Self-Healing:

The Road to Recovery and Improved Life



DR. PETRONA VELASQUEZ

1.

Dr. Petrona Velasquez: The foundations of a life-long interest in health care

I was born to a large, agricultural family in a rural community outside León, Nicaragua. Though León is the second-largest city in the country, my family lived and worked far outside the city in a place where opportunities outside farming were not widely available.

From the very beginning, I grew up doing domestic and field work, tending to crops (vegetables for the family and several types of grains) and caring for livestock.

But I wanted more. From a young age, I had a dream of studying to improve my knowledge, and I often asked my parents when I could start school. At the age of 8, I finally enrolled in elementary school and began a journey to better myself through academics.

After finishing primary school at age 13, there were not many options for continued education in the area. No high schools existed, and my parents were not interested in sending me any distance for school. My father had a common phrase whenever asked about continuing my education:

"I have never set foot in a school, and I am not starving," he would say. "I raise pigs and chickens."

It was a phrase often repeated in the household. So I went several years without studying. I spent more time in the field, rising very early. While plowing the fields, I would walk barefoot behind the oxen, picking up thorns in my feet. It was hard, intensive work. Hoeing for weeds was done by hand, as well as straightening seedlings so they would grow better. When crops reached maturity, my family harvested, cleaned, dried, and stored the grain in silos.

When not tending to crops, there was a herd of cattle that needed attention. As a young girl, I tended to pregnant dairy cows, ensuring healthy births, and then took care of the animals throughout their lives. Milking and making cheese was all done by hand. I also looked after the beef cattle. Both types of cattle had to be moved through pastures by hand to find the best grass. My sister, also a child at that point, and I were responsible for milking, cheese making, and cattle movement. I also repaired cattle fences, including the tough work of driving poles into the hard earth.

A DREAM IS FORGED

Throughout this work, my father was never far, keeping an eye on his children, making sure work was completed to his liking. It was a lot of responsibility for a child. Though my father had was a good-natured man, I resisted the work, already knowing at a young age that this life was not meant for me. My passion lay elsewhere. But still father's voice stood out throughout my childhood – constantly asking for obedience.

I asked my father almost every day to send me somewhere for school. But the request was denied again and again. No one understood my will to learn. No one to listen to my dream and no one to help me get out.

In 1979, Nicaragua experienced a revolution, and a new government took over. A renewed outlook for the country meant I was finally able to convince my parents to enroll me in high school at age 17 with the help of my older brother, who recently married and soon to leave the country. Together, they convinced my father to send my sister and me to León for school.



PURSUING A DREAM IN LEÓN

I received no financial help from my parents for the move. With only three pieces of clothing and one pair of heavily worn shoes, I set out for a new stage of life in a new city. To make ends meet, I took a job in the city and went to high school at night.

Work in the city was different than in the fields. It was still work, but it was not the labor-intensive nightmare farming had been. I cried at night sometimes, thinking of my youth on the farm, wondering why I had to live life that way instead of focusing on my dream early. But I was now on the right path with a new horizon waiting.

I worked hard to scrape together a living. I worked in a clothing store, doing sales and cleaning.



I worked in a sewing shop, making clothing and running the machines. But there never seemed to be enough time for my studies, so I looked into working for myself and setting my own schedule. Even with the recent revolutionary triumph, commercial business opportunities were hard to come by. I was able to find some work selling bread on the street that allowed more time for study. I carried around a cardboard box, stuffed with loaves of bread, and sold its contents to small cafés and resident families.

But the bread business didn't last, and again I looked for work. This time, I found an opportunity to sell clothes at a local flea market – contraband clothes. This required me to walk to the border of Honduras, pick up the contraband, and travel several kilometers back carrying heavy bags through livestock paddocks and over stone and wire fences. Though these journeys were treacherous and long, I imagined the bags I carried to contain not clothes, but my dreams. Each journey brought me a step closer to her goal. With that mindset, the bags seemed weightless.

Tired but happy, I was seeing her dreams come true already. I graduated high school and entered college. I soon found a job with a small business that made shampoo, talcum powder, and cleaning products for the home. My job was to take small samples of different products and sizes to nearby villages. The job came with a much better income that allowed me to purchase clothes, shoes, and support myself during all five years of university study.

