A Body Interrupted

By: Rosalba Mancuso

Early on-set Parkinson's disease disrupted the life of a fiercely independent Sicilian journalist, forcing her to confront loss, anger, and faith-while discovering unexpected forms of resilience, love, and purpose.

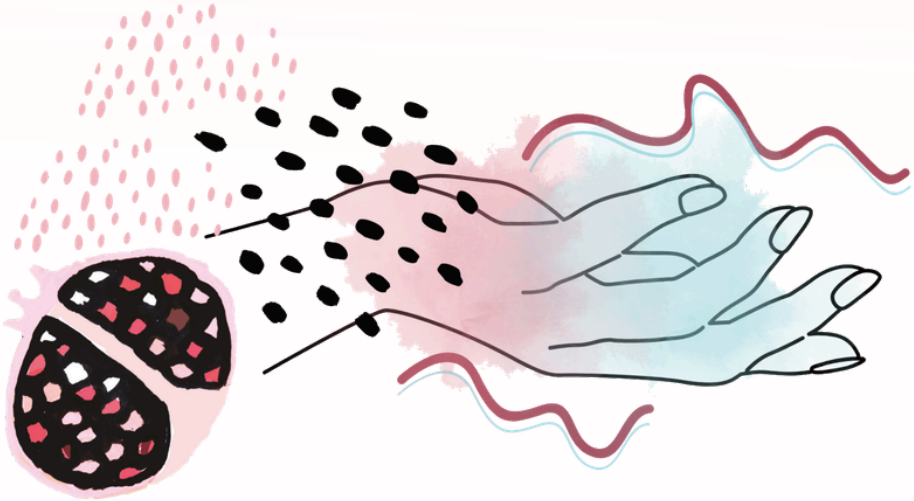
Getting Parkinson's disease while you are still young and active is unexpected. But it happens—and it happened to me when I was just 50. I often find myself returning to the moment when everything began.

It was a cold December evening in 2021, just a few days before Christmas. I was sitting around a table with my loved ones, surrounded by laughter and cheerful chatter. Suddenly, my hands began to tremble. At first, I barely noticed. The movement was light, almost imperceptible. My relatives, however, were startled and urged me to see a doctor - a neurologist, to be exact.

I brushed off their concern, reassuring them that I was simply tired. I had just finished translating a novel, and whatever else I was feeling, I told myself, could be explained by pandemic stress. I was wrong.

Those slight hand tremors were the first signs of the disease I live with now. They marked the beginning of a drastic, irreversible change in my life. That evening remains etched in my memory because it was they day when everything changed.

The diagnosis of Parkinson's arrived officially in June 2023, though my symptoms had been worsening throughout 2022, especially after a COVID infection. I live in Sicily, where the Italian healthcare system remained almost completely paralyzed by pandemic restrictions. Medical care for anything other than COVID or life-threatening emergencies did not fully resume until 2023.



Even before the official diagnosis, I sensed what was happening to me. Every day brought new symptoms, new difficulties with movement. I remember vividly how my hands began trembling violently on February 24, 2022, as I watched the national television broadcast announcing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That date, too, became a turning point in my life. The news of war returning to Europe triggered an overwhelming depression, which in turn intensified my neurological tremors. At that moment, I knew with certainty that I was no longer the same woman.

My Identity Before and After Parkinson's

Before the diagnosis, my life followed what I believed was a steady and ordinary path, guided by two essential goals: independence and autonomy. Ironically, these were precisely the things Parkinson's would begin to take from me.

Living in Sicily, achieving autonomy as a woman is not easy. Fairly paid jobs are scarce, and independence often feels like a constant struggle. For this reason, being a independent woman was not only important to me it was my life's central purpose. I wanted to pursue my professional dreams, to own and drive my car, to move freely through the world. And just as I reached these milestones, I lost them.

From that point on, my existence became a relentless negotiation between what I once could do and what I stood to lose next. I could no longer drive. I could no longer care for my elderly mother. I couldn't even prepare meals for my husband.

With Parkinson's, every day is both a challenge and an unknown. The disease reversed the roles I had always inhabited. I had been the pillar of my family the organizer, the caretaker, the one others relied on. I supported my mother, my husband, and anyone who needed me. Now, I was the one who required help. My hands trembled. My gait faltered. I asked myself repeatedly: How can I support the people I love when I can barely support myself?

