

BIPOLARIZED

BIPOLAR PARALYZED NIRVANA

ADAM HELBLING

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DEDICATION

When my grandma passed just several months ago that was the end of her life here on Earth, but it was the start of something greater where I felt her strength within me. And I knew, from that moment forward that with her in the heavens and me on the ground, we were ready to set out to do something truly special. Her passing marked the moment where I felt a guardian angel in my life guiding my every move. Guiding every conversation for the greater good. Guiding everything that I said, wrote, and set out to do each day. You would think life would get more difficult without someone, but now I absolutely feel her within me.

With her passing, I became more driven. I am writing this book in her memory because I feel that she is the one pushing me to put each word down. Whatever legacy is left behind when I leave, I will have to attribute it to a great deal of her guidance behind me. She always believed in me so much and was always so proud of me.

Now today, exactly eight years after the accident that left me paralyzed, I sit here writing in her legacy. Everything that I have fought for in the last eight years and everything that she fought for her entire life has led to this moment. The future feels bright because of her presence. The accident was a blessing that led me to do greater good. Yet, now with her by my side, I feel that

she was proud of me while she was on this Earth and was so happy for what I was fighting for, but now she has joined the fight, and together I know that we are going to be an unstoppable force of good for this world.

HOW CAN I POSSIBLY SAY I AM HAPPIER THAN I COULD EVER IMAGINE?

I am paralyzed from a car accident that happened back in January 2011 during a manic episode, yet I would let the accident happen over again. Because, today, I am happier than I could ever imagine. You probably all have the same question: How could I possibly say I am happier than I could ever imagine? I mean, I'm paralyzed, and I've said it before - that if I could go back and change the accident I wouldn't. It's due in fact to the direction that my life has gone due to my disability and everything that I have learned from having a disability that has internally made me more grateful for life. I am more grateful because I know how horrific the crash was and I am alive today to speak about it. I am also more grateful because I know the direction my life was going, and the accident and my disability sent me in a completely different direction.

Do I wish that the accident did not leave me paralyzed? No, I do not. The reason being is that paralysis has taught me patience. The wheelchair constantly reminds me of everything that I went through and is a constant reminder that I am lucky to be alive. The wheelchair has been a powerful tool to get people to listen to what I am trying to prevent them from doing. The fact is that nobody wants to be in a wheelchair. I guess you could

say nobody except me, but I know many people that are paralyzed that also believe that their disability was the best thing that ever happened to them. We see the world from a different perspective. We have more gratitude for the people around us because of our loss of independence. It makes us appreciate people more because we cannot live without the help of others. Sometimes we can live on our own, but help is very much appreciated because it makes life much easier. Yet there are those with disabilities that want and can do everything on their own.

Now, what if the accident had never happened? What path would I have gone down? There is no correct answer. I just know the path that I was going down was not the right one, but I do know the path that I am on now is for the greater good. The path that I am on now has a purpose. I have been able to help countless people and get people to think differently about their lives. I feel that people who see me smiling, see it as much more powerful than coming from the average person. It shows people that you can be happy regardless of your situation. It makes people think about their own lives and question their own happiness.

I am also happy because of the people that I have had the opportunity to meet because of my disability. I have met so many amazing disabled human beings that are living life to the fullest. I have a much greater understanding of the disability community and I have been a huge self-advocate for people with disabilities. I am very outspoken, and I have fought for what these

people need. Not enough people with disabilities speak up for what they need so I am happy to be in the position to fight for them. I have met people with disabilities better off than me and many times worse off than me. Even for those worse off than me, I have seen them live happy productive lives and go on to do truly special things. I have also seen those with disabilities be very bitter and angry about their situation. This is no different than the rest of society. We all must be happy and make the best of what we can do with the cards we are dealt.

The wheelchair has been a powerful tool to meet new people. I am constantly asked by random strangers what happened to me which often leads to an interesting and open conversation about mental illness. The conversations are eye-opening to myself and to the person that I am talking to. I meet so many more people because I am in a wheelchair than before because of the curiosity that it sparks. It is a conversation starter and it makes life more interesting when you are wandering down the street and random strangers want to talk to you. I feel that people remember me more because of the wheelchair and of the stories I share. I have so many people that know me by name at convenience stores, gas stations, random shops, and even drive-thru restaurants because it is not every day that you see someone driving a van from a wheelchair.

We all want to leave a legacy behind and be remembered. Living with a severe physical disability and having an extremely positive outlook on life has

gotten people to take notice of me. People have looked to me for answers on how to be happy, and I have been very willing and happy to be their guide. I can never look back and think about what “if”? What if the accident never happened? The reason for this is because it did happen, and I feel that it happened for a reason. The accident helped me find my purpose and led me down a better path and for that, I am truly grateful. Our lives are going to go in different directions, and we cannot change the past so why ask the question what if? Just be truly grateful that you are still along for the ride and enjoy the ride however long is left.

LIFE NOW

Never in my wildest dreams or nightmares (some would think) did I ever see true happiness coming from paralysis. But the story unfolded and started off rough, but each day I grew stronger and stronger, learning lessons through adversity which turned out to be my greatest teacher.

Stability was tough to come by considering the life-altering spinal cord injury on top of the fact that I am severely bipolar. So how is it today that I am writing a book about how I found true happiness? It is because once you have been through Hell and back and you have had every possible scenario thrown your way, you are ready to handle absolutely anything. Nothing bothers me today. People try to bring me down, but it does not work. I love wholeheartedly and I dream big. I never imagined a life of mediocrity. I have always known that I had a purpose. It just took a great deal of Hell in my life to find what it was.

You may not believe that you have a purpose or that we are supposed to have a purpose, but I 100% believe that I was put on this Earth for a reason. I was put on this Earth as a messenger of hope to spread happiness to those that are struggling. To make people believe that no matter where they are at in life they can still rise up and live with a smile on their face. I know this because I have seen it unfold in the last seven years of my life. I

have seen it through my speaking and my writing or just my day-to-day interactions. The struggles I have faced have all been worth it because now all the adversity that I had to overcome has shown me how to use those lessons to teach other people not to go down the same path that I went down to find true happiness. I am a tool for prevention.

Paralysis is life now and this is the best life I could ever imagine. There is too much in life to celebrate now. Too much to be thankful for. There is no room for self-pity. I see it all around me - living at a place for the severely disabled - and I just know it gets you nowhere. A lot of my neighbors spite me for being happy all of the time, but happiness is one thing you cannot take away from me. I have come too far to go back to the dark places that I once was in.

BEAUTY

People like to say, “Why me?” all of the time. I see it every day and I have been stuck there before. Self-pity is not attractive to anyone. It drives people away. After a while, you will find yourself in a lonely dark place. The people that love you come to a point where they no longer know how to help you. They no longer know what to say to you to make you happy. That is because happiness comes from within; and if you are not happy with yourself, then you are not going to find it anywhere else.

People rely on others way too much to find happiness. They believe that a relationship will find them true happiness. That, if they have not found the “one,” then they will never be happy. I do not necessarily believe in having another half. We, by ourselves, are a whole so there is no other half to you that is going to make you whole. Life can be magnificent even if you are single. You should never have to rely on another person to be truly happy. You can be in a relationship and still be miserable. You can give 100% of yourself to that other person, but then what is left for you? Nothing.

I have been single for a very long time now, pretty much my whole life and I feel like I have reached nirvana. It is because I love myself which is not a selfish thing to do. True love comes from within. You can have many people that love you, but if you do not

truly love yourself, then you will never experience true love. Loving yourself is accepting all your flaws and imperfections, looking at the greater picture, and seeing what makes you, you. The perfect you even though no one is perfect, but you can keep pushing yourself to be the perfect version of yourself. Because you were designed to be just that, you. Only you can be you.

Love is such a powerful force of good. You can love yourself, but you must also have love for what you have, for the world around you, and for other people in your life. Gratitude is key when it comes to love. If you are not grateful for what you have or for the people you have in your life, then you will never understand love. You must start by being grateful for the person that you see when you look in the mirror. There is no one else like you. When you look in the mirror, you must be grateful that you were created to be the person that you are seeing. But even if you do not see outer beauty, which you should because of you are a unique creation, you need to be able to look at yourself and see what makes you beautiful not just on the outside, but also on the inside because beauty comes from within.

I used to stand tall and be in perfect physical shape with bright blonde hair, blue eyes, a six pack and a perfect body. At the time, I thought physical beauty was so important. I spent hours in the gym every day. But now I sit here in my wheelchair with a big belly and a body that is hardly functional, and I see so much more beauty in myself. It is because I have let go of believing that physical beauty is of so much importance. I started

working on myself inwardly and what I believe now is that the mind is much more powerful than the body. A beautiful mind can lead to a beautiful life. We can do so much more with our minds and our voices and our actions than we can with our physical appearance. What I truly believe now is the best way to help yourself is to help others. We still must take care of ourselves first, but there is so much satisfaction in giving. You do not have to give anything of monetary value to help another person. Think of anything in your life that you have had to overcome and think of the lessons that adversity has taught you. If you can apply those lessons and teach them to others, then you can prevent them from suffering like you once did.

Adversity is the greatest teacher in life and, if you can learn from it, that is how you will become truly beautiful on the inside. If you can use it as a tool to help others, then you can spread love. Life gets difficult. We all know that. But if something difficult is thrown your way don't just complain about it or dwell on it. Deal with it and learn from it. Then move on and embrace the lesson you learned, but also prepare yourself for more adversity. It is a constant cycle that we go through, but we cannot let anything in life break us. If you can let the little things go and just treat mistakes as lessons, then you will more appreciate the finer moments in life and you will be more prepared to appreciate them.

I hate when I talk to people and it might be just 8 AM and they are already saying they are having a bad day. At this point, you are just setting yourself up for failure. You clearly are not looking at the bigger picture. You clearly are not being grateful for what you must be grateful for in your life. You are letting those small moments of adversity beat you from the second you open your eyes. You must appreciate each day from the moment you wake up till the time you close your eyes at night. Each day is going to have its ups and downs, but focus on the high points in your day and only learn from the lows.

When I was first paralyzed, all I focused on was walking again and getting back to my physical self. Then, another quadriplegic told me that only dreaming of walking again to be happy is like being able to walk and only dreaming of flying to be happy. I realized from this that we must be grateful with what we have. We must be grateful for the cards we are dealt; and no matter what hand we are dealt, we can still live life in abundance. I eventually became content living life in a wheelchair and today I would not change a thing. We cannot focus on what we do not have or cannot do. We can only focus on what is in front of us and what is possible in that very moment in time. Life is beautiful regardless of our circumstances. We just must truly appreciate the small things that make our lives beautiful.

VULNERABILITY

If we learn through adversity and find beauty through our struggles, then how do we teach? Vulnerability is something that our society struggles with because our society is so focused on perfection. No one wants to expose their imperfections. We all try to paint this picture-perfect life that we are living. We see it every day through social media. So many people are painting this picture of perfection when really, they are screaming for help from the inside. I have found that because we live in a society that likes to paint this picture of perfection, so many people internalize what they are feeling or what they are struggling with so they feel alone.