UNIVERSITY TRAINING

During those years, Nicaraguans could receive a university scholarship if they participated in civilian government activities. For me, that meant joining the neighborhood watch, which included activities like arming and disarming an assailant and shooting practice. The watch group was taken to the northern part of the country during coffee harvest to take part in security for the region. I was head of a squad of armed women from my school. These young, unexperienced women had to carry guns during all activities and even keep them close to their bedsides at night. They participated in surveillance missions and, on Sundays, swept the surrounding hills in search of "enemies."

I was outraged. These women had no experience with guns or military activities. Looking back, it seems incredible that I lived through this period. These demands were unjust and dangerous for women who just wanted to obtain a university degree and pursue their dreams.

But I got through it. In 1986 I started studying medicine at The National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in León and graduated in 1990 at age 27.

2.

An Accident Derails Everything

In 1998 when I was 35, I was coming home from a long day taking care of patients. I rode the bus to and from work, a 23-kilometer trip. It was winter, and there was not a suitable area for the bus to stop. Most often the driver had to let people off right on the shoulder of the road. This day, it had recently rained, and the shoulder of the road was slick with wet leaves. I got off the bus, slipped on the leaves, and fell into a sitting position.

At the time, I didn't know it was a serious fall. But from that moment, the pain in my back started and increased with every day. The accident had caused a shift in my L5 lumbar vertebra, breaking it out of place and bringing incapacitating pain. It felt as if my body had been snapped in two.

I kept going to work, taking oral painkillers. A fellow doctor suggested physical therapy sessions, which I did. Each therapy session left me with more pain. Until one morning, I could not get up. I couldn't sit, and moving my arms was impossible. I saw a spine specialist, who recommended surgical intervention. In April 1999 I had my first surgery (for those in the medical field, my diagnosis was spondylolisthesis L5-S1 performing an arthrodesis L5-S1). The procedure intended to fix the problem by uniting the L4 through S1 vertebrae into a single block. But in the months after surgery, the pain only grew more intense. Doctors deemed the first surgery a failure.

In December 1999, I underwent the same spinal procedure a second time. The second surgery fared no better than the first, and my deterioration worsened to the point where I became bedridden. I was placed in a plaster trunk cast from hip to thigh, locking me in position, for three months. There was no improvement with the cast and instead the immobilization caused severe pain in my feet and an even greater degree of weakness throughout my body. There seemed to be no escape from the pain. No way for my body to recover.

POST-SURGICAL PAIN

Doctors called the second surgery another failure. At a loss, the doctors' medical opinions concluded that nothing could be done. They told me I would remain in a pain-ridden and weakened state permanently. I had already been away from my passion so long, and I feared I would never again practice medicine.

The two surgeries had resulted in free-floating bone fragments in the spine area, which caused nerve root compression and damaged nearby neurological structures. These bone fragments damaged the spinal cord, which is connected to nerves throughout the body. My pain spread, a burning sensation from my bones to my limbs and even my skin. Even the touch of clothing was painful on my skin. I moved as little as possible, using a wheelchair for doctor's appointments.

In 2002, two neurosurgeons proposed another surgery that would focus on fixing the damage to neurological structures and the bone fragments. This surgery did little to decrease the pain.

In 2003 a clinic in Havana, Cuba, heard of my case and offered surgery to help stabilize my trunk. I had little hope that this fourth surgery would help my condition. Afterward, the pain didn't diminish, and unbearable cramps and a burning of the skin continued.

By this point, the pain spread to the base of my cervical spine. I placed myself in a cervical collar (neck brace) and remained at home, confined to bed and cared for by home-care professionals. I received intravenous treatments almost weekly. Those, combined with oral pain medication, brought some relief.

I remained in this state for almost a decade.



3.

The Disabled Life

In 2012, years after the accident, surgeries, and permanent disability, I was in despair. From bed, almost everything was out of reach, physically (because of the limited use of my limbs) and mentally. There was nothing to do but vanish inside myself.

Prior to the accident, I had spent her whole life dreaming, studying, and then achieving my goal of becoming a doctor. Now, physically crippled, I felt useless. I would ask God to please get me out of my body. My chest felt crushed, and my throat felt tight. Both the physical pain and mental anguish worsened my condition. I'd cry silently, secretly pouring out emotion. I tried to keep my anguish quiet because there's another layer to this story.

MISSING FAMILY LIFE

Before the accident and years of pain, my husband and I had a son, Eliot. He was 6 years old when I received her first surgery. Over the following years of immobilization, I lost his childhood. I missed out on helping with homework, shopping for school clothes, taking walks, cooking food, having meals together. Family life and social life was taken from me. I missed his elementary school graduation. I missed his high school graduation, which Eliot decided to set out to reduce my emotional pain.

