

The human spirit is resilient and hungry



By Holly Caudill (May 1999)

People work their entire lives trying to achieve greatness while completely missing the miracle and power of the human spirit. The human spirit is highly sophisticated and incredibly resilient. It knows no boundaries and is capable of facing any challenge, including a broken heart, broken bones, broken homes and broken lives. Our spirits are our most powerful and reliable source of strength, and they will instinctively pull us through and push us forward. The only thing that is required of us is that we must take action.

The night that I became a quadriplegic, I was a passenger in a van that left the road at 70 miles an hour and plummeted down a 250 ft. cliff. When the smoke cleared and the dust settled, the paramedics found me lying on the floor of the van, unable to speak, and my lungs were quickly filling up with blood.

As the hand of God guided me through that night and the days that followed, my spirit urged me to keep breathing and fighting to stay alive. I was barely conscious but can vividly remember the faint insistence to stay alive that came from somewhere deep in my soul. It was that same insistence that eventually gave me the strength to get out of bed and face what was left of my life.

It took me weeks, maybe even months before I could even talk about the fact that I was permanently paralyzed from the neck down. I knew that I wanted to live, but I had no idea how to live life now that I was encased in the hopelessness of a wheelchair. Everything seemed senseless and chaotic. Its only now, years later, that I'm able to look back and marvel at the way it was all coming together while I was falling apart.

My life was filling up with a unique and powerful blend of remarkable people who would become my support system, extended family and life line for years to come. Among those who began to make regular appearances were influential cousins, who would eventually carry the day with their fundraising efforts so that I could pay for college and law school. There was also a Catholic priest, Fr John Hurley, who gave me a full scholarship to attend the only Jesuit high school in Spokane. He also delivered the best friend I would ever have to my bedside and taught me how to make miracles happen in my life. In addition to all of that, he taught me the most important lesson of all, which is the gift of charity toward others.

There were also community leaders and service groups who modified our home so that it would be accessible and assisted us financially when we learnt that there would be no monetary settlement from the accident. The owner of the van had declared bankruptcy shortly before I was injured in addition to the fact that insurance wasn't required by law at the time of my accident.

Things couldn't have been any worse from my perspective, however, the reality is that they couldn't have been any better. I had gained so much support that I had every opportunity to make my life work. The only thing that held me back was that I remained devastated and had a horrible attitude about myself and everything around me. I didn't care that I kept my dad up all night while I cried, his mental or physical well being never crossed my mind. I think I would have driven him to a breakdown if it hadn't been for his strong friendship with Fr John.

I'm painfully aware that after sustaining such a traumatic and life changing injury, heartbreak is not only inevitable, its understandable. However, the fact that I refused to move beyond the pain during the first couple of years after the accident, could and would have ruined everything for me, regardless of how understandable it was.

Having no appreciation for anything anyone was doing for me, I refused to go back to school in a wheelchair. No one could convince me that becoming educated was the only chance I had to accomplish anything until another unforgettable key player arrived on the scene. Along with the full scholarship to Gonzaga prep came my freshman counselor, sister Marion Joseph whose reputation preceded her.

She had never been pushed around or manipulated by any student, and she wasn't about to make an exception in my case. She was rotund woman who was just as intimidating mentally as she was physically. She described herself as reasonable when she agreed to tape my classes and allow me to listen to them at home during the first semester of my freshman year. She agreed to this only under the condition that I would return to school at the beginning of the second semester.

I remember thinking, "I'm not going to do this, I'm too depressed and she'll never know the difference anyway." So, I instructed my attendant to throw the tapes away and I didn't think about it at all until the day that she personally delivered my final exams for that semester. I was so scared that I couldn't even offer an excuse for not having studied. I had to tell her why I couldn't take the exams. Her reaction was worse than anything I could have anticipated. During her tirade my depression was transformed into fear and I agreed to go back to school and make up every assignment that had ended up in my garbage can.

Nothing could have been as humiliating or heart breaking as facing my dad the next morning. I could tell that he was still upset because of the disgust in his voice when he ordered me to have my attendant dress me because he was taking me to school that very morning. I made one final attempt to not go back to school by crying quietly as he drove my attendant and I to the high school. As we arrived I pitifully told him that anyone in my condition had no use for any education, to which he responded, growing that I would need all of the education I could get, especially in my condition, because someday I would have to get a job. I was so shocked that I remember wondering if he was drunk. A job?? I kept repeating.

