

A
TRIP
AROUND
THE SUN

a decade of musings

2009-2018

SCOTT W. FEDOR

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A few of my favorite postings from over the years, or at least some of the ones that seem to have resonated with others.

I hope you find them worthwhile.

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NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

Well it happened. Whether you were ready or not, another year showed up. All that unfinished business you didn't take care of last year will just have to remain unfinished business.

Unless...

Another year is here, and for all of us, another year to make positive changes in our lives. Even if you're not into New Year's resolutions, I'm willing to bet you still think about things you'd like to change or improve or take on or let go of in your life.

I was always one to write down my resolutions. Not because of my OCD tendencies, but because I firmly had the intention of seeing them through until completion.

It didn't matter if my resolutions were of the self-improvement kind or of achieving an objective, I would jot them down on a piece of paper so that I could refer to them every so often. Not because I forgot them, but because I believe that when you write something down and refer to it often, you are more likely to allow it to take hold and find yourself more apt to work towards your goal.

That being said, I have written below two key takeaways from a TED talk by Jane McGonigal, in which she spoke about dying and post-traumatic growth.

She defined post-traumatic growth as a dramatic event that can be used as a springboard to unleash an individual's best qualities and allow them to lead a happier life. I wrote these down not just for all of you, but for myself as well.

Top regrets of the dying:

1. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
2. I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends.
3. I wish I'd had let myself be happier.
4. I wish I'd had courage to express my true self.
5. I wish I lived a life through my dreams, instead of what others expected me to.

Top things people with post-traumatic growth say:

1. My priorities changed. I'm not afraid to do what makes me happy.
2. I feel closer to my friends and family
3. I understand myself better. I know who I am
4. I have a new sense of meaning and purpose.
5. I'm better able to focus on goals and dreams.

The two lists are almost direct inverses of each other. Hopefully you won't need the traumatic experience to realize some of these. And I certainly hope you are able to die without regret.

Whether you believe in resolutions or not, perhaps you might keep the above in mind and work towards not having any regrets on your deathbed. Figuring out how to achieve that is up to you.

Of course, we can all expect to fail at times. I know I fell short in achieving many of my resolutions, but in most cases I ended up improving my situation in some way. Even failure can sometimes provide a positive residual effect.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Sometimes when it rains, it pours. Such is the case with spinal cord injuries. There is always something waiting in the wings to take the place of whatever is currently ailing you, giving you fits and making life a bit more discomfoting than you ever expected it to be in the first place.

When will it get better?

Most of us living with a spinal cord injury probably ask ourselves this question on a somewhat frequent basis. It doesn't mean we are not happy or not living a productive life.

You don't have to be paralyzed to want to constantly better yourself and your situation. I personally think it's a good thing to seek self-improvement, especially when it's for the right reasons. However, when you are paralyzed, you sometimes seek self-improvement in a physical sense – movement, breathing, stable blood pressure, regular body temperature, etc. As much as I may try to remember to not define myself by the physical, it is still a challenge.

But it's vital to seek self-improvement in a mental, emotional, and spiritual sense as well. Obstacles still remain – finding meaningful and productive activities to keep sharp, letting go of past relationships, accepting God's plan – but in some ways these obstacles, once overcome, will make you a stronger person than being able to walk to the mailbox or toss a tennis ball to a playful dog.

Having physical faculties intact, but struggling to find a happy place mentally, emotionally and spiritually, can be more paralyzing than sitting in a wheelchair. Is it better to be happy and at peace in a wheelchair, or frustrated and depressed hobbling around on two feet? (That's a rhetorical question).

However you choose to answer, I hope you never stop seeking self-improvement.

THE TRUTH ABOUT MIRACLES

I've learned that not all miracles are grand and big and obvious. Some miracles come to us quietly and reveal themselves in a subtle manner that we appreciate over time.

I am so very thankful for the miracle of friends, family, and the power of their prayers and support.

A RESOLUTION OF RESOLUTENESS

A new year is certainly a time of excitement which brings with it the opportunity to start all over. The truth is, though, we can start over at any time we want. But for those all of us who need a little extra motivation, hopefully the start of a new year will give us the boost we need.

People often talk of resolutions around this time of year. For me, I make resolutions every day. In fact, I would suspect most people do who find themselves in challenging situations that often present an unpredictable future. In this case, the biggest resolution is to be resolute.

When faced with a challenge like mine, I've learned that determination, perseverance, and an unwavering will are more important than doctors, pills, and hospitals. The latter are great defense mechanisms, but the former are the foundation for miracles.

While it's tough to always remain resolute, it is easy to see the effects it can have on one. For all of us out there who find ourselves tired and dejected, keep the faith and perseverance that you have inside of you close at hand and remain resolute.

MAKE A U-TURN

Life moves fast. For all of us.

Sometimes, we are lulled into the idea of thinking we have all the time in the world to accomplish those goals we've written down or established in our mind. The fact of the matter is, we don't know how much time we have, and it is never too soon to start working towards them.

When I was in my teens, I would see my orthodontist every few months. After finding my "care kit" and brushing my teeth in the very public view of the other patients, I would sit in one of the waiting areas and stare at the walls.

On one of those walls was a poster of a river winding and carving its way through a canyon. The inscription read, "If you find you're going in the wrong direction, it's never too late to make a U-turn." I was a teenager, too naïve to realize what the "wrong direction" meant, but not too young to fail to grasp the significance of the adage.

It's never too late to make a U-turn. These days I find myself headed down a road that I never thought I would travel along. However, I am eager to embrace the new opportunities that present themselves as a result of the path I'm on. I can't do anything about the highway I traverse, but I can do everything about the speed at which I travel, the stops I choose to make along the way and the U-turns I decide to take.



TIME FOR A CHALLENGE

Today is Groundhog Day. That means it's February. It also means we're a month into the new year. Did you make resolutions? How are they working out for you? If you set out to change something, do something, be something this year, hopefully you are well on your way, working towards it every day. If you're not, what are you waiting for? Even if you don't believe in resolutions or simply choose not to make them, you're still subjected to the same effect that time has on all of us.

No one is immune from the passage of time. Time waits for no one. Yet many of us wait for time. Often waiting for the "right" time. The right time to start/finish that certain something. The right time to reach out to that certain someone. The right time to get to that certain someplace. If you keep waiting for the right time, you'll probably be waiting for a long time.

Sometimes it's the getting started on something that is actually harder than the something itself. Challenge yourself to find the time to get it done.

Make today your temporal landmark.

COMMITMENT

Why it is so hard for most of us to commit to doing something we tell ourselves we will do, need to do, or want to do? I'm not referring to large endeavors, like committing to finally move south for the winter, starting a family, or building a new home. I'm talking about smaller and more benign undertakings, such as finally cleaning out the garage, calling someone you've been meaning to, or embarking on an overdue lifestyle change. It seems the relatively easy choices we have control over are the ones we struggle with most, or make excuses for why this isn't an opportune time.

There are a lot of people who regret not doing something they kept telling themselves they'd get to, and now they no longer have the ability or wherewithal to do. Worse, they might not even be around anymore. Why are we waiting? What are we afraid of? What's the worst that can happen?

Write down one thing (or several if you're feeling brave) you've been wanting/needing to do. Like I said, it doesn't have to be something steeped in grandeur. Just jot down that certain something you know would make you feel better if finally completed. Then give yourself a finite timeline to complete it. If your timing is more than a month, you're probably thinking way too big. I'm talking about something you can do this week or at the latest, this month. Finally, hang it somewhere that you will see several times a day. Better yet, somewhere where others will also see it so that it makes the commitment feel even more real.

If you're in a position where you don't have anything you want or need to do, then I commend you. Some of you may not want to make that commitment for various reasons. That's your choice, however, don't let fear of failure be the reason. As the famous Jewish religious leader, Hillel the Elder, said, "If not now, when?"

And if you're fortunate, perhaps commitment will become habit.

If you keep waiting for the right time, you'll probably be waiting for a long time.

BE STILL MY BEATING HEART: A VALENTINE'S DAY REMINDER

Inside all of us lies a heart.

Quite literally, it is an organ that pumps blood to all parts of the body and maintains its rhythmic beating from before birth until our death. The pear-shaped muscle's sole purpose is to keep us alive. If our heart stops then so too do our lives. Our ability to live and breathe depends on the beating of our heart.

However, there is a big difference between having a heart and having heart. People often tell me that it takes a lot of heart to endure the journey I've been on, make the decisions I've had to make and navigate the range of emotions I have felt.

In ancient times, the Romans defined having heart as having honor, courage and valor. To the Egyptians, heart meant having affection and love towards others. Based on these two definitions, I would tend to agree with the opinions of others – I have had to be strong and courageous as I deal with this injury; and I have certainly not been shy in expressing my love and gratitude towards all those who help me along the way. Although, I would venture to say that almost everyone reading this has also exhibited "heart" at some point throughout their life, as defined by the Romans and Egyptians.

But there is another kind of heart – The Awakened Heart. There has been a lot published about this topic and a variety of definitions as to what it means to have an awakened heart. For me, I have come to define the awakened heart as being open to receive the messages and energy that exists in the world around us.

My injury has provided me with a paradox that has helped lead me towards an awakened heart – stillness.

My paralysis literally forces most of my body to be still and deprived of movement. But it has also given me the gift of stillness and the ability to often find myself living in the Now and enjoying the beauty that exists by being still.

There is true beauty that anyone of us can attain by opening our hearts and awakening our souls to the energy surrounding us.

Whether through meditation, daily reflection or some other means of tuning out life's distractions, it is important for all of us to allow ourselves to be "open." It's okay to slow down, relax and take a deep breath.

It's quite good for you. Give yourself time each day to take a moment for yourself to be still and open. It is way too easy to get caught up in the alternative – always on the go, moving so fast that you fail to appreciate the true beauty that exists in your life and all around you.

I am speaking from experience. While driving up to the lake that day I broke my neck, Kristy mentioned to me that I tend to be so focused on what's next in my life, I fail to really appreciate the present.

I am not naïve and realize it is a busy world we live in these days and things move fast, I'm just reminding all of us to not be so busy "doing" that we have no time for "living."

So, on this day of hearts, Valentine's Day, take a moment to remind yourself to awaken your heart and be open and still.

NO FREE PASSES

There will be good days and bad days.

Like it or not, at some point all of us will face a daunting challenge that can cripple our psyche if we let it. It's during the times we find ourselves tested that we discover just how resilient the human spirit can be. More times than not, we make it through and come out the other end a stronger person as a result, even though we might not always appreciate it.

When it comes to adversity, there's no such thing as a free pass. Just because you have endured hardship and faced down what seemed like an insurmountable challenge in your past, does not exclude you from having to do it all over again in the future. This isn't a final exam at the end of school, where once it's done, it's over, and you'll never have to repeat it again.

This is life. It can be unpredictable, unfair, and trying. You should expect that bad days will still find you. However, you should take solace in the fact that you have gotten through them in the past, and there's no reason you can't get through them again. We are much more resilient than we give ourselves credit for and need to remember that each time we encounter a new and uncertain challenge.

Fortunately, there will still be good days too.

SHOWING UP

Sometimes success takes time (a lot of time). Occasionally, it happens underneath the surface, behind the scenes, inch by inch.

Foundations need to be laid. Eventually, hard work, perseverance, a little luck, will yield results.

I'll be the first to admit that it's easy to grow complacent and feel as if progress has plateaued, but sometimes just showing up is half the battle.

I continue to show up, work hard, and keep gaining those precious inches.

WHAT GANDHI SAID

Take a moment each day to be still and reflect on how you are choosing to live your days.

If you like the path you're on count yourself among the lucky ones. If things aren't exactly going the way you like or need them to, reflect on what you have the power to change and what you can do to create that change. It might not be as hard as you think, but it will most likely take some discipline.

Gandhi said it better than me, "Be the change you wish to see in this world."

THE WATER TABLE

There is a small reservoir that sits just off the highway's on-ramp. Its water level rises and falls as frequently and erratic as the weather. One day the water level nearly drowns out the tiny trees planted in the ground. A week later the warmer temperatures have sucked the water table dry to the point where the ducks huddle together in the few areas where water remains. Most people wouldn't believe their eyes if they noticed how quickly the water level changes.

Not me. I am very familiar with how quickly a lake bed can evaporate into the blue sky. It's a reminder I live with every day. However, it's also a reminder I can choose to look past. There will always be constant reminders of the past everywhere around us. It's easy to take notice and dwell on those reminders. It's also possible to maintain a forward focus and put the blinders on when appropriate. I've learned the strong commitment it takes to sometimes put those blinders on.

It's okay to look back and remember the events in your life. After all, the sum total of our past manifests itself in our present selves. But the longer we stay in the past, the longer we delay the future. The longer we delay what's in front of us.

The last time I checked our eyes were in front of us. I'm guessing that was part of God's design as He intended for us to move forward.



THINGS TO DO

As another week draws to a close and you look forward to the weekend, take a moment to ask yourself how you will enjoy your time and recharge your batteries. Even if you're planning to work this weekend, at some point it will be important to give yourself the physical, mental and emotional rest your body needs. It's not always easy to replenish your mind and spirit, especially if you're dealing with some intense things. Don't forget how vital it is to slow it down sometimes.

SMALL CHUNKS

I don't find myself looking too far into the future anymore. Rather, I focus on a few days at a time. There is so much uncertainty and sometimes anxiety that it's easier to not overwhelm my mind with far-off thoughts and worries that I can't control anyway. Things are more manageable when you take them in small chunks.

AN ELEPHANT, A DOG AND A JELLYFISH

I saw an elephant change itself into a dog trying to escape from a blanket it had wrapped itself in. And then, magically, a few moments later that same dog morphed into a Japanese soldier, in full kabuki dress, exhaling its icy breath in a puff large enough to fill the sky. In fact, it did fill the sky. A day later that same sky held the entire state of North Carolina in its grasp as it floated over a jellyfish.

No, I'm not on drugs. I just spent a few days watching the clouds and enjoying the opportunity to do nothing. In fact, I'm looking forward to spending my time the same way again once the weather permits me to do so. I've been very busy these past few weeks, and a few hours cloud gazing provided for a nice, temporary respite.

If you haven't spent some time doing nothing lately, you should. I realize it's easier said than done, but don't regret the missed opportunity to enjoy some productively futile moments. You might feel guilty while indulging in pure idleness, but trust me, you'll feel more pangs of disappointment down the road if you don't.

GO BE AWESOME

It's the start of another long and hectic week. The weather still stinks. I'm stuck in a rut and just can't seem to get myself right.

Yuck, yuck, yuck...

A lot of us are guilty of thinking along these lines at times, myself included.

Try this on for size: God has blessed me with another day of life! It's one day closer to summer! I can do this and will get through this, even if it takes time!

A lot of us could probably work a harder at changing our perspective at times, myself included.

So, go be awesome. Enjoy life. It's way too short.



MEMENTO MORI

We should not take even one day for granted, as we never know when it could be our last.

The Latin phrase, Memento Mori, literally means “remember that you will die.” Admittedly, thinking about one’s own mortality is not a pleasant thought. And yet, I have probably been in the position to think about this more than most given the events I have gone through. Interestingly, one might think that I have spent hours obsessing about this issue given the fact that I have coded in the past. However, the truth is that I have not.

This even surprises me, but not a lot. If I really think about it, I probably spent more time thinking about dying before I broke my neck. Now, my focus is more on thinking about living. I try to concentrate on everything I want to do and how I hope to someday achieve it. Don’t get me wrong, I have not completely avoided the thought of facing my own death, but I reflect upon it more along the lines of how I might die: old age or some related ailment to a spinal cord injury.

I used to lay in a hospital bed wishing I was dead, but now that I am alive, I think about all I still want to do and how much time I have left to do it. I wonder if I will achieve all of my goals, not before I die, but before those I love pass away.

There is so much I hope to accomplish as a way of showing my gratitude to all those who have supported me, especially my family. One thing that I recognize I need to do more of, is to pray. My faith is strong, but it can always be stronger.

I want to completely live with my trust in God so that when my time does come, I will be ready, unafraid and accepted and rewarded with Heaven.

A LAST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

There’s a last time for everything.

As I was sitting on my patio this past Sunday, enjoying a beautiful day, this song came on the radio. I couldn’t help but reminisce to some of my favorite “last times”. Inevitably, some of the not-so-favorites bounced around in my brain as well, but I always welcome those thoughts as they too have shaped who I am.

