "transitions would you anticipate into a position like this one?", my voice said "Whoah! what a smart question! Uhhh, I dunno-- I'm just bouncing along, doing what I think best next step at every stage of transition (graduation, graduation graduation again...), but I don't reflect on the transitions!"

But apparently I gave a more astute answer, because I got the job. I moved to Ithaca at age 25 to become a Higher Education-

Student Affairs professional in Residential Life at Ithaca College. I could fit everything I owned in my Dodge Shadow, by myself.

**Being useful/use my body**  
+  
**smart & capable**  
=useful &  
**= self-esteem/worthy**

"What going inner-

is the

again..., actually

I have Always identified “being useful” as equivalent to my self-esteem and so, “Do the most I can with my body + being smart/capable=Useful= my self-worth.”  
This is the recipe for my psyche, but I was never very self-aware about it until facing more transitions into my thirties, like becoming a career mom doing it all.



Before moving to Ithaca, I had just biked across the U.S. Twice. I had transitioned into the identity “cyclist” early in life... I suppose it began when, at age 6, I rode my bike 75 times around the block one afternoon.

I couldn't stop trying to push myself. One more loop. One more loop. One more loop. Doing the most I can with my body until my mother told me to come in for dinner.

Around that time, in the 1970s, from about age 6 to age 16, I was transitioning into the identities of “swimmer” and “runner” because of the sister in the middle, my “2<sup>nd</sup> mom”;

In an Irish-Catholic family of 8 children, we younger siblings were assigned a 2<sup>nd</sup> mom to help take care of the babies, and Joyce was mine, so I've always looked up to her. She was always on a swim team, and she always did and even still supports & encourages me around being a swimmer.

In my thirties I more fully took up the identity of “runner” because of that sister of mine on the left up there.

She had run a marathon and one day told me I could do one, too, so, I made the transition into “runner/marathoner” by age 38. That was ten years ago.

In my college days I had transitioned more fully into “cyclist” by taking my first bike trip, across the state of Michigan in 1985 “coast to coast” from Lake Michigan to Lake St Claire, what we Michigianians call the west coast to the east coast (of the state). And I got pretty strong. So some years later I rode my bike across the United States. (the “real coast to coast”). After graduation, and then after graduation again...  
Doing the most I can with my body in these times of transition.

On the cross-country bike trip, in Minnesota somewhere, I sat for dinner with “some guy” after he checked in for one week of the tour. He was nervous because he'd never completed such long rides before. I tried to help by reassuring him to go a reasonable pace, it's not a race. And he kept saying, “Well, if you can do it, I can do it”.  
And I kept on with my support and encouragement, “ just drink a lot of water, eat well...”  
And he'd say again “Well, if you can do it I can do it.”  
Eventually I asked, innocently, “What do you mean?” And he came back with it: “Cuz you're a girl”..., “Oooohh, you don't know me very well, do you?”  
It reminded me, in a flash, of that Driver's Ed teacher who had said in 1982 ”girls can't do well on the road test.”

Well, at least on the bike tour, I could pound out my answer on the road, so the next day on the bike, I rode up alongside ‘that guy’ and began to talk, starting with some

encouraging words again and roping him into conversation, while slowly increasing the speed bit by bit until he was breathless....(hmmph, 'not a race') and then I took off at 22 mph and dropped him! Doing the most I can with my body.

That x-c trip, by the way, was in some ways, because of the sister on the left.

When I was born, she had just turned 1 year old. And so I no doubt spent my early years crawling around after her, trying to be just like her....

This continued on into school. She joined yearbook; I joined yearbook. She picked Spanish for her language, I picked Spanish. She went onto U of M, so did I.

And by the end of college, she decided that summer of transition was the best time to take a big trip- the time in life with the most freedom and the least amount of responsibility. So naturally when I finished college a year later, I had to take a big trip, and I signed up for the cross country bike ride. Day 1 of the tour was 80-miles- a standard distance. We rode from the Pacific Ocean north of Seattle and smack into the base of the North Cascade Mountains. That night, I heard talk in camp of the next day's ride. Day 2 was to be 42 miles UP-hill to the mountain pass. I had never considered such a hill, since biking across Michigan had presented no such mountains.

I wondered if I could really bike uphill all day; I hadn't yet lived in Ithaca.