If you really want to make a difference in this world, make yourself vulnerable to someone or to others to show them that the world that we live in is not perfect. If you talk about a mistake that you have made and how you have overcome what you had to go through, then it may just resonate with someone else that is dealing with a similar circumstance. This is where people start to open up and conversations begin.

This “perfect” society that we live in has created so many different stigmas. Especially when it comes to mental health. When people feel like they are the only one struggling with something they are not going to

open up to anyone about it, but rather they are going to internalize it and the problem is going to get worse.

When I speak to large audiences or individuals I always open up about my experiences with mental illness. I am completely open about everything I have been through. I am an open book. Most of the world is not like this, so for them to hear someone talk so openly about something they may be so shameful about, it many times gives them the courage to open up for the first time in their life.

Very often, I present to large audiences of middle school and high school students. At the end of each presentation, I always have a line of students that come up to me to shake my hand, thank me, or wait to tell me something truly personal. I can always notice those students sitting at the end of the line and see on their faces that they are struggling, but they are finally ready to talk. So many students have opened up to me about their struggles and have shared with me things that they have shared with no one else. It is because they no longer feel alone. They realize they are not the only ones that feel the way they do or have done the things they have done.

I have helped many people, sometimes teenagers, that needed psychiatric treatment; and when they get to the point that they must go to the psych ward, I am always there to visit. I do not just visit with the one person that I am trying to help. I always open up to the other teenagers who are struggling. I have found them telling

me things that they have never told anyone before. This is all while they are surrounded by professionals who are there to help who are waiting to hear the exact same secrets that they just confided in me. I feel that the reason a lot of people do not open up to professionals in the mental health field is that they feel that they cannot relate to what they are struggling with. People are much more likely to open up to someone who has been through what they are going through. Vulnerability is the key to getting people to open up and is the key to starting conversations to get people to seek help and start talking about real issues.

We are in a mental health crisis because I feel that not enough people are opening up about their struggles. With so many people keeping quiet, it just brings more silence and more stigma and more shame. People need to realize that they are not alone when it comes to mental illness. One in four people has a mental illness, yet no one feels like they can relate to anyone else. If 25% of our population were talking about how they truly feel on the inside when it comes to their mental illness, then there would not be so much internalization, and people would feel compelled to join in on the conversation. We will never get to that point where everyone with a mental illness is talking about their struggles openly, but if we slowly raise the percentage, then we will have a nationwide support group and a group of people that no longer feel isolated from the rest of society.

I strongly encourage you if you have made it or are getting by while living with a mental illness to make yourself vulnerable and open up about mental illness. It is the only way that we are going to get people the proper treatment they need because they will finally realize that you can get better and people will want to get better because they will realize there is hope to get better. Keep in mind, though, when I talk about making yourself vulnerable that it is not just mental health where we can all make a difference. Chances are something you have struggled with and overcome is something that someone else is going through right now. So, no matter what the struggle be open about it so that one person screaming out for help has their new guide to help them through their journey.

THE STRUGGLE OF BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is known as the “CEO disease” and living with it firsthand I can tell you why that is true. It is not something I am shameful of, it is something that I embrace because it has pushed me to new heights. We are visionaries who see the world differently. We have grandiose ideas that we feel we must follow through with. We want so badly for those ideas to come to fruition because we feel that they will change the world.

We feel that we must stand for more because, no matter what we accomplish, it feels as if it is never enough. Sometimes, a manic high will sweep us off our feet, but that is when creativity is highest and a rampage of ideas starts flowing through our minds. Of course, we can become completely illogical and go as far as having delusions of grandeur. Although, once we come back to reality, there are some things that we thought of when we were in that irrational state of mind that we dwell on because some very good ideas do come to you during mania.

Un-medicated or un-diagnosed, we can fall into periods of depression because we feel that the life we are living is inadequate. Even medicated, it is very hard to find the proper balance to create normal brain chemistry that makes us function like the rest of society. The struggle to find the right combination of medications, many times, leads to people giving up on medications

altogether. Trying to find the right medications for your brain chemistry for bipolar disorder can sometimes take years. Through this frustrating process, so many times people will just say that medications do not work. Then they tend to go back to self-medicating through things such as marijuana, which can be helpful with depression. However, in some cases, such as mine, where I had a full-blown psychotic break and thought I was Jesus, it can lead to just that - delusions of grandeur. So self-medicating is very dangerous. Often though many people think it is the only way out.

Self-medicating and drug abuse are so common with bipolar disorder because people who are bipolar have extremely addictive personalities. Something like smoking marijuana for someone with bipolar disorder can be as hard as a habit to kick as cigarettes if you do not have a mental health disorder. We are impulsive and always want more. We go on spending sprees and many people end up filing for bankruptcy. We want more sex. We do risky things and things that are out of the ordinary. Euphoria sweeps us off our feet and we become energetic, talkative, and our thoughts race every night. We become very energetic and feel the need for less sleep because there is just way too much to do.

On the other end of bipolar is depression. In a manic low, I have had periods of depression that lasted for months. No matter how good that I had it in life, I had absolutely no self-esteem. I had so many friends, yet I felt lonely as if I were the only one alive. I would feel

worthless and feel as if my life was no longer worth living. You would think it would be easier to sleep the day away, but sometimes your racing thoughts of depression keep you up all night. I used to stare at the clock every night and stress every hour that would pass before my alarm clock would go off because I was worried about something as simple as just getting a good night's sleep.

Sleep is the best medicine when it comes to mental illness, and even if you are properly medicated you still need sleep. The first time I went full-blown manic was when the anxieties of my actions from my manic phase kept me awake for six days straight. This was the first time I had a psychotic break and suffered from delusions of grandeur. After three and a half days without sleep, you can go into a psychotic state. Sleep is sometimes hard to come by when you are manic, but it is crucial. The fact that it is hard to sleep when you are manic is a recipe for disaster.

So many people have such a stigma against medications because they are afraid of side effects or they just do not want someone to know that they are taking them or simply because they do not believe they would help. I do not understand why people do not think of the brain as an organ like the rest of the body. When you have diabetes and you are told to take insulin, you will simply take it - no questions asked. People will go through chemotherapy and radiation to stay alive from cancer, yet people are afraid to take a medication to heal their brain. Having a mental illness just means

there is a chemical imbalance in your brain. So, if you no longer want to feel out of balance, depressed, or out of your mind, you must do something about it. You must find the proper balance of medications to be able to live a normal, happy, and healthy life.

The feeling of being in a full-blown manic high is the best feeling you are going to get. It is like the ultimate drug and being that people with bipolar disorder love to feel high, it is sometimes a feeling that we chase. Sometimes, people will stay away from medications and suffer through the depression because they are waiting for the mania to sweep them off their feet. When you are full-blown manic, it is like your brain is operating at 100%. I have been there where I could turn absolutely everything into a sign from God. After my accident, still believing I was Jesus Christ, I thought that every song ever was written for me as guidelines of how I was going to take over this world. I could take any lyric and make it have meaning. It makes listening to music or watching television an absolute blast. When you share the signs with other people that are mentally stable you cannot comprehend how they do not understand the signs you are showing them.

I say that you should speak up when you are struggling, but there is one other problem when it comes to mania. When you are manic, you do not realize you have a problem. In those manic highs everyone else may realize you have a problem, but to you, there is absolutely nothing wrong. The spending is fun. The drugs are fun. The sex is great. Life is great when you

are manic, and you do not want that period of euphoria to end. You may just think your life is it an all-time high when really you are spiraling into an all-time low. It is the people around you that realize that you have a problem. Yet, if this has been your behavior for years and you have gone undiagnosed or they do not know about your diagnosis then they just may think that this is just the type of person that you are. You may go off to college, as an example, and your new friends may not know what your regular self is like. So, if you have a close friend spiraling out of control, then reach out to a family member back home and let them know what is going on. This way the person can seek treatment before it is too late. Before they reach that full-blown manic high that leads to hospitalization where it may take weeks or months for them to get their mind back. Sometimes people never can even come back to reality.

One of the most devastating parts of bipolar disorder is that it is hard to diagnose until you have a full-blown manic episode. People may not be diagnosed until their first suicide attempt. They may not be diagnosed until they have a full-blown manic high and do something dangerous like I did - like get behind the wheel of a car and crash going 120 mph leading to paralysis. Sometimes we do not notice that something is wrong with someone or that they are struggling and then we lose people to suicide. Our society needs to have a better understanding of the signs and symptoms of a manic phase to get people the proper treatment before it becomes too late and something drastic happens. More

importantly, if you are struggling you need to open up to someone right away. Do not internalize your struggles because you are loved and there is hope for you.

I am truly grateful to be stable these days. It took a lot of work to find stability. The first year after my accident, I worked with my psychiatrist once a week to figure out the proper medications. Most people are not this committed. Also, unfortunately, insurance does not usually cover this type of treatment and there are too many barriers with insurance to get people with mental health disorders the type of treatment they need. Just one of my antipsychotics without insurance would cost \$800 a month. With people getting manic and blowing through paychecks and filing for bankruptcy, insurance is not usually something they can afford. Even with insurance, sometimes it takes months to get into a psychiatrist and you are just written a prescription with no follow-up.

People are sent to the psych ward these days for maybe just three days at a time, and then sent on their way. Three days after a suicide attempt you would think that someone is not ready to face the real world. We need better treatment and better coverage to fight mental illness. We need affordable medication, affordable healthcare, and access to treatment right away. It is going to be a long battle before this mental health crisis is under control. I just urge you to spread awareness and be an advocate for yourself or a loved one with a mental illness, continuing to fight until we get the

proper treatment that we deserve and so desperately need. Most importantly, if you are struggling reach out for help. Never stay silent.

HIGH ON LIFE

I've done my fair share of drugs. I've enjoyed them I must admit. Before I turned 24 years old, I smoked enough pot to keep an elephant baked for a year. But why did I see it was necessary to dabble in drugs? For one thing, I thought it was fun at the time. Although the biggest reason was this: It was an escape. Drugs are the easiest way to escape from reality. Alcohol is the other way to escape from reality. I've been there too. There is so much pain in life that we are compelled to turn to drugs and alcohol for the simple reason that we want to escape from the reality that is our lives. Of course, some people think drugs make life more enjoyable, but do they really?

I have been on both sides of life. For the first six years of my adulthood, I relied on drugs and alcohol to escape, have fun, and get by. For the last eight years of my adulthood, I have been sober. I do have to admit that I have fallen off for a few very short periods of time. I thought up until the age of 24 when I had my accident and learned the hard way I had to stay sober, that I was experiencing true happiness. Although what I realize, now, is that I never experienced true happiness until I found sobriety. I never found true happiness until I realized the power of the mind and just how important it is to keep a clear head. Drugs and alcohol make us go through life in a blur. Do you want to go through your life and remember what you did throughout your life or

do you want to go throughout your life with so many forgotten memories? Through having vivid memories in our lives, we can learn lessons. If you cannot remember what you did the night before then how are you supposed to learn anything?

