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INSIDE OUT UPSIDE DOWN

My brain turned me inside out and upside down. That may not seem all that unusual given that our thoughts can be motivating, frightening, crazy, silly, depressing, ridiculous, compassionate, greedy and reassuring. And sometimes they can be all of that and more within a matter of seconds. Our thoughts can not only turn us inside out and upside down, they can rock our world, throw us into a tailspin, make us laugh out loud and on occasion, convince us we're crazy. But I'm not talking about the process of thinking. My brain, the actual physical part of my body we call the brain, is what turned me inside out and upside down. Granted when my brain did this to me, my thinking was forever changed but it all started inside my brain.

I'll start nearer the beginning. I emigrated from Slovakia to the United States in 1999 and opened a restaurant in Milford, Pennsylvania. It appeared that I was going to participate in and benefit from the American dream. For six years, life was everything I could have hoped for but in 2005 I received the news that my mother had been diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer. I sold my restaurant to return to Slovakia to care for my mother but that is where my story takes a sharp turn in a completely different direction.

Experiencing back pain and other seemingly unrelated symptoms, and after consulting with many physicians, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. An MRI revealed a mass in my left

frontal lobe. Unable to find the words to tell my very sick mother about my dire diagnosis, I took what seemed at the time to be the easy way out. I left her my MRI and the physician's reports, walked out of her house, and said, "Please read these and come out of the house with a smile on your face ready to fight!"

And the fight began. I have had three brain surgeries to remove the tumor but I am left with a slow growing terminal brain tumor: oligodendroglioma grade 2. This diagnosis meant that I would undergo consistent and frequent MRIs. I resolved not to undergo radiation and/or chemotherapy because of their serious and life altering side effects. I had a decision to make: Was my fight going to be with my diagnosis and prognosis, both of which I had no control over? Or was my fight going to be with my attitude? I could be depressed, irritated, angry and wallow in self pity or I could be quintessentially positive. I chose to make friends with my tumor, named him "Oli" and reminded him that when I die so does he. I pointed out that if he grew slowly, then together we could enjoy all life has to offer for our maximum allotted amount of time.

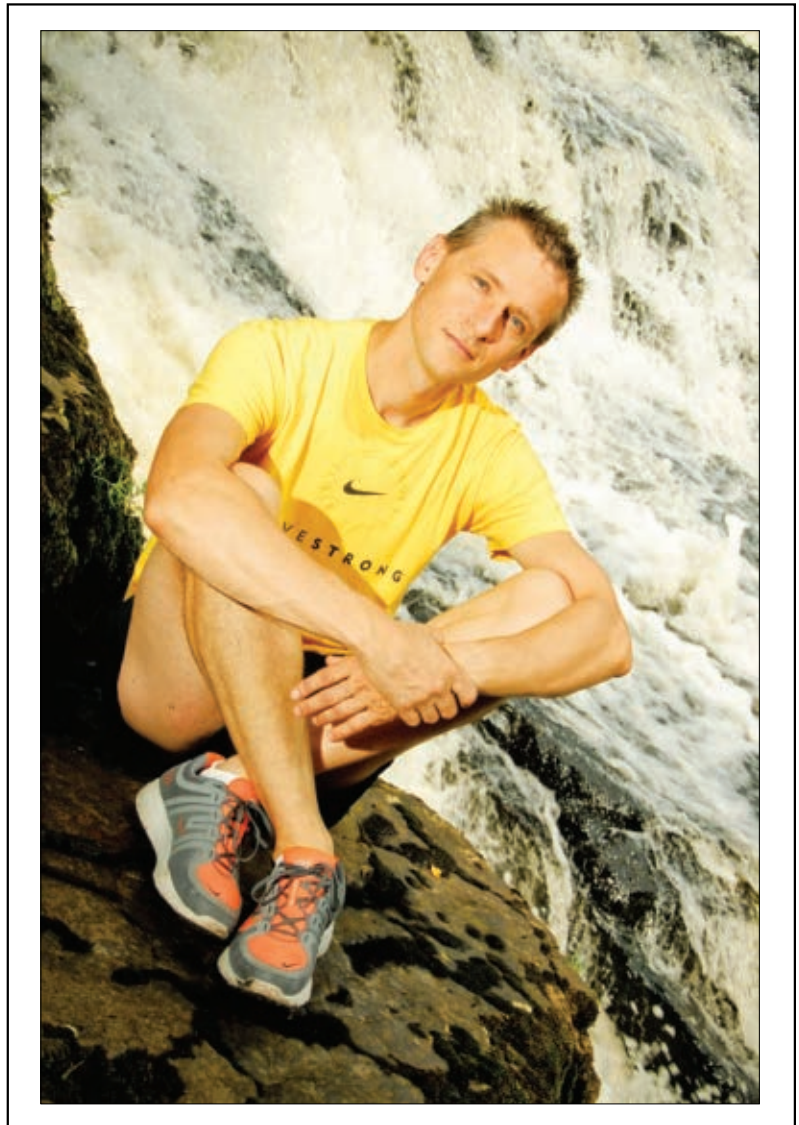
I returned to the United States where I had a wonderful group of friends and family all of whom would provide love and support. Working at a friend's restaurant led to opening my own restaurant but it was a totally different experience for me this time. Life was not all about work. I no longer had



the luxury of putting all of my energy into the restaurant thinking that there would always be time to do the things I loved. I had to focus on “right now”. I rekindled my childhood interest in sports and began to run and train again. Before I knew it, I was running half and full marathons and thoroughly enjoying every single minute of it. I had purpose and passion and I was taking good care of myself.

A friend suggested I try a triathlon and I was hooked immediately. There is an energy present at triathlons that is remarkable, almost palpable – the participants seem to be one happy, supportive, encouraging family. Being around triathletes is bliss ... it's not about the competition for me, it's about the desire to do my very best. Although I am always too excited to sleep the night before a race, I am consistently carried to the finish line by the enthusiasm and sheer powerful energy of the group.

My bold, brave goal is to compete at the Ironman World Championship in Kona but if this is not in my future, I will know that I have participated in a sport that along with my brain tumor, has turned my life inside out and upside down. My terminal diagnosis catapulted me into triathlon. I no longer spend very much time



or energy thinking about the past or the future. I am all about living in the present moment and making it count. Even my attitude about work has changed. Ten percent of the profits from my restaurant are donated to the Ronald McDonald House where I have had the opportunity to share my story with some of the children experiencing life threatening diseases.

I no longer look at a day as something to get through. Each day I have is a gift to share with Oli and it is to be treated with reverence and gratitude. I have discovered that hope is compelling and contagious. Every morning that I wake up is another opportunity to be the very best person I can be. And every triathlon in which I get

to compete is another chance to do the absolute best that I can.

Inside out and upside down is a brilliant point of view. Fully awake during my third brain surgery, I heard my doctors discuss my condition and analyze their options. In fact I participated in these conversations while they were operating on my brain. If that doesn't change one's perspective, I doubt anything will. There is no time in my life for and no valid reason for negativity, criticism or doubt. Being turned inside out and upside down has unleashed happiness, joy and serenity moment to moment to moment.

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