

Changing perspective

by Jennifer Miller

Imagine being at the peak of your career, with a prospering business and a reputation as a role model for excellence. Then, one night, you lose your power to get out of bed and even walk to the kitchen. How would you react? Meet Robin Sheppard, hotelier, mineral water connoisseur, entrepreneur and now author.

How do you define yourself? People generally use a combination of physical attributes, personality traits, skills and achievements. Our own definitions are subtly but constantly built up, altered or eroded by daily experiences and our interactions with others. Occasionally some people will experience such a transforming event that their previous definition no longer applies. The slate is wiped clean and they have to begin again.

Robin Sheppard, 'the hotelier', started his career in a very traditional manner. Educated at Oxford Brookes University, he then began a traineeship at British Transport Hotels in Liverpool where after only a few months he was 'handed the keys' and told he was ready to be a manager.

His progression and experience in the management of the UK's finest hotels continued at a pace. Appointed deputy manager at the Old Course Hotel in St Andrews, he honed his skills, before taking the position of General Manager at a conference centre outside Colchester at the age of 25.

A series of beautiful, well respected hotels followed including Bodysgallen Hall in Llandudno, Wales and opening The Royal Berkshire Hotel in Ascot for Hilton.

Attention to detail...

Along the way Robin's obsession with detail and precision made him an outstanding hotelier and earned him and his hotels countless awards and accolades. It was Robin's obsession with the details that shaped his career. Having noticed that he did not like to have Perrier mineral water with his meal (because the bubbles were too big!), Robin decided to take up a

'hobby'. He sourced a new mineral water, designed an iconic bottle and launched Ty Nant mineral water in the late 1980's. The rest of that story is history, with Ty Nant stocked in many of the leading hotels and Restaurants in London and even more internationally.

With his hobby overtaking his career, Ty Nant was sold at a good time and Robin returned to his hometown of Bath to operate the Bath Spa Hotel for Forte Hotels. Robin was encouraged to take opportunities to manage multiple units within the group which he did for a few years, however having experienced the thrill of establishing his own successful business, he knew that his passion lay in more entrepreneurial pursuits.

In the late 1990's Robin joined forces with current business partner Haydn Fentum, initially to purchase a hotel in Stratford and then, along with David Coubrough to develop the hotel management company, Bespoke Hotels.

All was well. By 2004 Bespoke was operating a number of hotels and had just secured the beautiful Home House in Portman Square. At this point 'Robin Sheppard' had been well defined.

Then in December 2004 Robin developed an all-over, body-aching, lethargic 'flu', three days later he was unable to move a muscle and was on a respirator in intensive care.

Suddenly, previous definitions didn't mean a thing.

After a battery of tests it was confirmed that Robin was suffering from Guillain-Barré Syndrome (pronounced ghee-yan bah-ray), an auto immune disease in which the patient's own immune system develops antibodies and attacks their own nerves. This results in disruption of the transmission of nerve signals

both from the brain to the muscles, and from the rest of the body back to the brain.

"It is like being buried inside your own body", Robin explains, "I could hear things and see things for brief periods but I couldn't move at all. The paralysis developed quickly and after the first few days it had spread to my breathing and I was placed on a ventilator."

Road to recovery...

After a long road of intensive treatment and sheer hard work, including daily physiotherapy, Robin has recovered the use of his arms and legs, is walking unaided and, on the day we meet, is thrilled that he may be able to drive again.

Not only that, in January 2006, just 13 months after the illness struck, Robin began 'writing' his first book. Without the aid of a secretary or the use of his hands, Robin began to tell his story using voice activated software.

"I finished my first draft and I had to go back through it and change it as I was told by friends and family that it wasn't miserable enough, there were too many gags!" says Robin with a chuckle, "I was surprised to find when I started writing the book that I really enjoyed it. It was an opportunity to get it out of my system, in a way."

To be fair, neither Robin nor the book is all doom and gloom. Robin explains "Different people deal with situations in different ways. Some turn to religion, some to music - I turned to humour. Keeping my own sense of humour and having friends and family around me who also could see the funny side was very important to me."

So how has the experience changed him?

"I no longer take things quite so seriously, I let the little things go more often and I lack the energy that I used to have. Relationships are more important to me and I have better manners, I say thank you more often!

Being in a situation where you simply cannot do anything for yourself makes you appreciate the things others do for you so much more."

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immersed in the medical profession and the hospital environment really changed his outlook. "In the hotel industry it is so important to put on the show, it's all theatre and an act for the audience. In hospitals, people die."

The road to recovery hasn't been smooth and isn't over yet. "Getting back into the world and work has been hard. I was very conscious of the way people view me and what they are thinking. For example, in 2005 my partner used to take me to the park in my wheelchair to get fresh air and see the sun, the reaction of the children was something that I had to get used to. They just ask the questions that are on their minds: 'Mummy what's wrong with that man?'"

Keeping in touch

I also spent a while apologising to everyone at the beginning of every meeting as I can't wear a tie because I can't do it up! I felt that I had to explain everything about my illness. Then a friend who had broken his back diving into a pool gave some valuable advice - he told me to just give them the short answer and it has made meeting people a lot easier."

Speaking to Robin, and reading his book I get the impression that the people he has encountered along the way are as important to his recovery as his own determination and hard work. From his family and partner, to the physiotherapists and occupational therapists that helped get muscles back to work right through to fellow patients who were working on their own recovery and provided a certain form of distraction and entertainment.

"Yes, I still keep in touch with a number of fellow patients and many of the staff and I don't want to lose that. One of the hardest things has been making the decision to move to a different physiotherapist. I was being treated in a ward that assisted people who are ill and disabled, and for my own recovery I needed to change to be treated in a place where I can compete with others who are well."

I found an old list of 20 questions that Robin answered in 1995 and asked them again. Not surprisingly some things have not changed, he would still choose to take a good book to a desert island, however some answers have changed dramatically: The thing Robin always carries is no longer a pen and paper but his disabled travel pass. To relax he no longer plays rugby but spectates. The person in the catering industry that he admires most is no longer Lord Forte but Desiree the cook at the Wolfson Rehabilitation Centre, who made fabulous Caribbean dishes whenever she could. And he now has a serious obsession with Jaffa Cakes. ■