Life is all about learning from our mistakes. So, keeping a clear head makes us remember our mistakes and allows us to learn from them, transforming us into better human beings. But where's the fun in life if all you are doing is learning? The learning that I am talking about is learning how to live a better life. Learning how to live a fuller life. Learning what our passions are and what makes us truly happy and what makes life enjoyable. Drugs and alcohol may be fun, but they are not passions. And while doing them at the time may be fun, they are not going to create long-lasting memories that you will be proud of long after you're gone. You are just escaping reality and enjoying yourself in the high, but what if you could always enjoy yourself and enjoy yourself in sobriety? What if you felt high even when you were sober? If you can achieve this feeling, then you can achieve true happiness.

Being high on life sounds ridiculous, but it is possible. To be high on life, you must find your true passions. To find your true passions, you must put yourself out there. You can still go to a bar and drink water or a Coke and enjoy yourself with your wasted friends. It sounds difficult, but it is possible. I have been doing it since I quit drinking when I was 21 except for one drunken summer six years back. You do not need to avoid

people that do drugs. You can still laugh at the stupid things that people do or say when they are high. You do not have to hide from our alcohol and drug-induced society. You should not judge people for using drugs or alcohol either. You just need to do your own thing no matter who is surrounding you and no matter how messed up they are. You need to let go and have fun sober. It sounds difficult to do, but it is possible through practice. It is fun being the person the next day that can recall every event from a drunken adventure the night before as the only sober person present. While those people around you forgot what they were doing while they were living, you remembered everything from that night. Would you rather remember your life or forget a lot of it?

Since drugs and alcohol are not the answer to happiness, then what is it? What will make you truly happy and how will you feel truly alive? You learn this through self-discovery. To figure out what makes you feel truly alive, you must go out and try as much as you possibly can to figure out what you like and what you do not like. Once you figure out what you like, continue to do those things until you figure out what you love. Once you figure out what you love, continue to do those things to figure out which one of those things you love makes you feel truly happy. Which one of those things makes you truly feel alive? That is how you are going to find your passions. Then instead of drugs and alcohol and constant partying to escape reality, you can

do those things that you are passionate about that make you feel truly alive and really start to enjoy life.

It takes a strong person to be the only sober one at a party. It takes a very strong person to constantly turn down drinks or drugs. It doesn't *just* take a strong person - it takes a truly happy person. It takes a person who knows they can be happy when they are sober to be able to turn down drugs and alcohol because they know there are better things they can be doing. They know what truly makes them feel alive. They know the passions in their life that make them feel high; that your friends are how you stay high on life. Pursue your passions once you find them through trial and error, and you will never have another dull moment in your life. You will be forever high.

THE PATH LESS TRAVELED

It takes great courage to share your deepest darkest struggles, but the reward in sharing with someone how you have overcome your struggles can be priceless. So now we must put ourselves out there. We must make ourselves be heard. In a world full of billions of people, so many people stay isolated. So many people feel alone. It just doesn't make sense, especially in this day of modern technology when we all are connected through the simple typing on a keyboard.

Technology is one way that we are all connected today, and it is a way that you can reach out to people and make a difference. Although, what we are lacking in society today is actual one-on-one human interaction. There is so much more power in talking to someone face-to-face than through a keyboard. When you talk to someone in person, you can see their facial expressions, their body language and make actual eye contact to show them that you are truly listening to every single word that comes out of their mouth. That is what people want. People need people to listen, and listen intently. We spend way too much time staring at our cell phones these days and not nearly enough time looking people in the eyes of others and making actual connections.

When you open up to somebody in public and share something about yourself, exposing yourself, and making yourself vulnerable, that is how you make true

human interaction. That is how you create connections. Something you say might just create that spark that generates a conversation that can be life-changing. It is amazing how many people I talk to and open up to about being bipolar that generates an extremely powerful conversation. Nearly everybody knows someone with a mental illness or they themselves may have a mental illness. My introduction and openness about bipolar disorder and how it left me in a wheelchair have led to countless conversations about mental illness.

Being in a wheelchair is a powerful tool because when I talk to people about how being bipolar led to the car accident that left me with a life-altering spinal cord injury, it immediately gets people to stop and think. I try not to scare people, but there is some shock value that the wheelchair brings. The shock value usually gets people to open up because it gets people thinking about their own mental health or the mental health of a loved one. They see me and they do not want either themselves or one of the people that they love to end up in my position. Even though I tell people this was the best thing that ever happened to me I know that no one wishes to end up in a wheelchair. So, when I share my story with people, they want to know how they can prevent anything drastic from happening to either themselves or someone they love.

When I crashed my car, I was off my medications for just five days causing me to go full-blown manic and think I was Jesus for the second time. When I tell

people this, they realize the importance of medications. Additionally, when they hear I have had no imbalances whatsoever for seven years now, while living life in a wheelchair with a smile on my face, it makes them understand that medications really do work. Someone that I talk to who has been going on and off medications usually reconsiders, and starts to believe that they should stay on medications because they see my mental stability and they want just that. When you see someone like me living life in a wheelchair happy as can be. Someone who has had to overcome mania, depression and living through hell. People want to know how I keep a smile on my face and how I can possibly say that I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life.

The greatest people I have met on this Earth are those that have been through Hell and back, now living life to the fullest because they know they never want to get back to the dark place they were in before. These people put the past behind them and truly start to live after overcoming extreme adversity. I have met people who have beat the odds of making a full recovery from a spinal cord injury (which is only 0.9% of those that are injured). Many of these people tell themselves to treat life as an adventure after their recovery. They go on to travel the world and change lives with their infectious personalities. It is not just those that beat the odds from any kind of injury, but it is anyone that has had to face extreme adversity and experience the depths of Hell. Those who tell themselves they never want to

live in self-pity, and they want to thrive no matter what their physical or mental circumstances are. These are the people who have the answers to understanding true happiness. They understand both sides of life. They understand pain and suffering AND they understand joy and living life to the fullest. They realize that choosing the latter is the only way to live.

Don't get me wrong, adversity can take people in two different directions. Way too often some people choose to live in self-pity after experiencing something too traumatic for them to handle. Not everyone is built to handle something as life-altering as a spinal cord injury. It does not even have to be a spinal cord injury. Some people could be devastated by just the death of their pet. People grieve in different ways and many people let grief take control of their lives. It is hard for me to see people that cannot leave their grief behind them. Some people, regardless of the perspective you give them, will continue to live a life of misery. Some circumstances, like the death of a child, may seem too hard to overcome, but even that child would hate to look down on you and see you grieve forever. The same thing goes for the loved ones around who see you grieving. They so badly want you to regain the happiness that you once had before the grief set in. They want you to keep living. It is okay to grieve to an extent, but you must still be able to move forward and live a fulfilling life. You just cannot let your grief overcome you so that you cannot move forward.

So, we can choose two paths in our lives: We can either choose to move past our grievances and be grateful for what we have left, or we can choose a life of sorrow and misery. So many people are living in grief. If you are one of those people who has chosen to be grateful despite having to suffer through grief or adversity, then pay it forward and show someone how to live on the path less traveled.

REFLECTION

Happiness is not just a choice, but rather a journey with a destination. Although the feeling of happiness is not going to maintain stability even once you reach that destination of feeling true happiness. Life is always going to have its ups and downs, so the feeling of happiness is something that you are going to have to practice over and over if you want to master it. It is waking up each morning and counting what you must be grateful for. It is going to sleep each night promising, yourself the next day is going to be better than the day you just lived. It is a constant mindset of positivity and belief that life is just damn good. It is looking past the negatives in each day and focusing on the positives. It is practicing how to overcome the negative emotions the day after. In order to live a fulfilling day tomorrow, you must psychologically prepare yourself every night by using what you experienced that day. Each day is a building block of happiness for the next.

Every night before I fall asleep, I reflect on the day in my mind. I go throughout my day and think about all the positives that happened that day, and I feel grateful. If anything negative happened that day, I take a brief moment to reflect on it and brainstorm how I can prevent or move past those negative moments from happening in the future. Reflection is such a powerful thing to do at the end of each day. I believe it is an

exercise that everyone should practice. If you do not take time to reflect, then each day life is just going to be a blur. Taking the time to reflect gives you clarity in each day and allows you to create gratitude within each day, creating a roadmap to how you should live the next day.

Many people keep the television on until their eyes close and they fall asleep. I always leave at least an hour of complete silence before I go to my bed. I do not have a television in my bedroom. The bedroom is not for entertainment, but rather for recharging and preparing yourself for the next day. If you leave an hour of silence before you go to bed, then you have time to clear your head. It is not good to overstimulate your brain right before you fall asleep. Use the hour before you go to bed each night to relax and soak in the day. With a clear head, you are better able to reflect on each day when you go to bed. It is much better than watching the nightly news that uses so much shock value these days to draw in more viewers. You do not want the news of another mass shooting running through your mind right before you close your eyes and fall asleep. This is your time for reflection. It is not the time to reflect on all that is wrong with society these days.

If you go to bed each night reflecting on what truly made you grateful that day, then you are much more likely to wake up grateful and ready to take on the next day. It is an amazing feeling to wake up excited about each day. So many people dread the mornings. So many people wish they could press snooze for hours. Through

reflection, I have found myself waking up earlier with more energy and with so much excitement about each day. I take more time in the morning to think about what I am grateful for in my life. Never let an alarm clock annoy you - let it be a reminder of another day worth living.

Now how do we go throughout our day and be happy? The personal reflection and gratitude that you practice each morning and every night will set you up for each day, but you are going to run into difficult situations each day. When you run into a difficult situation, you cannot let your emotions get the best of you. Always remember that a difficult situation will pass and keep in mind what you must be grateful for. Learn from the situation and move on. Try not to get emotional and stay strong no matter what you are going through. Always practice positivity and believe that what's next is something greater. If we have constant belief that each moment is going to get better each day, then it will be much easier to get through those difficult situations that come your way.

I constantly practice positivity. I always believe in something greater. I always believe that life is going to get better. Even when life is great, I know that it can get even better. It is hard to get to this mindset. It takes practice. It means not letting the little things bother you and having gratitude in every small victory. Constantly practicing positivity is going to lead you in a positive direction each day. If you see each difficulty you experience as an extremely negative situation and you

hold onto that negative emotion, then your day is going to go into a downhill spiral.

When you practice positivity, you are going to attract positive people and positive circumstances. When you practice negativity, you are going to attract negative people and negative circumstances. When you attract positive people, these people are going to lift you up and move your life forward. When you attract negative people, these people are going to bring you down and make you dwell on the negatives in your life, making it harder to see the positives in each day.

As I said, happiness is a journey. It takes practice and patience. Happiness is not going to be there 100% of your day. Although if you practice positivity, reflection, and gratitude you will start to see better in each day. So tonight, before you go to bed, turn off the television and look back on today. Appreciate the small victories that you had today and look for ways to avoid the negative circumstances that happened today. Be grateful even if the bad outweighed the good. Just always prepare yourself for a better tomorrow.

PATIENCE

You've always heard that patience is a virtue. I used to have no patience whatsoever. How did I learn patience? I got paralyzed. Before I was paralyzed, I could wake up, take a shower, get dressed and be out the door in 15 minutes. Life is a little bit different now. I rely on someone to help me get a shower. I rely on someone to get me dressed each morning. Then at night, I must wait for someone to get me ready for bed and tuck me in like a baby. A lot of my independence was stripped from me when I was just 24 years old. Now eight years later, this is my new normal. I am used to everything being a process. I am used to relying on people for help. I know I need people to get by and I am truly grateful for the tremendous amount of support that I have.

