24 yrs ago this month I had my job cut in half because of the sick time I'd racked up leading up to my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis – ½ the salary, ½ the benefits, ½ the hours – but still 5 days/week 8:30-12:00 each day – knowing that mornings were my worst time of day.

This action followed 7 months of harassment and discrimination that I endured at the hands of my supervisor – she didn't believe that I could be blind in one eye and still driving myself to work each day – she passed a hand in front of my face to test her theory – "we didn't have a summer because of you" she complained to me

Then there was my general manager, who personally called my neurologist the day after I shared my diagnosis at work, trying to strong arm information from him about my prognosis – my neurologist was appalled, never had someone so blatantly disregarded the personal rights of one of his patients – he warned me, fight for the right to work

At that point I had been blind in my left eye for several months, had a continual burning sensation in both of my hands and arms and was limping from dragging the 50-lb bag of flour that was my right leg

I responded to the demotion by filing a complaint with the Human Rights Commission – the Federal or Canadian Human Rights Commission because the organization I worked for was federally regulated

My supervisor responded by turning up the heat – hemline comment in front of clients – MS in the Workplace pamphlet returned with hostility – doesn’t want to hear that words “multiple sclerosis” from me again

Months and months of harassment – crying myself to work and back daily – the stress was unimaginable – here I was diagnosed with an incurable, progressively disabling illness and I was studying my group insurance benefits book at night instead of sleeping

Mercifully, 10 months after my symptoms had begun, 3 months after my demotion, my employer terminated my employment and walked me out the door

After 3 years of exemplary performance, getting kudos from the VP of our parent company, I reviewed all my ongoing small claims cases with her, genuinely concerned about “my” cases before she escorted me out – I must have been in shock

That day my tears on the way home were of utter, explosive relief, and a dash of fear for the first time, for my health

Just as I cover in my first book “After the Diagnosis: The Journey Beyond”, I grieved the loss of my job, then finally I came to grieve for my health & the life I would never see because of the MS

The human rights complaint was settled in my favour two years later. I was grateful it was over and I could finally put my previous employer in the rear view mirror – or so I thought

Not unlike surviving any other traumatic experience, it took me a few years to get my confidence back – I felt as though I’d been “shamed” for being sick – at one point I was actually hiding in my car while my general manager walked down a street I was parked on

After having the human right case settled, I wanted to walk up to him and shout, “See, I really am sick and now you’ve had to pay for your insensitivity and ignorance” but I didn’t – I stayed in the car where it was safe – there was no way I was going to confront this bully and risk being “shamed” again

Brene Brown’s TED talks on “Shame” and “Vulnerability” were very healing for me

The journey back to “confident me” has been long, hard and filled with potholes but what I learned along the way was that my experience with my employer didn’t have to go down like that

Since my company had no HR dept for me to turn to, I was on my own facing the discrimination and harassment that began soon after my symptoms started – 10 mo’s prior to my termination

I had no choice but to disclose my diagnosis and the details or my employer threatened to withhold my short-term disability benefits – that meant that my paychecks would stop unless I told all – the shaming was routine

No lawyer would take my case back in the early 90’s, I had no one to seek support from – there was no Internet to turn to - I was feeling lost and very alone – these days there are lawyers with commercials on TV about fighting for disability rights – things have definitely changed since then

My response was to turn to the MS Society of Canada for support, joined a support group and started volunteering – slowly the shame started to dissolve

14 years later I had led the founding of the local chapter of the MS Society in my area and trained 100's of volunteers through building annual fundraisers to expanding public awareness of MS and benefitting the local MS community

In 2002 I went back to school to become certified as a Life Skills Coach – it felt like something I'd been doing all my life – helping people in need with their problems – lending a compassionate empathetic ear – What do you mean I can get paid to talk to people on the phone?

In 2003 I hung up my shingle and launched "Changing Paces" – Nurturing a culture of inclusion where EVERYONE matters – providing support to people with disabilities struggling with work/life/business challenges – Man I'm lovin' what I do and doin' what I love! – the shame is almost gone

Then in 2004 I was honoured by the MS Society of Canada when they nominated and awarded me both the top volunteer in Ontario and top in Canada – the MS Society trained me in support counselling, self-advocacy, social action, group facilitation and organizational development

It’s now been 20+ years I’ve been coaching people with disabilities on work/life/business issues, and 10 years training & consulting for organizations about how to better interact with clients, customers and employees with disabilities

I am now THAT person that I needed to find 24 years ago when I was feeling shamed, lost and alone – what if I could have found someone who would have coached me through the entire journey, someone who could have attended meetings as my advocate, with my employer and I if needed? What value would that have been in my life?

Priceless, that’s how valuable. And given the fact that this outcome ended my career as I knew it, THAT person could have helped me see options and make choices instead of allowing myself to become the victim while my employer held all the cards.

And what value could THAT person have brought to my employer? Helping me stay on the job would have saved the company tens of thousands of dollars on my settlement for 1 and, another $10,000 or more for the cost of retraining the level of expertise and efficiency that I brought to the job as a mid-level manager.

And what about the fact that there's ill will felt by everyone at the firm after someone's leveled a law suit at the company. Opposite to that, as I talk about in my 3rd book, "IN OUR SHOES: Practical Strategies for Disability Inclusion", finding a way to accommodate and effectively work with employees with disabilities actually breeds company loyalty among fellow staff members and the public.

Employing people with disabilities not only raises that organization's social profile as an inclusive employer, it also leads to an increase in your bottom line because people like to shop where people with disabilities are employed.

Now, what value or benefit could THAT person have been to my employer? I say again, PRICELESS. Including and retaining people with disabilities in the workplace is a win-win-win.

Who’s winning at your place of business? Make sure it’s your people and your company culture and your profits will take care of themselves. And by the way, THAT person can definitely help.

And THAT person is me, Trish Robichaud, Disability Inclusion Coach. If you want to know how to better support employees with disabilities at work, please see me at the break

In the meantime, my assistants Shirley & Janice are here with my business cards and my books if you’re interested. Thank you for your time and attention today.