I sat in camp and pondered the climb and realized that if I'd known about it ahead of time, I never would have signed up for the trip, but I knew that I faced the challenge now and had exactly 2 choices: I could ride back to Seattle, get on a plane, and quit, or I could point my wheels uphill the next day and start pedaling.

As I biked for 7 hours uphill, I came to a life lesson that has stuck with me for 25 years:

**"We can ALL rise to the challenges set before us".**

In some ways, I think that climb was preparing me for the challenge that would come almost TO THE DAY twenty years later.



In away, I began to put all 3 sports together into triathlon (swim, bike, run) around the turn of the millennium, *while also becoming a skydiver, a pilot, a Cornell employee, homeowner, wife, and "career mom doing it all" but soon also a triathlete*, because of that marathoning sister on the left. One day in the '90s back in Michigan she proposed the "family fun triathlon".

The race involved 4 or 5 of us nearly forty-year-old siblings and in-laws hammering it out on the small lake and around the neighborhood streets:

- Swim to the dock and back.
- Run around the neighborhood senior center and back.
- Bike to the ice cream shop and back. Without buying an ice cream; though I can't speak for Oliver, who was miles ahead of us all, and would have had time for a snack before nabbing the win.
- The prize was a 20-pound, broken blowtorch from the corner of the garage.
- Because Oliver handily won every family fun triathlon, the prize is in our garage today.
- This blowtorch triathlon went on for about 3 summers and then fizzled out.

But triathlon stuck with me, particularly at the annual YMCA triathlons here in Ithaca and at this 2008 Cayuga Lake Triathlon, after which I decided to really get serious.

By 2009 I had signed up for the Olympic distance on Keuka Lake in June AND the half-ironman distance on Seneca Lake in July. I was knocking on the door of my 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday. On top of the world, I took first in my age/class at that Olympic-distance triathlon on June 7<sup>th</sup>. Four days later I had a stroke.

We had gone up to Maine for a long weekend vacation. It was to be my last really big training weekend before the half ironman, with some good lake swims, long bike rides& runs.

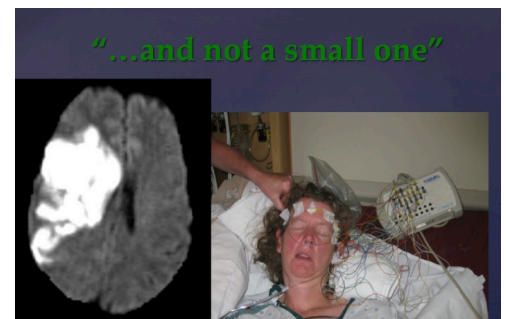
I got up the first morning and swam strongly, and I 'KNEW' I would do well in that half-ironman in a month. What I didn't 'KNOW' was that during the morning my right carotid artery had slowly dissected, or torn, spilling blood inside my neck. A blood clot rushed to the site, thankfully, but the clot caused a blockage of oxygen to my brain, a stroke. Out of the swim, I felt a little funny on the left side of my face. I shrugged it off; surely it's just a bug bite. Stroke was not on the list. In the house we all sat around for breakfast and when someone asked for more coffee, I got up to make it. I was feeling 'off' and spilled the coffee grounds. I began to clean up and thought I should say something before someone notices me cleaning up and comes over to make a big fuss (at that moment a fuss was the worst thing that could happen.) I knew what I wanted to say but I also knew I could not produce it as language. Moments passed and I figured I'd better say something, so I turned around to say "Hey guys, I'm not supposed to have the coffee jitters until after the 3<sup>rd</sup> cup, but look what a mess I made" and I could hear my speech coming out as a garbled mess of non-syllables & consonants, and I tried to say "Honey, when the EMTs come, remember to tell them I was feeling funny on my face here, the EMTs will want to know that." All that came out was garbage, and my speech went back and forth between garbage and fine over the rest of the morning. We went to lay down on the hallway daybed and I put my left arm around Oliver. It was feeling sort of numb and weird, and I said "Honey, is my arm up against your chest getting warm? It feels cold but I can't tell where it is *Honey, I don't know where my arm is!*"

The ER trip in the back of my brother-in-law's car was uneventful, but our 4-day weekend had turned into 44 nights in 4 different hospitals.