They say you do not really realize what you have until it's gone. The first year after my accident all I focused on was what was gone. Somehow, though over a period of time, that feeling of emptiness transformed into gratitude. Even though today it may seem that I have less, at least physically and regarding my independence, I now feel that I have so much more to be thankful for in my life than the days before the accident. I have so much more gratitude for others because I have realized that I need others to get by. Before my accident, I thought I could get by doing everything on my own. Now that I have been stripped of my independence, I have grown to be truly grateful for what other people

can do for me. No one can get through life alone. It does mean you have to be paralyzed to realize this!

So, I learned patience the hard way. Now how do you go about learning patience? Just like happiness and positivity, patience is something you must practice. You cannot go through life with the mindset of. "I want it right now." Everything takes time. How I have learned to live patiently is to live in the moment. You cannot think too far ahead. You must appreciate each second of every day. You cannot stress about the future. You cannot stress that you have not completed your goals or fulfilled your dreams. You must live moment-by-moment with great appreciation. Everything takes time and life is a journey. You can only do so much in a certain period. As you work towards the life you desire use each moment as a building block to get one step closer to fulfilling your goals.

Living in the moment is one of the most difficult things to do. We all want to get rich quick and we all want everything right now. When you live in the moment, you must let go of all your future expectations and just be happy exactly where you are. If we constantly think about the future and where we are not at yet, then we will never be satisfied in the present moment. In each moment you can create small victories to get you closer to your goals. You are never going to get there instantaneously. So just enjoy the ride!

Not every moment is going to be pleasant. So, appreciate the good moments in each day. Move from one moment to the next in a relaxed state of mind believing that the end goal will one day come to fruition. It is what we do in each moment that gets us one step closer to living out that dream that we have in our minds. So constantly practice patience, living life one moment at a time.

KINDNESS

There is a practice these days that not enough people are doing, which is simply being kind to the people around you. We get so caught up in making our own lives better and our actions are focused so inwardly that we forget how our actions are impacting others. Our society is very divided these days, especially politically, and our views are so outwardly shown to the rest of the world through social media. No two people are going to have the exact same views or opinions on any issue. The division on our views leads to people to want to not associate with those that do not agree with us. No matter how strongly you disagree with the views of someone else you must accept that we are all different and we all have different beliefs and values so you still should treat all people with kindness.

Religion has led to all sorts of wars because people have different beliefs and they feel obligated to fight so strongly for what they believe in, although most religions are similar in many aspects. They teach you to be kind to one another. That if we are to be kind then we can go onto live an afterlife in perfect peace and harmony. If we are all being taught to be kind, then why does it not transcend from one religion to another? Many times, because we feel that we must all believe the exact things from one religion to another as a whole. What makes our culture so great is that we are a melting pot of many different religions and cultures.

We talk so much these days about border control, building walls and keeping immigrants out of our country, yet we are all immigrants. Why do we feel so strongly that we belong here and no one else should have the freedom that we have? We must respect and be kind to one another regardless of our religions, cultures or viewpoints because each one of us equally belongs in the society we live in.

Practicing kindness and taking the focus away from yourself towards someone else regardless of how different that person is from you can go a long way to create a better society. I believe in equal rights for all people. For all ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and sexual identifications. You are inherently unique, and your views are different from everyone else and you do not want to be judged by others because you are a different person. So, do not do the same to others. Treat everyone as an equal regardless of how different they may be from you. Let people live their own lives their way and be respectful of how they live their lives. Treat them with kindness because that is how you would want to be treated. No one wants to be treated differently than anyone else.

Imagine a society where everyone got along. Where everyone respected the viewpoints of others. Where there was no more arguing. No more pointless back-and-forth batter from keyboard to keyboard in every comment section you see. From this moment forward try not to get offended when someone does not agree with you. Just understand that we are all different and

that we were all raised with different values and through different cultures.

Next time you see something posted on social media that you do not agree with, just try to accept it and remember that we are all unique. Do not try to argue with people's opinions and try to change their minds. Arguing only causes more frustration and people's opinions will rarely change because of what you present to them. Be respectful for that we are all unique and from this moment forward practice kindness and truly appreciate what makes us all different because our differences are what makes our society so unique and so prosperous. If we all brought the same thing to the table and had the same views on everything then society would never move forward. So kindly accept our differences and move society forward.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness... Isn't that what we all are set out here to practice? Think about it in your own life. Do you have friendships that are broken for one reason or another? Is it just one thing or one event that led that friendship to fall apart? Do you ever find yourself thinking about that friend or even missing that friend? Just one argument that was unforgivable. Maybe it was a couple or even several. Now if you think back on that friendship does the good outweigh the bad? Can you remember all the good times before the fallout? Can you picture what life would be like if you had that friend back by your side? Forgiveness is what we are supposed to practice, yet these days the norm is, if someone screws you over, it is unforgivable.

I agree... some relationships are toxic, and we are better off going our separate ways. That still does not mean that you cannot forgive that person even if you still are going to go your separate ways. It's just not a good thing to hold that hate in your heart. For every time you see that person or think about that person it is just going to cloud your mind with negative thoughts.

Love is the answer. We need to love everyone unconditionally and realize that we all make mistakes no matter how much we love each other. I have even heard that the more you care about someone the meaner you can be to that person. I have seen that, but I know it

is not true when it comes to all people. Even with those people treat them with respect. Kill them with kindness. It might just rub off on them. Plus, just do it for yourself because you will feel like a better person because of it.

We are living in a world of so much hate right now and it is driving me crazy. I am sure most of you feel the same. The country is divided, and tensions are at an all-time high. We need to come together and create some sort of unity. It starts with each one of us and how we treat each other.

Remember that each person you encounter is struggling with their own issues. You may think you have been through a lot, but you have no idea what another person is going through or what they have been through. Do not judge a book by its cover. Sometimes you simply just catch somebody having a bad day or it could even be a bad week or years for that matter. Do not add more agony to their lives by spreading hate. Set an example and always be kind or if you are about to say something you might regret hold off and just smile and walk away.

Be someone that cannot be offended. It is hard to get to that point and takes a lot of practice. You must stay mentally strong and always believe in yourself. Always believe in the greater good of people. You know what is true about yourself and what is not true about yourself. Sometimes if you hear the same offensive thing repeatedly just take note of it and ask your close friends if it is true and if it is something you need to work on.

We are all a work in progress so always look for your weaknesses and try to strengthen them. Just do not dwell on your weaknesses. At the same time, you really need to just focus on your strengths because sometimes our weaknesses can barely be strengthened.

People often tell me that I am too forgiving. I do not think there is any such thing. We are supposed to love each other and get along. I have made mistakes and I say some messed up stuff sometimes, so I surely do not want people holding things against me forever. I appreciate forgiveness more than anything. I really appreciate understanding. Anyone I meet I try not to judge them or make assumptions. I try to understand where they are coming from. I take the time to get to know them. I ask questions and I listen. I always try to see the good in people. Yes... sometimes they mess up and sometimes they mess up bad. Sometimes they do it repeatedly. But change is a process. If you do not allow people to make mistakes and practice forgiveness, then you will get nowhere.

I have a neighbor that I used to hang out with all the time. He considered me a brother and he was like a brother to me. We had a falling out years back and now he looks at me with anger and I look at him as if I won the fight. It probably seems to him that it does not bother me to not have him in my life. I have forgiven him in my heart but it is time to go up to him and apologize and make things right. I know it must be painful for him to see me still living a happy life without him. It is time to invite him back into my life

and wash away the pain. I need to practice what I preach because he is the one person I have not verbally forgiven. I want him back in my life.

Trust that everyone is capable of change. Remember that we are all flawed in our own ways. We are not always going to view things the same way and we are not always going to get along. Life is not perfect. People are not perfect. We all are a little bit broken and in those broken moments sometimes the worst comes out. Just let the situation pass and give it a day or two and talk things over with that person when things calm down.

Practice forgiveness and mend the broken relationships that you have in your life. Just think of how it feels when someone will not forgive you. We all need each other especially right now so it's time to spread love and stop this division. It starts with you. Be the example.

GIVING

There is so much more joy that can come in giving rather than receiving. We grow up and as children, we receive more and more gifts the younger we are for our birthdays and for holidays. As we grow older, the number of gifts starts to diminish because it becomes our turn to give. There is no reason you should wait for a birthday or a holiday to give. You can give on any day of the year. I am not just talking about things of monetary value. You can give advice, lend a helping hand to a friend in need or even a random stranger, or you could give something to someone hungry on the street. So many people are struggling while so many people live in abundance. If you have more to give than to receive, then practice being a giver.

There are people that are homeless and starving. There are children that do not have a good meal to come home to every night. There are countless items that we have or might have duplicates of that other people so desperately need. In our society, it pains me to see so much food going wasted every day. When a restaurant gets your order wrong, they are required to throw it in the trash when they could save it for someone that really needs that meal. Our society is so wasteful. So many people are starving, yet so many people are overweight. Imagine if every time you went to a restaurant your plate of leftover food went to someone that otherwise would have gone hungry that night.

Imagine if all the clothes sitting in the closet that you barely wear went to someone that was freezing. Then, our whole society could live in warmth and comfort. We constantly buy more and more clothes, yet our closets and dressers could clothe us for over a month. I myself am guilty of this although I have passed along everything I do not wear to a good friend. You can make a difference if you start to look where you live and start to go through and pick out things you are going to use. If you have not worn something in a year or if you have something sitting around your house that you do not even touch, then please consider giving it away. If we all started to become less selfish and gave away a lot of the personal belongings that we do not need, then our whole society could live in abundance.

Make it a priority to thoroughly clean out your home and get just the essential things you need for living and give away the rest. You do not need ten pairs of shoes. You do not need seven jackets. The list can go on and on. Get down to exactly just what you need. Get rid of the clutter because somebody else could put it to very good use. They say that one man's trash is another man's treasure. I do believe in that saying and I do believe that if we stopped living in abundance and started giving away the things that we do not use then society would be much better off.

Just the other day I was looking at a pair of LeBron's made for people with disabilities and I thought how I never wear them. I did not care about how much I paid for them. I went to therapy with them where there are

people with various disabilities. This one guy caught my eye so I struck up a conversation with him. I asked him what size shoe he wore and it was a perfect match. Then he went on to show me his prosthetic leg that he had trouble getting his shoe over. These new shoes were going to make his life just a little easier. One man's trash is another man's treasure.

Just think how great this world would be if everyone had access to the clothes that they need and to the household items they cannot afford. Think if we stopped wasting food and the restaurant industry changed and started giving high-quality meals to the hungry. Just think of a more giving society. So many of us live in abundance, but just imagine an entire society with all its needs met. I truly believe it is possible if we all do our part.

