

## “Flip Side” by Julia Kautz

I was never taught how to walk on my hands; I figured that out on my own. I might have grown tired of seeing things from the usual perspective at an early age, because before I could do multiplication I was able to flip upside down and navigate on my palms. Only now can I see how this seemingly pointless party trick has played an important role in my life. The act of balancing on my smallest appendages and perambulating is a perplexing challenge, but so are many obstacles I have faced, such as experiencing the death of my father last year. It is precisely in times like these that I torque and twist myself upside down for a new angle. It has become a reflex for me to turn things around whenever possible. Take for example, living in the smallest geographic town in Massachusetts, a island tethered by a narrow causeway to the mainland, without a grocery store, a gas station, or a stop light. The only school on the island ends at 6th grade, leaving the opportunities for enrichment limited, but I chose to turn my world on its head. I was the small town girl who found free engineering challenges and maneuvered my way around obstacles to achieve what opportunities I wanted to pursue. I may have found more extracurricular activities per square mile (and the island is only one square mile) than those who had them in their own backyards because I was looking paradoxically, particularly for the free and unusual and challenging. I volunteered to work at the Ig Nobel Awards to learn about science. When dance lessons were not available nearby, I fell in with a vintage dance group that taught the mazourka and schottische for free. No track club; I found an open group in Boston to run with. No youth orchestra; I took violin lessons from a local fisherman who caught striped bass in our backyard. I found there is nothing small when you are looking up instead of down and are willing to put yourself in new situations.

The biggest flip I have had to make was when my father developed stage 4 Glioblastoma, and I was forced to acknowledge a tumor the size of an orange growing inside his skull. The evening before his brain surgery I saw him for the first time since his shocking diagnosis. I sensed the neuro-oncology unit was not conducive to light conversation with someone whose cancer had a 100% mortality rate and an average survival time was 14 months. How was I going to see the flipside of that situation? My dad was the one who asked me to walk on my hands for the staff working the night shift. For the first time I hesitated to perform my small stunt, feeling that it was not the right setting, but my dad insisted and gathered the phlebotomist, the chaplain, a couple of aides, and housekeeping staff to the ensemble of onlookers to see me walk on my hands. So I kicked my legs up over my head, placed my hands on the floor, and began to walk upside down following the path before me. It was from that angle that I looked up and saw something on my father's face that I hadn't seen before – it was pride, and it was directed at me just for doing what was idiomatic and weird. If he had asked for my right arm, I would have given it to him, but what he asked was that I show what made me unique.

Walking on my hands might not seem to save lives or make the planet better, but being able to see the world from a new perspective has allowed me to be my own person and opened a path of opportunity I am eager to continue exploring.