

LEMONADE ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

By Bill Tipton

[Before this story, Bill Tipton worked at Hewlett-Packard as a customer support engineer. After losing his sight and the ability to walk for some time, he remained at HP making sure disabled employees have access to needed resources and can advance in their careers. Bill is an active member of the Silicon Valley chapter.]

Have you ever wanted lemonade so badly you had nightmares and your tongue felt like it was a piece of sandpaper or steel wool? No? Well I surely have! Let me explain.

A few years ago, I was critically ill; in a coma for three months; hospitalized for seven more; and had many tubes and wires attached to me. During this time I was on life support with a ventilator attached to a trachea tube in my neck and could not drink or eat anything for four months. All nutrition was given through my intravenous line (IV).

I had many torturous nightmares during my hospital stay about being thirsty. In my dreams, glasses of ice cold beverages were always just out of reach, so close I could feel their coldness. I'd see people watching me as I sat in my wheelchair trying to reach that glass, agony in my face, and nobody would take the time to push it just a little closer. It was though I was invisible to all those people staring at me. I was so thirsty, it was pure torture.

My thirst was all I thought about while awake or asleep. I almost looked forward to the interruptions of pain, sickness, blood tests, surgeries and procedures; these things could take my mind away from thoughts of cool beverages and how good it would feel to have a drink. I'd lay there thinking of being able to walk over to the faucet, turning it on and have cool running water come out; about filling a glass of water and drink it down gulp after gulp until it was empty. I passed the weeks and months not only thinking of drinking water but also of orange juice, iced tea, tomato juice or anything cold. My best daydreams were of the day I could leave the hospital, walk to a refrigerator, open it, and grab an ice-cold drink. I thought this would be a dream come true. I thought how lucky all the people, not in my situation, were to be able to get drinks whenever they wanted; perhaps not even realizing they have it so good and taking it all for granted.

My mouth was so dry for so long I wondered when this part of my torture would end. The nurses were allowed to swab my tongue with cotton swabs with a little lemon flavor but this did little to quench my thirst. About a month or so after awaking from my coma I was allowed to have a little crushed ice. The compassionate nurses would give me only about one teaspoon, or less, as a treat I greatly anticipated. It was such a joy and temporary relief. I'd try not to swallow the ice or chew it too quickly, preferring to let it linger to refresh my parched mouth and tongue. When the nurses switched shifts, I would ask for more ice but eventually they caught on and put a big sign above my bed which said "patient not allowed anything by mouth." This was, according to the doctors, because my body was not ready for ice.

I eventually was given two rehabilitation therapists and my therapy started. They would have me do things to build up my strength, coordination and orientation. As undesirable outcomes of my illness, I had become totally blind, could not sit up in bed or walk. As you might imagine, I needed all the therapy I could get. Most of it was very difficult and painful at times.

One day I was told that, as part of my therapy, I would get to make and drink lemonade. I thought I was hallucinating or dreaming. Drinking lemonade would be much better than the things I normally did in therapy. First, though, we had to get me to the location before my fun could start. I could barely move, and could not walk, so getting me in or out of bed was always a challenge. The therapists used a crane-like device called a Hoyer lift to hoist me from the bed and lower me into a wheelchair. Dangling from this device by straps was very relaxing and soothing to my body. Once I was lowered into a sitting position in the wheelchair, the straps were removed, the IV bag was transferred to a hook above me and I was ready for my journey.

I had no idea where we were going or what the therapists were carrying so I could make lemonade and I didn't care, I just knew I would be drinking real liquid, that was all that mattered. I had a great big smile on my face as they wheeled me by the other patients, with my IV bag hanging high above me on its hanger. **Since I couldn't see anything, I just imagined me being wheeled by other patients' beds; I looked over as I smiled, pretending other patients were watching as I paraded by. I could have been smiling at the walls for all I knew. I imagined my therapists smiling as well, the love and joy in their voices made me feel they really wanted to help me get well and be whole

again.