THE "PERFECT" SELF

Do you ever get tired of trying to be perfect? Every day we wake up and look in the mirror and try to get our hair to fall in the perfect place. Women coat their faces in makeup trying to cover up what they think are their flaws or imperfections. We dress in designer clothing. I do it myself and I do not know why I feel the need to do so. It is as if when we leave the house we think that all we did to prepare ourselves each morning is going to lead to greater acceptance from others. Our society is obsessed with perfection. We look at celebrities and models with perfect bodies and call ourselves fat, lowering our self-esteem. So many people cannot just simply look in the mirror and see their true beauty inside and out. America is a very tough society to live in. We constantly compare ourselves to everyone else in society and look past the true beauty that makes us an individual. Even other countries that have members of society who believe they are truly beautiful start to suffer from low self-esteem once they are turned onto American television.

So why do we so need to be perfect and look perfect? I think the media has a huge part to do with it for us to constantly want more and to be better, but I think as a society we are generally selfish. I have maxed out credit card after credit card filling my apartment with everything I thought I needed. It got to the point where I would wander around Best Buy or browse Amazon

and I could not find anything left to buy. We feel no matter how much we have or how good we look it is never enough or never good enough.

No two people are the same. So why do we look at others and feel the need to look like them or be like them? Why can't we just be individuals? We are inherently beautiful just the way we are. I have been asked the question many times if I would change lives with anyone else. My answer is absolutely not. I was created to be myself. I was not created to be anyone else. I was created to be the best version of myself so that is what I strive for. I feel that is what we should all strive for. We should all strive to be the best versions of ourselves because we are unique and that is all we can be. All we can be is the best version of ourselves. So, if you are striving to be perfect just drive to be the perfect you.

“Our flaws are what make us perfect,” as Machine Gun Kelly says. Your flaws are what make you unique. If no one had flaws, then there would be nothing for us to learn from. We need to have flaws and make mistakes to be able to see what makes us truly beautiful and to be able to teach from our mistakes. We should not relate to each other through our perfections, but rather through our flaws that make up our imperfections. If our society was to relate to each other through our imperfections rather than our perfections, then people would have much higher self-esteem because more people would be able to relate to each other. We are much more relatable in society by our imperfections than our perfections

because perfections are almost impossible to come by. I am far from perfect.

“SHOW ME YOUR FRIENDS AND I WILL SHOW YOU YOUR FUTURE”

I truly believe that the type of people that you surround yourself with is the type of person that you will become. I first heard this quote from Jim Tressel after I spoke to his class, he said, “Show me your friends and I will show you your future.” I’ve seen it play out in my life firsthand, and it makes me carefully select who I choose to spend my time with these days. A lot of the bad decisions that I made during the first chapter of my life were a result of being surrounded by bad influences. The good in my life during that time happened while I was surrounded by people pushing me forward. Highly motivated people that wanted more with their lives that supported me and believed in me.

I had so much time to reflect on this after my accident. Today, I choose to surround myself with those that are going to motivate me and make me a better version of myself. Sometimes you want to be the smartest or most beautiful person in the room, but this is a selfish way to live. It is never going to lead to bettering yourself. If you choose to surround yourself with people that are as smart as you or smarter than you, then you are much more likely to learn so much more in your life. If you surround yourself with people that believe in you, then you are much more likely to believe in yourself. If you surround yourself with people who are happy and

practice positivity, then you are more likely to live a happy life and practice positivity yourself.

Take a moment to evaluate the people that you surround yourself with and what they bring to your life. If people are constantly bringing you down, then search for people that are going to lift you up. If these people are constantly letting you down, then search for reliable people that will be there for you and truly care about you. Search for people that accept you for you. Search for people that love you despite your flaws and imperfections. Search for people that you can respect their advice and their wisdom. Establish strong relationships with these people and make yourself vulnerable so that they know you inside and out. Be around people that you feel that you can be yourself. If you find people that you can be yourself around and be comfortable with, they can learn everything about you and your behaviors and you can turn to these people for constructive criticism. You do not want to turn to someone that brings you down to give you advice on how you should live your life. Only turn to those people that truly respect you and want the best for you. Value their advice and use it to better yourself.

Cut ties with people who are toxic in your life. Put yourself out there and find people that will allow you to live a truly satisfying life; people who celebrate your accomplishments with you. If you can surround yourself with these types of people, then you more easily celebrate your victories and gain a greater sense of self and greater self-esteem. I strongly urge you to

take the time to evaluate the people in your life. “Show me your friends and I will show you your future.” What do your friends look like right now? Does your future look bright with the friends that you have in it right now? If not, do something to make a change. It takes time, but it can be done. There are so many great people out there.

BLOCK OUT THE NOISE

In my life, I experience a lot of noise both good and bad. When I look back at the person that I used to be, I know I wasn't exactly a bad person, but I wasn't the best version of myself. I'm still not the best version of myself because that is a continuous process through growth and maturity. It is so easy to just hear the bad noise. Just to see the bad in each day. Just to see the bad in ourselves. We let the opinions of others who sometimes we have never met whose voices we have only heard behind a keyboard get to us. We let someone we have spent very little time with, or even just someone with not a very strong friendship get inside our heads. Maybe there are things you are not doing right, but this is the noise you have to block out.

The person who knows you best is you. Remember that you need to love yourself in order to live a happy fulfilling life. I truly do love myself and I also have many people in my life that love me who I also love who truly know me. These people know who I am, and they are the ones I should listen to. Ask questions. What can I improve on? What do I do right and what do I do wrong? Constructive criticism is the only criticism that is worth taking. If you are hearing the same type of criticism through the "noise," then ask somebody that truly loves you and understands you, for their advice. People that spend a lot of time with you and understand your behavior.

Even if you are trying to do all the right things, you are not going to have everyone on your side. I know that I am a good person. I know that what I am working for is for the right reasons. I also know that I am not perfect, and I make mistakes. Although, one thing I am quick to do is to apologize. But sometimes I do not even know that I did something wrong or hurt someone so please let me know and I will try to make it right.

You cannot let a bitter person get inside your head and make you think less of yourself. Bitter people want to bring others down and hate to see people with smiles on their faces or accomplishing anything. It makes them feel less of themselves when it should be pushing them to want to do more.

If you know that what you are working towards is for the right reasons and you are doing good in this world, then block out the negativity. People are going to try to bring you down no matter what. People will bring you down for being happy. People bring you down for being successful. People try to bring you down for being wealthy. People want what they do not have which is where all this negative noise comes from. Ignore the negativity and block out the noise. Follow your own path and do not let anyone stand in your way. If you believe, in your heart, that what you are doing is for all the right reasons, then there is no reason to let anyone bring you down. Block out the negative noise of society and continue to do what your heart desires. This is your life, not theirs.

PUT DOWN YOUR CELL PHONE

A good listener is hard to find these days. Since I have been paralyzed, the one thing that I have enjoyed more than anything is the power of conversation. Give me a few good friends and a small room to gather in and I will enjoy myself more than in any other scenario. I do a lot of talking and tell a lot of stories, but I think my greatest quality is that I am a very good listener. I listen intently to what people have to say. I try hard to wait until they finish their thought and it is my turn to talk. I ask questions so that I can learn from people. I ask questions so that I can understand people. I ask powerful, open-ended questions so that I can help guide people.

Learning to ask questions and, more importantly learning to listen, is very hard for many people to do. The wheelchair slowed me down so that I was forced to be in a scenario that was more mental and less physical. It made me appreciate my mind and the mind of others. It made me appreciate what I can learn from others. It made me appreciate stories more. Most importantly, it just made me appreciate people more.

To intently listening is to take all the focus away from yourself and to put it on someone else. You need to avoid all distractions and look someone directly in the eyes and observe their facial expressions, their body language, and their tone of voice. There is a lot to take

in if you are to listen intently. It takes a great deal of concentration and a great deal of patience.

Patience is something that our society lacks, and our society is also constantly distracted. We live in a world full of distractions which makes it very hard to pay attention to other people. We have cell phones that can so easily disrupt conversations. Many times, I see circles of friends sitting out and they all are holding their cell phones and not actually having real conversations with the people right in front of them.

A conversation on a cell phone and especially a text message conversation is not nearly the same or as powerful as a real conversation. It does not take the same level of concentration. When you are texting, you have time to sit and think about what you are going to say to someone before you get yourself in trouble. In the moment, in a face-to-face conversation, it is not that simple. You need to be completely aware of other people's feelings and emotions when you are having a real conversation. The other thing about text messages is that you cannot sense things like sarcasm, and it is hard to read people's emotions. In real-life conversation, you can actually read people. If you do have a conversation on a cell phone, then I do recommend doing something like a FaceTime call or an actual phone call. Phone calls can be powerful, and they keep people connected, but they are not as powerful as actual, face-to-face conversation.

When you are in a real-life conversation, people can tell when you are not listening to them or if you are not interested in what they have to say. When you are texting, for example, you can simply ignore that text even though you saw it and pretend that you are too busy to respond. People are much less likely to get offended if you are not quick to respond. You cannot do this in real-life. This is something that I think turns people off to real-life conversation these days. We are afraid of real confrontation, of real emotions, and just of dealing with real people. We have grown used to learning to be able to just ignore people when they text us that real-life conversation is difficult because people in real-life really do not want to be ignored.

When you talk to people from now on try to arrange a conversation with them in real-life. The conversation will go much further and will be much more powerful than any text message conversation you will ever have. You take so much more away from the conversation. You can grow to be a better listener and have better human connection. It will create stronger friendships that are harder to break. There is no ignore button in real-life. You can ignore people, but it will bother them much more than it would if you ignored them on a cell phone.

Start practicing real listening. Start looking people in the eyes and have actual conversations. If society reverted back to this, then our future would be very bright. I am scared for our society right now with how much we stare at our cell phone screens. Be the

example and put your cell phone down and have a real conversation with a living, breathing, beautiful human being.

LIFE COACHING

I used to think the best way to help people was to give them advice. I thought they would follow it and it would lead them down a better path. I called myself a life coach long before I became a professionally certified life coach. It was not until I went through my training with the Institute for Life Coach Training that I learned I was doing it all wrong. People have all the answers. Everyone knows what is best for themselves. I have found that as a life coach I was only supposed to do 20% of the talking, and most importantly what I was supposed to do was intently listen to the 80% of what I was hearing.

It is through powerful, open-ended questioning and intensitive listening that you can help people find answers. If you ask the right questions people are going to open up and discover things about themselves that they did not even realize they knew. Problems can be discovered that they did not know existed and they can create solutions to their own problems that free up their lives. They can create goals and come up with an action plan to complete their goals. Having a life coach hold them accountable each week makes them much more likely to follow through and get things done. It is almost as if through the process they are thinking out loud and so many breakthroughs come with this type of communication. Most importantly, they have someone there to support them and to listen to them.

No one can make it through life alone, so we need people to lean on. It is hard to find people these days who intently listen to everything we have to say. We all want to be heard and we all have problems that need answers. A life coach gives you someone you can confide in, that will listen intently to your every word, and support you every step of the way. There is no back-and-forth where the client talks about themselves and then the life coach tells their story. The focus is on the client. That is not usually how it works in real-life. When we have problems people constantly chime in and tell them a similar situation that relates to their problem. This takes the focus away from the person that is seeking help. A life coach is there to exclusively benefit the client.