Have you ever thought about the last time you did something? Maybe it brings a smile to your face. Maybe it makes you cringe in disgust. Maybe you wish you could do it again, or perhaps even change the outcome. A first kiss with someone new. The missed chance to tell a loved one just how you feel. That time to say, “I’m sorry.” A holiday meal with the whole family. The first day of school. An afternoon swim in the lake. The list is as infinite as all the times we probably took them for granted. But one thing that isn’t – our time. We never know when next time will be the last time. Our time here is finite.

Here’s a thought: treat every time as if it is the last time. Make the conscious choice to appreciate things more for what they are. There are some last times impossible to repeat. Whether it was a joyous or sad occasion, how you choose to remember them is up to you.

For all those other “last times”, what are you waiting for? Make it happen again. Go do it now. While you’re at it, why not try something new you’ve been wanting to?

There’s a first time for everything.

LOTTERY TICKET

I love my life and find myself excited about the future. I have absolutely no regrets in choosing to live and thank the Lord for the strength he gave me to make that decision. I am happy. I realize that happiness is relative. In fact, one study indicates that paralyzed individuals live happier lives than lottery winners. I would still like to win the lottery, though.

I don't need to tell anyone how fragile life can be. I hope everyone realizes and accepts that basic tenant. Have fun and live your life the best that you can but know that nothing in life is guaranteed and sometimes things change in the blink of an eye. Sometimes, decisions must be made that had never been previously pondered. And sometimes, those decisions affect more than just the decision-maker. Take the necessary time to make decisions when time is needed.

LIFE HAPPENS

Life happens. It happens fast and unpredictable. I am constantly reminded of this. It truly is fascinating to contemplate the paths we find ourselves on throughout our life. Indeed, life happens. It can surround us with its beauty and overwhelm us with its chaos. It can throw a lot at us and leave us with a sense of drowning, gasping for breath, desperately trying to keep our heads above water as we try to make sense of it all. But life can give us so many great gifts – the love of family and friends; the beauty of a summer day; innocent laughter of a child; strong inner will to keep going when times are tough and to never, never give up... even after you've drowned.

A FEW DEEP BREATHS

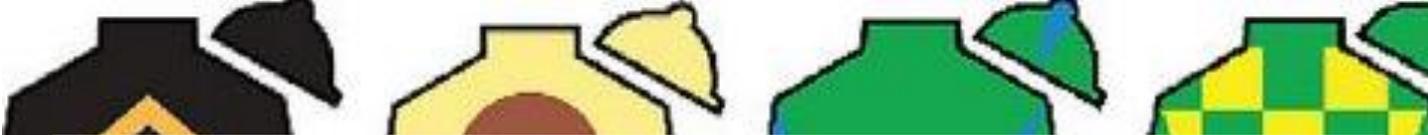
"What day is it?" asked Pooh
"It's today," squeaked Piglet
"My favorite day," said Pooh.
– A. A. Milne

Do people really make the most of their lives every single day?

I could recite different quotes, bumper stickers and slogans about living every day as if it were your last. However, do people really listen? Just as I'm sure others are guilty, I too am guilty of sometimes rushing through the day, eager to accomplish everything, whilst often accomplishing nothing – at least nothing of true substance. I will admit, since my accident, I have made somewhat of a conscious effort to truly appreciate each day and the gifts in my life. But I have realized the hard way that there is no such thing as "over appreciation." It's a lesson I wish I did not have to learn the way I did, but the bigger tragedy would be to forget to remember it.

At the risk of sounding too preachy and somewhat hypocritical, why not try to make it a point to truly appreciate every single day in your life for what it is, a gift from God that comes with no guarantee you'll receive another one. At least try to focus on the concept for a few minutes a day. Maybe while making coffee, picking out the shirt you'll choose to wear or brushing your teeth – a few deep breaths, a smile of gratitude and a true appreciation for the day you have been given can only help you as you prepare to rush through yet another one.

And if you're really brave, repeat this exercise numerous times throughout the day.



FIRST SATURDAY IN MAY

The first Saturday in May is the Kentucky Derby, otherwise affectionately referred to as, “The Run for the Roses.” Even before I attended my first Kentucky Derby in 2007, I was always a fan of the race, getting caught up in the excitement leading up to the first Saturday in May. However, it’s more than a race, it’s an event, and something I have always thought others should try to witness at least once in their life if given the opportunity.

The last Derby I attended was May 2, 2009, two months before an accident that left me paralyzed. Every race I’ve watched since my injury has been somewhat bittersweet, with me feeling fortunate to be alive, but wishing I could still be walking the grounds at Churchill Downs.

Derby Day is somewhat analogous to life, and I think a few parallels can be drawn between the two.

When it comes to Derby Day, it’s all about the anticipation and the events leading up to the race itself. It’s truly an epitome of the reminder that life is a journey, not a destination. After all, the actual race represents less than 1% of the entire day at the track. But it’s the other 99% of the day that I always hearken back to when thinking about the Derby, not the actual two-minute race.

First of all, there is a tremendous amount of detail and meticulous planning that goes into choosing the outfit you will wear on race day. This is somewhat akin to the choices one makes in life, such as where to go to school, whom to marry, whether to start a family, etc. that sets the tone for an individual’s future direction. While the fate of picking out the perfect hat, tie or pair of socks may not be as significant as making a more crucial decision like choosing the right retirement funds to invest in, one cannot underestimate its relative importance. The right outfit just further helps enhance the entire day and should not be taken lightly!

Next, there is the incredible and arduous task of predicting the winner and wagering on the right horse. Kind of like all the preparation and care that someone puts into going about his or her life, you can study the daily racing form until you’re blue in the face. And even though you may have the best of intentions in making the safe, educated and well-researched bet, at the end of the day sometimes a little luck is still needed. And every now and then it just might be worth throwing caution to the wind and letting it ride!

And then of course, there is the raw, unfettered and unpredictable range of emotions that accompany the day. A day at the races certainly runs the gamut of emotions that are impossible to escape throughout one’s life. There are incredible highs and extremely deflating lows. I vividly remember the exhilaration I felt in 2009 watching Mine That Bird come from dead last to win, claiming the longest margin of victory in over 60 years, and becoming the longest-odds horse to win the Derby in 85 years. The jubilation I felt was further punctuated by the fact that I had placed a bet on the horse to win! But the amazing high I experienced watching Mine That Bird make history was matched by the incredible low I felt the previous year witnessing the mighty filly, Eight Belles, fracture her ankles at the finish, and subsequently resulting in her being euthanized right there on the track – the first fatality in Kentucky Derby history.

I have personally witnessed the highest of highs and the lowest of lows at the Kentucky Derby. Similarly, life filled me the same highs and lows as I joyfully celebrated my second wedding anniversary with the love of my life, only to break my neck three weeks later. Inevitably, we will all experience ups and downs throughout our lives, sometimes leaving us searching for answers, while at other times reveling in our good fortune, whether planned or serendipitous. However, it’s important to continually thank God for our blessings along the way.

Finally, no Kentucky Derby would be complete without the traditional mint julep. Even though the drink is comprised mostly of straight bourbon, its taste is rarely associated with the bitterness bourbon possesses. To the contrary, the classic cocktail is heralded for its sweetness, which is very pleasing to the palate due to the sprig of mint and sugar muddled amongst it. The perfect reminder that, just like a mint julep, life is so much sweeter when the right ingredients are added to it. To this I say, choose your ingredients wisely!



A MOTHER'S DAY MESSAGE

I haven't hugged my mom in almost eight years. She gives me plenty of hugs, which I thoroughly enjoy and relish. But it's not the same. And sometimes a bit of effort is needed to hoodwink myself into believing it's not so one-sided. If I could hug her it might be another eight years before I'd let go. My mother has been at my side since the day of my injury. Of course, she was at my side prior to my accident, but in a different way. We had a different type of relationship. I often joke that a son and his mom are not supposed to spend as much time together as we do. Inevitably, the more time you spend with someone, the more time you have to get on each other's nerves. Of course, when someone can take you at your worst, and still see the best in you, it's a relationship more valuable than anything on earth. That's my mom.

I remember the first time I saw the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. There were a lot of powerful images throughout the film, but one stuck with me above all else. It's when Jesus is constructing a table and his mother, Mary, innocently teases him. He playfully gets her back by splashing her with some water from a jug. That's the scene I always come back to when I think about the model of love between a son and mother. I'm very aware of how much God loves me, and the sacrifice He made for me. However, it's the aforementioned image I hold in my mind as a constant reminder of how much my mother loves me and how much I want to love her. Every night I thank God for the people still in my life, and my parents and sister are at the top of the list. These days when I think about how much time a son is forced to spend with his mom, I smile, and thank God for the amazing gift He's given me.

Unfortunately, not everyone still has the ability to ask for a hug from their mother. But I'm pretty sure just about everyone would tell you they wish they could. So until that day when I can hug my mom back, I'll continue to be grateful for the hugs she gives me. To everyone who still has the ability to bond with their mother – Do it. And if there are obstacles in the way that might prevent you from doing so – tell her how much you wish you could.

A FATHER'S DAY REMINDER

Shortly after my injury, while sitting at my bedside, my father took out a pen and notebook and asked me what my goals were over the next several months. He then proceeded to write them down.

He showed me this note a few days ago, almost 8 years later, after he came across it in his planner. He tore the page out and gave it to me so that I could keep it close at hand and keep working towards completing the list. As I continued to glance at it over the next several days, that list took on an entirely different meaning. It served as a reminder of just how much my Dad has always been there for me. It's just one more way I can appreciate the fact that he has always supported and believed in me, especially when I didn't believe in myself. He's proven that all those hours he used to make me listen to Norman Vincent Peale aren't worth a damn if they're not put into practice.

But that's what Dads do. Encourage us in moments of weakness; congratulate us in moments of triumph; ground us in moments of self-importance, believe in us in moments of doubt; and never stop loving us.

IT'S MILLER TIME

Thoughts for my niece and nephew, Perry and Miller, respectively. Welcome to the world. It's a great big place that gets smaller every day, and its unpredictability should be expected. Choose to live how you want but accept that things will be out of your control. Go at life with reckless abandon and give it everything you've got, making sure you proceed with caution. And always strive to do the right thing, but never be afraid to make mistakes.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Keeping a positive attitude when faced with adversity is not always the easiest thing to do. However, I firmly believe it is a learned behavior we are all capable of achieving.

KINDNESS HITS HARD

There are those who have endured tremendous suffering – the loss of a child, a spouse, or parent; a debilitating disease; an unexpected hardship, etc. I remember the fun times I shared with those same individuals, at times thinking we'd be young forever and that things would only get better. The bad stuff could be avoided. We all know that's not the case. Reality hits us hard. But kindness can hit even harder. And I am grateful and blessed by the kindness I receive. I try my best to pay it forward, but it never seems like enough. However, it's an honor to keep trying.

IT'S OKAY TO BE TYPE A

"If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself." – Native American Saying

There's always something to be thankful for. I think the majority of most people's "thanks giving" can fall into two types.

Type A – being consciously aware and grateful for the people and things currently in your life. No subtle or not-so-subtle reminders (i.e. Thanksgiving) are needed to appreciate what you have and the blessings you've received.

Type B – becoming grateful only after realizing who or what has been lost, taken away, or let go of. That's not to say that you didn't appreciate what you had, you were just never completely consciously aware of how great that gift might have been. However, I hope you never find yourself having only attained the appreciation for something after you no longer have it.

Many a musician and rock band have made a living by penning songs about Type B. And although those ballads can offer a catchy tune to get stuck in your head, it's not the ideal way you want to live. Sometimes being a "Type A" isn't such a bad thing.

Take a moment to consciously be aware and grateful for the gifts you have in your life. Just remember: It's okay to be Type A!

LESSONS FROM THE HARDWOOD

I've learned a lot of lessons through sports. Lessons that have proved far more valuable for me when put to use off of the field.

My family and I have always enjoyed a strong bond through sports, especially my father and I. When I think back to my childhood, it is filled with sports memories I shared with my dad. He helped me learn how to deal with defeat and how to carry myself with class when things didn't go my way. These are valuable lessons that I have always tried to carry over into other aspects of my life.

However, learning some of those lessons sure did sting a bit. The two of us have seen the highs and lows that sports can offer.

I experienced my best moment as a Cleveland Browns when I was in attendance at the old Municipal Stadium on the shores of Lake Erie, and watched the Browns defeat the New York Jets 23-20 in double overtime in the Divisional Playoffs. The unbelievable jubilation I felt watching the team rally to win that game and advance to the AFC Championship was equally matched, if not surpassed, by the devastation I endured the following week when the Denver Broncos came to town. I watched helplessly as John Elway ripped our hearts out when he orchestrated The Drive.

Leaving the stadium that evening I was in tears. My dad had to remind me that it was in fact, just a game.

You win some, you lose some. But life goes on.

Two years later my father and I were at the Richfield Coliseum and shuddered with disbelief as Michael Jordan hit The Shot at the buzzer to beat the Cavaliers in an epic showdown. Two of the most iconic moments in the history of professional sports, and I had the inauspicious honor of being on hand to experience them both. Yet each year, my dad and I keep returning to cheer on our teams, in spite of insurmountable odds. If that doesn't build character than I don't what does.

You can never give up, because you just don't know when that victory might occur. It doesn't matter whether it's a Cleveland sports team or an obstacle in your life. Breakthroughs can happen.

My father and I have certainly seen the good, the bad and the ugly that sports can offer. We both basked in the sun in the Daytona international Speedway when our favorite NASCAR driver, Dale Earnhardt, finally won the Daytona 500 in his 20th attempt. Tears of sheer joy filled our eyes as we hugged each other and celebrated the victory.

Those tears were forever replaced by tears of grief when, The Intimidator, as he was often called, died after crashing into Turn 4 in the same race three years later. My father was at that race, I watched it from my couch, learning yet another valuable life lesson.

The world doesn't owe you anything. And life can be very unfair.

The Drive, The Shot, Dale Earnhardt, as well as my personal athletic experiences, have all taught me some of the toughest lessons that life and sports have to offer.

They also re-instilled the fact that no matter how earth-shattering things may seem at the time, it will get better, this too shall pass and you will emerge a stronger individual because of it.

I'm grateful for having experienced these events with my father. However, I'm more grateful for him showing me how they could be applied to my life, even when a glove or helmet wasn't needed.

THE 1 PROVEN THING YOU CAN DO NOW TO ACHIEVE THE RESULTS YOU WANT

If you're like most people, you might have set out with the best of intentions to do something but reality got in the way. You were too busy... something more important came up... you didn't see the results you wanted... [insert favorite excuse here]. Fortunately, there's quick, tried and true method to get back on track and hurtling towards the results to which you aspire. Start. Pretty simple solution, huh? Not always simple to do.

Growing up, I remember the summer weekends when the weather was clear and blue skies could be seen in every direction. Those were the days my dad fired up that beauty that sat idle in the garage most of the year: a 1970 Buick LeSabre convertible. It was pale yellow, a little rust along the underside, and a torn hole in the rag top. Each time he fired it up and told us to pile in, I felt like I was riding in the presidential limousine. The challenge was getting its 350 four-barrel engine to turn over. Since the steel boat on wheels sat dormant most of the year, it wasn't always easy to start. There were days dad spent what seemed like most of the afternoon trying to get that carburetor to crank. It often felt like that old thing would never fire up and the weekend cruise through the parkway would never happen. However, my father kept turning that key, gently pressing on the gas pedal, until eventually he'd succeed in getting the engine to turn over. But once she started, we could drive for hours.

Momentum is a lot like that old Buick. It's not always the easiest to get started, but once it kicks in, you get to go for a drive. And the more you drive, the more enjoyment you feel, the more you want that ride to last forever. Think of whatever type of change you'd like in your life. Sometimes we put things on hold for so long that it feels like we will never get going. But once we start it gets easier and easier to keep going. You just have to want to start. You have to want to take that ride. You have to visualize the enjoyment and satisfaction that awaits. It might not always be easy to get started, but trust me, the ride is worth it.



DENNIS BYRD

“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us.” – Romans 8:18

In 1992 Dennis Byrd broke his neck during an NFL game. At the age of 16, while lying on my bedroom floor, I read about his story in Sports Illustrated. He described how after waking up in the hospital the Romans Scripture verse hung on a poster board above his bed. It was the first and last thing he saw each day. It reminded him that God was in control.

I was so moved by his story and belief that I typed the verse onto a piece of paper and tucked it in my wallet. For the next 17 years of my life, I pulled it out and referred to it on a weekly basis. When I woke up in the hospital after breaking my neck, that same verse, inscribed on a poster, now hung above my bed. To this day, it hangs in my room.