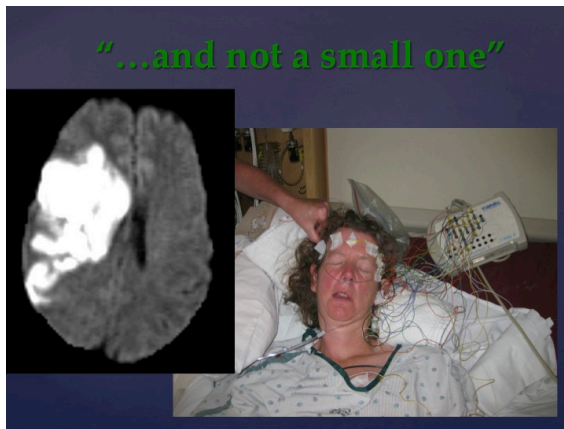
After 36 hours and 2 hospitals, when the doctor came in with a confirmed diagnosis, he said to me: "Well, Mrs Habicht, you have had a stroke, and not a small one"

In that moment, I had made the transition into the identity "stroke survivor" and doing the most I can with my body in recovery was to become useful & self worthy.

To understand the resiliency of comeback, it's important to know the depths of damage. It took less than 24 hours to go from this:



to this:



Now I'm no MRI Technologist, but from what I know, the white area on my brain there represents damage, the white area represents the space in which some of the brain's billion billion synapses have ceased to exist.

In June 2009, I had lost the energy to stay alert and pay attention to a conversation, the mental agility to quickly add 2+2, or to track details small and large, like "how many eggs are in the fridge?", or "what does that red, or green, arrow mean on the traffic light over

the lane ahead of me, and which lane am I in, anyway?"

As an athlete, I lost ALL feeling, movement, and proprioception down the left half of me.

Now proprioception is an amazing thing to have but we go about our days completely unaware of it. Do me a favor and extend your arms outward, one in front of you, and one overhead. Now close your eyes and slowly bring your fingertips together. How did you know where your fingers were without looking at them? Millions of proprioceptor cells throughout our muscular-skeletal system and connected back to our brains provide constant information about the position of our limbs and moreover, provide for a sense of ownership & a sense of the very existence of our body: "*Honey, I don't know where my arm is!*". It was first described in 1833 by Charles Bell who called it the sixth sense. Proprioception affords you the feeling of where your body exists in space, it's what allows you to take a step without staring at your feet, to gracefully put your arm around your loved one in the dark, or to turn your car keys without watching. Without 1-sided proprioception, it's nearly impossible to balance and sit up, or stand. Forget triathlons.

In the hospital at meals, my kids would put the silverware on the left side of my dinner tray and giggle with glee while I looked for my fork. The fork was plainly there on the tray on the left, but I could not find it.

Without one-sided proprioception, it was impossible to notice what's going on in one half of the room, because my body on one side, and by extension the space around it, simply did not exist.

*"Honey, I don't know where my arm is!"* Hemispheric paralysis meant that my left arm just flapped around like a big al-dente spaghetti noodle taped to my shirt. My left knee collapsed under the slightest weight, causing deep fear of taking a single step- because my knee and my whole leg simply did not exist.

But I saw my story as more inspirational than tragic, so I infused it with hopeful bravado, and wrote my own character as more superhero than victim.

I had to draw upon that 6-year old girl who wouldn't stop biking one more loop, one more loop, one more loop, AND on the 25 year old young adult who wouldn't stop pedaling until covering the mountain pass. I still had exactly 2 choices: to quit or to fight like hell until I've climbed the hill.

And I had to transition into the identity of a rehab patient & give-up on that summer of triathlon. I had lost so much cognitive & physical capacity, but I retained no small amount of RESOLVE.

I resolved that

a) since people can recover, that → b) I would recover.

I resolved that a) since it was not fair to lose my summer, that → b) I would come back and DO that Half-Ironman and then the FULL, along about 10 years of recovery.

To do this, I had to resolve little things along the way, like to change my underwear and to brush my teeth and hair every day (these are not small issues in a hospital stay). I resolved to work hard in various modes of Physical Therapy especially. I resolved to make someone laugh every day but to cry whenever I wanted to- I shed a LOT of tears.