Life coaching is extremely powerful. It is an amazing process to watch unfold. Sometimes you want to jump in and tell someone exactly what to do, but what always ends up happening is they have the answers. No one knows you better than yourself. We are all so used to taking advice from everyone else. We also all try to give advice. I think we doubt ourselves that we have the solutions to our life's problems. When deep down we really do. I have seen clients at rock-bottom, begging for answers who through powerful questioning realize that they themselves have all the answers. The process of working with someone one-on-one and seeing them go from rock-bottom to maybe a year later, where everything in their life is going right, is amazing. No matter how hard you are struggling right now you have

the answers. Sometimes it just takes the right questions and someone to listen to you to pull the answers out of you.

In today's society, everyone wants to be heard, but no one wants to listen. That creates a major problem. We broadcast our lives on social media watching for notifications for someone to like or love our posts on Facebook or Instagram. This is our barometer that measures how well our lives are going. The problem these days lies in the lack of actual human conversation and interaction. A comment on a Facebook or Instagram post may make us feel a little better, but it is not going to compare to positive feedback from a live, loving, listening human being.

Next time someone approaches you with a problem, be prepared to intently listen. Let people vent to you but be prepared to ask questions to get them to start thinking differently. Do not wait for your turn to talk about your life. Let this be their time. We all want to be listened to so be that person who is there to listen. You must also find people in your life that will listen to you and do the same.

Finding a good life coach can be a very powerful way to change your life. Although we can all be a life coach to one another if we just do a few simple things. Listen intently to the people you love. Ask the right questions. Always be supportive throughout the process. Push them to seek solutions and always be there to follow-up in the future.

THE POWER IN WRITING

Writing is something we all can do no matter how good or how bad we are at it. It is not something that has to make sense to anyone else. That is because it is not something that has to be shared. I have found that writing is the best way to clear my head. I usually put everything out to the world, but most people are generally afraid to do that. If you dare to share everything that is inside your head with the world and everything that you struggle with, everything that goes on in your life, and everything you believe in, then you can make a significant impact on this world. If you are afraid to do that, then writing simply is a phenomenal way that you can impact yourself. It is by far the best way to get out of your head.

Most people think too much when they go to write. That is where the writers' block comes in and you cannot get anything down. If you are writing to yourself, then there is simply nothing wrong to write about. Taking time out of every day, whether it be just 10 to 15 minutes, to write and get out of your head is extremely healthy. We have so many built-up thoughts and emotions. Many times when we write them down, it makes a whole lot more sense to ourselves. If you start practicing writing, then you can keep track of the progress in your life of where you were mentally when you first began writing and where you are at today. You can write down all that happened in your day and, then

one day, you will have something to go back to and reflect on and remember your life. We all have so many forgotten memories and ideas; so, by writing them down, they will never be forgotten.

There are so many different things that you can practice writing each day. You can write about your emotions and about how you feel each day. You can write daily reflections of why you feel how you feel. You can simply just write about what happened each day. You can write down ideas that you stumbled upon each day. You can write about what you must be grateful for which will go a long way. You can write about what you believe in and what you want to see change in this world. You can write about negative things that happened each day and how to prevent them from happening again. You can write about your friendships or your family. You can write about something beautiful that you saw that day. Your dreams, your goals, your hopes, and your ambitions can all be written down, and every day you can reflect on how close you are to achieving them.

Writing completely saved my life. The first year following my accident I sat on a dock staring out at Lake Erie watching people water ski and tube, seeing them smile and hearing them laugh. I believed to myself that life would never be the same or good again. That it was no longer worth living. So, I sat in my power wheelchair and went to push the joystick forward to end my life right then and there. Thankfully, I turned around and my mom was rushing towards me. She

knew exactly what I was thinking. So I just hugged her, crying, telling her I did not know how much more I could take. She comforted me and told me to enjoy the weekend because I was surrounded by people that loved me and cared about me. It was the day before her 60th birthday and I did not want to do that to her especially, right before her birthday.

The next day, she got her presents for her birthday and one of the presents that she got was some wish lanterns from my sister. We took these paper lanterns to the beach that night to light them off one by one. As each one floated away, we were to make a wish. I thought of the one thing that would make me happy. As each lantern floated into the sky, I wished that I would walk again. When we went back, I asked my mom what she wished for and she said she wished that I would be happy again. That made me stop and think right then and there. People wanted me to walk, but more importantly, they wanted me to be happy.

When I got home, I started to think differently. I started to think for once what can I do right now that will make me happy? I always enjoyed writing, but my left hand was paralyzed so I could no longer type as fast as I could think. So, I bought a copy of Dragon which is voice recognition software that would type for me using the sound of my voice.

When it came time to write, I decided I wanted to share everything with the world. I wanted to share my story. I wanted to share my emotions and everything I was

going through daily. I wanted to get everything out of my head, but I wanted everyone else to know what was going on and what was going on inside my head. I was screaming out for help, hoping for someone to reach out and rescue me. So, I put everything out there and when I thought I was screaming out for help for myself all the sudden people started messaging me and started telling me that I was completely changing their perspectives on life, and that they no longer would take the little things in life for granted. For once, I thought to myself - maybe I had a purpose. My purpose was to share my story to help others in a positive way.

From that moment forward, I became more and more driven. I was an open book and I wrote daily. The more I wrote, the better life became. The more I wrote, the more I wanted to do for myself to better myself. I created goals for myself. Goals other than walking like getting back to The Ohio State University to finish my degree. Like publishing a book and becoming a motivational speaker one day. The more I wrote, the clearer my life became and the emotions that were stuck inside my head no longer existed. They were all out there for everyone else to read so I gained a huge support system that pushed me to be the person that I am today. That is how writing changed me and saved my life. I found true happiness through writing.

I urge you to start writing today. If you are struggling, like I once was, then it may just save your life. If you take it one step further and put everything out there and completely expose your life to the world and your

thoughts, then you may be able to save someone else's life. Writing is extremely powerful and through words, we can connect with people and change lives. Writing changed my life forever, and I hope each of you take the initiative to start writing because I know it will forever change your life.

THE CHILDREN' S GUIDE TO DISABILITIES

When I go into a public place such as a mall, I constantly have people staring at me, especially children. Adults usually take a quick glance at me until they notice that I see them looking and then they quickly turn their heads away. Children, on the other hand, keep staring. The wheelchair sparks curiosity and they have so many questions. I do not mind them staring. It is something out of the ordinary for them to see. As I wander through a mall, parents will pull their children out of the way as they stare as if they are doing something wrong by simply just standing there in curiosity.

I always dreamed of developing a program where I could have a platform to allow children to ask me all the questions they have ever had for someone with a disability. There is so much stigma that children have towards people with disabilities. They think they are so different than everyone else when really, we just live life a little differently and adapt to our needs whatever they may be. I wanted to do something to show children that people with disabilities are not that much different than anyone else, that we can make great friends, live great lives, and go on to do great things.

Through a partnership with The Franklin County (Ohio) Board of Developmental Disabilities, I was able to establish the “Disability Awareness Project.” Through this project, I was provided funding to give free presentations to elementary schools around the Columbus area. The experience has been eye-opening, to say the least, not just for me, but also for the thousands of elementary school students that I have spoken to.

I start my presentations showing them that I was just a regular kid with love for the water and an extreme passion for water skiing. I go on to talk about my experiences at Ohio State, but exclude my struggles with mental illness and drug abuse. They see what they think is the picture-perfect life of someone getting to experience so much of what life has to offer. In their minds, they must think I would never have wanted to trade that life for anything. They see me going out on top as a national champion water skier and then I show them a picture of the wreckage three months later, where I died at the scene and became paralyzed.

This is where the presentation gets interesting. “What are your favorite things to do?” I ask. The answers are mostly physical things like basketball, soccer, or football. With a paralyzed left hand, those kids that love video games must imagine life without them. I ask them how they would feel and most of them say they would feel sad. It is then time to show them how I adapted to this new way of life and this became my new normal.

I keep the students guessing the whole time. “How do you think I got here today?” I ask. Answers usually vary from a bus dropping me off to me driving my wheelchair there in the snow. “What if I told you that I drove myself here today? I can’t press the pedals with my feet, so how would I be able to drive?” I go on. The best answer I ever got was from a young boy who said, “You have a stack of bricks and you throw a brick at the gas pedal to go and then when you have to stop you throw another brick at the brake.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t you think that would be a little dangerous to constantly sit there chucking bricks at the pedals while you’re trying to drive down the road?” I responded. I have had so many hilarious responses, but I have had equally brilliant responses. I just love how students at this age have no filter and are not afraid to ask you anything. They have no shame.

I go on to show them all the things that I can still do even though I am paralyzed. They see that I can water ski, drive a boat, go swimming and do nearly all the things that I loved before my accident just in a different way. I tell them that I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life; that if I were to go back to the day of the accident, I would let it happen again. I talk to them about how it has taught me patience and how to appreciate the little things in life.

At the end of each presentation, I open it up for questions and nearly every hand goes up in the air. It is as if children are given the opportunity of a lifetime to finally be able to ask someone with a disability

everything they have ever wondered. I show them that I have a good right hand, yet I have been asked five times how I eat. My response is, “I take a fork. Stab the food. Put it in my mouth, chew it, and swallow it.” Some students are in awe that I eat just like them. The most profound question I was ever asked was from a young boy who asked me, “What hurt worse? The physical pain after the accident or the emotional pain?” I applauded him for his question and asked him how old he was. My response was, “...the emotional pain by far.” He was only eight years old.

Children are profoundly curious about the world around them. If something is different or out of the ordinary they want to ask, “Why?” I think it is important to allow children to ask questions. I love being someone that children can go to and ask any question they want about what it is like to live with a disability. Many people with disabilities hate when children stare at them, but I say, “Let them stare.” Let them soak in the differences in the world around them. Let them observe and learn. If a child has a question about anything that may be different about you, keep an open mind and provide them an answer. They need to know that everyone is unique yet, no matter our circumstances, we are all in this together. No child should look at someone out of the ordinary and see them as an outcast. Be open to questions from children and as they grow society will become more and more inclusive quite possibly because you showed them you may be different on the

outside, but we are all just human beings who may live life a little differently.

BECAUSE I WAS IMPORTANT IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD

If you are looking for the most beautiful innocent creatures in this World, then look no further than a child. Children are curious about the world around them because they are new to this world. There is so much for them to learn and so much for us to teach them and mold them for the future and betterment of society. They are our future, so we need to instill love in all children because, if they feel loved as a child, then they will grow to be a more loving, caring, and giving adult.

I have run into so many people that say that they do not like children. They ask too many questions, they are annoying, they are loud, or they do not listen. They ask questions because they are new and curious about the world, so they are thirsty for knowledge. So give them a valid answer. They may be loud because they love to play and have fun. They see the world as their playground. They see the beauty in the world. They are creative and can make up games with whatever is in front of them or wherever they are. They may not listen because they are living in this fantasy world that is all about peace and love and having fun, so they are just trying to enjoy themselves in the moment.

