

Awakening from the Fog

by Ola Sundberg, ASPE



Photograph by Ola Sundberg

It happened halfway through my first cup of coffee of the day. I was sitting in my armchair, having just read something in the news that made me put my tablet aside for a moment and reflect. My left hand was resting in my lap, and the morning light fell across its tendons, drawing fine shadows on the skin. A tiny, almost unconscious movement made the shadows shift. Fascinated, I started playing with how subtle movements could be. Some required little more than a thought, a slight tension that didn't even move a finger, yet it was still visible in the play of shadows.

My thoughts wandered, analyzing and associating, triggered by this window into the small nuances our bodies are capable of.

Suddenly it struck me: *I'm awake—truly awake.* For the first time in years, I feel completely sharp and clear-headed. My mind almost explodes into a kaleidoscope of thoughts, and I revel in it. The freedom, the clarity, the sheer pleasure of thinking—a freedom I'd almost forgotten existed.

Then comes the sadness ... over how long I've been away, over how much I've lost, over the knowledge that this clarity is temporary.

Since childhood, I've suffered from severe restless legs syndrome, or RLS. The condition itself is not uncommon, but the severity I experience is. It's a neurological disorder that creates unbearable discomfort in various parts of the body when at rest. Trying to ignore it only makes it worse. Sleep

becomes impossible during flare-ups. My RLS has steadily worsened over the years, and now I suffer continuously, day and night.

In recent years, the only thing somewhat keeping it at bay has been a combination of medications, with opioids doing the heavy lifting. But they make me foggy; and, even then, they're not enough. I sleep poorly at night and can't nap at all during the day. I could achieve full relief, but only at the price of even higher opioid doses and therefore even deeper fog.

There are other medications that work better, dopamine agonists, but the relief is short-lived. I quickly experience what's called augmentation, meaning the effect diminishes and my symptoms worsen and spread. Eventually, I must stop completely, and then I have no choice but to return to opioids.

Right now, I'm in one of these brief periods of relief. I recently reintroduced a dopamine agonist, allowing me to not only sleep normally—four nights in a row, and even some daytime naps—but also to halve my opioid dose. I know it's not sustainable; but after years of worsening symptoms, I was desperate. And now, for a brief moment, I have returned to myself.

What frightens me is how unaware I've been of what I've lost. I understood that I was tired, constantly foggy, less sharp; but I gradually grew accustomed to it. I suffered without realizing how much of myself I had lost.


This morning I could feel it clearly: my old self is back. My thoughts are quick again. I'm associating freely, brimming with ideas, curiosity, and the joy of creating. I have a lust for life. I've missed this, but I'd been away so long that I'd forgotten how it really felt. Now I savor having myself back.

Yet the shadows remain.

This treatment is just a temporary parenthesis. The longer I continue, the higher the price afterward, and the longer I'll have to wait before trying it again. It's bitter. I don't know how long I dare stay in this clarity—but perhaps long enough to gather strength, to remember, and to carry something with me back into the fog.

I suppose I'm mostly writing this to remind myself, in darker times ahead, of what's waiting on the other side. That thought brings both hope and anxiety. Hope, because research progresses and because now I know I'm still in there. Anxiety, because maybe this is as good as it gets. Maybe one day I'll have to let go of the hope entirely.

But perhaps this can also be a contribution to something larger: a reminder to others of how much it means to be mentally present, to have your mind clear and available, to have the energy to think, feel, create.

Cherish every day you have that. 

“Gratitude is the fairest blossom
which springs from the soul.”
—Henry Ward Beecher