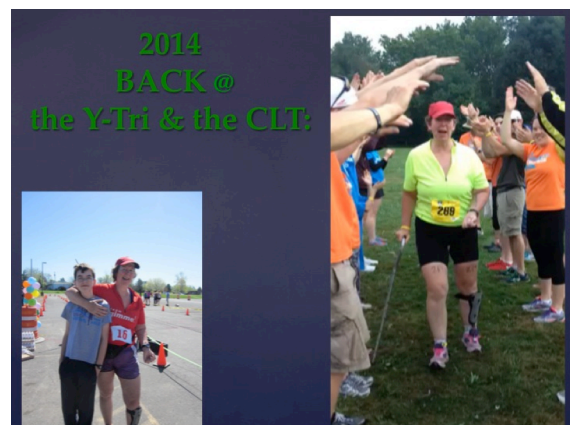


And I worked constantly on doing the most I can with my body with some drastically tapped energy stores. As I worked hard and cried hard, in Physical Therapy and in what we called Snuggle Therapy on the left there, I began to get stronger. Soon out of the hospital I resolved to adapt and find new ways of gaining fun, fresh air, and freedom; On the upper right, using my adapted recumbent trike, and on the lower right, in the adaptive ski program at Greek Peak.

I learned to love the treadmill, carefully obsessing over glacially slow improvements in form and pace.

Now Fast Forward 5 and ½ years, or, 2.6 million minutes, of gut-punching determination.

Bounce 5 years ahead and I've gained varying amounts of proprioception and strength up & down my left side, my speech is largely unaffected (only occasionally do I grab the wrong word off the mental shelf), I can find my silverware, no matter which side of the plate it's on, I can change my underwear and brush my teeth when I want, and I've transitioned BACK into being an athlete of my own sort, completing the full YMCA Triathlon, and the Cayuga Lake Triathlon this year. (where Linnie saved the day, racing to the park at 6am in her filthy dirty CRV); and I'm NOT DONE.



By now at almost 5 ½ years of recovery, I'm still getting better.

I'm just beginning to occasionally feel the energy levels I once had.

I'm a painfully slow athlete, still with aims at that half-Ironman, and at running with my friend Jody.

Mostly, I aim to:

- Walk. Smoothly. Run. Smoothly. Run a 5K, Run a 10K.
- Stroll in the backyard. Smoothly.
- Hug my kids with both arms at their high school graduation- IF they'll Let me;
- Run & get the mail. Run for the bus. Run out for coffee.
- Hike the Treman Gorge. Hike the Grand Canyon.
- Compete with strength. Run that marathon.
- Do the most I can with my body. With my kind of determination.



**Determination=Patience + Resolve.  
Do the most I can with my body=  
Determination=Inspiration, which  
=Useful/ self-worthiness.**

As you can imagine, scientifically defining Determination, and then measuring it, are difficult. But in my experience “Determination=Patience + Resolve, patience+ resolve.

In my experience D is the knock-down, drag-out, teeth-gnashing, fingers-clawing, all-out FIGHT to resolve and to never tap out. And Determination is powerful beyond measure.

This personal character of pressing on is NOT courageous. It's being chicken-shit about turning my back

on the person that life's transitions have made me into, so I am doing the most with I can with my body. It inspires others, which is fine, because that's something useful I can do. So, patience + resolve = determination = inspiration = something useful=self-worth.

But in early 2009 as a marathoner-triathlete & a career-mom-doing-it-all, I was already an inspiration before the stroke. And so are you. Thank you.

*Queue video, & “The Climb” for silent reflection time.*

*Lyrics: The Climb:*

I can almost see it.  
That dream I'm dreaming, but  
There's a voice inside my head saying  
You'll never reach it  
Every step I'm takin'  
Every move I make  
Feels lost with no direction,  
My faith is shakin'  
But I, I gotta keep tryin'  
Gotta keep my head held high

There's always gonna be another mountain  
I'm always gonna wanna make it move  
Always gonna be an uphill battle  
Sometimes I'm gonna have to lose  
Ain't about how fast I get there  
Ain't about what's waitin' on the other side  
It's the climb.

• **American Stroke Association: Know the Warning Signs: “F.A.S.T.” see: // [www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org) Music for reflection**

**1<sup>st</sup> bike ride post-stroke:  
June 17, '13  
8/10<sup>th</sup> mile  
6 minutes.  
And then:  
2 calls,  
1 intense, long cry + several emails.**



The struggles I'm facing  
The chances I'm taking  
Sometimes might knock me down, but  
No I'm not breaking  
I may not know it, but  
These are the moments that  
I'm gonna remember most, yeah  
Just gotta keep goin',  
And I, I gotta be strong  
Just keep pushing on....