



Living with the Enemy

By Ema Keast



When two people enter into marriage they make many life-long promises to each other, one of the key ones being to stay together in sickness and in health. However, this promise, in reality, can be a hard one to keep. My own experience is testament to this fact, experience that has brought me painfully - physically and emotionally - through many years and a diagnosis of Osteo-Arthritis. Learning to live with this disease and finally embracing it to achieve a fulfilling life-style has been my greatest challenge, but here is how I did it, with a few broken promises along the way.

I was just 15 when I started to realise that there was something 'wrong' with my body. Something was not quite right. Yet when my body ached at this time, I put it down to all the hard work I was doing. As a dancer with good prospects I wanted to perform, to be on a stage in front of thousands dancing my way through life. So, determined, I set off on my journey attending university to study Dance and Fine Art - I passed with flying colours. My body would not let me fulfill this dream though, and it was with tremendous disappointment and anguish that I had to let it go.

In 1992 I met my first husband. Originally we were best friends and we stayed together for 12 years. However, in that time I saw a myriad of emotions, from him and from me, resulting from the day-to-day reality of my Osteo-Arthritis. When I was pregnant with my daughter I found it extremely hard to carry out even the simplest of daily tasks. My symptoms meant that they became difficult and complicated. Managing the increasing pain and juggling family life left me exhausted. This in turn led to feelings of sheer frustration compounded by a complete lack of emotional support. My husband was the type of person who did not, and would not, accept that something was wrong. He had an idealistic path for his life that did not include a debilitating illness, and it became clear that he was going to follow his path with or without me.

With a child on the way and my husband ignoring what was going on - he chose to work away a lot so he did not have to see what was happening - I gradually realised that our relationship was at an end, it could not be saved as there was not an iota of emotional support. The promises lay broken and could not be mended.

It is vital that a sufferer of any type arthritis needs help advice and support throughout its progression. I have found that ignorance has had a very negative impact on my life. Following the breakdown of my marriage, I entered a new chapter of my life with a new partner, but the way that he and his family looked at me and my condition was, 'if it can't be seen it can't be helped'. Looking back, this part of my life seems unbelievable - almost like looking in on someone else's life. I had been with my partner for nearly three years, and I thought everything was going well. He understood my condition and supported me physically - helping me when I was not able to do small things, like opening jars, reaching for things and the like. Yet as time progressed I noticed that my body was becoming more and more rigid and simple chores became impossible - it was not that I was reluctant or could not be bothered, I simply could not do them. Many a time I was sent home from work with pains in my fingers, feet and back until eventually my doctor signed me off work completely. This was a turning point in this relationship, as money issues came to the fore. He said before he walked out, "I am not getting into financial difficulty for you."

The next two years went by in a blur; I just shut myself off from the world and went to sleep. Of course, I was leading a very simple life, getting up, doing the school run, going to work, simple house work, making the tea and bed. All the while I was being engulfed by my condition. The one person who kept me sane during this time was my daughter. She is now 12 years old. All she has ever known is mummy has bad bones. She is my carer and my trusted friend, and proof that love can be unconditional.

During those two years I finally arrived at the conclusion that no one could change my life but me. I could either sink under the pain and the additional difficulties life had thrown at me or I could work with it and utilise what I did have. I knew if I was to survive this I had to change because other people would not. I needed more information and learned a great deal more about Arthritis. I became a Personal Trainer so that I could help others like myself to be healthier and combat the disease. My research also allowed me to find the right medication for me. I subsequently moved to be closer to my family to get the help and support I needed.

I was determined I was not going to give up. I believed in myself, and now, as I am able to look at all the things I have overcome, I know I can do anything if I put my mind to it.

I am in a happy relationship that offers love and support providing a warm environment for my daughter. What is more I have initiated a career that is fulfilling and can work around my condition. I have found great joy as a painter and sculptor with some great commissions under my belt. I am also a professional photographer and my next great aim is to exhibit my work locally.

I take it a day at a time, set myself challenges and realistic goals and I try to help others with Arthritis. It's not easy, but it is worth it: I am loving life again and the constant learning that comes with it.

When you are only suffering from, rather than living with, Arthritis, it is time to reassess, make changes and find the support you need!

Ema Keast is a professional painter, sculptor and photographer. To see examples of her work visit: www.emakeast.deviantart.com
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