

Condensed excerpts from the book.

# PARALYZED *but not* POWERLESS

I AM DEAD.

It's not shiny or bright.

No past life goes rushing by.

No one waits for me at the end of a tunnel.

This is not like near death experiences I have heard about.

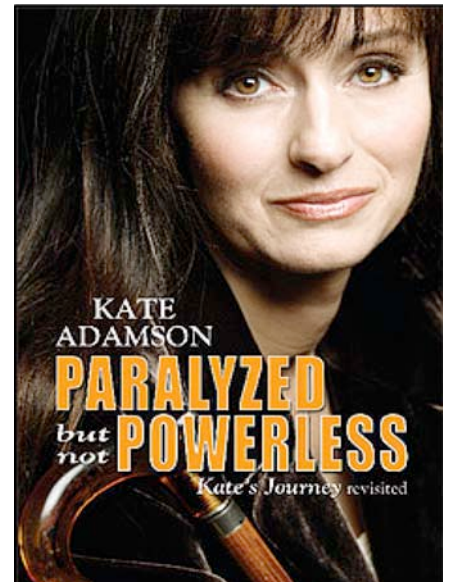
Other peoples' hearts stopped, sending them down a path toward the light.

My heart is fine – beating away; but its beat is killing my brain.

My brain has begun to decerebrate. My microprocessor is being fried – the wiring burning up at the speed of light. The pain is unbelievable. Everything is falling away from me like autumn leaves in the wind. I cannot move my arms or legs. Now, I cannot talk. Now, I cannot even blink my eyes. I see and hear everything going on around me but there is no link whatsoever with my body. I am alive – in here somewhere – but where? I cannot make even the simplest movements – locked in a rigid fetal position. Look at me. I am a thirty-three-year-old fetus, going out just as I came in. I don't know what is happening, except that I am dying. My children are terrified. So am I. Thoughts of my little ones fill my dying brain. I can hear Stephanie fighting and screaming, "Give me back my mommy, you can't take her. I want Mom!" The paramedics can't respond to her. They are busy doing their job. Death stands silently nearby. No matter how much Stephanie screams for her mom, Death is not obliged to answer. Death is no stranger to the men who have my life in their hands. They pay no attention to Death standing in the shadows. The paramedics can do little, but they will try everything – and there is no time for bedside manners.

"We are losing her!"

Now there is no time to reach UCLA. The ambulance is diverted to the nearest hospital. It is a good hospital, but small. The chance for cutting edge treatment is gone. The first trick is over and death has won. The paramedics are undecided. Should they go to sirens or just allow me to finish dying quietly? My youth and excellent physical condition make it inappropriate to just let me "go peacefully into that good night." Sirens wail as they hit the accelerator. Good. I will "rage against the dying of the light." So here we go – sirens, lights and speed. I live my life by my day planner. Today's schedule: 11am, funeral; 1pm, eternity. NO. I want to survive. But what if I do? Will I throw my schedule off? I'm moving fast now. Where am I going? Information comes in jangled and confused – except the pain, which is crystal clear. The midbrain – the pons area – that routes electrical impulses to and from my brain is drowned in blood. I should be terrified, but even fear can't enter this place through my shorted-out switchboard. Brainstem to main brain: "We are closing down. Let's go home."



---

*Damage to nerve tracks passing through the brainstem disconnected the upper parts of the brain, the cerebral hemispheres, from the spinal cord and the body, Kate became "locked-in." Her intact cerebral hemispheres enabling her to be awake and aware but unable to move her limbs or facial muscles..." —Dr. Jeffrey Saver*

I stared vacantly into space – still as death – completely paralyzed. I could hear and understand everything, but was unable say anything. Though totally paralyzed, I wasn't numb. Nothing would move but everything hurt. My husband overheard a doctor telling a nurse that I would die – if I was lucky. If I was not lucky – I would live. The hopelessness of my situation was often discussed in my room, within earshot. "I can't tell if she can even understand us." *I hear you! Don't you dare let me die!* My husband refused to believe I was dying.