Throughout my hospital stay, my dad sat at my bedside and read me motivational books. The first book was, *Rise and Walk: The Trial and Triumph of Dennis Byrd*, which was written by Byrd. I will always be amazed by the strength, courage and faith that Dennis exhibited after breaking his neck. He will forever remain a true inspiration to me.

In closing, I'll leave you with a quote from the last interview I read that Dennis gave: “A man has a body, a mind and a spirit. There are times in a man's life when his body will tell him it can't continue on. There are times in a man's life when his mind will tell him that the task set for him is too hard to accomplish. Those two don't matter. It's a man's will and his spirit, and in those moments and in those times that will tell him, 'You can do it,' and it will make the mind and body follow along.”

RIP Dennis.

ANNIVERSARIES

Today is bittersweet.

Three years ago, I broke my neck and was left paralyzed, but was also given the rare and beautiful second chance at life. So what do I choose to let occupy my mind – the fact I was paralyzed, the fact that the Lord granted me a miraculous renewal, or both?

I woke up today, took a seat in my wheelchair, went to work out and progressed through the day allowing its hours to move me ever so slightly further from the day that so many others remember all too well.

The reality I have accepted is that I have the same choice to make, every day of my life – focus on being paralyzed, focus on being alive, or both. Perhaps that's why today is normal, yet so different.

I received a tremendous amount of support and well wishes today. I am fortunate to receive the support, prayers and generosity of others on a constant basis. A blessing I do not take for granted.

For me, it was a great day!

It has become customary for me to spend this day on or as close to the water as I can. I miss the water. I miss riding over it, swimming in it, even diving under it.

I experienced a strange sense of freedom cruising along the pier on the banks of Lake Erie, riding as close as possible to the thick, metal chain-links that decoratively serve to separate pedestrians from the water below.

It felt so routine, yet strangely atypical. Believe it or not, there are many days I don't feel, or at least don't behave as if I'm paralyzed. I keep myself as busy, positive and appreciative as I can each and every day.

My ability to harness my boundless energy to traverse a staircase in two steps may lay dormant, but my passion, drive and determination burn more fiery than ever.

Of course I miss running around like a chicken with its head cut off, but I love feeling productive, useful and alive! It all feels so customary, yet oddly uncharacteristic.

There is no profound sense of awakening for me today. No learned wisdom to accompany and mark this day as more significant than any other.

Frankly, it feels the same, yet so extraordinary!

THE TASTE OF NEW TOMATOES

July is already here. That seems fast and somewhat unfair. Many of us, at least myself, count the days on the calendar waiting for this time of year. However, it always seems to come later and leave quicker. The reality is that there is the same amount of summertime every single year. The weather may change, how we choose to use our time might vary, but the only true constant is that we actually get the same amount of summertime every year. So why is it that some years it moves too fast, while others take too long?

July also brings with it the anniversary of my injury. Every July 3 now serves as a new guide post for me. It has replaced my March 3 birthday as a much more significant measure of the time that has passed these past four years. At times, the pace at which they have flown by is excruciatingly slow. While at other times, the rate at which they've crawled along has been shockingly fast. I feel as if I've lost so much, yet gained so much at the same time. Life as I knew it ended, but also began. These are all paradoxes I accept even if I haven't quite figured them out.

On the eve of the same day reserved for celebrating our independence, I'll always be reminded of the day I had to relinquish mine and take on a new individuality.

At times, my mind feels as if each July 3 seems more and more like just another day. After all, that's really all it is. However, my body constantly reminds me it's not just another day. It hasn't been "just another day" since 1,461 days ago.

Fortunately for me, the past four years have revealed many new opportunities to take the place of the many things that I had lost. I feel like I've lost so much, yet gained so much at the same time. I still enjoy many of the same things, do the same things and look forward to some of the same things. I just enjoy them, do them and look forward to them with a deeper sense of appreciation for the way time puts its stamp on them.

As I was sitting outside this morning, I found myself looking at the tiny, green tomatoes on my plant and wondering when they were going to ripen. It seems as if, they too, are taking their time. I remember in the days immediately following my accident, with barely a whisper, I would ask how my tomatoes were doing. I had just broken my neck and here I was worried about a few tomato plants sitting on my apartment balcony. For a few moments in time, those tomatoes were the most important thing on my horizon. I never got to enjoy them, and never will, they're gone. But each year I get a new tomato plant and will soon enjoy the taste of new tomatoes.

New opportunities can be just as sweet as new tomatoes.



MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY

The Fourth of July used to be my favorite holiday. I always loved the festivities that surrounded Independence Day: hanging out with wonderful friends, enjoying some great food and reveling at the pageantry of all the local firework displays. It certainly marked a time for celebration.

And then came July 3, 2009. The day I lost all my independence.

A few days ago was my anniversary of living with a spinal cord injury. People always ask me if I feel any different or more melancholy every year when the third of July rolls around. My response has always been the same – no different than July 2nd or July 4th or any other day for that matter. When you live with something every day, it never goes away.

But this year was different. This year marked year five. For whatever reason, someone long ago arbitrarily decided that we should assign more meaning to nice whole numbers like 5, 10, and 25. And a small part of me bought into this philosophy.

So as the day approached, I found myself thinking more about my injury and the fact that it has in fact been five years. My mind soon filled up with thoughts of what things might look like had I jumped feet first instead. What would my family look like? Would I be a father? Would Christmas Eve be an all-night extravaganza of wrapping presents in time for morning? Would the kitchen look like a tornado ripped through it on weekend mornings after making pancakes for everyone?

A lot of questions have been answered since I broke my neck. A lot still remained unanswered.

As I thought about these things, I didn't find myself feeling sorry for myself or more somber than I have before. I will admit, there were moments when I wished I could answer the questions my mind raised, but just because it's supposed to be some milestone date doesn't mean this was the first time those same questions were posed. I have had five years to think about those same things. People don't just think about things that are important to them on important days. They think about them all the time. And I'm no different.

It's the lucky ones who learn to be happy and live content even with the unanswered questions. I consider myself a lucky one. Not because I've learned to not obsess on what might have been, but because I'm able to realize what is. I'm alive. By all accounts, I should've died five years ago. And maybe a small part of me did, but a small part of me was awakened and given another lease on life.

I am lucky because a lot of other questions have been answered. Questions that were first asked five years ago. What will my life look like? Will I be able to enjoy things anymore or is the fun over? Will I be happy? Will I want to live? Will things ever be the same again? The answers have been better than I expected. And so, I made sure to embrace July 3rd for what it is – a new beginning. As has become my custom, I spent some time down at the lake. Mostly just looking out across the water and breathing in the lake air. Ironically, one of the things I miss the most is the water. I still enjoy a sense of peace, as well as exhilaration, when I'm near the water. I relish the emotions that the crashing waves can churn up inside of me. I'm glad I haven't lost that love.

I also started a new custom. I made sure to do something that I was told five years ago I would never be able to do again. A small, yet symbolic gesture to remind myself that all my independence has in fact not been lost.

Yep, the Fourth of July is still my favorite holiday.

It's the lucky ones who learn to be happy and content even with the unanswered questions.

A TRIP AROUND THE SUN

6 years. 72 months. 312 weeks. 2,191 days.

Any way you slice it, it's still the same. Sort of. It's been another trip around the sun and I'm still here. That's a good thing. So I got that going for me.

And each new revolution conjures up the age-old dilemma: "Does absence make the heart grow fonder?" or "If it's out of sight, is it out of mind?" I guess it depends on who you ask, and the perspective with which one chooses to view things.

My body has been absent of any meaningful movement for over six years. I'd be the biggest liar if I said I don't miss it. Each day I still try to defy the odds and generate any type of voluntary motor response. I hope I never stop trying. I really miss my old body, even though it wasn't really that old. I felt like I was just getting started. I will always hold a fondness in my heart for the rhythm in which my muscles used to work together.

But the reality is, that it has been six years. And a lot can change in a short amount of time. Yes, it really has been a short time. While a trip around the sun might seem like a long time, consider that our planet has already done it more billions of times. How's that for some perspective?

I have learned to adapt.

Actually, been forced to adapt. It's an adaptation that I vigorously fought, tooth and nail, screaming and crying, half a dozen Julys ago. Today, that same adaptation is something I embrace, almost covet, and work hard to parlay into something worthwhile with each new revolution through the solar system.

Adaptation has given me perspective.

Although movement is still an aspiration of mine, it's not always top of mind. What is top of mind is I continue to gain new perspective with every orbit. This is something I don't just reflect on every July 3rd, but rather a tenet that I have disciplined myself to consider on a frequent basis.

My perspective probably won't help me resolve the questions I've sought answers for: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do others with the same injury move when I can't? What makes a marriage really strong? But what each circumnavigation has given me is a perspective to answer questions I used to ignore: How important are family and friends? Is life worth living after horrible things happen? Will things get better?

The perspective I continue to gain, reflect on, and try my best to always appreciate is what keeps me looking forward to that next trip around the sun.

Adaptation has given me perspective.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

The Fourth of July.

My favorite holiday.

Independence Day.

It also marks the anniversary of my injury. Technically, it's July 3, but July 4 was the day the stark reality of my injury was made certain. It's the day I lost my independence.

That was 7 years ago. I found myself thinking about this while at the gym today. A lot has changed and a lot has happened over these past 7 years. After all, it does represent nearly 18% of my life. It's crazy to think almost 1/5 of my time on this Earth has been spent living with paralysis. Unable to move much. Unable to partake in thousands of things I once enjoyed and thought would last until my time here was done. That's why I try not to think about it. However, I'd be lying if I said I don't think about it. I challenge anyone not to think about something you lost that changed your life forever. But I certainly don't obsess about it.

I'm extremely proud of the way I've handled myself these past 7 years. In particular, of the way I've grown as a person. I'm proud of the way I've learned to accept events that I cannot control nor change, something I struggled with prior to my injury. And I'm proud of the way I've learned to enjoy and discover new things. Things I might never had experienced. Just as my injury has made me weaker in my physical capacities, it has also made me stronger in my spiritual and mental capacities. And for that I am grateful.

For that, I smile on the 3rd of July each year.

However, I would not be where I am were it not for the support of the amazing people I have in my life. Especially my parents and Lindsey, who have had their own challenging journeys these past 7 years. But together, we weathered a lot of storms that we probably didn't think we could. They have helped me find a new type of independence.

According to the Bible, 7 is the number of completeness and perfection (both spiritual and physical). It derives most of its meaning from being directly tied to God's creation of all things. Throughout the Bible, Jesus performed 7 miracles on the Sabbath. The 6th miracle was when he cured a paralyzed man (John 5: 8-9).

I don't know what it means to feel complete. I certainly don't know what it means to be perfect (although at times I might act like I do). But I do know what it means to feel like I've embarked on a journey, especially one I never intended to take. But one I've come to embrace. The number 8 in the Bible represents a new beginning, meaning a new order of creation, man's true "born again" event when he is resurrected from the dead into eternal life.

For me, another new beginning starts July 4th. And that to me is definitely worth celebrating.

8 UNIVERSAL TRUTHS LEARNED FROM A BROKEN NECK

1. IT ALL STARTS WITH THE RIGHT ATTITUDE. I had the word “Attitude” written under the brim of my hat when I played baseball. Every time I ran onto the diamond it was there to remind me: Attitude equals altitude. This has never rung more true for me than over the past eight years. We are not in control of what happens to us. But we are in control of our attitude and the way we choose to respond to what happens to us. The power to change one’s mindset, take on a new perspective and focus on positivity is a gift most will never fully appreciate. I am still learning to appreciate the power my attitude can have over my life. The ability to influence how I perceive what happens to me cannot be taken from me. It can make all the difference in the world. It has made all the difference in the world. It’s never as easy to act on a belief or idea as one might want. But it’s never as difficult, either. Determining your attitude is something that’s left up to you. You can be in control of your attitude. Or not. It’s your choice. Tough times will still find you. No one is immune from the storm. But the rains don’t last forever. Choose the right attitude. Make that last.

2. INCH BY INCH IS A CINCH, YARD BY YARD IS AWFULLY HARD. Sometimes it helps to break things down and compartmentalize. Almost nothing is insurmountable when you break it down into its smallest parts. It’s easier to focus and see results when you are not overwhelmed by the bigger obstacle in front of you. “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” “The journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step.” The reason these sayings are clichés is because they’re true. We’d all like to do great things and see great things happen right away. It doesn’t just happen. It doesn’t work overnight. Things take time. And sometimes, really great things, take lots of time. We must invest the time if we want to improve. Stay the course, stay patient (even when it isn’t your strong suit).

3. THERE’LL BE GOOD AND BAD DAYS. I had good and bad days before my accident, so why should I be surprised if I still have a bad day. The important thing is what you take from those bad days. Once you learn to move through tough times, you accumulate tools in your toolbox for the next tough time you encounter. Sure, you will encounter bad days in the future, but apply the lessons you’ve learned and they won’t last as long. Pretty soon you find yourself stringing together more good days than bad days and you start to realize, “Yeah, I can do this.”

4. TAKE CARE OF YOUR SHOULDERS. Only three bones, some muscles, ligaments and tendons comprise the shoulder. However, the shoulder joint is one of the most mobile parts of the body, and as a result, one of the most unstable joints prone to injury as well. Ironically, before my injury my shoulders were the strongest and biggest part of my body. Now they are the weakest and smallest part of my body. Given the choice, I’d rather have my arms working than my legs. Take care of your shoulders, otherwise you will miss them when they don’t work the way you want. Trust me. The same could be said for your entire body.

5. YOU ARE NOT DEFINED BY YOUR ADVERSITY. Cursed. Decrepit. Inadequate. Invalidated. Screwed up. Weakened – all synonyms for “Disabled”. Those are ugly words to me, and certainly not words I would use to define myself. I may have a disability, but I am not disabled. I believe I still have a lot to offer. I still hope to achieve a lot, just need to do it from a chair for the time being. Regardless of what you are going through or have been through, your adversity does not define you. How you choose to live in the face of adversity is a much better definition. Do not let adversity define you.

6. IT’S ALL RELATIVE. No matter how bad you have it, there is someone worse off than you. Same can be said for how good you have it, someone has it better. Who cares. After I was injured I compared myself to others with a similar injury. Although people told me each spinal cord injury is unique, if I saw another person making more progress than me, I wondered what I was doing wrong. I felt I was working just as hard, if not harder, but not seeing the same results. Finally, I accepted that my situation was not for want of effort, rather, just the way it is. The same can be said for the situations we find ourselves in. Don’t compare situations, because everyone chooses to deal with things differently. What has helped me: focus on the now; celebrate every victory, even small ones; incrementally get back what I lost; appreciate simple things that provide comfort.

7. THINGS CHANGE. Not only do things change, so do people, places, feelings, memories, and bank accounts. The sooner you accept this the better off you will be able to deal with change when it occurs. If you need some help, read the book, *Who Moved My Cheese* by Dr. Spencer Johnson.

8. NO ONE CAN PREDICT THE WEATHER. I went to an outdoor concert this past Saturday. The forecast called for rain all night. There was no rain and it turned out to be a beautiful night. Similar to the day I broke my neck after trying to get in a quick swim before the impending rain (that never showed up). My point is that no one knows what’s going to happen next. We’re in control of our lives and what we choose to do. Don’t let others determine the path you follow. There is a great line from the movie, *Vanilla Sky*: “Every passing moment is another chance to turn it all around.” If you find yourself on the wrong path, don’t be afraid to make a U-turn.

