

Foreword to Second Edition of “WHY ME? My Journey from M.E. to Health and Happiness”

by Shirley Conran

It is said that everyone has a book in them. This is not true: some people don't have even a paragraph. However, Alex Howard is a walking library: first there's the story of Man battling against Adversity, then Man on a Quest, followed by a Medical Detective and finally Love Story with Happy Ending when two people part.

I always want to know what happened after the end of a book, particularly so when, some years ago, I read Alex Howard's WHY ME? because Alex and I have something in common: M.E.

Forty years ago, when I was Woman's Editor of the Daily Mail, I went into hospital with viral pneumonia and came out with M.E., to face a wall of medical disbelief that I was ill. My GP sent me to three different “experts”; quickly, I realised that they were psychiatrists, quickly I realised that they were wrong in their diagnoses: I am not workshy, I do not need to draw attention to myself and I am not a hypochondriac. Quickly I realised that the medical profession was saying, “If we cannot find anything physically wrong with you, then you must be mad, to some degree.” When I realised that it was the medical profession that was wrong, I decided to avoid their Kafkaesque attitudes and deal by myself with the symptoms of my illness.

However, when every medical expert is telling you that black is white, when your family is worried about your odd behaviour, and when you lose your job and your income, you probably will need a psychiatrist. Eventually I met one, who said, “I'm going to assume that everything you say is true”. He understood my contempt for psychiatrists and from then on, he helped me deal with my symptoms. Once he scribbled a note to my new GP. “What have you told him?” I snapped. He took the note out of the envelope and handed it to me. It read, “Dear Colleague, contrary to what you may at first believe, this patient tells the truth. Yours sincerely, Jonathan Gould”. So he meant what he had said, when first we met.

One day my mother said, “You've changed for the better, since you met that Dr Gould”. Certainly, I had stopped being an appeasing, unctuous, eyelashbatting, role-playing little woman. Now, I didn't care what people thought of me, but what I thought of those people; now I stood up for my own opinions; I became friendly with my body; I learned to be my true self. I grew up.

Eventually, I no longer had money problems: I could afford to have M.E. because I made a fortune in property and another fortune when I became an international

author. I travelled round the world eight times, seven of those at the expense of my publishers. I was able to financially help my children when they needed it.

One day I realised that the silver lining of M.E. is that it pushes you onto your own resources; it forces you to think for yourself and to create your own disciplines and determination, because the only person that can understand your condition and improve it ...is YOU.

Dr Gould died and for the next twenty years I spent a fortune trying everything that claimed to cure or help M.E. None of it worked.

Then I read a book and immediately identified with the young author, who had been bedridden for two years as a teenager. Alex Howard eventually earned a first class degree in psychology and Swansea University should be proud of him.

“WHY ME?” was a gangly, exuberant book and the dynamism and determination of the author shone beyond the grammatical errors (I’m still an editor!). Three years ago, I actually met Alex. Meeting someone with M.E, forced to lead a similar life to yours, is like meeting someone who comes from your home town and speaks your language, after you have spent years in a foreign land. Because Alex had dealt so successfully with his illness – and was clearly helping others to do so – I decided to ask for his help. So Alex became my mentor. We talk for an hour every fortnight. My health and my well being have improved considerably.

Often when a new edition of a book is published, it adds nothing much of value. But, the added chapters of WHYME? kept me up beyond midnight, and I used the highlighter so much that some pages are almost yellow

Alex takes the reader along his journey through adversity to success; he does not hesitate to tell of his stupid behaviour: he succumbed to the temptation of overworking and he suffered the consequences. He struggled financially and emotionally to reach his well-deserved success, both personally and with his clinic The Optimum Health Clinic.

In this new edition, the autobiographical sequence – what Alex did next – is followed by three transcripts of TV interviews with the three directors of The Optimum Health Clinic. And – to use two of Alex’s favourite adjectives – these chapters are incredibly amazing.

I shall re-read them tonight, and often afterwards, because – to my surprise - just reading these added chapters has taken me a step further in my own M.E. quest for health. I nearly wrote “battle with M.E.”, but I no longer regard M.E. as my enemy. I look upon my symptoms as messages from my body that I reached burnout in the past because of my determined, stressful, body-ignoring behaviour. I now suspect that my M.E. is partly the result of living a hardworking,

exciting, adrenal-filled life in a way that my body could no longer tolerate, but that I refused to face.

For three years, I have argued with Alex that complete recovery in M.E. is not possible.

Now, I am not so sure.

Having read this new edition of "WHY ME?" I have a new courage, a new willingness to explore where I have – until now – refused to go. I have a new optimism based on facts that I know are scientifically proven, not some mindless, new, fix-fast "discipline". My determination has been renewed. I feel that I have just started to take the next step towards... dare I say it...recovery. I wish you the same good fortune.

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