

# What Matter Wounds?

By Pete & Mary-Jo La Chance

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We dreamed an "Impossible Dream." On the Weekend of April 24-26 that dream came true. We'd like to share the dream with you. We're not sure how to do it, where to begin, what to say, but we'll do the best we can to convey some of the beauty and majesty of that Weekend as we experienced it.

The Weekend was the first Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend for Multiple Sclerosis couples, presented by teams with Multiple Sclerosis. It took place at Howard Johnson's Motor Inn in Rocky Hill, Connecticut. Nineteen couples and a priest experienced the Weekend.

A little bit has to be said about Multiple Sclerosis in order to understand why the Weekend seemed like an "Impossible Dream" to us.

MS is a unique disease, and each patient is affected differently. Because it attacks the brain and central nervous system, it leaves its mark in varying degrees of intensity.

Some of our couples (only one spouse had MS, but we called them all "MS couples" because the disease leaves its emotional scars on the non-afflicted partner) were in wheelchairs.

There were others who could walk with the assistance of canes, walkers, or crutches. Others had difficulty with sight, weakened or useless arms, slurred speech. Many had more than one symptom, which is not unusual, and some seemed apparently unaffected.

When we received permission to give the Weekend, there was only one condition: that it be a regular Marriage Encounter Weekend, true to the outline, and presented by regular teams.

We kept that commitment. It was a regular Weekend, given by two MS couples, an MD (Muscular Dystrophy) couple and a team priest who is a hospital Chaplain, all regular teams.

Fr. Luke Sawyer from Middletown, Connecticut, was our very sensitive priest. He offered Mass sitting down, "just as the Lord did on Holy Thursday," he said. There wasn't a couple in that room who ever suspected that the Mass wasn't offered that way on every Weekend.

Tom & Claudia Sanders from Plattsburgh, N. Y., were our second couple. They traveled eight hours, back and forth, for a team meeting in Connecticut, and for the Weekend.

Claudia has just recently been diagnosed with MS. She ended up in her wheelchair on the Weekend, and was more concerned that the wheel was flat than that she was in that chair. Tom and Claudia shared their deepest feelings of hurt, and frustration. They gave their all.

And, there was Jan & Al Ponce from White River Junction, Vermont. Jan has Muscular Dystrophy, which has slowly weakened the muscles on one side of her body, and is starting on the other side.

That by no means slows this couple down. They put spark and honesty into the Weekend. Al and Jan want to encounter every couple locked behind closed doors with disabilities. We're with them, Pete & Mary-Jo La Chance, from Weston, Connecticut, the Weekend's administrative couple.

### **"What matters wounds?" . . .**

As often as I (Pete) have heard these words on a Weekend, they never had the meaning for me that they did this time. I could relate to wounds. After all, Mary-Jo has MS, and I have a heart condition, so we are "wounded." We don't consider our disabilities as inhibiting. Our Father has been good to us in our recoveries, and we-at least in outward appearance-are healthy and in good shape.

I (Mary-Jo) realize now I had set my expectations too high for this Weekend, higher than for any other. I so wanted the hurting inside of those couples healed with their love.

I forgot how much I resisted "tenderness" and love on our original Weekend. How difficult it was for me to believe that I could be lovable with a disease that I judged took away my beauty.

These couples were no different. They were tough. The Weekend itself was the most grueling and tiring we have ever presented, but it is one we won't forget for a long time.

Our faithfulness to the outline or the dedication of the teams is not the message of this Weekend. The courage of the 19 couples and the priest who experienced it is.

### **"What is illness of the body to a knight errant?"**

Courage was one beautiful guy who was in a wheelchair, and had minimal use of his arms. He shared with us that before the Weekend he hadn't been outside of his house for six years.

We couldn't figure out why until we saw his 98-pound wife who lovingly pushed his chair, lifted him, and took care of him. They were at every presentation, straining to hear each word. At the end of the Weekend, the two of them were glowing, and their eyes glistened with tears.

Then there was the young couple. The wife had uncontrollable spasms on her right side. She wrote all Weekend. Her left hand held and supported her right hand as she wrote and wrote. Her husband was so tender, and gentle and neither one quit at any point.

At some presentations, a disabled partner was unable to attend, but their mate was there, taking notes, and absorbing every word. It made us feel very humble, like winning a prize that you believed someone else deserved.

One girl in a wheelchair kept having severe spasms, and would slide right out of the wheelchair during the presentations. The able-bodied people in the room would put her in the chair, and she'd go on writing. At one point she said, "I'm so sorry I disrupted the group."

Courage is couples who were so tired that their symptoms flared up. They kept going. It is a wife spending the 90-90 time on the bathroom floor where she had fallen, but writing her love-letter. She shared with us on the Weekend that she hadn't written in years, and was so proud she could. She was going to write her daughter when she got home.

It wasn't just the MS people who touched us. The tenderness and strength of their mates gave us feelings of humbleness and encouragement. The husband who carried his wife to their room in his arms. The guy who told us, "She can do it!" Know what? The wife did write, and got herself back and forth to their room unassisted.

Courage, strength and tenderness was couples struggling to obtain acceptance, which for some never came. It was motorized wheelchairs, a wheelchair with a flat tire, walkers, canes, tape recorders, braces, and a legally blind priest holding his notebook an inch from his eyes to write like crazy. It was sharing emotional scars that can be only healed in time, if ever.

For the team, it was a faithful Weekend. We were a faithful people, faithful to our movement, our family, and our Church. It was a faith-filled Weekend, given in faith with the support of your prayers and petitions.

For us, it was like going on the Pilgrimage to Lourdes with the petitions of many people, some of which were granted, and some were not. We were faithful to our mission.

We're ready to give another Weekend for couples where any handicap is present. Somehow we'll figure a way for the deaf to hear our words, the blind to read a loveletter, and paraplegic to write.

There is no doubt in our minds that if we are to be a living, vibrant Church people, bringing the message of love and hope to married couples, we have to minister to our handicapped brothers and sisters. Their matrimony is as sacred and rich as ours. It's not easy, and won't be easy, but it has to be done.

If, in 1968, Chuck Gallagher and those few couples had said, "It's an Impossible Dream," we wouldn't be here today as a family. There are thousands of couples locked in their homes by handicaps. It is up to us as a family to open the doors. We pray this Weekend won't be the last.