WHAT'S IN A NUMBER

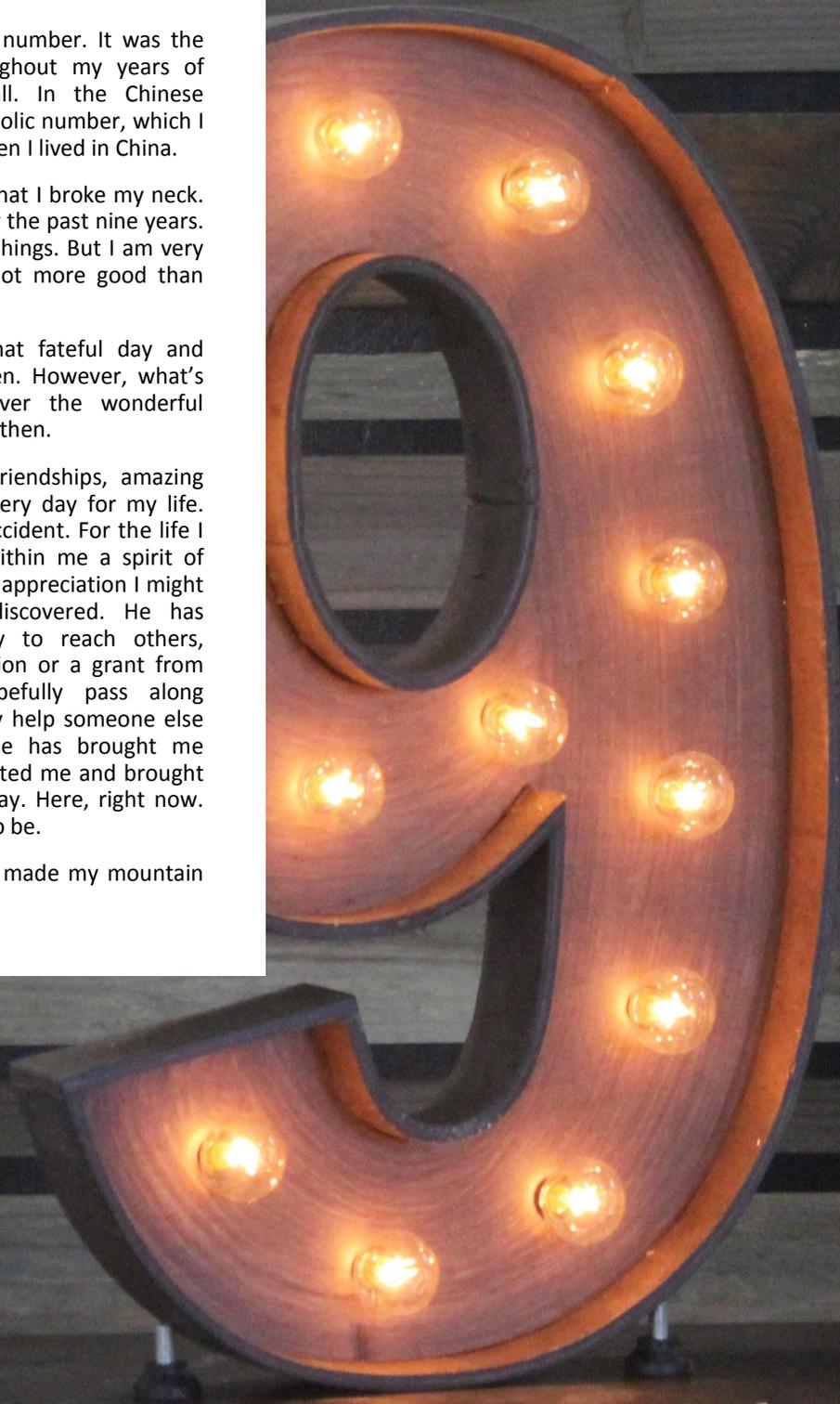
The number 9 is my favorite number. It was the jersey number I wore throughout my years of playing baseball and football. In the Chinese culture, it's an extremely symbolic number, which I came to further appreciate when I lived in China.

Finally, it was nine years ago that I broke my neck. A lot has happened to me over the past nine years. Some bad things, some good things. But I am very grateful that there's been a lot more good than there has bad.

It's easy to look back on that fateful day and wonder what might have been. However, what's not so easy is to gloss over the wonderful experiences I've enjoyed since then.

Personal growth, incredible friendships, amazing opportunities. I thank God every day for my life. For the life I had before my accident. For the life I have now. He has instilled within me a spirit of resilience as well as a sense of appreciation I might not otherwise have ever discovered. He has allowed me the opportunity to reach others, whether through a conversation or a grant from Getting Back Up, and hopefully pass along something that might one day help someone else when they need it most. He has brought me through whatever has confronted me and brought me to this very moment. Today. Here, right now. And it's exactly where I want to be.

"Lord, by thy favor thou hath made my mountain to stand strong" – Psalm 30:7



LACE UP

I love lacing up my turquoise Nike running shoes each morning. However, every time I leave my apartment, going for a jog is usually the furthest thing from my mind as the door closes behind me.

In fact, I will go out of my way to avoid a set of stairs like it's the plague. And if I get somewhere and the elevator is out of order, well, let's just say it can sour my mood quicker than a cold cup of coffee. In spite of all this, I certainly don't consider myself to be an individual in possession of an indolent nature. Actually, I'm more productive than most people I know. I just don't use my feet right now.

I'm paralyzed.

A 2009 diving accident took away the use of my feet. And my legs, hands, and arms. My spinal cord injury stripped me of any movement and sensation below my shoulders. Not to boast, but I do have a pretty strong shoulder shrug. Unfortunately, any muscles I do build up don't stand a chance against the perpetual atrophy always waiting to pounce on my progress. A quick jump in the lake to cool off turned into a life full of navigating much more complicated tides. Gone are the days spent obsessing about gross margins, inventory turns, and sales data, like I did when I was a sales and marketing vice president. I no longer plan my vacation time around customer line reviews. All of the aforementioned tasks I used to deem meaningful, have now been replaced by much more critical issues, such as trying to maintain bone density, skin integrity, and pulmonary health.

Paralysis can be paralyzing.

Anyone of us could recite ad nauseam, the indelible marketing campaigns that have been rammed through our TVs and jammed into our psyches, reminding us to, "Be All That You Can Be," "Go Forth," and "Seize the Day." However, living life isn't just about enlisting in the Army, wearing your favorite pair of Levis, or purchasing that sparkling DeBeers diamond.

Living life is about not succumbing to paralysis.

All of us have goals and aspirations. Unfortunately, we also have responsibilities and obligations that often consume our focus and take precedent over our happiness. Most of us spend our days attached to our smart phones and tablets which keep us connected to all that stuff we've designated as important. It helps fool us into thinking we are in control. I've discovered that the only thing I can control is my attitude. I've also discovered it's the only thing worth controlling. My attitude is what has kept me going stronger than a pack of Energizer batteries ever could.

As I can certainly attest, anyone's situation has the ability to drastically change in an instant. Anyone. Your entire life's agenda can change quicker than it takes Apple to introduce another version of its iPhone. Unfortunately, that change can occur when you least expect it. Life doesn't reconstruct itself to accommodate our plans. We need to adapt our plans to accommodate what life hands us.

My paralysis has not paralyzed me.

I run a successful nonprofit organization, serve on multiple boards, routinely speak to large audiences as a motivational speaker, workout several hours a week and still find time for the occasional cigar and single malt with my friends. I am busier now than I was before I broke my neck.

I have not let being paralyzed define who I am.

What you choose to do in life is entirely up to you. Whether it's your aim to become a successful advertising executive, help others through some philanthropic endeavor, achieve financial independence, or simply dive headfirst into a hobby you've always wanted to, it's up to you. Don't let your situation define you. Be willing to take control of your attitude. Because when it comes down to it, there is some truth to be found in all those advertising campaigns that companies spend billions on. They are right, life is too short, and tomorrow is never guaranteed.

Just Doing It isn't just about lacing up those Nikes each morning.

NOT DEAD YET

A constant theme keeps reemerging in the music I've been listening to. Regardless of the artist or genre, I've been very aware of a particular concept being voiced throughout the different melodies: Life and Death. It's as if most of the songs' lyrics keep driving home the same point. Life is finite.

'There will come a time when all of our lives will end. Most of us do not know when that time will be, although I will admit, after my injury I was very sure that my end was near. However, it hasn't been just the music reminding me of this notion.

I recently watched a TED talk entitled, "Am I Dying?" It was a short presentation given by a critical care EMT. He recalled of how he learned to be honest with gravely injured individuals who asked him that very question after arriving on scene to treat them. He went on to state that in almost every case, he noticed three patterns that emerged when individuals were faced with their mortality. The first pattern is the need for forgiveness. Whether classified as sin or regret, their guilt is universal. For some it's wishing they had spent more time with their families, for others it might be wishing they had tried different things. Regardless, when faced with imminent death, everyone wanted forgiveness. The second pattern was the need for remembrance. All of the individuals needed to feel that they would be able to live on. They wanted to be remembered by others. The final pattern touched him the deepest. The need to know that their lives had meaning. They needed to know that they did not waste their lives on meaningless tasks.

It can be overwhelming to think about the fact that your life will end at some point. Once you're gone, you can't come back. All of our days are numbered.

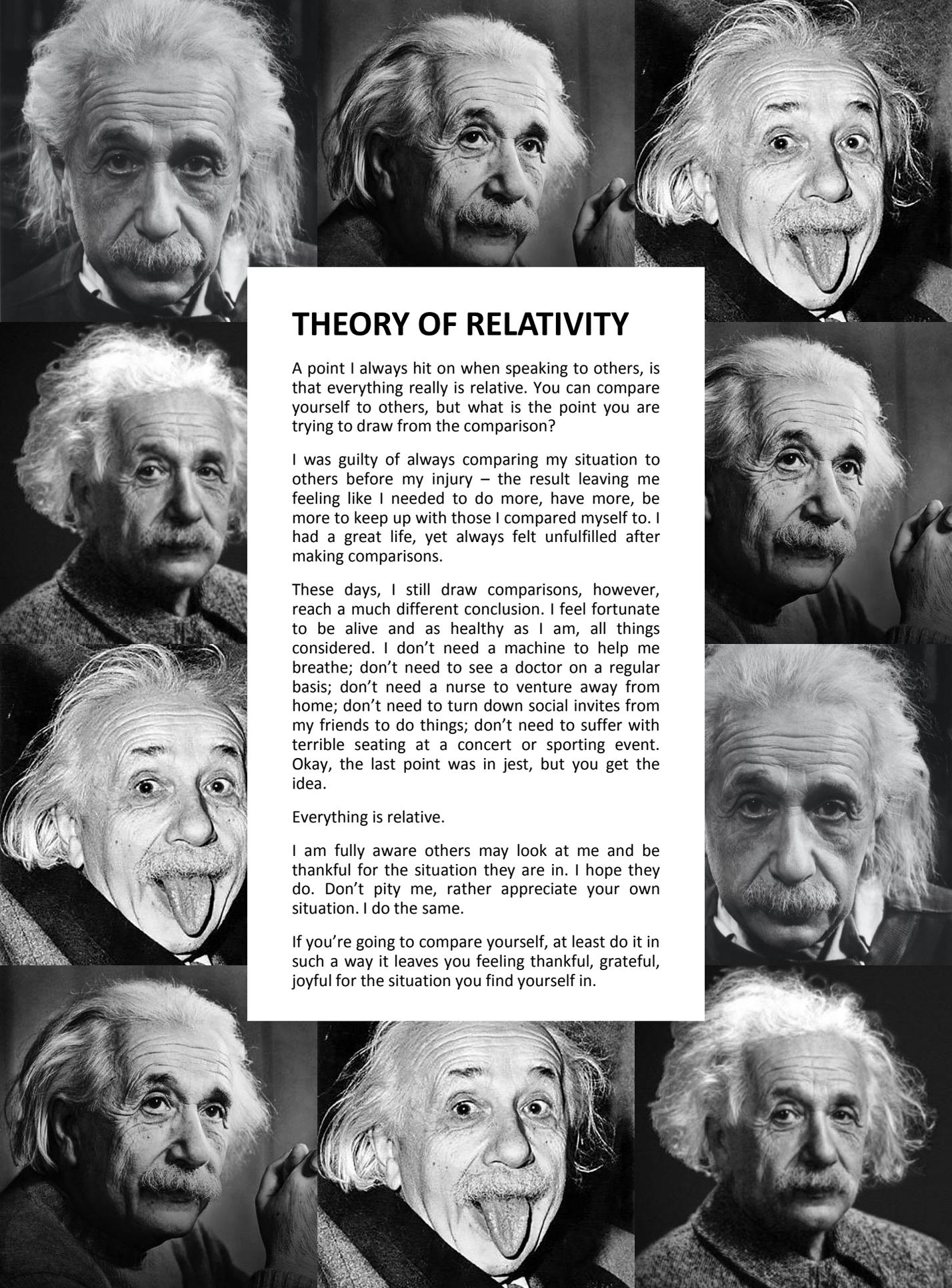
Weeks ago, I experienced powerful moment of reflection, a feeling of appreciation, which could almost be classified as wonderment.

It occurred while at the Cleveland Browns home opener, which I attended with my Dad and great friend, Eric. Sitting in the radiant sun for several hours I couldn't help but think about the fact that five years ago I asked myself the same question of, "Am I Dying?" I wasn't sure if I would ever attend another Browns game, let alone make it out of the hospital. I thought my days were numbered. But that afternoon at the game I didn't focus on the fact that I was paralyzed, but rather the fact that I had survived an injury that paralyzed me and came out stronger as a result.

There were many moments throughout the afternoon that I almost felt giddy with an appreciation for my life. What is truly remarkable, though, is that I later came to find out that Eric also had been reflecting on this very same concept, experiencing some of the same feelings I had. A little over a year ago he was diagnosed with Stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a devastating diagnosis that unfortunately gets the best of most people. He made a miraculous recovery, now living cancer free and being able to appreciate that moment for what it was – a reminder of how precious life is and how grateful we should feel to be alive.

Unfortunately, as we all know, even Superman wasn't immortal. Christopher Reeve admitted he was cruelly reminded of his own mortality. He told ABC 20/20, "When I first was coming out of, you know, unconsciousness and you have the thought 'Maybe it's not worth everybody's trouble,' I suggested, 'Maybe I should just check out. And then Dana said to me, 'You're still you, and I love you.'"

We are all still us for a little while longer. Seek forgiveness, be remembered fondly, and live with meaning!



THEORY OF RELATIVITY

A point I always hit on when speaking to others, is that everything really is relative. You can compare yourself to others, but what is the point you are trying to draw from the comparison?

I was guilty of always comparing my situation to others before my injury – the result leaving me feeling like I needed to do more, have more, be more to keep up with those I compared myself to. I had a great life, yet always felt unfulfilled after making comparisons.

These days, I still draw comparisons, however, reach a much different conclusion. I feel fortunate to be alive and as healthy as I am, all things considered. I don't need a machine to help me breathe; don't need to see a doctor on a regular basis; don't need a nurse to venture away from home; don't need to turn down social invites from my friends to do things; don't need to suffer with terrible seating at a concert or sporting event. Okay, the last point was in jest, but you get the idea.

Everything is relative.

I am fully aware others may look at me and be thankful for the situation they are in. I hope they do. Don't pity me, rather appreciate your own situation. I do the same.

If you're going to compare yourself, at least do it in such a way it leaves you feeling thankful, grateful, joyful for the situation you find yourself in.

IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Tomorrow is not guaranteed to any of us. I've learned the hard way how quickly and abruptly life can change. All of your hopes and dreams and plans for the future can get ripped from your grasp, regardless of how tight you try to squeeze. We are not in control of what may or may not happen to us. But we are in control of our attitude and the way we choose to respond to what happens to us. It can make all the difference in the world. It has made all the difference in the world.

Determining your attitude is a choice that's left up to us. You can be in control of your attitude. Or not. It's your choice. Tough times will still find you. No one is immune from the storm. But the rains don't last forever. Eventually, everything passes. Choose the right attitude. Make that last.

IF I HAD A TIME MACHINE

If Marty McFly gave me his DeLorean time machine and allowed me to travel back into time to encounter my younger self, I would tell myself:

Be nicer to your mom.

She is the only one you have, or ever will have. She will do more for you than anyone else. She will always have your back no matter if you are right or wrong. When you're sick and she's sound asleep, she will be the first person at your side. When things aren't right and you wish it could be better, she will do more than anyone else to make it so. She's not perfect. She will embarrass you. She will try too hard. But she will never give up on you. Regardless of the situation you find yourself in, she is the one you want there with you. Even if she can't make it right, she will make you believe she can. She won't let you push her away. So don't try.

One day she will no longer be there with you. But today she is. Here's wishing every day could be Today!

I love you mom!

TODAY IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE

Just imagine if you could wake up every morning and tell yourself, "Today is the best day of my life." Who says you can't? Why not? It is certainly not my intention to just offer up a bunch of lip service. I can appreciate the daily challenges we all face, whether it affects us or someone else in our life.

Life is a challenge at times. Life can be unfair, cruel and unforgiving at times. But life is also beautiful. Every day I thank God for my life. I may be living it differently than I once planned, but He has allowed me to continue living it. I tell myself that the more positivity I can infuse into my daily regimen, the more I am honoring Him and appreciating this gift He has given me. The realist in me knows that waking up and living the best day possible, each and every day, is a lofty goal. However, it's also a goal worth striving for.