I was so excited, it felt like Christmas! Instead of never tasting thin fluids on my tongue and throat, I was on my way to drink Lemonade! I say thin fluids because what little liquid I did get had a thickening agent added, causing it to be gritty with tiny granular particles. They did this to prevent me from aspirating fluids into my lungs and getting pneumonia. Imagine drinking thick room-temperature water or thick and gritty orange juice, not very pleasant. Now you can see why drinking any cold refreshing fluid would be so exhilarating, especially lemonade.

Soon we arrived at our destination and my therapist pushed my wheelchair up against a sink, handed me a plastic pitcher and told me to fill it about three quarters full. Since doing most anything was new to me as a blind person, making lemonade was a challenge. I reached to find the faucet handles on the sink and realized I had no way to tell which faucet was hot water and which was cold. Both handles felt exactly the same to me, and since I prefer cold lemonade I did not want to fill the pitcher with hot water. Realizing my dilemma (no doubt from my baffled expression), one of my friendly therapists gently put my hand on the cold faucet where I proceeded to fill the pitcher until I realized I wouldn't know when it was three-quarters full. Since, according to the therapists, the directions required this much water to make the lemonade, I explained my predicament. They suggested I use my fingers. I quickly shoved my hand into the pitcher to test the water's height. Once the water felt like it was at the proper level I turned it off. The pitcher felt heavy to me with my weak hand and arm, so after getting a good grip with both hands, I gently pulled the pitcher out and away from the sink while trying not to spill anything.

I was then ready for the lemons, wondering how I would cut them without sight. I reached out, ready to grab a lemon or two, but was handed a plastic bag. I asked, "What is this?" They told me it was powdered lemonade mix. I was a bit relieved because being weak and clumsy, I thought I might cut myself if I attempted to cut lemons. I gently opened the Ziploc baggie and poured its contents into the pitcher. I did not have to worry about measuring because my therapists had already done it. Setting the pitcher on my lap, as I sat in my wheelchair, I positioned it firmly between my legs, to hold it snugly, and proceeded to slowly stir the lemonade, with the wooden spoon given to me, so as not to spill anything. When the therapists told me I had stirred enough, we added some ice cubes and I stirred some more to make the

lemonade ice-cold. As I stirred, I imagined drinking this delicious beverage. I couldn't wait!

Once complete, I poured some into a plastic glass, judging it's fullness by its weight and cheating by sticking my finger into it. (The therapists must not have trusted me with a real glass.) I offered it to the therapists (being the gentleman that I am, ladies first). In amazement, neither wanted it, probably because I had stuck my fingers in it; but since I couldn't see the expressions on their faces, I never knew. In any case, I was ready to indulge in this cold, delicious, thirst-quenching lemonade. I took a sip and couldn't believe how good it was. My taste buds went wild and my mouth seemed to suck it up before any of it had a chance to go down my throat. Some did make it, and I felt this large quantity of cold, icy liquid going down. Soon the glass was empty. I poured another and offered it to my therapists and, again, they declined. I couldn't believe it. They said go ahead and have another glass. I thought I must be in heaven! I slowly poured another glass with my finger in the glass, waiting until I felt fluid touch it. I drank this glass down very quickly, barely letting it hit my tongue. I took the pitcher and swooshed the liquid around to test its fullness. I heard the lemonade swooshing and could feel its weight. This instantly widened my smile, knowing there was still more of this delicious, cold drink left. Still trying to be a gentleman, I asked the therapists, one last time, if they wanted a drink. They both said no, so I filled my last glass; drinking more slowly, savoring every last drop of pleasure as the coolness, wetness and delicious taste of this lemonade delighted my senses. I did not know when I'd be able to have another drink and wanted this pleasure to last forever. All too soon the glass was empty. I then washed everything as this was a part of my occupational therapy lesson.

After this thirst quenching adventure, my wonderful therapists wheeled me back to my room. All the way back I felt like I was in a daze and very contented. Before I knew it, I was in bed. I pulled the thin hospital covers up to my neck as I got comfortable. I just laid there thinking about how enjoyable a nice cold glass of lemonade can be. As I lay there in my own darkness, still smiling from the great experience I just enjoyed, I thought this was really a very good day and you sure can't beat a cold lemonade.