---

Weeks have gone by. *Where am I? Eternity?* Eternity is undecided whether it wants me. Eternity can bring relief from pain – but cannot end. Eternity lasts forever and then some. My only companions are my thoughts. I am so desperately alone. *Do I exist? Who is here in this place? God, are you here?*

---

I am in a glass coffin. I can see and hear everything, but I am shut off from everyone. I think and think – then I think and think some more. It is all I can do – "I think therefore I am." Where have I heard that? Wait! I can think – therefore I am! I exist. I must exist. Well, then it is back to talking to God. I never prayed much before, but now I have all the time in the world to pray. Praying is the only thing I can do, so I will do that. I will think and think and talk and talk to God. Maybe God will get tired of it and I will get some action.

---

I required a feeding tube surgically inserted into my stomach because I wasn't getting enough nourishment from my IVs. A nurse placed a padded mouth guard between my teeth. *Why is she doing that? What are they doing?* Suddenly, I realized to my horror that I was being operated on – while I was awake! The doctor thought I was comatose and did not give me adequate pain medication. My silent screams echoed inside my head. *Oh no! Stop! Please stop! I'm awake!* I felt them cutting me open. I felt the entire operation – every cut. The ordeal lasted an eternity. Imagine lying there feeling everything but able to say nothing. No grimace – not even an involuntary jerk – could communicate my pain and terror.

---

*Locked-in syndrome is one of the rarest and most feared consequences of stroke. Patients are awake and aware, but unable to move their limbs or most facial muscles. The neural circuitry controlling blinking and vertical gaze is usually spared from injuries affecting the rest of the brainstem. As a result, patients can blink to communicate. Coding systems have been developed to facilitate communication with the locked-in patient, but even the most sophisticated is frustrating and exhausting. Success requires, as Kate exhibited, a determined and resilient spirit. —Dr. Jeffrey Saver*

---

More time passes. No signal in or out. They still think I am dead, but the joke is on them because I discovered I can think. Now I know I exist. Thank you Descartes! I can talk to God. If God listens, I may live again. It's possible. It must be. I have hope – doesn't that make it possible? *Okay, God, here's the deal. Let me live. I may never be the same, but I am willing to be different. I was once Kate Adamson, Katie or Mum. You may not let me be those people again, but please let me be someone.*

---

My husband Steven is standing by my hospital bed talking with my friend. They are trying to remember where Rachel's earache medicine is. *Oh, for Pete's sake, it's amoxicillin. It's in the refrigerator! Steven! STEVEN! Oh what's the use, I can't say a thing. I can't do a thing but think. I want to TALK. If I could just tell people what is going on... Wait! Steven just looked at me. Where is it? Steven, for Pete's sake, I can't talk. What? Can I blink my eyes? I don't know. I will try. Once for "yes" and twice for "no?" This is exhausting. I will try again. Dear God, I did it! You did it! We did it! I can blink! I can communicate!*

---

Now I can do two things. I can blink and think – the world is mine! If I can blink I can communicate. If I can communicate, I can connect. I can be a wife – a mom. With those two gifts, I can be me again. Steven ran to the nurses' station. "Make a poster so people know that Kate is alive and that she understands." Steven is a lawyer. He is not EF Hutton, but when he speaks, people listen! No one moved fast enough for him. So he made his own sign and put it over the bed. In large handwritten letters it said:

**THIS IS A HUMAN BEING LYING HERE  
SHE UNDERSTANDS WHAT YOU SAY  
PLEASE TREAT HER AS A PERSON**

---

Every day Steven would ask, "Can Stephanie come in today?" I blinked out "No!" *Come in and see me? Are you crazy? I don't want her to see me like this.* "Kate," he pleaded with me "she needs to see you. She thinks you are dead." *Stephanie thinks I am dead? Oh, my baby! Some think it would be better for everyone if I were dead!* He started taking pictures. "I have to show Stephanie you are still alive." *What is he thinking? I'm ugly!* I tried to turn away. I couldn't. *Go away!* "Try to smile," he said. *Try to smile?! If I could do anything, I'd wring your bloody neck! Haven't died? Haven't I? Do I look alive to you?*

