

Whispers of Hope

Lifting a finger; feeling a son's touch. For Christopher Reeve, seemingly simple moments add up to a medical marvel

Never let it be said that Christopher Reeve doesn't know how to work an audience. In New Orleans to give a speech at a neuroscience conference in November 2000, Reeve greeted his doctor, John McDonald, offstage and then paused dramatically. "I said, 'I want to show you something you might find interesting,' " Reeve recalls. As McDonald watched in awe, the actor slowly, deliberately raised the tip of his left index finger. "You would have thought," Reeve says, "that I'd walked on water."

Or—dare we say it—leaped a tall building in a single bound? Reeve cringes at *Superman* references, but his astounding progress makes it hard not to think of the role that catapulted him to stardom in 1978. Since he was thrown headfirst from a horse in 1995, Reeve has been paralyzed from the shoulders down and dependent on a ventilator for nearly every breath. At the time of the accident, doctors predicted he would never breathe on his own or regain any motor ability. But now, as he reveals in his new book, *Nothing Is Impossible: Reflections on a New Life*, as well as in a documentary airing Sept. 18 on ABC, he can wiggle toes on both feet, move the fingers of his left hand, raise his right hand 90 degrees and sit (albeit slightly slouched) on the edge of a table for 30 minutes. In addition, he can breathe independently for up to 90 minutes at a time and distinguish between hot and cold, sharp and dull over much of his body. Best of all, he can feel the hugs he gets from wife Dana, 41, an actress, their son, Will, 10, and Reeve's children by his ex-girlfriend Gae Exton, Matthew, 22 (who filmed the documentary), and Alexandra, 18 (a Yale sophomore).

"I haven't been able to give Will a hug since he was 2," says Reeve, who turns 50 on Sept. 25. "But now if he comes over and puts his hand on my hand, I absolutely feel it the way I used to. To be able to feel just the lightest touch is really a gift."



"Chris is goal-oriented," says Dana (with him at home). "His successes really lift his spirits."
(Ken Regan/Camera 5)

A gift indeed—but is it the first step toward a full recovery? Even Dr. McDonald—medical director of the Spinal Cord Injury Program at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and creator of the Activity-Based Recovery Program that Reeve has been following—doesn't know for sure. What he does know is that "no one who has suffered an injury as severe as Chris's and failed to have any initial recovery has regained the amount of motor and sensory function he has—not even close." (McDonald's work with Reeve, based on the idea that electrical muscle stimulation combined with repetitive motion exercises might regenerate nervous-system cells, is the subject of an article this month in the prestigious *Journal of Neurosurgery: Spine*.)



"I don't like to fail," says Reeve (on his FES bike at home with nurse Bill Bernhev, left, and trainer Jim Hartigan).
(Ken Regan/Camera 5)

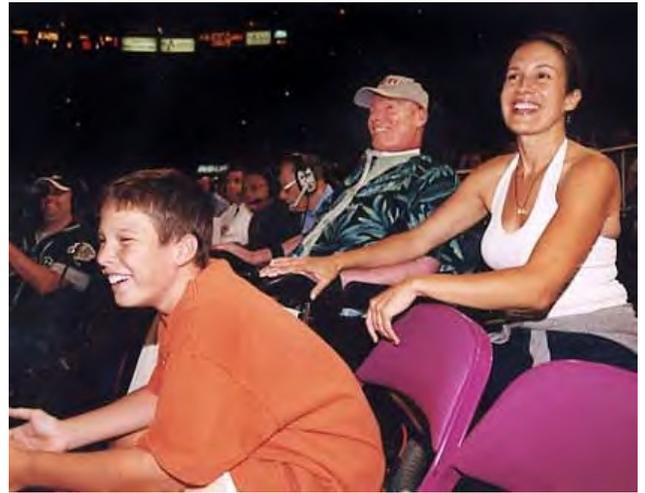
Although only a post-mortem analysis of his spinal-cord tissue could determine whether any of Reeve's nerve cells have regenerated, the actor's recovery does appear "remarkable and bears further study," says Dr. Jack Zigler, president-elect of the American Spinal Injury Association, who cautions, "one case does not make new science."

