

A Second Life

“You will begin to have serious jaw pain when you are in your late thirties,” oral surgeon, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

“You will most likely experience pain on your right side for the rest of your life,” orthognathic surgeon, Anchorage, Alaska.

“It must be asymmetric day. I’ve been seeing a lot of you recently.” DDS, specializing in oral and maxillofacial surgery, Seattle, Washington.

The oral surgeon who removed my wisdom teeth eventually turned out to be right. When he told me that I would succumb to chronic pain in my thirties, I was a twenty-year-old college student, the future spreading out in front of me. In the wisdom teeth extraction consult—the sole reason I was there—the doctor challenged me on my teenage years of orthodonture. “Why didn’t your orthodontist say something?”

The “something” he was referring to was my asymmetric mandible and slanted maxilla for which my orthodontist had compensated by pulling teeth from both my upper and lower jaws to create a functioning bite. The water was well over the dam. Several years of braces, headgear, rubber bands, tears, and aspirin had eventually culminated in a bite that worked. I was well aware of my jaw being out of alignment. My parents—the go-betweens for the practitioners—did return to the orthodontist and question him. He simply said that he did the best he could with what he had—and no, he hadn’t gotten a second opinion.

I was in the middle of college exams and not amenable to looking at jaw surgery and more years of braces. Plus my jaw didn’t really hurt. I had other problems, frequent sinus infections, which my doctors treated with antibiotics, and blinding headaches that came and went. I certainly didn’t put these ailments together with my asymmetric jaw. In my mind the various ailments were all separate health problems I was dealing with. I focused on finishing my schooling and then entered the world of work.

Flash forward to my late thirties: I was living and working in Anchorage, Alaska. On cue and as predicted, my jaw was causing me drastic pain. An MRI revealed that I was no longer aligned on my right meniscus (the disk acts as a cushion between the bones of the joint so that the joint can move smoothly). The problem was also evidenced by pronounced right-sided clicking when I opened and closed my mouth. I saw a dentist who made me dental splints (sort of like upper and lower mouth guards) to help relax my jaw when worn. I visited a chiropractor two or three times a week who worked on my neck and “reset” my jaw, temporarily relieving the pain. I saw a physical therapist who designed exercises to help release my tight masseters and neck muscles. I was able to get some temporary relief with these therapies, and otherwise relied on yoga, Feldenkrais (a practice of movement awareness), painkillers, and anti-depressants.

For me, pursuing day-to-day pain management meant that I was on a circuit of practitioners and it was beginning to become hard to imagine the future. There were some days where I was barely hanging on, the right-sided pain was so pronounced. I knew that chronic pain doesn’t typically get better on its own and as a person ages, and I started to question my increasingly challenged existence. It seemed that I was in a world of unrelenting pain. I got into arguments with friends about the validity of suicide. I felt

like I had reached the end of the road health-wise, and there was nowhere to go except toward a state of continued maintenance.

One day a chiropractor I was seeing for adjustments referred me to an Alaskan Native healer. “She’s made a big difference for one of my clients. The husband of my client told me that he was so happy to have his wife back.” These are the kind of words anyone who is in chronic pain wants to hear, but I skeptically asked him, “Did it last?” “So far so good,” was my chiropractor’s response. I made the appointment the very next day. The woman had me lie on a table while she performed a hands-on manipulation with stones and charms. She obviously knew what she was doing because my body felt wonderful; I felt whole and centered by the time she finished her work. “You know,” she said looking into my eyes after the session, “You don’t have to live your life in pain.” I nodded. Those words would become very important to me as I continued to look for solutions. I practically glided out of her office. The throbbing and aches did return a few days later as my body reverted to its familiar twisted dysfunctional pattern. Yet it was the first time that I felt like the pain I was in was somehow controllable, somehow of my own choosing, although at the time I couldn’t fathom how that could be true.

The dentist who had made my jaw splints eventually referred me to an oral surgeon who, true to his specialty, recommended surgery to straighten my jaw. One afternoon I sat in agony in his office—I was having a particularly bad day—and I asked him to write me a prescription for the pain. He was reluctant to do so, but I refused to leave his office until he handed me the script. I knew a lot of professionals talk very theoretically about pain management, but seldom offer anything immediate to alleviate it. His office staff wrote up the recommendation for surgery and submitted it to my insurance company and then we waited.

I spent hours researching jaw surgery on the internet. I discovered that there was no medical consensus on the definition of TMD (temporomandibular disorder) or TMJ, as it is often called. The internet search results revealed some very gruesome surgery stories as well as some positive ones. I came to understand that cases for surgical success really varied by the patient’s condition—the shape of the mandibular condyle, the head structure, the skill of the surgeon, and whether or not the surgeon “went into the joint” (the temporomandibular joint is the most complicated in the human body). Surgery was oftentimes followed up by a wiring shut of the jaw for the initial healing weeks and then by subsequent orthodonture. I learned from my research that there were people who were off both their meniscuses who were in no pain at all, and those who had no displacement whatsoever who were in terrible pain. Therefore, it seemed likely that being off my right disk possibly had little or nothing to do with my chronic symptoms.