---

*...brain lesions can directly compromise the neurotransmitter systems that underlie mood, producing depression by altering the brain circuitry of emotion. —Dr. Jeffrey Saver*

---

Steven tried to prepare my girls for their first visit. "Sit down next to Daddy. I'm going to show you a picture of Mom. She is very sick but she is getting better." He pulled one of the prints from his wallet. "This is Mom in the hospital." Stephanie stared at the snapshot for a long time. "What is that, Daddy?" She said, pointing. "Oh, that's a tube to help Mom breathe and that funny thing on her arm takes her blood pressure," he said trying to sound casual. "That helps the doctors and nurses make Mom get better," "This doesn't look like Mom." Stephanie gazed vacantly at the photo, teardrops sliding down her cheeks. Suddenly she jumped from the couch and ran from the room crying, "That is not my mommy! Mom doesn't look like that! She doesn't! She doesn't!"

---

I was so thirsty. I had no swallowing reflex. My lips were parched and cracked. I had to settle for mouth swabs or occasionally an ice chip. Those hospital lemon swabs just didn't cut it. For weeks, I dreamed about Gatorade. *A big bottle of green Gatorade would be great. I can just taste it.* Why Gatorade? I don't know. I never liked it before. But now that is all I could think about – it's sweet, salty, fruity flavor filling my mouth and pouring down my parched throat in great healthy gulps.

---

One of the most hellish things I endured was starvation. My digestive system shut down and they were forced to turn off my feeding tube. They assured Steven it was only until my system started working again. They said it wouldn't hurt. The count started. Day one: no digestive movement, so no food. Day two, day three: the same. No movement; no food. Seventy-two hours without food. The agony was unbearable. I was starving – literally. I thought I would go insane. I need to eat! My entire body screamed, "Feed me!" *For God's sake, feed me! You are killing me. What do you mean, "this won't hurt?!"*

---

This continued for another five days of sheer agony. Were they trying to kill me? No. Did it feel like it? Oh, yes. Don't ever believe that "letting a patient go" by starvation is merciful.

---

Amanda, our nanny, stood in the doorway holding Rachel. She bent down. There, Rachel, go say ‘Hi’ to Mom.” Rachel held onto Amanda’s leg and started to cry, “Mommy, Mommy, pick me up.” *No, no, Rachel, honey, I’m your mom, not Amanda!* I began to cry. “Don’t cry, Mom,” Stephanie said, taking Rachel by the hand and walking her slowly to me. Rachel refused to come too close. She held tightly to Stephanie. “Sissy, Sissy,” she said fearfully. “It’s okay, Rachel. It’s Mom – really it is.” Three year old Stephanie tried to comfort both of us at the same time – bless her heart.

---

*Intact parts of the brain take over the functions of the damaged parts, to the extent they are able to do so. Brain imaging studies have disclosed that this shift in functional activity is driven by training and practice. This activity-dependent neuroplasticity is the biological substrate of successful rehabilitation. Learning to control even simple movements and tasks is an extraordinary challenge to portions of an adult nervous system already committed to other functions. In Kate’s case, her youth and excellent fitness before the stroke were factors favoring a good recovery, despite the severe brain injury she suffered. Most important were her spirit and determination. —Dr. Jeffrey Saver*

---

Therapy was a process of baby steps – little miracles. Sometimes, though big miracles happened. In a range-of-motion exercise, one of my legs was placed on a “powder board.” It was raised off the ground about seven inches [lessening the impact of gravity]...sprinkled with talcum powder [hence the name “powder board”] reducing friction making it easier to move my leg back and forth. “Good job, Kate. Now keep trying,” said Steven, my eternal cheerleader. *Stop it! You have no idea how hard this is. You have no idea how irritating you are. Keep kneeling right there in front of me, Steven. You are the perfect target.* Steven read my mind. He taunted me, “Come on, Kate. Kick me. You can do it.”