Missing out on life was gut wrenching. To add onto that, I needed help doing everything. Someone had to take me to the bathroom, help me eat, dress me. My reliance on others was another mental blow adding to the frustration and pain. Once there was a complication due to a lumbar procedure that meant I spent a week with my feet elevated at a high angle above my head. I was not to leave the bed, even for the bathroom. When I needed to relieve myself, the position made it impossible to cleanly do so. I lay there, frustrated, feeling urine dribble down my back. At that point, one of my lowest, it's almost impossible to find words to accurately express my emotions. It was a low point in more than a decade of mental and physical anguish.

4.

The Healing Begins

Watching his mother day after day, deep in anguish and pain, Eliot felt compelled to find alternate reliefs to my pain. He had watched doctors come up empty handed for years, trying no new solutions besides adding more pain killers.

His plan was to use my mind to fight the pain. It would be a struggle, we both knew, because I had been buried by pain and hopelessness for so long. This method of healing had no guarantee of working, and if it failed, could result in more emotional turmoil. But with no other options, I decided to try it. There was nothing left to lose.

MEDITATION

There are several styles of practice for meditation, but I focused on guided meditation that would relax body and mind. We paired it with breathing exercises, affirmations, and visualizations. My son started to study hypnosis for pain relief. I read about the pillars of faith, soaking up information on serenity and gratitude.

Then I did something I had not done in years: set a goal. I would, on my own, get up out of bed. To do this, I needed to do some soul searching. There was always an intense desire to get up, but I always put it out of reach. "Someday I'll get out of here," I would say, never really believing it was true or taking any steps to get there. It as a far-off future in which I was recovered and happy.

My conviction to actually stand up had been absent, buried by the perceived futility of my state. Meditation and visualization showed me the mental block that existed between my bed-ridden state and the dream of standing up. I started visualizing standing up – believing that the possibility was achievable. Belief didn't come immediately, though. At first, I went through the motions of visualization and meditation. I planted a seed, and belief started to grow.

I became increasingly disciplined in meditation practice. I became adept at relaxing my body and mind to a point I could slip into the state quickly. Eliot's hypnosis training began to pay off, too. We had regular sessions where we used hypnosis both to relive pain and train my mind in positive visualizations and affirmations. I dedicated myself to practicing all these aspects of mental conditioning as much as possible. For someone who is bed-ridden, there's not much else to do. I had the time to reach into the deepest recesses of my mind, to start to mold my mental state and influence pain.

BREAKING THROUGH

That's when something interesting started to happen. As I dedicated waking hours to these mental practices, I started to see positive results.

Pain had always come in peaks and valleys. Throughout the years I experienced pain 'crises' that had absolutely flattened my body and mind. Sometimes they'd last for hours and sometimes days. Painkillers could not do much to fight them. I lived through these periods, waiting for the usual level of pain to return. They left me weak and exhausted.

The meditation, affirmations, and visualizations started to create larger and larger gaps between these pain crises. For anyone living with chronic pain, periods of normalcy (whatever that is for the individual) are a godsend. I felt like I could actually feel a bit of joy in these periods. I could see the possibilities and started to visualize a possible future. My heart filled with great expectations for the future. Very quickly, I made the decision to do whatever was necessary to get up.

At this time, I started to train in expressing appreciation and gratitude for life. It may seem strange to be grateful for a life of pain and suffering, but life itself is a beautiful thing. I drank in information about gratitude like a lost wanderer in the desert: with great appreciation and an unending thirst. I read everything Eliot brought me about the subject and incorporated it into my meditation practice.

Taking all these practices together, day after day, my pain intensity began to diminish. It was a slow process, but every bit of progress reinforced my determination. The joy I felt from the pain reduction was intense and boosted my morale. The more I dedicated myself to my practice, the better results I saw.

EXERCISES BEGIN

Because of the reduction in pain, I was able to start doing minor exercises. I started very slowly, beginning with deep breaths along flexing the thoracic and abdominal muscles while lying in bed. These very light exercises are miles away from lifting weights at a gym, but for me, they were just the right amount for muscles that hadn't been used in years. I followed that with flexing and extending my fingers, wrists, elbows, and shoulders – all done without moving or affecting the torso.

Gaining confidence in working on my hands and arms, I moved onto my toes, knees, and hips. Each movement was done gradually without forcing my body into anything that felt too uncomfortable. Patience and perseverance were key. The movement was exhausting, but I pushed on by focusing on my goal of standing up. Adding these exercises didn't mean I reduced meditation practice. In fact, it was the opposite. I used meditation and affirmations to steel myself to get through the work.