What's the worst that can happen if you don't reach it? You have a pretty good day? Not the worst consolation prize in the world.

DON'T FRET OVER LIMITATIONS

We all have our limitations, but usually, if we look, there also exists the opportunity to move through them. Unfortunately, I think the average person will encounter more obstacles than opportunities, at least at first glance. But I also think the average person will discover how much opportunity can arise from the challenges he or she faces. Most of us were probably raised with our parents telling us the same thing – you can do anything you set your mind to. It's not rocket science. In most cases, the adage holds true, even if you're paralyzed. It didn't take my injury to realize that, but it did help remind me just how true that really is. Next time you encounter adversity, do a little gut check, and discover any potential opportunity that may exist to help you break through your difficulties. I'm still learning to do this. It's hard. But I think it's true, and I know it helps.

A BRAND NEW ENDING

“Though no one can go back and make a brand-new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand-new ending.”

I am sure at one point in our lives we have wanted to start over. I know I have. Obviously, we can't go back and do things over, but we can start now and do things right.

The random chaos and happenings of our lives are so unpredictable and uncontrollable. I had to break my neck to learn that lesson – I can control my actions, but I cannot control the actions around me. Sometimes, no matter how cautious we may be, bad things will happen. We can't go back and receive a brand-new start, we can however move forward in the right direction and work to create a better brand-new ending.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

It's all just a matter of perspective. I used to always hear this before my accident. Now it's me who preaches it. The movie, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, helped me appreciate what I have. Yet, my situation might help someone appreciate what they have. It's all relative. I want to move things. I want to feel things. I want to take care of myself more than I can. But right now, that's not the case. However, I can still appreciate things. In fact, I can appreciate them more, especially the things I was told I would never do again. The fact is, there's a lot I appreciate. There's a lot I still want, but there is a lot I still have. Make sure to take the time every day to appreciate what you still have.

LOOK THROUGH YOUR WALLET

A few days ago, I found an envelope which housed the contents I used to carry in my wallet. Things like pictures, quotes, and hand-written notes to myself, conjured up a flurry of memories. As I've done thousands of times in the past, I read through each one again, pausing to absorb its intended meaning. When I chose to write various words down, or copy a quote I liked, it was done with the intention of it serving as a reminder for how I wanted to live. Regardless of what situation I may have been in at the time, or what I felt those words might apply to, they were written down to serve as a reminder. A reminder to take action.

We all have little reminders in our life that at times we may have forgotten. Whether you've written something down, or tried to make a mental note of something, those reminders at one point were relevant and important to you. I'm willing to bet most of them still are. We just need to remember to remind ourselves. Make it a point to “look through your wallet” and act on what you once promised yourself you would do. Time moves fast, and sometimes we all need a little reminder to keep us moving towards what it is we need to do.

HAPPY BIRTHDAYS

Ultimately, every birthday serves as a guidepost of how we lived our lives and chose to evolve. If we're lucky, the birthdays will continue to pile up. And if we're really lucky our stories will continue to evolve in a way that is purposeful and meaningful.

We can't go back and do things over, but we can start now and do things right.

SUFFERING CAN BE A SACRIFICE

Leaves are falling from the trees and each passing day we are left with more and more bare branches. This is nothing new, but rather a process that's been repeating itself long before we ever took the time to notice.

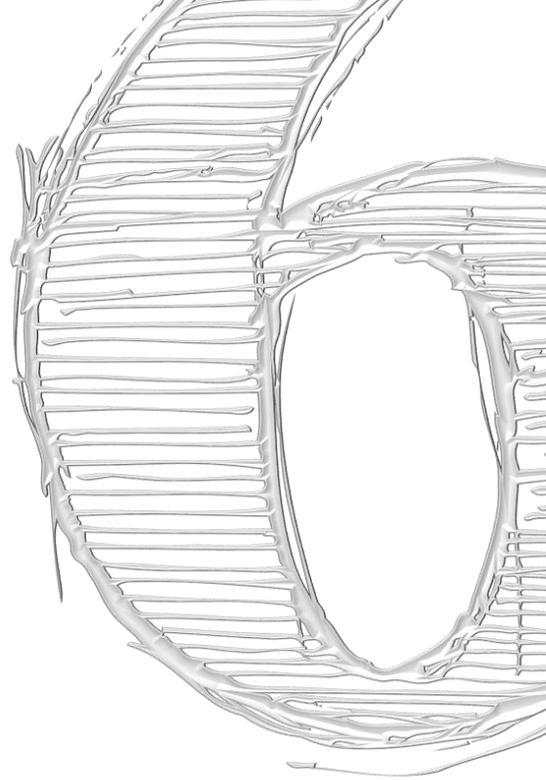
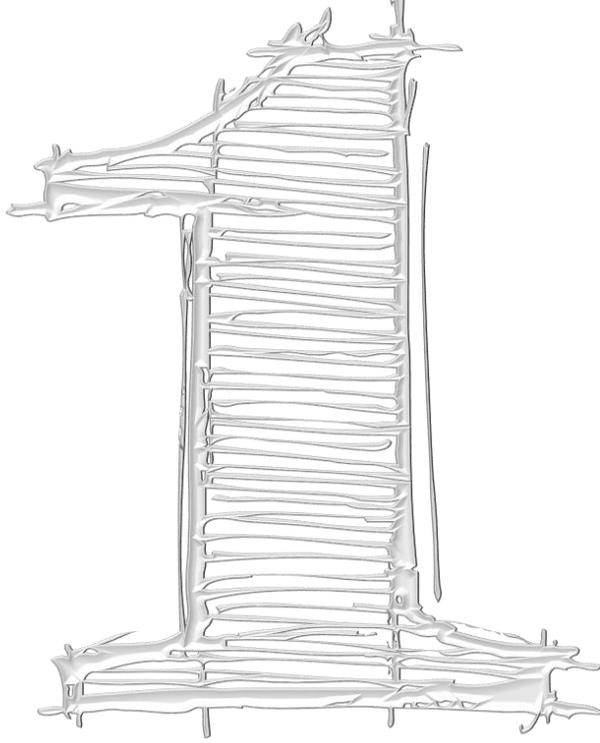
As unspectacular as Ohio weather can be at times, when the leaves start to change colors it's nothing short of magnificent. The Fall fashion show that nature treats us to in the Buckeye state is a true display of remarkable beauty. This year is no exception. Except for the fact that I have found myself noticing this annual ritual more than ever before. I'd be remiss to overlook the fact that the same beauty reflected in the bright red, orange and yellow hues also signals the impending arrival of the cold, gray, and often brutal days ahead.

Irony? The calm before the storm? How about suffering? I'll posit the following: Choosing to live the right way may entail suffering. It might be presumptuous to say that living the right way "should" elicit some type of suffering, but in many cases it's inevitable.

Whether starting a diet, decluttering a house, shedding a toxic relationship, etc., making the conscious decision to change something can often be uncomfortable and scary. Suffering can be a sacrifice. But while a sacrifice may be permanent, suffering doesn't have to be. Maybe think of suffering as a long, cold winter that leads to regeneration of new leaves.

So, if you are not living your life the right way, choose to turn over a new leaf. It might hurt and your branches might be bare for a spell, but they will flourish again.

They always do.



SWEET 16

1. It starts with the right attitude. Stay positive.
2. You can learn a lot from your parents.
3. Own a pet.
4. Time is a precious gift. Don't squander it.
5. Patience is a powerful tool.
6. Fly the flag.
7. Respect our Veterans. They've earned. It.
8. You will make a lot of mistakes. Learn from them.
9. Hard work still gets you places.
10. It's okay to dream BIG!
11. Know when it's time to move on.
12. Every decision you've made brought you to this moment. Embrace the present and determine your own future.
13. Stop waiting for reminders.
14. Be grateful for days without pain.
15. Remarkable people are all around you. Discover some of them.
16. Enjoy some wine.

WHAT DOES THE FOX SAY

I sat at attention in the church pew, not something that comes easy for a young child. My focus was clearly in that moment, locked on the Reverend who spoke from the pulpit. It was Christmas, and this wasn't your typical sermon about Scripture. Instead, I was mesmerized as he told the tale of a fox and a few little bunnies.

As the story went, it was Christmas Eve, the weather was brutal, and a mother bunny, fearing her children might starve, had no choice but to leave her babies and search for food. The storm intensified, stranding her from her children, who would be forced to spend the night alone. They had never been left to fend for themselves and were clearly outmatched by not only the elements, but the predators that roamed the forest also looking for a meal. In particular, the mother worried most about the fox, the natural enemy of the bunny and most skillful hunter. If a fox came across her defenseless children, huddled together and scared, it would be sure to make quick work of them as its feast.

By this point in the story, I think I was just as terrified as the bunnies must have felt. My love for animals had me facing a quandary. As much as I loved the cute fox, I didn't want him to eat those bunnies. I didn't think it was right, even though it was the natural order for the fox to do so. I couldn't wrap my head around this and accept it as okay. The Reverend continued, building to the moment I feared all along, even though I knew it was inevitable. The fox came across the bunnies, shivering in the cold night, alone and petrified, waiting for their loving mother to return and keep them safe. However, the innocent bunnies sensed they would not be seeing their mother again as they realized the fox had no intention but to devour them. The chance to meet Santa Claus would not have pried me from that church pew. I was completely invested in the Reverend's yarn and determined to hear it through to its bitter end. But then something magical happened. The story took a dramatic and unpredictable turn I had not anticipated.

The fox sensed the bunnies' fear and realized they were alone. Not knowing what happened to their mother and if she would return, the fox knew it wouldn't be long before the bunnies perished. The fox also knew that if it didn't eat, there was no telling when it might find its next meal. And then it happened. A Christmas miracle. Faced with its own survival, the fox made the decision on that winter night to be a source of comfort, rather than danger, for those bunnies. It curled itself up into a ball and invited the bunnies to seek shelter under its warm coat of fur. The storm raged on all night and showed no mercy until the sun rose in the morning sky to warm the land. The bunnies awoke from their slumber, safe and sound. Somehow the mother also survived having burrowed under a nearby thicket patch all night long. In the morning she found her way back to her children, still nestled under the fox. She approached with caution, and soon realized there was no need for alarm. The freezing temperatures took their toll on the fox during the night. The fox never woke up.

I was 6 years old when I heard that sermon and it remains top of mind every Christmas season. As years have passed, I've come to appreciate it more, realizing the meaning of love and compassion for all that exists at the heart of the story. It's Christmastime. "It's the most wonderful time of the year," as Andy Williams likes to remind us. But not because of the presents, but because of the presence – His presence. Christ has come and is born in all of us. It's a time to rejoice in the promise His love brings, but also a time for us to embrace His promise and share it. All of us are faced with our own storms, left to feel scared and alone at times.

There will be the moments in which we feel like the bunnies who seek safety and comfort in the arms of another. And then other times we might find ourselves in the position of the fox, with the choice to either feast on the plight of others or share our fur and embrace them, just as Christ has done for us. What does the Fox say? I hope it's the latter.



STOP SOMETHING

Everyone always talks about waiting for the right time to get started. Started with whatever it is in their life that needs to be embarked upon. In some cases, “starting” actually means “finishing”. Some things need to be wrapped up, put away, left on the shelf for good.

Are you starting something or finishing something?

Either way, it doesn't matter. What does matter is whether or not you've learned from your past. Are you going to continue doing the same thing you've always done, hoping for different results (see: definition of insanity)? Or are you going to do things differently. Actually work towards a new result? Imagine if that were your last day on earth.

How would you live it?



A simple, yet profound list arrived in my inbox the other day. I thought it might be useful.

Stop...

- ...spending time with the wrong people.
- ...running from your problems.
- ...lying to yourself.
- ...putting your own needs on the back burner.
- ...trying to be someone you're not.
- ...trying to hold onto the past.
- ...being scared to make a mistake.
- ...berating yourself for old mistakes.
- ...trying to buy happiness.
- ...exclusively looking to others for happiness.
- ...being idle.
- ...thinking you're not ready.
- ...getting into in relationships for the wrong reason.
- ...rejecting new relationships because others failed.
- ...trying to compete against everyone else.
- ...being jealous of everyone else.
- ...complaining and feeling sorry for yourself.
- ...holding grudges.
- ...letting others bring you down to their level.
- ...wasting time explaining yourself to others.
- ...doing the same things over without a break.
- ...overlooking the beauty of small moments.
- ...trying to make things perfect.
- ...trying to follow the path of least resistance.
- ...acting like everything is fine if it isn't.
- ...blaming others for your troubles.
- ...trying to be everything to everyone.
- ...worrying so much.
- ...focusing on what you don't want to happen.
- ...being ungrateful.

That's a lot of "Stops." Isn't it time to get started?

START SOMETHING

New beginnings bring with them a chance to wipe the slate clean. Sometimes, we find ourselves literally wiping things clean through our own annual ritual of spring cleaning.

I got a head start this past week when I decided to clean out my closet. My closet looks like the place where dressing room rejects go to die. Its shelves are packed, brimming with stuff I tell myself I plan to wear soon, even though I can't remember the last time I did. There are way too many pants and shirts hung on plastic hangers, smashed so tightly together, there's hardly any room to slide them aside to sort through its contents.

I looked at each shirt or pair of pants and gave the old "yay" or "nay" on whether or not to keep it. A somber mix of emotions bounced around my head as I watched the "nay" pile grow larger. I found myself remembering when and where I wore each pair of pants or button-down dress shirt. I couldn't help but think back to when I used to get dressed every morning for work. I liked getting dressed up. That was a morning ritual I repeated every day for more than a decade, yet haven't done once in the past five years. And I wondered if and when I'll ever have the chance to repeat it again.

These days, I'm stuck in a pattern of repeating a different morning routine. Yet, the strange thing is that while the ritual may have changed, the excitement I have to take on each new day hasn't. In fact, in some ways it's actually grown stronger. As I reread that last sentence, it even seems strange to me. I really can't explain it. People have always asked me how I find the strength to stay positive in spite of the challenges I might face. All I can tell them is, "I choose to." Even when it comes to tossing aside pieces of the past, like a shirt. What is beautiful, yet scary, about each moment, each ritual, each beginning, is that the choice is left up to us to interpret the moment as we see fit.

It's easy, and quite natural, to slip into a melancholy facet of emotion as you remember what it was that you lost, no longer have, or don't expect to have any more. However, that's also when the opportunity exists to embrace the "Do Over" and start anew. Even when it's hard. You just need to choose to.

A few weeks ago I posted a litany of things to stop doing. I recently came across the inverse of the very same list. It was an extremely powerful reminder of things to Start doing. And it's much more than just doing the opposite.

Believe it or not, there is a difference between "Stop worrying so much" and "Start concentrating on the things you can control". You might say it's simply a matter of interpretation.

Start...

- ...spending time with the right people.
- ...facing your problems head on.
- ...being honest with yourself about everything.
- ...making your own happiness a priority.
- ...being yourself, genuinely and proudly.
- ...noticing and living in the present.
- ...valuing the lessons your mistakes teach you.
- ...being more polite to yourself.
- ...enjoying the things you already have.
- ...creating your own happiness.
- ...giving your ideas and dreams a chance.
- ...believing that you're ready for the next step.
- ...entering new relationships for the right reasons.
- ...giving new people you meet a chance.
- ...competing against an earlier version of yourself.
- ...cheering for other people's victories.
- ...looking for the silver lining in tough situations.
- ...forgiving yourself and others.
- ...helping those around you.
- ...listening to your own inner voice.
- ...being attentive to your stress level, take breaks
- ...noticing the beauty of small moments.
- ...accepting things when they are less-than-perfect.
- ...working towards your goals every single day.
- ...being more open about how you feel.
- ...taking full accountability for your life.
- ...actively nurturing your important relationships.
- ...concentrating on the things you can control.
- ...focusing on the possibility of positive outcomes.
- ...noticing how wealthy you are right now.

It's Spring. Out with the old and in with the new.
Time to get started with a new ritual.

PROST!

“Time may fly and time may stand still,
Tomorrow may come but yesterday never will.
All we have is the present, this moment right here.
So let’s enjoy Oktoberfest, and drink some beer!
Prost!”

(My toast as celebrity ToastMaster at Oktoberfest)

DECADE OF CHANGE

As I write this, I’m still in my 30s. By the time most of you have read this, I’ll be in my 40s. These past 10 years have booked to certainly brought a lot of change with them.