Although I was stuck in my search for the one-problem—one solution answer, I think I unconsciously knew that my body’s dysfunction moved beyond just the jaw. I had upper thoracic scoliosis – right sided, which acted up in concert with my jaw spasms. The Anchorage surgeon had nodded at me in the initial examination—noting that there were aspects of my right side that were smaller than the left—the right ear, the right eye, and the right mandible. “My wife has something similar,” he said to me, before pronouncing that I would most likely be in pain for the rest of my life. He even conceded that surgery might not take me out of pain.

Throughout my life I had noticed my incoordination at all things sports. I felt sometimes like my ribcage was sitting directly atop my hips or that there was a relentless gnawing on my right side. A boyfriend claimed he was sometimes afraid to hike with me—because of what he called “my unsteady feet.” These other types of pain, and lack of center seemed insurmountable to me, and unconnected with the

potential jaw surgery, although I really hoped a surgical resetting would be the magical answer to everything.

My insurance company was taking its time so I continued to wait, visiting my circuit of medical professionals to manage the pain. And then finally one day the surgeon's office called and told me that my insurance company denied coverage because according to their records, the TMD splint was helping me. I was devastated and relieved at the same time. The office person indicated that we could appeal the decision. But by then I had heard of something else, a treatment that I really couldn't get my mind around just yet. Something that would change the whole trajectory of my health and my life. My chiropractor seeing my despair one day had said, "I think there's a doctor in the Seattle area who does some kind of manipulation work." "How? Is it permanent? Is it a brace of some kind?" I asked. He didn't know any details but he gave me the doctor's name: Dr. Dean Howell.

After researching the neural cranial restructuring (NCR) treatment online, I knew I wanted to try it. However, after excitedly explaining it to my parents and to some friends, I felt quite alone. It sounded too radical, too off-the-mainstream, too unconventional they told me. Luckily my new boyfriend lived in Seattle, was supportive, and offered to take me to my first series. I flew to Seattle and together we made the drive to the doctor's office. After the orientation with Dr. Howell, where he explained NCR, I was determined to try it, but very, very scared. The doctor and his assistants—one was Hillary Lampers—maintained a confident air. I trusted the doctor and appreciated the fact that he seemed to take a whole-body approach to my treatment. He understood how my seemingly disparate symptoms were connected. The technique made so much sense to me—the treatments actually work from the inside out—and there would be no cutting, no surgery, and I didn't need to stop my meds.

I wish I could say that the first treatment zapped my jaw into submission. Rather it unlocked my mind and started peeling the onion on the whole-life body pains I'd been experiencing. After my initial series, I paid a visit to my Anchorage chiropractor who was so amazed by my progress and testimonial that he ended up studying the treatment himself to learn the technique. I continued treatments with Dr. Howell, flying down from Anchorage every few months. And after a few series, I visited a longtime friend who told me I never looked better. My jaw tenderness started to fall away, not in an instant, but perhaps in a gradual reaction to the realignment of my skull. Over time my chin, misaligned to the right, began to migrate to the midline. The pain would continue to come and go, but it lessened between treatments. At first, I had been dismayed that I wasn't a one-treatment series patient, but I came to understand the nature of the gradual unpeeling of my dysfunctional structure. Eventually I relocated to Seattle, and continued with NCR every few months. To accommodate the facial and skull changes, I decided to again work with an orthodontist to create a more level bite to complement the NCR treatment and the way that my upper palate was changing.

It's been well more than a decade now since that first NCR treatment. My face is wider, my posture vastly improved (back straighter), and the chronic sinus infections are a thing of the past. Most significantly, my jaw pain has all but disappeared. I believe because of NCR and my open-mindedness, I've been able to explore other non-mainstream modalities. Currently, I am lucky enough to be treated by Dr. Hillary Lampers, one of Dr. Howell's original assistants who had witnessed my progress since the very beginning. Together we have discussed many aspects of health—physical, nutritional, mental, and spiritual—and the pursuit of other healing modalities has also enriched my life and improved my health.

When I consider the dire straits that led me to NCR, I can't imagine my life without it. It has allowed me to experience something closer to my optimal structure, and the treatment's side "effects" are amazing:

no more hip pain, good facial alignment, the ability to turn my neck freely, and yes, better coordination—a knowing of where my center is. People cannot understand why I look so young and happy at the age of 52—the years of pain and struggle have vanished and I believe it is the more relaxed nature of my face and body that gives the illusion of youth. The fact that I am a much nicer and happier person than I was before doesn't hurt either.

Today I live in Seattle, my adopted city, I am employed fulltime in a job I love, and I'm in a solid and fulfilling relationship with my partner. I can walk down the street with no pain. I do Pilates with a trainer once a week. I am an active beginning skier and I am learning to ride a bike again. I go to bed without pain and wake up without it. I am more in touch with my spirit than I ever have been. When my jaw, hip, or back twinges revisit, I now view any structural discomfort as a sign that my spine or posture is off. Therefore, I have learned to adjust my body, knowing how to keep my spine erect, head balanced, and my joints mobile. I have been able to manage my own pain and more so, my continuing good health. It's a blessing to be healthier later in life. I value every day now and am grateful that NCR gave me a second chance, a second life.