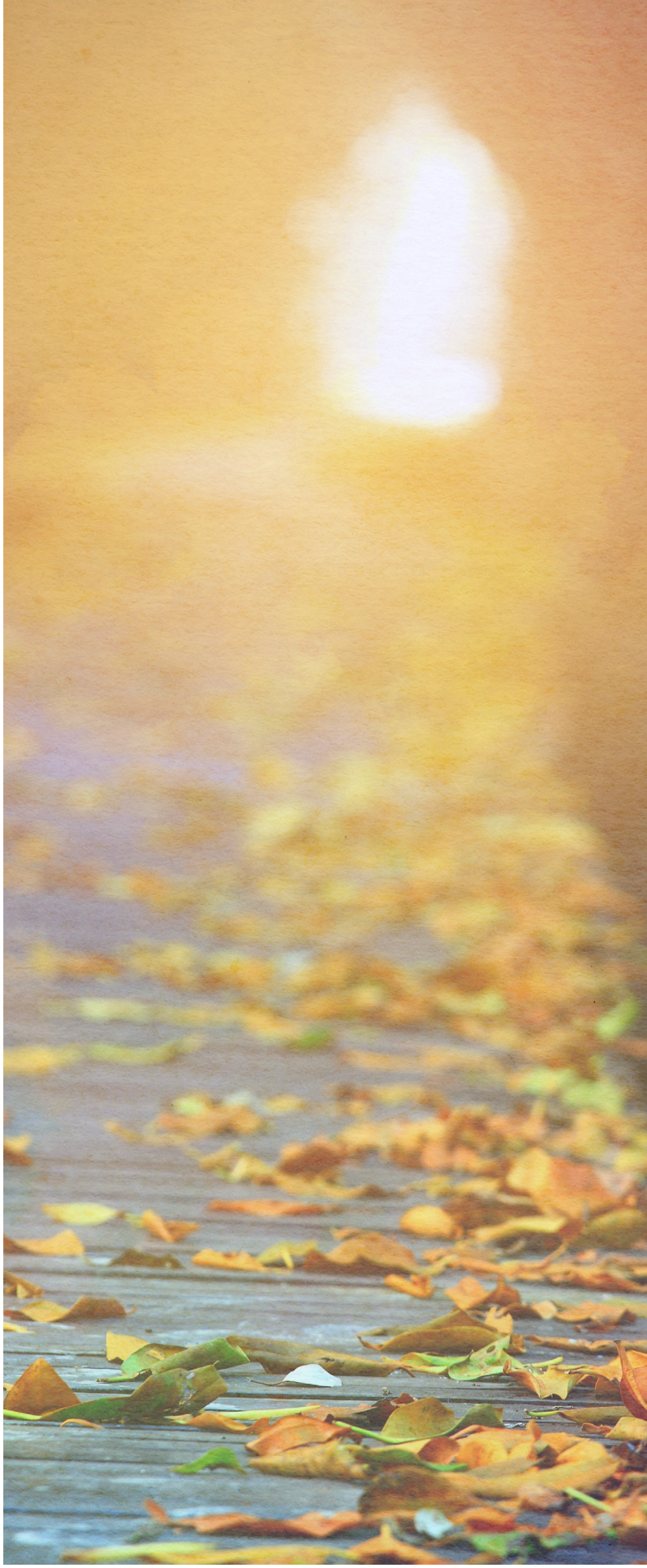
I performed these exercises alone. Counting silently: 1, 2, 3, and repeat. After exercises, I used affirmations to express positivity at the progress I saw. Already I was gaining more strength than expected. With each day, I was regaining pieces of myself.



It was not always a positive, life-giving process, though. Some days it was difficult reconciling my visions for the future, a normal family, and a renewed career, with the pain. Sometimes doubt would crawl in, and I would start to view the dream of standing as an impossibility. If I followed those lines of thought too far, I found herself back in severe pain, hanging on by a thread. When my mind failed, the pain returned with force, reinforcing feelings of hopelessness.

But these periods were actually highlighting the progress made through the practice of meditation. By backsliding somewhat, I came to value my practice more than ever. I persevered with affirmations, visualizations, and expressions of gratitude until, over time, it became an ingrained habit. These practices cut deep paths into my mind leading toward pain reduction and mental calm.