I got engaged. Laughed a lot. Moved away, bought a house, started a job. Got married. Laughed some more. Left a job, moved back home, started another job. Dove into a lake. Cried a lot. Lost most of what I loved, and a lot of what I worked so hard for. Cried some more. Started over. Cultivated new and wonderful relationships. Founded an organization to make a difference in people’s lives. Built a home. Discovered the strength of the human spirit. Laughed again.

By all accounts, I’d say it was a pretty remarkable decade. And I’m excited to see what’s next!

NOW WHAT

I vividly remember the feelings that held me hostage that first night I spent in my apartment after being injured.

I had finally arrived in my own place after living in a hospital and nursing home for the previous 20 months. But as I laid in bed I found myself filled with a melancholy that shouldn’t have been there. After all, I was finally achieving some type of normalcy that I had set out to do. But that was just it. I weaned myself off the vent and diaphragmatic pacer, had my trach removed, founded a nonprofit, and moved into my own place.

Yet, as I laid in bed, all I thought was “Now What?”

At that precise moment, I couldn’t see a path to the next goal in front of me. I couldn’t even see a goal. And by goal, I don’t mean getting my body to move again. That to me is a constant absolute that I work towards every day. Rather, in this case, I’ll define a goal, as something I can write down, work towards, and achieve in a specified period of time.

I’ve always been goal driven and lying in bed that night without knowing what my next objective was going to be, left me feeling more helpless, useless, and defeated than the break in my neck. Had I nothing else to look forward to?

Luckily, it didn’t take long before I started to write down one thing after another that I was going to do. At first, my objectives weren’t of mammoth proportion, but little things, that when strung together, begin to resemble bigger things that once seemed far-reaching.

To this day, I’ve continued with that practice, while also making room on the page for much larger aspirations. And I’m excited about some of the next things I’ll be working towards.

All we have is the present, this moment right here.

THANKSGIVING. EVERY DAY.

Regardless of the ups and downs we inevitably face, there is always something to be thankful for.

We have all been blessed with some type of a gift in our lives. Whether it is something that allows us to grow as individuals; an experience that causes pause for reflection and appreciation; the benefit another individual's presence brings to our lives; or the value derived from good health; every single one of us has something to be thankful for.

The gifts and blessings bestowed upon us are relative and should not be compared, but should certainly not be taken for granted either. Thanksgiving should be a part of our daily routine.

Not just one day. Every day.

THOUGHTS IN MY HEAD

For several months after my injury, the first thoughts that greeted me each morning as I awoke were, “[expletive], I’m still paralyzed,” or “when will things get better?”

Now those thoughts have been replaced by, “[expletive], I’ve got a lot to do today and better get going.” It’s definitely better to start the day off with a positive thought rattling around inside my cranium instead of something pessimistic that is out of my control.

Even when I’m feeling at my worst, like I have been recently, I’m constantly reminded that “this too shall pass” and I’m still in a better situation today than I used to be.

THROW AWAY THE THESAURUS

Crippled. Cursed. Deadened. Decrepit. Diseased. Feeble. Inadequate. Incompetent. Invalidated. Powerless. Screwed up. Sickly. Stupefied. Tampered. Undermined. Unhealthy. Weakened.

What do the above words have in common? They all describe me, or at least my condition. After all, every single word is a synonym for “disabled.”

But here’s the funny thing – I don’t feel decrepit. I’d like to think I am not inadequate. Some might say I’m screwed up, I guess that can be debated, but I don’t really feel too sickly. And while it’s happened in the past, at the moment I do not find myself stupefied.

I’m willing to bet that any thesaurus/dictionary you choose to consult for other meanings of the word “disabled” will give you a plethora of choices that sound very ugly. And I will double down on my bet and venture to say that if someone asked you to describe me, you would probably choose another word other than the choices given.

Kind of makes you stop and think, huh?

‘CAUSE YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

I'm not afraid to put in the work needed, but also realize that some things are beyond my control and left up to faith and God's will.

There are a few things this injury has taught me, one of which is that things change. Our life's plans, our goals, our dreams, and our relationships with others. Things change. Our plans are not what matter. It's God's plans for us that matter.

The great thing about Faith is that it is free and doesn't cost anything. It's there for us to benefit from if we choose to.

CHECK YOUR THERMOSTAT

I'm cold. It's a bitter 12° outside today and a blistering -5° when you factor in the windchill. I'd venture to say it's the coldest day of the year, but sometimes they all feel cold. Such is the result when the body's thermostat is broken and you are unable to regulate your temperature.

I'm hot. Outside, people need to brace themselves as they move from building to car, car to building, bundled up like Eskimos as their chattering teeth cry out for global warming. Inside, though, I'm burning up and want the thermostat setting at 70°.

A few hours ago it was set at 76°, then lowered to 68° before being raised back to 72°. Now it's a balmy 70° but I might have to raise it again as I'm starting to grow cold. I feel clammy, a little sweaty in my 70° apartment. After all, it did heat up to 16° outside. I'm cold again. No, I'm hot. Oh forget it, I don't know what I am.

All I know is that I keep a dry washcloth on my lap so that I can have people wipe my face every few minutes as it starts to feel wet again. However, my face is dry as a bone, no sign of moisture, but rather a few dry flakes. Sometimes if I wear a hooded sweatshirt while inside I can fool my mind into thinking my body is dry. But it doesn't always work and it's back to fidgeting with the thermostat. Hot, cold. Up, down. This whole body temperature thing is definitely in the top three things I hate about living with a broken neck. I don't think I'm in limited company when it comes to feeling this way.

Ask anyone with a busted spinal cord and you'll probably get the same answer, "I'm always cold. I'm always hot. I never quite feel comfortable." The weather forecast is calling for 44° next week. Woohoo, I might just have to break out the frisbee!

Fortunately, I appreciated every single warm day last summer. Each day as I headed outside, I consciously told myself to enjoy it, to revel in the warm sunshine and be grateful for the beautiful day God granted me. That's something I didn't do enough of before my injury. I thought I appreciated every little gift in my life, but in hindsight, I realize there was so much more to appreciate.

It's easier now to be thankful. And I also realize that I can be even more thankful. Actually, I see now that you can never be thankful enough.

Any one of our situations can change in the blink of an eye, and sometimes the change can be as bracing and extreme as a nor'easter or a relentless hurricane. It's just as easy to slip and fall on an ice patch or skid off the road in a vehicle as it is to dive into a soggy lakebed hiding under shallow water.

Some things are just as uncontrollable as the weather forecast. What is controllable is how we react to our situations, how we choose to appreciate our good fortune, what we learn from our hardships, and what we thank the good Lord for at the end of every day.

It's days like today that I long to be back on the beaches of Cancun or Punta Cana. I'll be honest, it's tough not to miss the feeling of barefoot feet in the sand, the smell of salt on the skin, the sound of crackling pages turning in a good book. I don't know if I will ever get those days back. But I do look forward to the sunny days that are months away.

However, even those days aren't guaranteed and I've learned to not put off my happiness, my appreciation and my gratitude for the things that I have in my life.

You never know when things will change. But one thing I do know, is that things can change, and sometimes they can change just as fast as the thermostat setting in my apartment!

*I thought I appreciated every little gift in my life...
I realize there was so much more to appreciate.*

RESISTANCE CREATES SUFFERING

“Pain is a relatively objective, physical phenomenon; suffering is our psychological resistance to what happens. Events may create physical pain, but they do not in themselves create suffering. Resistance creates suffering. Stress happens when your mind resists what is. The only problem in your life is your mind’s resistance to life as it unfolds.”

I really like the above quote, which is attributed to Dan Millman. If you have the time, you should check out his story for yourself. “Resistance creates suffering.” Let that sink in for a moment.

I certainly am not advocating that one should just accept whatever situation he or she finds themselves in and not try to work towards a better outcome. What I really think this quote tells us is that it is only after you accept the situation at hand that you will be in the best position to confront the challenge in front of you.

After my injury I was extremely depressed and anxious for several months. Most of my time was spent wishing I could erase what happened and go back to the way things were. While I believe this is somewhat of a natural reaction after experiencing a catastrophic event, it is also an unproductive and futile exercise.

Unfortunately, it is easier said than done (at least it was for me) to feel sorry for yourself and question why things happened than it is to pick yourself up, released the reins of resistance and embrace the new path that lays in front of you.

I certainly don’t want to come off as a Pollyanna. I am well aware of how difficult it is to shake off the blanket of fear and anxiety that often engulfs someone following a tragedy. In hindsight, I wish I could have been stronger in initially dealing with my circumstances.

However, I am grateful and in a better place today as a result of accepting my reality and beginning the work towards charting a new course.

Adversity can be overcome through hard work, a positive attitude and faith. It’s a recipe that I truly believe can help anyone in any circumstance. I’m not saying that all your problems will disappear if you pray hard enough or will it hard enough, rather I believe you will find the strength you need to face the hardships you encounter.

Try it for yourself.

MAKE EVERY HOUR COUNT

“Don’t count every hour in the day. Make every hour in the day count.”

I came across the above quote in an e-mail that was waiting for me to read this morning. What struck me about the passage was the simplicity in which it stated such a complex concept for most individuals to adhere to.

Throughout the day, the more I thought about this quote, I realized that what it really speaks to is quality over quantity.

It doesn’t matter how many “things” get crossed off your To Do list, or how much “stuff” you can pack into 24 hours, but rather how much contentment, fulfillment and enlightenment you get out of each day.

At the end of the day, if you lie in bed exhausted from everything you did that day, rather than refreshed from the way you chose to spend that day, chances are you’re already thinking ahead about everything you need to do tomorrow and counting down the hours, rather than reflecting on what you took away from the day you just rushed through, the day you will never get back no matter how hard you try (yes, I’m aware that was a run-on sentence).

It’s okay to get a lot done throughout the day, and in most cases is necessary, however it is also important to accomplish it with the right attitude and frame of mind.

This quote was a perfect little note placed in my Inbox at just the right time to remind me to appreciate the quality and not the quantity of hours I have to do stuff.

My injury has left me with the ability and opportunity to “be still”, a gift which I probably don’t use as much as I should. However, it’s a gift available to all of us free of charge, and one I invite all of you to take advantage of.



THE BENEFIT OF SUFFERING

Everyone suffers.

Whether physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, or some other type of suffering, no one is immune to pain or distress. Our level of suffering may vary greatly, just as our response to it does, but I've yet to meet someone who hasn't had to endure some type of suffering in his or her life.

As I laid in bed a few nights ago and prepared for a talk, my mind was consumed with recollections of what my life was like in the months immediately after my injury. I recalled what I felt each night as I laid in the hospital bed.

The one word that kept coming to mind was fear.

Most of my nights were spent alone. It was during those late and lonely moments, unable to fall asleep and escape the discomfort I was in, that I was forced to share the space with my thoughts.

And I was scared.

Waking moments were spent searching for the answers to all the questions rattling around in my head – What does the future hold? When will the constant pain go away? What if the doctors are right and I have to spend most of my remaining days in bed? What did I do to deserve this? Why did God let this happen?

I never found all the answers, but I no longer ask all the questions.

Somewhere along the way I stopped focusing on all the "what if's" and made the active decision to concentrate on the "how about now's" that constantly surrounded me. The "suffering" began to wane, ease up and eventually dissipate.

I have no idea what true suffering really is. Sure, I thought my life sucked for a while, but there are moments now that I experience a different form of happiness than I ever thought possible.

A spinal cord injury is a difficult plight to deal with on a day to day basis. But I find myself surrounded by so many incredible individuals these days that I can't imagine my life without these people in it.

I am blessed. I am certainly not suffering.

Of course I have a laundry list of wishes that will never come true. I wish I would have jumped feet first. I wish I was still married. I wish I could pick up my own child high above my head. I wish I could hug my mom, my dad, my sister... hell, I wish I could hug the world. I still remember how all these things made me feel, and in some weird way, don't want to forget that.

I'm reminded of a line in a song by Fuel, "Leave the memories alone, I don't want to see the way it is, as to how it used to be. Leave the memories alone, don't change a thing, and I'll just hold you here in my memory."

So as I reflect on all those memories, I can't help but embrace the suffering I have endured, the relief I have experienced, and the renewal of faith I have found. I'm not where I want to be, not by a long shot. But I'm where I need to be.

I think it's important to focus and dwell on true suffering – Jesus Christ's suffering, and the reason for it, which was for our redemption, and the hope we might all live a life full of kindness and respect for others. Imagine what our lives would be like if everyone experienced the outpouring of love and generosity I did without having to break one's neck to do so. Imagine how much fear would no longer occupy our thoughts.

If you are not into praying, then reflect and choose to be grateful for the good in your life. Maybe volunteer your time to help someone in need. Or choose to pause, bite your tongue, before responding to the comments of others. Realize that everyone around you has had to endure their own form of suffering, and everyone around you can benefit from some sort of kindness.

GET UP OR GIVE UP

Over the past several days I have been contacted by different individuals who recently had their worlds affected by an SCI. All of the individuals are from different parts of the country but are united by their unfortunate situations.

Many of the questions for which they seek answers are similar, yet the stories they shared with me are all unique in their own way. I feel extremely fortunate to be able to help people understand this injury in whatever way I can. However, I wish I didn't have to. I would be much more satisfied if there were no broken necks, no paralysis, no shattered dreams and no new harsh realities to talk about. But that's just not the case.

Bad things happen. Sometimes they happen to good, innocent people for no reason, at least not a reason we are able to discern, digest and accept.

I am always humbled and grateful when others reach out to me in the hopes of hearing something, no matter how seemingly insignificant it may seem, that might help them make sense of the brave, new world they now find themselves living in.

The medical community is quick to classify a spinal cord injury so it fits neatly into a specific box so they can treat according to what the "book" says. If only it were that easy. Unfortunately, classifying an injury may limit the type of care, therapy and other treatments an individual receives. Much worse, classifications may limit the hope and willingness of an individual to push forward. I have had doctors tell me conflicting information about my injury.

I choose to focus on what I can do and continue to get stronger through hard work. I listen to myself and my body and have stopped listening to doctors tell me what all my limitations are.

I am reminded every day of what I can no longer do/feel/experience, etc. I don't need a doctor to explain that to me. I am the one living with this injury, and the one learning to accept what has been taken from me. But I am also the one discovering all that still exists inside of me.

This human spirit and will cannot be seen with x-rays and MRIs. They can only be seen in the actions of the individual who chooses to not give up and pushes forward, regardless of the obstacles he or she has been told lay ahead.

The point of intersection between the physiological and psychological is perhaps the most crucial moment in any survivor's journey. At this moment they must confront their plight and decide to give up or get back up.

It's okay to ask "why" as long as it doesn't stop you from accepting the situation and moving forward. There is no recipe on how to do this. It all depends on the makeup of the individual. Some of the ways in which I was able to overcome these hurdles was to celebrate every event that allowed me to gain a little bit more independence.

No matter how small, every victory is still a victory.

I'm at my best with every new victory. For me, it's also about finding the things that bring comfort and help me not focus on what I can't do. I've learned to enjoy the small things in a big way.

There is no timetable for "accepting" an injury like this. It is different for everyone. Some people may adapt after a few months, other a few years, others may never adapt. Just as every spinal cord injury is unique, so too are we as individuals.

But as individuals, we hold the power to choose how we will respond to our situation. We should also never lose hope or stop believing in miracles and the power of faith.

We get to choose whether to give up or get up.

LIFE IS NOT A DRESS REHEARSAL

The clichés are endless when it comes to trying to seek solace or some sort of understanding from past experiences. I have no doubt that all of us could recite similar pearls of wisdom ad nauseam.

Whether we put any stock into the insight we rattle off and choose to act accordingly is an entirely different matter.

We all have a past, previous experiences written and etched on the walls of the soul. Those experiences, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual, make us who we are. A conscious effort can be made to apply some learning from a previous occurrence and influence the choices we make in our future.

At times, individuals may be haunted by a prior happening they cannot escape no matter how hard they try. There are cases where an individual is capable of repressing what has already happened, often times not without some type of psychological side effect. And there are those who refuse to learn from their past, destined to repeat the same mistakes. Regardless, we all have a past.

In the months following my accident, I spent the same amount of time wishing I could have a July 3 “do over” as I did dwelling on all the negative karma that had suddenly invaded my life. Neither offered anything constructive I could apply to moving forward and getting better. I was in a very unconstructive and destructive frame of mind.

It took a conscious effort to transition my outlook and perspective on life from a state of constant despair to hope to happiness. It didn’t happen overnight, but it did and it has made all the difference in my road to recovery.