Of course I then immediately demanded that he tell me just what kind of a job he thought I would be able to get with this private Catholic education I was being forced into. He quickly retorted by mentioning judge Ben, a family friend who had been a victim of polio and overcome it all to become a Washington state court of appeals

judge at which point, I told him that lawyers and judges were academic nerds and I would never be either one. One of life's sweetest ironies took place over fifteen years later, when judge Ben participated as one of three judges who swore me in as an attorney and member of the Washington state bar association.

My dad died after I had completed my first year in law school, but on the day that I became an attorney, I felt his presence and realized all over again how hard it must have been for him to drive away and leave me alone to start my long but successful academic career

As the years have passed I've come to realize what my dad and Fr John tolerated during my teenage years. They gave me so much love and only asked in return for me to find happiness. On one particular occasion when I was moping around the house, complaining that my life was worthless my dad and Fr John suggested that I become involved in preps campus ministry community service. My attitude about community service wasn't any better than it had been about returning to school. Instead of coaxing me into helping others, my dad called the head of the campus ministry department and before I knew it I was on the committee for the annual food drive. I was certain it would ruin my life and my reputation but I had a blast. I could never have imagined how wonderful it is to be the giver instead of the recipient of someone else's time, efforts and money.

Opening myself up to an education was truly my most effective vehicle back into the world. However, my formal education would mean very little without the benefit of the emotional and spiritual lessons that the uniqueness of my life has given me the opportunity to experience.

Among the many pearls of wisdom that I have acquired since my accident, none is more precious than the knowledge that any of us can change the course of our lives at any time. To actually be capable of drastically changing the circumstances in which we live is superior to any power that can be obtained with money or social status. It can't be begged borrowed or stolen, it can only be discovered through much insight and at times, even painful soul searching.

The realization that I possessed the power to change my life became apparent to me in several different stages. At first, there was only the vague knowledge that I had somehow continued to breathe when I should have died. Then there were the friendships that continued to emerge even though I felt socially awkward. Ultimately, Throughout college and law school I learned that I could defy the status quo and accomplish those things that others said would be impossible.

Personal power is the key that unlocked every door that was ever closed to me. My desire to reach any of my goals would have been virtually useless without a commitment. Becoming an attorney was something that I wanted so badly that I could feel it burning inside of me. For the first time since the accident, it didn't matter if I was sick or cold or discouraged, I was going to become an attorney. Even after the first year of law school, when I was exhausted to the point of being physically sick and my dad died, I refused to let go.

Finally five years after setting the goal of becoming an attorney I finished law school. On the day that I graduated from law school I was stunned when I was presented with an award that had been established in my name. The award acknowledged my perseverance and determination to make it through, against all of the odds. The Holly Caudill award will be passed on to future graduates who basically go through at least as much hell as I went through while pursuing a juris doctorate in law.

As rewarding as graduation had been, there was yet another day that my efforts and accomplishments were celebrated. That was the day that I became an assistant United States attorney in a private swearing in ceremony which took place in the federal court house in Spokane.

I felt like I was in a dream, as Washington state supreme court justice Richard Guy told me that instead of cursing the night, I had chosen to reach out and touch a star and that because of that decision, everyone who was sitting in that packed court room could also reach out and touch a star, because I was in their lives and they could touch me and be a part of my life and happiness.

After judge Ben administered the oath in which I solemnly swore to protect and defend the constitution and laws of the United States, the United States attorney stood up and read a letter that I had received from Janet Reno, welcoming me to the department of justice and congratulating me on everything I had done.

Because of that day and so many other remarkable days in my life since, I can tell you that without a doubt, dreams do come true if you work hard enough for them. You alone are the determining factor in exactly how your life will turn out and the best part about that is, you can be successful as many times as you want to. You'll never fail as long as you're striving toward something worthwhile.

Where you begin is irrelevant. It's where you're going that counts. Discouragement will come and go, but holding on to the pain can be deadly. Prolonged sorrow can cloud your vision and rob you of all of your hope. At the tender age of ten, my mothers suicide gave me a close look at what happens when the sacrifice ourselves and our lives for what could, should or would have been only if... We finish that sentence with a million different things, but it doesn't change anything. Instead, we have to continue to look forward at the things that can and will be, if we can just hold on through the pain and doubt when things become overwhelming and unfair. Life isn't perfect for anyone, and we all experience heartache, but we really do owe it to ourselves and those who love us and count on us to give it everything we've got.

Whenever I start to loose my way and my doubts become bigger than my dreams, I think about my cousin Colleen, who is actually more a sister than a cousin. Just as I had passed the bar, Colleen was diagnosed with the deadliest form of melanoma that there is. Colleen had one of two ways that she could handle what many believed would be the end of her life. It was either despair or dignity and she had to choose. She handled that life threatening disease with more dignity than I've ever seen in a person, including myself.