Over time, I realized that this question only deepened my emotional exhaustion. The disease I avoided naming was already reshaping my life redesigning my goals and eroding my sense of identity.

Before, I was energetic, multitasking, vibrant. After, I saw myself only as a disabled person, stripped even of a clear sense of my own gendered identity. I no longer felt like a woman, but like something undefined a body marked by illness, constrained by movement.

It was this profound sense of dislocation that compelled me to confront my innermost emotions and spirituality.

When Normal Fell Apart

At the beginning, fear governed my inner dialogue: fear of losing control of my body, of falling, of ending up in a wheelchair, and of losing my hands to writing. Writing was, and still is, a fundamental part of my identity. I had worked hard to become a writer and a journalist, and now the disease threatened to take that from me.

I didn't just do journalism - I was a journalist. In my village, people called me The Journalist. How could I live without the role I had pursued, defended, and nurtured for most of my life?

Eventually, my doctors prescribed Levodopa, the gold-standard treatment for Parkinson's disease. At first, I oscillated between rejection and acceptance. For months, I resisted. After six months, I finally gave in and took the pills. Before that, I had relied on herbal supplements, which not only failed to help but accelerated the progression of the disease, causing serious balance issues. Without Levodopa, my neurologist was forced to acknowledge that my Parkinson's had already reached stage three.

By easing my hand tremors, Levodopa gave me back the ability to write a small miracle.

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But it did not solve everything. Parkinson's also worsened health conditions I had lived with for years.

I suffer from autoimmune thyroiditis and bipolar depression, both of which began in adolescence and had already complicated my studies and professional life. Now I was facing three illnesses at once, and it felt as though they had formed an alliance. When my bipolar symptoms intensified, my motor disturbances eased. When the depression receded, my Parkinson's symptoms returned. I couldn't plan anything. I felt unreliable and unable to see a future for myself.

Slowly, rage took hold. I was angry, angry at myself and at God. The conflict with God was the most devastating. I had always been a devout Christian, a committed believer, but this spiritual rupture exacerbated by Parkinson's and perhaps by dopaminergic therapy triggered a severe form of obsessive compulsive disorder. A profound sense of injustice fueled intrusive religious thoughts, followed by overwhelming guilt and unbearable anxiety.

That was when it became clear to me that I had crossed a threshold, and that life would not return to what it had been.

Choosing the Present

I needed to change my lifestyle in order to better cope with my neurological condition. More than that, I needed a complete shift in perspective. As the title of a famous Italian novel reminds us, You can't Save Yourself Alone. And so, I sought psychological support and began psychotherapy. Meeting my therapist in 2024 proved to be a turning point.

Gradually, my fear of the future gave way to a commitment to the present. Instead of allowing worry to overshadow my days, I focused on a single task: living each day as fully as possible, as if it were the last. This new perspective taught me to notice what I had long overlooked. My disease did not define my identity not even my movement disorders. I could still be who I had always been: a wife, a woman, a journalist.

Through psychotherapy, I learned to explore my inner life with greater awareness and mindfulness, and to accept what this experience had given me, not only what it had taken away.

Parkinson's did take some abilities from me, but it also opened unexpected paths. It taught me to recognize the love of my mother, the devotion of my husband, the affection of my sister. It renewed my passion for my work and gave me the strength to confront my bipolar depression through targeted psychotherapy something I might never have pursued without Parkinson's entering my life.

In this sense, Parkinson's has been a profound life lesson. I no longer believe that things happen by chance; I believe they happen for a reason. Often, they arrive to unsettle us, to awaken our conscience, and to teach us new ways of caring for ourselves and for others. Through suffering, we learn how to listen to our inner lives and grow into better versions of ourselves.

Today, I can say with certainty that I am a better woman one who is capable of loving more deeply than ever before.

Parkinson's disease may have reshaped my life, but it did not change my heart. And that is what matters most.

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Rosalba Mancuso

is a Sicily-based bilingual journalist with over 30 years of experience as a contributor to newspapers and magazines. International medical reporter and professional member of the AHCJ, American Association of Health Care Journalists, she writes about mental health, autoimmunity, and neurological disorders. After a diagnosis of Parkinson's in 2023, Rosalba is also dedicating her writing to spreading awareness about this disease in the hope that her experience helps others with the same disorder.

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