The world would be a better place if we all were a little more like children. If we all were thirstier for

knowledge and saw more beauty in the world. If we ignored what was going on in the media and thought that the world was an innocent peaceful place. If we cared more about making new friends, discovering new places and being loved and loving others. If we cared less about what people thought about ourselves. If we just let go and had fun and treated the world as a giant playground.

Of course, there is work to get done and we cannot act like a child 100% of the time. Yet, there is so much we can learn from children. We can learn from their innocence and their acceptance of others. We can learn to ask questions as they do to better understand the world. We can learn to be more open and receptive to change. We can learn not to care so much about how we look or how we are dressed. We can learn to make a fool out of ourselves in public and not be ashamed of it.

Think back to when you were a child. What kind of worries did you have? Didn't you worry much less than you do now? Wouldn't that be a great feeling to have? To be carefree and treat each day as an adventure. Now, think back when you were a child and think back to what you would want to have more of. Did you have enough affection? Did you have enough people telling you how great you were going to be when you grow up? Did you have a family or people that loved you and supported you and believed in you? If you did not have some of those things or even if you did, then how great would it be if you could give those things to a child now? It would be such a rewarding feeling to give those

things to a child so that when they look back as an adult, they can remember you and for what you gave them and provided them.

Children need our love and affection. They need answers to all of life's questions and we should be there to provide them. We have grown through our childhood and we have learned so many lessons along the way. Be there, now, to support a child and provide them with all that you have learned. Children are our legacies. They are the future that lies ahead. If you want to give, then give to a child. Love all children wholeheartedly as if they are your own. Play with them and have fun with them. Use your imagination as if you are a child and create games to play with them. If you are reading this book, then you can teach a child how to read. How rewarding would that feeling be? I taught one child how to read and it was one of the most fulfilling things I have done in my life.

Live like a child and enjoy life yet always be there for a child because once we are gone, they are what is left. Adults are not as susceptible to change as children are. They cannot be molded as easily, and many times are set in their ways due to how they were raised. So, if you want to change the world today look no further than the beautiful innocent children around us. The world would be much better off if we all took our part in shaping the children of today for the future and betterment of our society tomorrow. Forest E. Witcraft said, "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I

drove... but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.”

LOVE

Do I see myself settling down one day and having a family of my own? In all actuality, I do. It is not going to be your typical family. I see myself settling down with a woman who already has kids of her own. I want to make this woman feel as loved as possible and be the best possible father figure I can. I am sure there are plenty of single moms out there that do not feel like this is an attractive situation they are in. Although to me, it is incredibly attractive. It takes an extremely strong woman to be a great, single mom and raise kids on her own or mostly on her own. To me, that is beautiful and powerful. I want a woman that has instilled so much love into her children and has raised them right. I want her to be all about family. I want her to be selfless. I want her to have a sense of humor just like mine. I want her to have an extreme passion for her life and for the lives of her children. I would love her unconditionally, but I come with my physical setbacks. Would she be willing to accept them?

I know what I can bring to a family and the one emotion I understand more than anything is love. I would love you despite your flaws and imperfections and look at exactly what makes you beautiful to me. I would love your children unconditionally and teach them life lessons to prepare them for an unbelievably successful future. I would spread happiness and peace into your life and remind you every day of your self-

worth and remind your children of their self-worth. If this is what you are looking for in a man, then look no further.

If you are out there, the person that I love for exactly who they are, then you will know from day one that I love you for all the right reasons. I love you because of your strengths. I love you because of your passions. I love you because to me you are the most beautiful woman in the world both inside and out. I love you because I see how much love you have for your children and how much joy you bring to their lives and how much joy you will bring to my life. I love you because to me you are the strongest person I know.

If I were to have the happiest, healthiest relationship, I could ever ask for, I know that we would have to wholeheartedly love each other, but at the same time, we would have to wholeheartedly love ourselves. I want someone that can still go out there and completely love life and love everything about themselves without me having to hold their hand the whole way. Of course, I will constantly instill this love in you and remind you of how beautiful you are every day both inwardly and outwardly. I just want you to feel complete even when I am not around. I know that for us to live completely satisfying lives we must be able to be happy both together and apart. I want your life to be just as complete when you are not by my side as when you are by my side. I want you to be happy 100% of the time. I promise to do the same. Yet, I promise to love no one above you.

So, if you are out there here I am. I know love more than anything so if you are the one by my side that is exactly how you will always feel, loved. I look forward to the day that I meet you and together we will raise the most beautiful loving family. Life is beautiful just how it is right now, but the day you come into my life, the beauty is going to be unfathomable. Or maybe I already know you?

DIVINE INTERVENTION

I know that a lot of people are turned-off by religion, but I must share my side of things where I felt something real. We all want to know if something or someone is out there looking over us. We all want to have faith in something real. We all want to know there is something bigger out there guiding us and protecting us. That someone is out there giving us answers along the way. We look at the Earth and the sun and it makes us believe that someone bigger than us designed it. The Bible was written, yet so many people do not believe it because it was written by humans, so we believe it to be flawed. Many of us are negligent to believe anything until the second coming is standing right in front of us. But what about a feeling? What about an extremely powerful force that you cannot deny when you feel it you know something greater is out there?

I have truly felt that force. The undeniable force that a greater good is out there. That someone is truly watching over us. It does not explain everything, but it sure makes life more comfortable. It happened right when I needed it to happen. Right before I could have lost my life. The presence was there, and it was undeniable. The force was so powerful and so present that it cannot be explained. I truly experienced divine intervention and from that moment forward my life had a purpose and I feel that I was used as a powerful force of good in this world.

So, when did I feel it and how am I so sure that it was real? I was going 90 mph on the drive that led to my eventual paralysis. My car blew a flat tire in the snow and spun around backwards and went straight down the highway for five seconds in reverse. I took my hands off the steering wheel and laughed. The car spun straight back around, and I gripped back onto the steering wheel. That is when I felt it. A powerful undeniable force and presence were felt inside my car. It is truly unexplainable what this felt like, but more than anything I felt protected. I felt invincible. That no matter what everything was going to be OK. Was it the presence of God? I do not know who or what it was, but what I do know is whoever or what it was in control of my destiny.

I stopped to change my tire at a nearby gas station and did not have the wrench to get my tire off. I did not have my wallet and I did not have my cell phone. Stuck in a gas station in the middle of Indiana, I was completely calm and just sat there enjoying myself listening to music. Then, I decided it was time to take off with a flat tire and a quarter tank of gas. I flew through snowy back roads heading west and I remember taking a right onto the highway. I put the pedal all the way to the floor and started to pass cars on a two-lane highway.

I hit 120 mph and looked in my rearview mirror and saw police lights back in the distance. The song “Dynamite” by Taio Cruz was playing on the radio. I opened my sunroof and put both hands to the sky, and

flicked off the police. Then, everything went black. After flipping five times end-over-end for more than a quarter-mile, my car came to rest in a snow-covered field. The state troopers pulled me from the car and asked for my name. "I am Jesus Christ," I said. Then I died there in that frozen field.

The way everything took place on that drive shows just how truly remarkable it is that I am alive. If I did not take my hands off the steering wheel when I did, I could have hit someone head-on because I was driving on the wrong side of the road. What if I took a left? I would have gone into town and could have much more likely lost my life for good. I took a right and passed a state trooper's office where two state troopers were walking into their station for the night when they saw me fly past. They got back into their vehicles and came after me. If they had not seen me at that very moment, I would not be alive. The paramedics were already on their way, so they were able to resuscitate me. Were the troopers guided by God to be there? The hospital was only a half mile down the road so chest tubes got in quickly and I was able to be taken by life-flight to the number two trauma hospital in the country (in Indianapolis) for surgery.

The next moment I remember was waking up to the start of a new life in the ICU. There were countless struggles along the way, but eventually, I found my purpose. I knew my purpose was to share my story and my knowledge from my mistakes to be a messenger of hope and prevention for others. I was able to do this in

multiple ways through writing, speaking, and working with people one-on-one or just talking to random people whom I encountered daily.

My life went in a completely different direction the moment I experienced divine intervention. I live today with so much faith that someone is out there looking over me and guiding me down my path. We all want to have a purpose in our lives, and we want our lives to have meaning. We all want to feel protected and know that someone is always there for us. I truly know that something greater is out there. A powerful force of good that guides our every move. I wish that everyone could experience the powerful force of good that I felt. Having faith that something greater is out there guiding me drives me every day to live a better life. We all would live much more different if we had this type of faith. I am forever grateful that I felt that unexplainable powerful force of good when I needed it the most.

REGRET

Every day we make choices and sometimes there clearly is a right choice and a wrong choice. Sometimes the difference between right and wrong choices may be harder to see. Even sometimes there is no right or wrong choice. Although all the choices we make are going to change the trajectory of our lives. Some choices have little effect, but there are some much larger choices that may greatly impact our lives. The thing is, you are never going to go through life making all the right choices. We, as humans, are flawed. And we inherently make mistakes. We also are built with temptation so that can also lead to making the wrong choices. Life is all about living and learning from the choices that we make.

Sometimes with the wrong choice comes regret. Way too often do we regret making the wrong choices. I do not believe in having regrets. All our choices are going to define us and make us into who we are today. They paint the paths of our lives. Rather than regretting making the wrong choice, we must learn from that choice to not make it in the future. We must evaluate how that choice affected us and how that choice affected the people around us. Sometimes we choose to make a drastically wrong decision and the outcome leads us to hold onto that for the rest of our lives. Outcomes are meant to happen and cannot be avoided or changed. We can only learn from the outcomes that

happen and to use them as preventative measures in the future. We can go further and teach others from our wrong choices so that they can avoid any regrets in their lives. Yet, once again, I do not believe you should live with having regrets. You can use a regret from a wrong choice as a powerful force of good in the future. If we let go of our regrets, we can live a truly happy life.

I used to be full of regrets. Do I regret taking my hands off the wheel at 120 mph to flick off the police that led to paralysis? At first, I absolutely did. However, now if you ask me, I would do it again. That was the defining moment of my life. What that moment led to was a more fulfilling life with an actual purpose. It led to clarity in my life where I realized all the actual mistakes I was making. It led me to not want anyone else to ever go through the same pain and suffering that I had to experience. It prepared me to be someone with a message for prevention and hope.

I knew in my first book (*Well... I Guess I'm Not Jesus – A True Story*), that if I wanted to make an impact and truly resonate with people, then I had to be 100% transparent about everything I did wrong. I had to be real. I wanted to paint a picture of all the wrong choices being made and what they could lead to. My hope was not to scare people, but rather to get them to think about the choices they were making in their own lives. The outcome of paralysis is deathly scary. With such a scary outcome, I knew it would get people to think more about their everyday choices. But, I did not want people

reading my book to leave feeling sorry for me. I wanted them to understand that I was in a better place because of all the wrong choices I made, and I was ready to take on the world to spread the message of hope and prevention.

My speaking career did not really take off until my book was published, but since then, I have presented between 300 and 400 times to audiences of all ages. I never thought I would find something in my life that would make me feel so truly alive. I look forward to the days I have a presentation more than any other days of the week. My career is my absolute greatest passion. The euphoria of getting up in front of thousands of students and keeping them silent and 100% focused for 45 minutes at a time is not something you can explain.