Colleen was amazing to watch as she faced the possibility of death and defied it. She was amazing to watch from the day that she was diagnosed, through the relentless assaults on her body that the treatments inflicted, right up to the end when she declared herself a cancer survivor. That day miraculously came after a full year of the self administered interferon shots which caused her to lose most of her hair and a lot of weight, but it never took her spirit to fight nor did it break her will to live.

I had never seen so much of myself in another person until I watched her flatly refuse to die after which she instructed all of us to not even entertain the possibility of death. With all of the statistics against her surviving, she lived each day as she always had, positive and enthusiastic. She had two boys to raise and she wasn't leaving them and that was that!

Colleen's goal was not to mock the medical community. However, the fact remains that the human spirit and a positive attitude can triumph over an illness for which there is no cure and rarely survival. How long will it take us to believe that we're born with everything that we need to become anyone and overcome anything?

We spend our lives in fear because we're so certain that we could never handle going through cancer or becoming disabled. The fact of the matter is that we can handle anything that presents itself in our lives. The very day that the doctors told Colleen that her chances of survival were minimal, she promised herself that she wasn't leaving those boys. She and her husband moved across the state, she set new goals and worked on them daily while tolerating the biggest dose of Interferon anyone had been on. Most people would have thrown in the towel, but not my cousin! She got up everyday with her kids and instead of being mad at God and the world, she continued to love abundantly and even encouraged others.

Colleen is and has always been positive and enthusiastic about her life, her family and the world around her and I believe that those are the ingredients that make a person capable of handling whatever comes their way. How many miracles do we have to witness before we accept that there is only one way for good things to come into our lives, and that is for good things to come out of our lives.

There are no shortcuts. As nice as it would be, they just don't exist. Don't waste your money on books that tell you you'll be rich in 5 minutes or happy in 10 minutes or and skinny in three days. It's not going to happen without hard work and people are capitalizing on your fantasy that it will. The statement get rich quick is an oxymoron. The only way to get anything worthwhile is to work for it.

I see people everyday who refuse to accept that wealth and success happen slowly and require constant work and commitment. A life of crime may include easy money but it's risky business and eventually ends in either a jail cell or grave yard.

Presently, I work in border crimes as an intake attorney. What that means is that each morning I wait for case agents from border patrol, DEA and INS to bring me copies of complaints against defendants who were arrested overnight. After reviewing the files I go to court where all of the defendants are arraigned, and without fail fifteen to twenty defendants are ushered into court every single morning. Ninety percent of these guys are couriers for drug cartels who got busted trying to smuggle drugs into the United States. Most of them are Mexican nationals who are struggling to support their families and its there first offense. There sorry and remorseful but it's too little too late, their lives are ruined.

One of the most devastating cases I ever prosecuted was a college basketball star who was headed for the NBA until he was arrested smuggling steroids into the United States. That's an incredible future to throw away. The judge was really hard on him because unlike many other first timers, he wasn't desperate to feed his family, he was looking for an easier way and he got it alright. He never has to break a sweat again, at least not on the basketball court. It's times like that when it's hard not to turn to the defendant and ask "what were you thinking? And how could you do this to your parents? And how could you do this to yourself?". It's frustrating to watch people sabotage their lives and forfeit their futures.

For a very long time after my accident I would have given anything for what I perceived as a normal life. I didn't want to be different, especially from the neck down. I longed to be a normal teenager who could do normal things. Again, it was years later that it became apparent to me that there is no such thing as a normal life. Have you ever noticed that people always place quotation marks around the word normal. That's because

“normal” doesn’t exist. I discovered in law school that the quote normal life unquote is analogous to the quote reasonable person unquote. There is no such thing as a reasonable person. It’s a legal term describing the perfect person in society who conducts themselves in a perfect manner avoiding all negligence so that no one gets injured or killed. It’s a legal fiction.

Although there is no perfectly reasonable person, the word and concept of the reasonable person is extremely valuable to an attorney, just as the word normal is of utmost importance to a teenager. A lawyer defending a client has a specific definition of reasonable and I’m sure that during my teenage adjustment to becoming a quadriplegic I must have had a specific definition of exactly what normal would be, although I can’t remember now exactly what it was. However, I prayed, hoped and longed to be normal. It was the most important thing in my life. Ironically, I now spend time feeling extremely blessed and grateful that God didn’t grant my request because what I really wanted was to have an extraordinary life, and after all of this time, through the heartache to the hope, from the wreckage of the van to the United States attorneys office and from the depths of despair to the anxious and open arms of my family and friends, I have achieved the extraordinary.