One thing is already clear: It took heroic effort for Reeve to get from the moment life as he knew it tragically changed to where he is today. The then 42-year-old was competing in a May 1995 equestrian contest in Virginia when his Thoroughbred stopped mid-jump over a 3-ft.-high rail fence. Reeve was pitched forward and landed on his head, the weight of his 6'4", 215-lb. body shattering his top two vertebrae.

For five days, he drifted in and out of consciousness, hovering near death, only to awaken and find out that he was a quadriplegic. Over the next few years he learned to master new challenges—operating his wheelchair by puffing into a tube and submitting to hours of physical therapy, including being stretched daily to control muscle spasms and maintain flexibility. Plagued by blood clots, a broken arm, and a bout with pneumonia, partly because of inactivity and decreased circulation, "I made so many trips to the hospital the first few years, it was ridiculous," Reeve recalls.



"It's extraordinary what can happen in a pool," says Reeve (in aquatherapy in St. Louis).
(Diana deRosa)



"I worried about not being able to succeed as a parent," says Reeve (with Will and Dana at a New York Liberty basketball game in August). "But we've found ways to make it work."
(Ken Regan/Camera 5)

All the while, Dana remained by his side, even when it meant turning down tempting acting offers like a role in the 2000 Broadway musical *The Full Monty*, which would have required leaving the couple's Bedford, N.Y., home for the shows six-month tryout in San Diego. "He's an incredible human being," Dana says. "Who wouldn't want to be with him?"

Reeve's fortunes began to turn in the spring of 1999, when he met McDonald at a medical fundraiser. Intrigued by the neurologists theories, Reeve started riding a "functional electrical stimulation" bicycle three times a week for an hour. Customized with electrodes that zap Reeve's hamstrings, quadriceps and glutei, the FES bicycle essentially jolts those muscles into pushing the pedals. In addition, Reeve's team of aids, including a nurse available at all hours, runs an electric muscle-stimulating machine over different parts of his body each day.

In the fall of 2000 Reeve had the breakthrough he had been waiting for. He and Dana were chatting, Reeve recalls, when "she noticed the index finger on my left hand was moving. She said, 'Are you doing that on purpose?' I said no. She said, 'Try.' I looked at the finger, and I remember literally trying to establish a connection with it. And it worked. It was unbelievable." Recalls Dana: "We were both like, 'Where is this coming from?'"

A follow-up MRI showed that when Reeve moved his finger, “the appropriate area of the brain activated, just like it would in a normal person,” McDonald, 39, says. Thrilled and hopeful, “We ramped up the exercise and said, ‘We’re going to see how far we can go,’” says Reeve.

In July 2001, McDonald added 90 minutes of aqua therapy once a week to Reeve’s regimen. During the first session, as aids helped him up, Reeve was able to slowly kick his legs forward and make his way across the pool. “People were cheering,” he says. “I’ve been an actor since I was a kid, and this was definitely show time.”

How much further he can progress remains unknown. “I’m in the best health I’ve been in since the accident,” says Reeve, whose osteoporosis has even been reversed, thanks to his fitness routine and medication. But there are practical obstacles to be surmounted: Reeve’s therapy and medical care are expensive—\$400,000 a year—and his three health insurance policies, each of which has a cap of \$1 million, run out in 2005. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” he says.

Besides, Reeve has other things on his mind, like campaigning for stem-cell research and health-insurance reform to help other spinal cord patients. Reeve, who last acted in a ‘98 TV remake of *Rear Window*, is also preparing for an upcoming directing project.

He still believes, against the odds, that he will walk again one day, and McDonald isn’t betting against him. “The fact that he’s having some recovery could make that a possibility,” McDonald says. Meanwhile, Reeve spends as much time as possible with Will, “coaching him in hockey and baseball, going to every game I can,” he says, adding proudly: “I taught him to ride his bike just by talking to him.”

Whatever the future holds, Reeve is acutely aware of what matters now. “Even if your body doesn’t work the way it used to, the heart and the mind and the spirit are not diminished,” he says. “It’s as simple as that.”

Galina Espinoza

Fannie Weinstein in Bedford

For information on the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation, go to www.People.com or AOL (keyword: People)



Making a film about his father "brought us closer together," says Matthew. "There's no sense of pity or sadness in this house," says Dana (with her men). (Ken Regan/Camera 5)



Dana says Reeve (with Will and dog Chamois) "has more energy than most people I know." (Ken Regan/Camera 5)