Not every day is a great day. We all still have bad days. In fact, in some weird way I don’t think it’s such a horrible thing to have bad days every now and then. But it is detrimental to consistently experience a disproportionate amount of bad days.

If done constructively, we can look to the past to create present happiness.

I vividly remember a business meeting I attended in Atlanta several years ago. Walking through the lobby of a building my eyes were drawn to a middle-aged woman with a large, bright orange button adorned to her blouse. It was nearly impossible to not notice her, as the obnoxious emblem she was wearing seemed to scream, “Hey everyone, look at me!” But what is impossible is for me to forget the message inscribed on her badge:

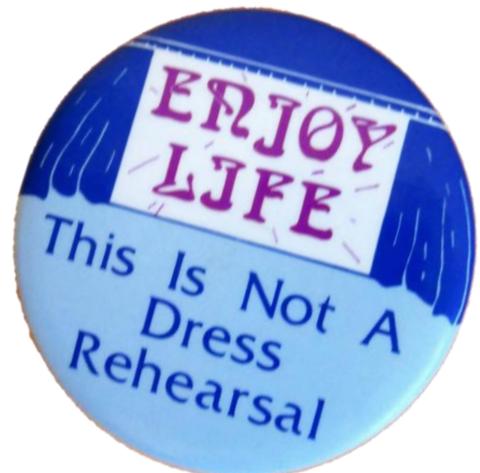
Enjoy life. This is not a dress rehearsal.

I think in some ways our past can serve as a rehearsal for us when it comes to creating our happiness.

Try to remember the happiest moments in your life. If you are able to recall them, then try to ascertain what it was that created your happiness – an event, a person or thing, or an attitude? Even if you think it was someone or something that made you happy, it had a direct effect on your attitude.

The opportunity exists to re-create that attitude, even if you just have yourself to do it.

Every passing minute is another chance to turn it all around. Perhaps if we choose to put some stock in this and act accordingly, each passing minute might be the closest thing we ever get to a “do over” and an opportunity to find what it is that makes us happy.



MY OWN STUDY

I read a study that claimed, 33, is likely to be the best year of your life. The result was from a survey of people over 40 by Friends Reunited, a British website. A whopping 70 percent of people were happiest at age 33. Supposedly, at this age “we’ve had enough time to have shaken off childhood naivety without losing the energy and enthusiasm of youth. By 33 innocence has been lost, but our sense of reality is mixed with a strong sense of hope, and a belief in our own talents and abilities. We have yet to develop the cynicism and weariness that comes with later years.”

Naturally, I thought back to my 33rd year of life – I was working as a vice president, settling into a city I desired to live in, and married to my best friend. As the study claimed, my life was mixed with a strong sense of hope and belief in my own talent and abilities. However, at the age of 33 I broke my neck and was left paralyzed. Contrary to what the study cited, I developed plenty of cynicism and weariness that I had to work hard to let go of.

I used to try to look for meaning in my accident. I was born on March 3 and injured on July 3, exactly 400 months. Is there some meaning to this number? I’ve yet to find any meaning and the combination of dates has yet to yield any Mega Millions jackpots!

I’ve stopped looking for meaning and started to live with meaning. It’s a much better payoff.

HOW ARE YOU DOING TODAY

“How are you doing today?” “Terrible.”

While in the waiting room of a doctor’s office, I witnessed the above exchange of dialogue take place between a nurse and an elderly gentleman.

I found myself smiling after hearing his reply when he was asked what seemed to him to be such an intrusive question. It reminded me of a scene from the movie, *Kingpin*, when Woody Harrelson asks his neighbor, “How’s life?” “It’s taking forever,” his neighbor answers, as he smokes a cigarette, while hooked to an oxygen tank.

As I watched the man disappear behind the door and down the hall I wondered if things were really that bad for him. I sat paralyzed in a wheelchair with broken titanium rods in my neck causing constant discomfort, and yet if you ask me how I am doing “terrible” would be the last thing I would expect myself to say.

Life is full of surprises. Each day holds something different in store for us, but are things really that bad to be terrible? Who knows, perhaps they are for some of us. Who are we to judge other people and decide how they should or should not respond to the events they encounter throughout their lives?

Instead, maybe we should make ourselves more available to help others who struggle to deal with certain things they find themselves up against. I know I wouldn’t be where I am today without the help and support from my family and friends. I am extremely grateful for that and hope I can continue to also help others in need.

WANTS AND NEEDS

There is a litany of things I want.

Before my accident there were a lot of things I wanted as well. Mostly things I'd yet to experience, acquire, or achieve. However, those wants, I once thought awaited me in the near future, have been unexpectedly replaced by past familiarities.

My wants are much simpler now, yet the pursuit of them unbelievably complex and complicated.

A splash in the ocean, followed by a nap on a lounge chair, toes sunk deep in the sand and a piña colada close at hand. Grass stains on my clothes from chasing nieces and nephews around all day. A few minutes spent trying to catch my breath after breaking into a spontaneous backspin at a wedding reception. My fingers saturated with the smell of seafood from all the peel 'n eat boiled shrimp consumed on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The list goes on, but you get the idea.

I want what I had.

But then comes the list of needs. Do I really need all those things? Sure, they're wonderful and great for the soul, but are they truly needed?

I give everyone living with paralysis and other health issues credit for dealing with the fact that our "want list" may always be just out of reach.

Let that sink in for a moment. it's not easy to accept that your life has changed and no matter how hard you try, wish, or pray, things may never be the way they once were.

That's the bad news.

Our needs will include things we never thought we would need – Someone always nearby to assist with even the most mundane of tasks. House closets stuffed with inventory items one is more apt to find at a hospital. Wide hallways, open floor plans, doorways equipped with ramps. And let's not forget the accessible vehicle, usually a jacked-up minivan or large conversion van.

But then there is the good news.

A beautiful metamorphosis washes over our wants and needs list and a transformation occurs leaving us with everyday items some people spend their whole life hoping to cross off their want list – Loved ones always with us by our side. Friends, and even strangers, who go out of their way to offer their help and support. The ability to reach others with our words and actions in a positive way we otherwise might not have had the chance to. An appreciation for all the little things, that one day we will discover were in fact the big things.

And don't forget the great parking spaces.

There will always be wants I will desire and needs I will require. However, the middle ground exists in focusing on the wants I can achieve that will better myself as an individual.

In the end, that's all I really need.

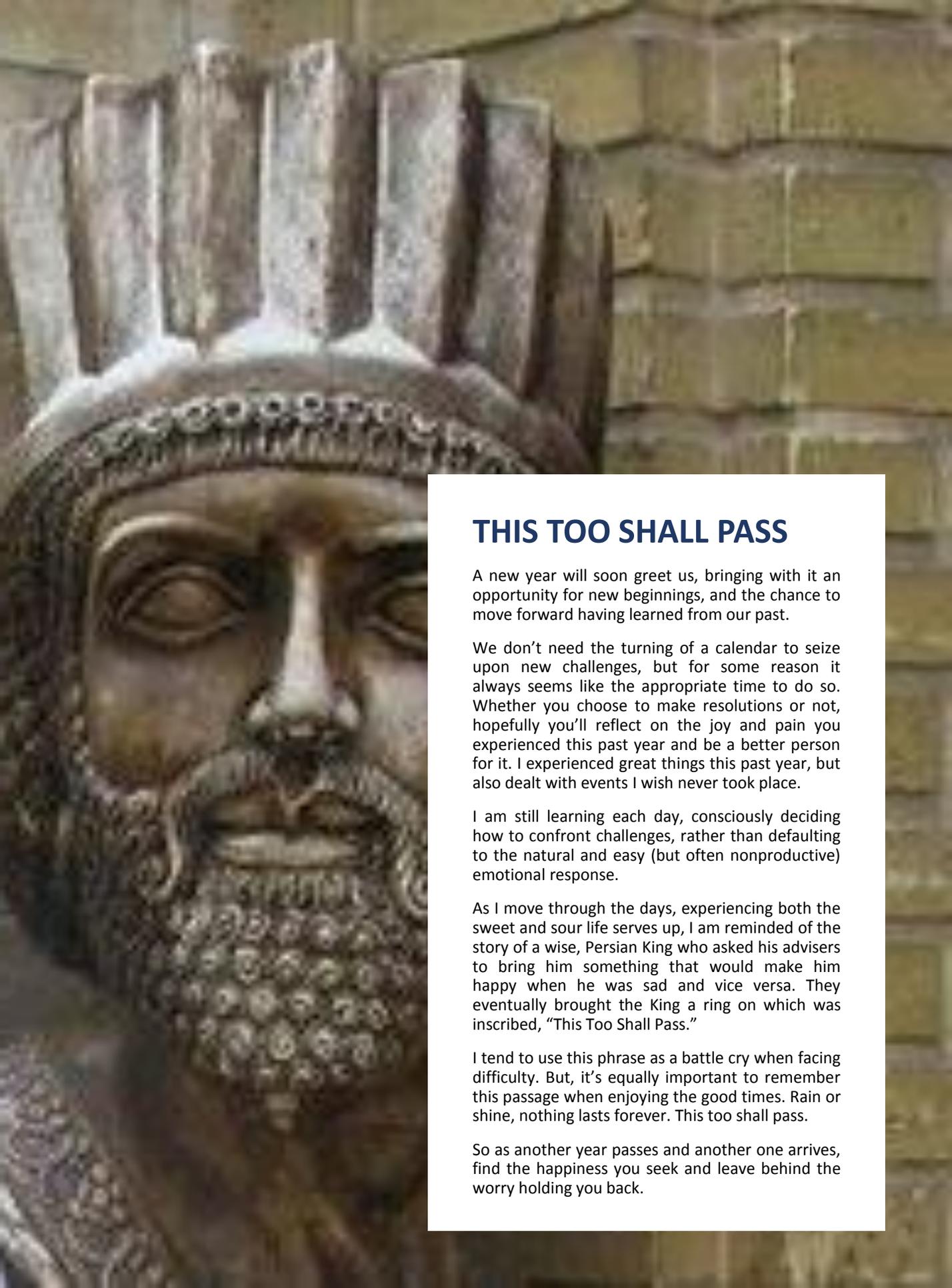
THEY USED TO BE MINE

I received the following email in my inbox:

"A blind girl hated herself because she was blind. She hated everyone, except her loving boyfriend who was always there for her. She told him, 'If I could only see the world, I will marry you.' One day, someone donated a pair of eyes to her. When the bandages came off, she could see everything, including her boyfriend.

He asked her, 'Now that you can see the world, will you marry me?' The girl looked at him and saw he was blind. The sight of his closed eyelids shocked her. She hadn't expected that. The thought of looking at them the rest of her life led her to refuse to marry him. He left in tears and days later wrote her saying: 'Take good care of your eyes, my dear, for before they were yours, they were mine.' "

Unfortunately, this is how the human brain often works when our status changes. Few remember what life was like before, and who was by their side in the most painful situations. Life is a gift. Rather than complain, we should be grateful for what we have, because others aren't so fortunate.



THIS TOO SHALL PASS

A new year will soon greet us, bringing with it an opportunity for new beginnings, and the chance to move forward having learned from our past.

We don't need the turning of a calendar to seize upon new challenges, but for some reason it always seems like the appropriate time to do so. Whether you choose to make resolutions or not, hopefully you'll reflect on the joy and pain you experienced this past year and be a better person for it. I experienced great things this past year, but also dealt with events I wish never took place.

I am still learning each day, consciously deciding how to confront challenges, rather than defaulting to the natural and easy (but often nonproductive) emotional response.

As I move through the days, experiencing both the sweet and sour life serves up, I am reminded of the story of a wise, Persian King who asked his advisers to bring him something that would make him happy when he was sad and vice versa. They eventually brought the King a ring on which was inscribed, "This Too Shall Pass."

I tend to use this phrase as a battle cry when facing difficulty. But, it's equally important to remember this passage when enjoying the good times. Rain or shine, nothing lasts forever. This too shall pass.

So as another year passes and another one arrives, find the happiness you seek and leave behind the worry holding you back.

WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING

Often when we hear of tragedy, it can be difficult to accept the fact that our God would allow something so horrific to take place. It seems especially incomprehensible to try to rationalize how He could allow this to happen to children.

“Why could such a loving God allow such evil?”

Undoubtedly, at some point in our lives we will ask this very question. And it doesn't apply to just evil. It applies to any suffering that our human brains are unable to explain with logic that makes sense.

Is a mass school shooting more terrible than a four-year-old diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer? Or a young girl killed in a car crash by a drunk driver? It is not fair to compare our sufferings, nor should we entertain such a notion. It is all painful.

So the question remains. “Why could such a loving God allow such suffering?”

I don't have the answer, nor have I met anyone who does have a definitive answer. However, I choose to have faith and believe that God knows what He's doing. Although I may question why God allows the innocent to suffer, I choose to believe in His plan even though I don't always understand it.

The last time I checked a complete comprehension of something was not a prerequisite for believing in something. Kind of like gravity. That's faith.

I've been asked how I manage to keep such strong faith after my accident. How can I not? Faith won't make the suffering disappear, and it might not give us the answers we seek. And unfortunately, faith will not bring those children back, at least not in this world. But for me, faith offers the promise of something better, a type of reward extraordinarily unfathomable. With all the hardship and heartache in this world, why would I not want to believe in something far greater than anything I have yet to experience?

Faith doesn't cost anything, but I choose to believe it will give me everything.

JOY AND PAIN

“Pray as if it all depends on God, for it does. But work as if it all depends on us, for it does.”

The above quote is attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola. I remember reading about a pastor who quoted Ignatius during his sermon the Sunday after 9/11. The pastor cited the quote in hopes of helping explain why bad things happen to good people – a question as old as time itself, that I’m sure we all have pondered several times throughout our lives. The truth is, it is easy to question God’s way of doing things even though we may never understand or comprehend it, at least not while on this earth.

I also struggle with trying to find an answer to explain why kindhearted parents lose their three kids in a car accident, yet they survive, only to have to live out their days without their children; or why a young, innocent child suffers so much, never having the opportunity to appreciate all of the beauty and greatness life has to offer. We are constantly bombarded with the devastating reminders of how much pain surrounds us.

And yet if you look closely, you will find there is a story of triumph and joy to match every story of heartache and suffering. However, I don’t believe that one equals one.

I get excited to hear of individuals who accomplish great things, such as Dick Hoyt completing Ironman triathlons while pushing his son, Ricky, who suffers from cerebral palsy, because it makes Ricky happy. But as uplifting as team Hoyt’s story is, it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with the news that a friend has a son suffering from inoperable brain cancer. The jubilation of one story does not erase the anguish of another story. The fact remains that there is so much hurt and sorrow in this world, and only God understands His plan.

Inevitably, as we move through our lives, we must learn to take the good with the bad, the sweet with the sour and the joy with the pain.

Regardless of how we choose to live, one thing is certain, at some point we all experience the sweet and sour life has to offer. While we can’t possibly seek to understand why some things happen, we can control the way we choose to let them affect us. We can also choose whether or not we accept God into our lives. I hate living with a spinal cord injury, I hate the ups and downs, the unpredictable and uncontrollable. But I would hate to think how much worse it would be if I was going through this alone without Him in my life.

I will continue to work hard as I have seen how much it matters. But I will never stop praying because I know how much it matters.

TENT MARKS

The frustration pendulum constantly swings back and forth with a spinal cord injury. What you get out never equals what you put in. It's especially frustrating for results-oriented individuals like myself who measure success by visible progress made. An extraordinary amount of time is often needed before results are seen.

In 1995, Will Steger lead a dogsled expedition to the North Pole. Each day I read his daily online updates transmitted from the frozen landscape. I was so affected by one of his entries that I kept it with me for years. He spoke about the monotony of the day-to-day grind and how slow the pace of progress seemed to move. He would use a pen to mark each day on the inside of his tent wall. The time between each mark at the end of the day seemed excruciatingly slow, however, as he would look at his tent wall at the end of each month he noticed big chunks of marks which served to remind him of how far his team of mushers had actually come.

For whatever reason, Steger's insights on progress struck a chord with me all those years ago, and seem even more relevant in my life today.

I find myself discouraged by the molasses-like measure in which my body repairs itself. However, when I look at pictures and journal entries from just two years ago, which serve as my tent marks, they reinforce the fact of how far I to have come.