Months passed, and my mind, body, and emotions were gradually infiltrated with a sense of comfort, security, serenity, and confidence. It was a true road to recovery. A way through the fire and into a new future. I built upon this progress by replacing the feelings of pain, despair, and sadness with joy, wellness, and hope. I found the strength to get up both mentally, physically, and emotionally.



5.

Dr. Velasquez's Program for Healing

My journey was not an easy one. It involved months of study and careful practice. Through the power of meditation, exercises, and gratitude, I saw improvement even when doctors told me not to expect anything. I was supposed to remain pain-riddled and immobile for the rest of my life, but that life was never in the cards.

I spent my childhood working hard, long hours on the farm, struggling to even get the chance pursue my dream of an education, then putting myself through school and eventually helping others through medicine. When it was all cut short, I could have given up, conceding another blow in my difficult life. Instead, I believed in the strength of my mind to make up for the weakness in my body.

The program consists of three simple but effective building blocks for self-healing. Before beginning them, I suggested to stop all pain treatments that involve injections, and instead use oral pain pills only occasionally.

THE THREE BUILDING BLOCKS:

Gratitude: In recent years, researchers have studied the effects of gratitude on physical health. In 2012, **an analysis** published in "Personality and Individual Differences" found gratitude was strongly linked with better physical health. Gratitude is the ability to maintain a positive appreciation for the world. Unlike optimism, in which people expect good things, appreciation takes into account the hard work that goes into happy outcomes. For me, that meant appreciating the small successes.

The reason gratitude led to better health, those researchers gathered, is because it stems from better mental health. People with better mental health are more likely to practice a lifestyle that promotes health. The mind is a powerful thing, and, as I saw firsthand, it can be put to work healing the body.

I practiced gratitude by taking a pen and a notebook and writing down all the things for which I was grateful. It was hard at first, with so much pain clouding my mind, but I forced myself to write every day. I was aware of every pen stroke, every word. With humility and sincerity, I wrote daily for three straight months. At that point, I also incorporated verbal gratitudes. My body felt the benefits. I started appreciating the details of life all around. Gratitude gave me peace, calm, serenity, appreciation, and love. It's the greatest thing I've learned in my recovery experience.

Faith: Faith was a great pillar in my recovery. It gave me the invisible, inner strength that gave me the power to recovery. From it, I learned certainty, security, and confidence. I built my confidence around the faith that I would one day feel better. That I would one day enjoy my family, my work, and all the wonderful things life has to offer.



I had faith that I would recover. I convinced myself I was strong. And I was strong. And I did recover.

Meditation: The practice of meditation has a long history of creating a calm mind and a physical relaxation. Meditation **has been shown** to help people cope with illness, ease anxiety and depression, and even lower blood pressure.

To practice it yourself, follow these steps:

- **Find a quiet location devoid of any distractions.** Find a comfortable position (as comfortable as you can if you're dealing with chronic pain). The position itself doesn't matter (lying down or sitting is fine), as long as you're able to relax in it.

- **Focus your mind toward something that is not pain.** Choose a word, an affirmation, a sound, or the sensation of breath moving in and out of the body. Several phone apps offer guided meditation if you'd like to follow along with a speaker.

- **The final step is to relax into the meditation.** The mind may be full of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and it's OK to have them. The important thing is to not follow those thoughts. Let distractions come and go without imposing any judgment upon them. Simply let consciousness float along, unimpeded.

In the beginning, I could not concentrate because my mind was a jumble of hectic thoughts. I would restart again and again. Gradually, I could clear my mind for longer and longer amounts of time. With dedication, discipline, and commitment, I trained my body and mind. For my meditation, I focused on performing visualizations about what I wanted: health, a normal family life. I played these visions like a movie in my head. The more I practiced, the more tranquility and serenity I gained. My thoughts and emotions stilled and I experienced improved physical health and less stress. Meditation can give you control over your thoughts and help you discover a new, healthier way of living.

Some research has even shown that meditation has a physical effect on the brain. Researchers found that people who practiced meditation have more folds on the outer layers of the brain, which may lead to better information processing. It is a powerful tool for both mental and physical healing. It's easily customizable (length, technique, focus topic), and many people are able to tailor their individual practice to meet their needs.

COMBINING THE PILLARS

Taking these three practices together allowed me to journey back from the brink of unending pain and despair. My body could not recover on its own. It needed the mind to show it the way.

Incorporating meditation, gratitude, and exercise into my life allowed me to recover and share my story with others. I now live a fulfilling life of much-reduced pain, and I have experienced the best result of all: I stood up.