I gritted my teeth with the effort – and to everyone’s astonishment, my leg flew forward. Oh – my leg – it just moved! Steven stumbled back, bent over in mock pain then dramatically collapsed. He says he was pretending, I think I connected! *Let’s try that again. That was fun.* Steven did not care if I hated him or loved him. He just wanted me to walk again.

---

I have gone through my grieving process and have accepted that I am not the person I was. But I like the new, more compassionate and stronger me. Once I felt deserted, sealed in a glass coffin. Now I thank God for the common bond I share with thousands who have moved from tragedy to triumph. The devastation we suffer may be outside our control, but our triumphant journey to reclaim our lives and become more creative and resourceful in the process is very much within our control. I admit to asking, “Why me?” That question may never be fully answered; but one thing is for certain; when my life was put on a shelf for a time, it made me realize how precious life is – and that God is only a prayer away.

I once lived in a five bedroom home in an exclusive California neighborhood. I had it all. I knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Now I know the value of life and am profoundly grateful for it.

---

Kate Adamson has touched the hearts of thousands with her book, *Paralyzed but not Powerless*. She has testified before Congress as an advocate for the right to live and be recognized as a viable contributing employee, executive, parent or spouse despite even severe disabilities. Her popular keynote presentation, “One Hand Clapping,” refocuses those who feel paralyzed in their personal or professional progress on what they can do, not what they can’t. She motivates public and corporate audiences to overcome their paralysis and move to their next level of accomplishment by focusing on the simple concepts and methods that created their success in the first place. She is a powerful advocate for “Ability Awareness” and “Appreciation before Accommodation,” inspiring audiences to recognize and value the creativity

and personal power that overcoming disability can create.

Kate was appointed to the University of Southern California, Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy Board of Counselors. She has served as a national spokesperson for the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association and is a board member of the Stroke Association of Southern California. Her story has been featured in *Redbook*, *Prevention*, and many other national magazines. She was a finalist in the *Prevention* magazine's national Picture of Health competition and has appeared on Larry King Live, CBS Sunday Morning News, CNN, Fox News, The O'Reilly Factor, The Abrams Report, MSNBC, ABC, 700 Club, Coral Ridge Ministries and the Trinity Broadcast Network.

---

A powerful story by a courageous woman... An inspiring message to all.

–Eric Adamson, Director, Rotary International

Inspiring and informative. Strength of will is the most important elements of rehabilitation.

–James Gordon, EdD, PT, FATPA Assoc. Dean & Chair, USC Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy

You were both phenomenal presenters. Western Marilyn Conference is still abuzz.

–Cynthia Miller Pellegrino, CEO, Western Marilyn Hospital

I was deeply impressed!

–Eddie Reynolds, Brain Injury Association of Kentucky

You were terrific... This is my first conference and I am so impressed.

–Ruth Ineagle, TM International

You were amazing! Thanks for your inspirational, entertaining talks [to our franchise convention].

–Natalie and Liam Crowe, C.E.O., Bark Busters USA

You nailed it! We had a blast! There was so much message in the magic.

–Kristy Bell, Bark Busters HQ & Paula and Steven Hinz, Franchise owners, Bark Busters USA

You made us remember what our job was all about. Everyone leaving had a smile!

–Carmen Newkirk & Pat Bucher, Association for Persons in Supported Employment

You remind each of us just how meaningful and important [employee contributions] are.

–Janet Peet, Director, Human Resources, Farr Company

Your words were an inspiration to me and the entire audience.

–Patricia Flaagan, Co- Chair, National Association of Insurance Women, Int'l

You “spoke volumes” to our group. You sparkled. What an inspiration you are.

–Ernie Weckbaugh, President & Irwin Zucker, Founder Book Publicists of Southern California

A powerful and inspiring story for providers and patients.

–Michael A. Elliott, MD, Medical Director, Neuroscience Institute, Virginia

Kate in 1995.



Kate today.

*Paralyzed but not Powerless*  
**Ability Awareness**  
*Appreciation before Accommodation*

Follow my journey -  
visit [www.kateadamson.com](http://www.kateadamson.com)

For further information:  
800-641-KATE (5283)

[kate@kateadamson.com](mailto:kate@kateadamson.com)