Yesterday my aide transferred me to my living room couch where I sat for an hour. Not something I would have envisioned myself getting excited about years earlier when I could still accomplish the meaningless feat on my own accord. But now it's different, as are most things in my life. Whereas the vast majority of people move through their days in search of new adventures, those who are paralyzed will spend a lifetime seeking to repeat the things we used to do. I am not ashamed that I search out ways to replicate past tasks that never seemed such an achievement when I took them for granted. I am proud of my ability to keep finding ways to repeat the past.

Progress comes in all shapes and forms. Sometimes it comes quickly, while other times it meanders to its own tempo. To some, progress might be finally renovating a room in their house; to others it might mean realizing that big promotion at work; and yet for some it means sitting on the couch. Progress is relative. And like the Scottish author, Samuel Smiles, tells us, "Progress, of the best kind, is comparatively slow."



HOPE IS JUST HOT AIR

We can't see hope, we can't hold it, we can't create it, at least not enough to make it a tangible item. The reality is hope is something we conjure up in our hearts and heads to help us confront or cope with situations that may arise in our lives.

I'm not writing to speak out against hope. I am a strong believer in hope and feel it is vital to have hope when dealing with any traumatic situation.

But hope alone is not enough.

I've always maintained that every individual needs to constantly work towards bettering his or her situation and not just sit around waiting and hoping for circumstances to change. Sometimes things change for the better by themselves, and that is great. But more often than not, things don't change without some type of inertia behind them.

I received an email that discussed this concept much more eloquently than I could.

"Sometimes hope is a beautiful thing. It can motivate, empower, and inspire when tempted to give up. But other times it just keeps you stuck. When you push through today for a better tomorrow, without doing anything to create that new possibility, your hope creates the illusion of change to come. Your hope allows you to avoid reality. Hope is comforting, but not always empowering. Hope may give you possibilities in tomorrow, but belief gives you possibilities now. You can hope yourself into a corner, waiting for tomorrow to improve. Or you can believe your way onto center stage, and create that tomorrow you want."

For me, hope is a part of my daily recipe for living, but it is just a part of it. There are so many other traits I feel it necessary to possess in order to reach my full potential. I certainly welcome all forms of serendipity, but also realize that I am the catalyst for my own change.

*I welcome all forms of serendipity, but realize
I am the catalyst for my own change.*

THE CROSS WE BEAR

On the street today, a young man dressed like Jesus slowly plodded past me. He carried a large wooden cross and wore a crown of thorns as he walked hunched over from the weight of the cross.

Seeing an image as moving as this also got me thinking about the challenges in life all of us face.

Inevitably, there'll come a time in all of our lives when we too will have our own cross to bear. There will be times in which we carry that cross ourselves, but will also be times when we rely on others to help shoulder the burden. I've always thought of myself as an independent person, and have taken much pride in my ability to do things on my own. This injury has taught me otherwise. It has helped me come to learn how important it is to allow others into our lives to help us, even though we may feel we don't need the assistance.

Trust me, for someone like me who was very prideful, this was a challenging lesson to accept. However, welcoming others into my life and being open to receiving the help they provide, has helped me grow as a person.

Almost every great story you read about someone who has accomplished tremendous things, involves other individuals whose guidance and benevolence that person benefited from along the way.

Remember the power that exists in helping others.

TRUE MEASURE OF THANKSGIVING

My life hasn't exactly gone the way I planned it.

It's taken a turn away from the predictable and headed down the path of the unpredictable. But no matter how terrible we feel our situation might be at times, there's always plenty to be thankful for. However, we often are so fixated on what is wrong with our lives that we spend most time missing and failing to ever appreciate what is great in our lives. I am guilty of this at times as well. It's often too easy to do. But have you ever really focused on the blessings you have in your life and what you have to be thankful for? If not, try it – if not every day, at least on this day of Thanksgiving.

I'm thankful to be where I am at this point in my life. I survived a horrible accident that should've left me dead. Instead, I am on this earth and able to spend time with those I love. I have an amazing network of support and have had the good fortune of meeting several fascinating people whose paths I might never have crossed. I have time every day to reflect and pray, and not get caught up in all the meaningless details that use to consume me. I have learned to appreciate a beautiful day more than I ever thought possible. I have personally experienced the good in others. I've been put in a powerful position of helping others appreciate their lives and all they have – a position more powerful than what my former career path could have offered me. I can go to the movies for free.

You get the point...

Believe me, I still get frustrated. Every day is not a picnic. However, every day is a chance for us to notice the good God has blessed us with and be thankful.

We don't need to wait until Thanksgiving to reflect on what it means to be thankful. Remember, though, it is how we use those blessings that is the true measure of thanksgiving.

THE CHANGING LEAVES

Soon the leaves will start to change and nature's paradox will surround us all. That is, the beauty that presents itself as a result of death. It's weird how beautiful dying can look.

For most people affected by spinal cord injury, it can be a struggle to not think of life as pre-and post-injury. Something I also struggle with at times.

A new road is laid out in front of me which affords me the opportunity to take things one day at a time. I have formed many new relationships that are rich and filled with acceptance, understanding, and genuine love. For that, I am truly blessed.

Then there is the road behind me, where I was and where I came from. Sometimes my past feels like it happened lifetimes ago and yet at the same time it still seems so fresh that I forget how much my life has actually changed. A lot of things around me are moving on at the speed of life, yet sometimes I find myself trying to desperately pump the gas as if to yell "wait up for me." It is such a contradiction to feel like the past has passed me by. After all, hasn't it already happened? So why do I want to keep looking behind me at times?

Sometimes it's difficult to move forward when the road ahead doesn't look as pretty and certain as the road left behind. I'm still learning to move forward. Even though I focus on living in the now, I am still human and often get blindsided by the past. When this happens it throws me for a loop. I still need to learn how to more quickly get back on the forward path.

The past isn't going anywhere. It will always be there when and if I need it. But the future is ahead of me and still unwritten and meant to be experienced. I am doing myself a disservice if I spend more time looking at the road behind rather than moving forward on the road ahead of me.

This brings me back to the leaves. As I prepare to embrace this fall season and the changing of the leaves, I am especially cognizant of the fact that just like the leaves have a pre-and post existence before the winter, so too does my life. My accident was my winter, and just like the leaves come back more beautiful and ever, so too will I!

The future and all its uncertainty is still something to look forward to and be excited about!

CELEBRATE EVERY VICTORY

Last week I received a visit from a friend who had been in a serious accident that left him laid up for quite a while. I asked him what helped get him through the tough times and he shared with me a lesson that had been passed on to him.

Celebrate every victory no matter how small.

Good advice when you really think about it. I often find myself too focused on wanting the big result that I tend to look past the smaller victories.

It's important to make the effort to focus on celebrating the little victories.

They add up to the big victories.

MAINTAIN A PROPER FOCUS

It's often too easy to dwell on what is not going right, we owe it to ourselves to take the time to be grateful for what is going right.

Focus on all the good going on in your life, because it could all change. It may change slowly over time or in the blink of an eye, but there's never a guarantee that tomorrow will be as good as today.

Choose to focus on everything going good in your life, appreciate it and find your happiness.

WINDOW OF HAPPINESS

Someone asked me this past week if I am happy. A simple question, yet it caused me to pause and reflect before I answered.

Yes, I am happy.

There is a lot of in my life to be happy about. A lot that I enjoy, look forward to, and expect to continue looking forward to. However, I also feel sad, frustrated, angry, disappointed, scared, and confused. It's perfectly normal to have a wide range of emotions, to have good days and bad days. I experienced all these emotions before the accident, so it should not come as a surprise that I am experiencing them after the accident.

I think the biggest difference, though, is the time factor. Before my injury, my negative emotions were finite. Adversity would come, but I also knew it soon would go. Now, I am faced with constant adversity and an unknown sense of when it will end. It's an adjustment I continue to learn to deal with and accept.

However, I have come to realize that acceptance does not mean I have settled. I won't settle until I get to where I want to be.

But, on my journey, I still have the right to be happy and enjoy the things life has to offer. In many ways, I enjoy them more. A lot of people have told me my happiness is of concern to them. I appreciate the concern but I share the same hope that my family and friends are happy as well.

As the saying goes, "We are all our own window through which we see the world."

I hope we always see happiness in addition to the many other emotions and challenges we all face.

HAVE YOURSELF A ROBERT SCHULLER CHRISTMAS

“Tough times don’t last. But tough people do.”
– Robert Schuller

Northeast Ohio finally succumbed to the seasonal weather. Over a short period of time, four inches of the white stuff managed to blanket the ground and the temperature plummeted. Less than 48 hours later it was a completely different scene. Not a flurry was to be seen. Green grass, scattered with leaves, and a partially sunlit sky. Any evidence of a winter storm was nonexistent. My, how quickly things can change.

The weather can be somewhat akin to the adversity we face in our lives. At times we might feel as if things are too much, pressing and wearing us down, with no end in sight. And then a quick minute later we find ourselves in a completely different situation and mindset. What may have seemed insurmountable one second, now seems like a distant memory.

Some might call this bipolar. I call it a fact of life.

Inevitably, it happens to all of us, and it happens often. We experience good days and bad days, sometimes without any meaningful explanation of their random order. There are times when the challenges at hand require a significant amount of mental fortitude and perseverance to push on through. At times it’s much easier to accept the role of victim rather than believe we are the master of our destiny. But we are the masters of our own attitudes.

Tough times will find us. No one is immune from life’s adversities. However, as we all know, things do change, often for the better or at least for the more manageable. Sometimes it is a direct result of our deliberate actions, while other times it may simply be a result of the passage of time. And then lo and behold, another storm finds us. We will all be forced to weather (pun intended) several storms throughout our lives. Fortunately, we have the ability to adopt the proper mindset to confront those storms. We just need to make the active decision to do so. It’s not always easy, but I’d venture to say it’s always better than the alternative of focusing on the dark clouds.

It’s Christmastime. A time for God, family and friends. A time for love. It can be a difficult time for those who have lost ones they’ve loved. All the more reason to appreciate the ones we still have. The ones who may help us through those storms. The ones whom we may help through their storms.

MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM BILL MURRAY

As I've gotten older, it seems that December 25th arrives earlier each year. Perhaps because when younger, we're obsessed with the anticipation of what's to come, which inevitably seems to slow things down. Our focus is not misplaced on the commercial side of things, or the busyness that consumes the holidays. Rather, we choose to relish in the joy and wonderment this special day brings with it.

Sometimes it's nice to remember what Christmas is truly about. This time of year can also be difficult, as it tends to highlight the emptiness we may feel in our hearts due to loved ones we have lost. That is why God has sent us His son, Jesus. To fill the void in our hearts and fill our lives with that joy and wonderment we had as a child. He is here to give us all the peace we seek. Yes, it's good to remember what Christmas is really about.

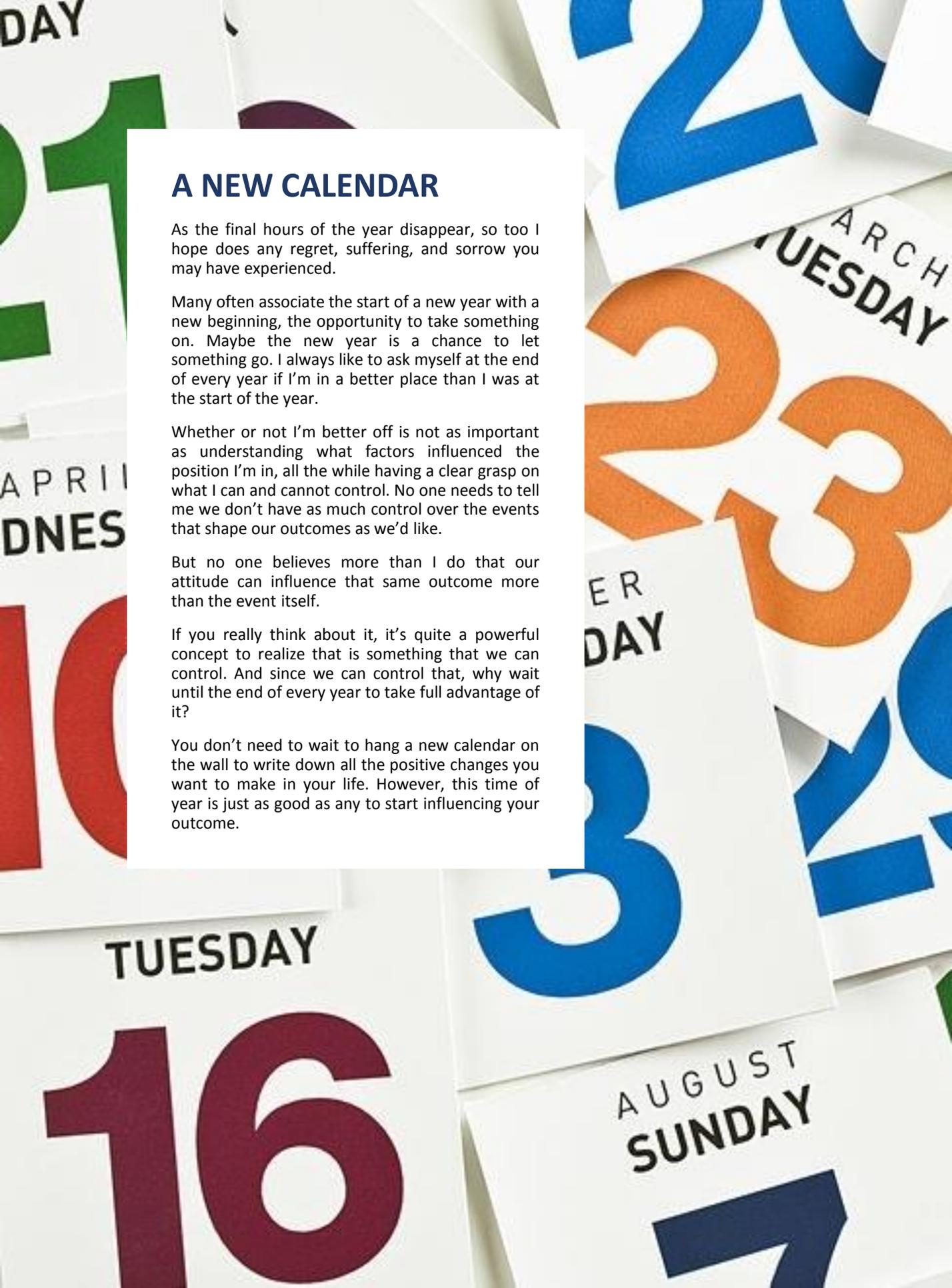
Finally, I'm sure we are all aware of the suffering and injustice that exists in the world. One only needs to watch the news or read the paper for a grim reminder. But we should not lose sight of the greater amount of kindness and decency that surrounds us. This is a great time of the year for us to be reminded of that.

In the words of Bill Murray, from, *Scrooged*: "It's Christmas Eve! The one night of the year when we all act a little nicer. We smile a little easier. We cheer a little more. For a couple of hours out of the whole year, we are the people that we always hoped we would be. There are people who are having trouble making their miracle happen. There are people who don't have enough to eat. There are people who are cold. You can go out and say hello to these people. You can take an old blanket out of the closet and give it to them, or make them a sandwich.

If you give, then it can happen. The miracle can happen to you. It's not just the poor and hungry, it's everybody who's got to have this miracle. And it can happen tonight for all of you. If you believe in this spirit thing, the miracle will happen and then you'll want it to happen again tomorrow. You won't be a person who says, 'Christmas is once a year and it's a fraud.' It's not! It can happen every day, you've just got to want that feeling. And if you like it and you want it, you'll get greedy for it! You'll want it every day of your life. And it can happen to you. I believe in it now! I believe it's going to happen to me now! I'm ready for it! And it's great! It's a good feeling, it's really better than I've felt in a long time. I'm ready.

Have a Merry Christmas, everybody!"





A NEW CALENDAR

As the final hours of the year disappear, so too I hope does any regret, suffering, and sorrow you may have experienced.

Many often associate the start of a new year with a new beginning, the opportunity to take something on. Maybe the new year is a chance to let something go. I always like to ask myself at the end of every year if I'm in a better place than I was at the start of the year.

Whether or not I'm better off is not as important as understanding what factors influenced the position I'm in, all the while having a clear grasp on what I can and cannot control. No one needs to tell me we don't have as much control over the events that shape our outcomes as we'd like.

But no one believes more than I do that our attitude can influence that same outcome more than the event itself.

If you really think about it, it's quite a powerful concept to realize that is something that we can control. And since we can control that, why wait until the end of every year to take full advantage of it?

You don't need to wait to hang a new calendar on the wall to write down all the positive changes you want to make in your life. However, this time of year is just as good as any to start influencing your outcome.