I do not really know what is going through their minds until after the presentations when I can speak to the students. This is when things get real. Many students will just thank me or want to shake my hand or give me a hug, but many students are ready to open up for the first time in their lives. I have realized that by sharing all the imperfections of my life and the choices and mistakes that have defined my life, I prepare students to open up about the wrong choices they are making or the mindset they are in. This process of getting students to open up and be receptive to change for the first time in their lives makes me think back to all of the mistakes that I have made and realize that they are worth it.

I had a point, a few years back, where I was almost ready to give up speaking. I was feeling burned out giving a series of six presentations in one day, after three consecutive to seventh graders, I called a good friend of mine and told her I did not know how many more times I could tell my story. During my last presentation, the vice principal called the teacher out of the room while I was speaking, and I was curious as to what was going on but continued my presentation. After all of the students left the classroom, I found out that a boy in the class of the presentation after which I felt like calling it quits, went to his next teacher and said he was thinking about suicide.

I was supposed to speak the day before, but there was a snow day. The night before I came to this school, this boy had planned his suicide. He stayed up all night and decided not to go through with it. The next day, when I spoke it gave him the courage to open up. He had the thought of suicide on his mind for about a year. In my presentations, I talk about being depressed in the sixth grade and how it is not normal. I show them how my life played out and how I had to learn the hard way to find true happiness. After hearing my story this boy was ready to open up and finally, after opening up he felt comfortable for the first time about his life. He was now in good hands and had the support of his family and counselors to get him moving in the right direction. When before they had no idea this was going on inside his head.

After this moment in time, I realized the importance of continuing to share my story. Even though I may be telling the same story repeatedly, you never know how it is going to affect somebody hearing it for the first time. A moment like this, a life-saving moment, was enough to for me to tell myself to never look back. To never to have regrets because every choice and wrong decision I ever made lead to that moment where I was able to save a life. I will never have any idea how far my story will reach people, but the more I keep putting myself out there and sharing the mistakes that led to a life of true happiness, the more potential I have to make an impact on this world.

OVERCOMING THE ODDS

We hear stories of people overcoming extreme odds all the time. I think there is a difference between overcoming these odds and overcoming extreme adversity. To truly overcome extreme adversity, I think you must be able to look back with a smile on your face and be thankful for all that you went through. There has to be a lesson or lessons learned. There must be true gratitude, in the end, that you are living despite the new circumstances that you may face in your life. I believe the true lessons of adversity come to those that go through something horrific that changes them physically or mentally for the rest of their lives, yet they are still truly grateful for everything they have. There can be a certain amount of gratitude for someone who makes a full recovery. It is different to those who do not make a full recovery and go on to live a full life. They are constantly reminded every day of the adversity they had overcome and the adversity they must push through each day because of what they went through.

Picture yourself in my situation: There are two types of spinal cord injuries complete or incomplete. Those with a complete injury are told right away that they now have no chance of ever walking again or making a full recovery. With an incomplete injury like mine, you are told there is a chance to fully recover. Now the chance of making a full recovery from a spinal cord injury is

0.9%. That is not something they tell you right off the bat. Most people when they are told they have the chance of making a full recovery truly believe in their hearts that they will make that full recovery. That's what I truly thought. Now, if you were in my situation, would you rather be told that there is no chance of recovering or would you rather fight to be one of the 0.9%?

Those that are told that there is absolutely no chance they will walk again can go straight into the phase of acceptance. There are of course those that are stubborn that even if they are told the word never, they will hold on to some sort of hope. When you are told there is a chance, you become fixated on getting back to the physical self that you were just before whatever left you paralyzed. Three months before my accident, I won a national championship for water skiing for The Ohio State University. It was my absolute proudest physical accomplishment; and being that water skiing was my life, it validated everything I had ever worked for physically. I started when I was three years old, so imagine the thought of never getting back to being able to do what you love more than anything. Water skiing was a part of me, and it almost defined me, in a way. So, I never imagined myself getting to the point where I would accept life without it.

I fought tirelessly for almost 2 1/2 years to regain everything I had without seeing any results. Some might call this the definition of insanity! So, just imagine what it was doing to me mentally. About a year

after my accident, I started a treadmill therapy at Ohio State called locomotor training where I was suspended on a treadmill in a harness and two people would move my legs in a walking motion in the hopes that I would regain the ability to walk. I did this five days a week, two hours a day for 15 months. After three months, I thought to myself that it was not going to work out. I finally moved to the stage of acceptance. Before I reached this stage, I was completely depressed believing that the only thing that would make me happy again was getting back to the physical being that I was before.

Now think back to the question that I asked you before. I know acceptance would still be hard if you were told from the beginning that you had absolutely no chance of walking again, but what if I could avoid that sense of false hope that I so desperately held onto? I think I would have reached a point of acceptance much earlier and started to go out and live my life way before I held up the white flag more than a year later. What would you choose to be told from the beginning?

Once I moved onto that state of acceptance, I started to look at my life in a different way. Instead of focusing on what I did not have or could not do, I started to gain a sense of gratitude for all that I had left. For once, I felt lucky to be alive. I looked at my accident in a different way. Rather than it being something that took everything away from me that I loved, it was now a moment in time where I was given a second chance to start living again. So that's what I started to do. I started

living a fuller happy life. You may think I had less to be grateful for in my life, but now in my mind, I truly believed that I had more.

I thought back to the other battles that I faced. I thought back to the two times in my life where I completely lost my mind. I asked myself a question, “Would I rather have my mind, or would I rather have my body?” I became more and more thankful for the power of the mind. With my mind, I found out that I was still able to live a very fulfilling life. I became more grateful for the beauty that I would find in the minds of others. I became grateful for the power of conversation. I found that human interaction is the greatest thing worth living for. I started to think about and learn from my past mistakes. I started to listen intently and learn from others. Through all that was lost, I started to find more and more things to be grateful for because I was learning lessons that I never would have learned otherwise. So, I thought the best way to pay it forward to society was to give this new knowledge away. To show people what we all must be grateful for and what true happiness is all about. I started to understand the secrets of life, so I shared them.

In my case, I found that the best way to help myself is to help others. I found a variety of different ways to do this through writing, speaking and working with people one-on-one through life coaching. People saw just how incredibly happy I was despite all the adversity I had to overcome. When people saw this, they started looking at me for answers. In my past life, I would have

considered myself to be a taker, but now I was truly a giver. I was a giver of knowledge and happiness, and I was open to talking to anyone that reached out to me. I have met so many people struggling through random messages on Facebook, emails, students I would meet at speeches, or people I opened up to on the streets. They saw the genuine smile on my face, and they wanted to know how they could get there themselves.

Did I beat the odds of making a full recovery? Absolutely not. Although I beat some odds that I think are even greater to overcome. I found true happiness greater than ever before and learned from my adversity and started to spread happiness even though the wheelchair was still there. Having the wheelchair here is a constant reminder of everything I have been through and overcome. I believe it is a powerful tool when I speak to others and they see that I have found true happiness despite my situation. Able-bodied people look at me for answers. It makes them wonder why they cannot be happy even though they are physically capable of almost anything. It is hard for them to wrap their heads around, but it gets them to think differently. They see me and they think to themselves if he can be happy in a wheelchair then I can be happy despite my circumstances.

So, I absolutely do feel that I beat all the adversity that was thrown at me because today I live with a true smile on my face. No matter where you are at or what you are going through keep fighting the battle that is in front of you. We all may not win the physical battle, but if we

can win the mental battle then we will have overcome adversity and we can show people how to live a better more fulfilling life.

LEGACY

Death. Let's talk about it. It is not something you so openly talk about daily or casually talk about around the dining room table. It is a subject we all avoid, yet it is something we are all going to experience. Why does it scare us so much? Maybe because it is inevitable and that no one truly knows what exactly happens when you die. Will I go to heaven or will I go to Hell? Have I accomplished everything I set out to do? Will I leave a legacy, and will people remember me long after I'm gone? What's my family going to do without me? How much sorrow is my death going to bring? There are just way too many questions. Death scares the hell out of most people in our society. So, let us try to look at death a little differently. Let us live a life that prepares us for a beautiful death that can be celebrated.

How can we look at death and have an appreciation for what it is? Often people will have a celebration of life when they die yet no one in that room is crying tears of joy. Imagine a true celebration of life. A room full of people reflecting on the life of a loved one and truly appreciating their presence on Earth, not a room full of people sitting in sorrow imagining life without them. When I die, I want just that - a joyful reflection for all the good that I brought to this Earth. When people die, we should reflect on the lessons they have taught us so that we can carry their legacy forward. If we truly celebrated death in this way, then with each death we

would move forward as a more prosperous and understanding society. Each individual person on this Earth was created for a unique reason. So, at the moment of their death take time to celebrate that reason and to celebrate everything they brought to this Earth. If we can create reasoning at the time of death for why exactly that person came into existence and why it was time for them to leave this Earth, then we are much more likely to create closure and the mourning process will be much shorter.

While we are alive, we all want our lives to have a purpose. No two people are going to have the exact same purpose. Also, no single person is going to have just one purpose. Your purpose can change every single day. One day you are going to be needed in one place and another day you are going to be needed in another. You have those close to you, your loved ones, that are going to need you every so often. Some days you may be able to be there for a random stranger. You may say something to a random stranger that changes the course of their day or even their life. I believe that we are all interconnected. I believe that nothing happens by chance. That each person comes into our life for a reason. That each person sometimes does not stay in our life for a reason. Every interaction you have allows you to make an impact and it does not matter how big or small that impact may be. It could be something as simple as saying hello and smiling or creating small talk to or with someone that looks lonely on the street. That may just change the course of their day.

I feel if we practice positivity in our daily lives, we can act as a force of good in this world and create progress to move society forward that will leave a lasting impact on this world when we pass. A smile is an extremely powerful force of good. Smiling at a random stranger is a way of showing them that you accept them for who they are. Taking it a step forward and doing simple things such as saying hello with a smile on your face or taking a genuine interest in the life of a stranger and asking them questions can go a long way. We can move through life isolating ourselves from the rest of society or we can choose to embrace the people around us. We all can leave little lasting memories each day with the people around us. Do you want to be remembered or do you want to be forgotten? It is not so much doing it for yourself, but rather doing something to create a positive memory within another person's mind.

When we think about the small day-to-day interactions that we have and compare it to a long-lasting legacy it does not really make sense. The reason for this is because a legacy is something you build on. If you practice positivity, spreading peace and human connection daily then you will work towards building your legacy. If you practice this every day, then the number of people that you are going to impact is going to grow astronomically. Never put too much focus on one single person. We all have too much love to spread around. Love is the powerful force of good that is going to allow you to leave a legacy behind. If you go throughout your life truly loving your life, loving the

people around you and having a love for the world itself then you truly are going to create change.

But still what about that legacy? What about that one thing that people are going to remember you for? People want to be remembered for bringing something special to this Earth. Whether it be a book that people will read for years and years to come, an invention that revolutionized our society or any other type of legacy that will never be forgotten. People are scared to be forgotten. Although not many people go on to be remembered forever. Your legacy is whatever you want to be carried on after you pass. Through every life, we all learn different lessons. So, if we want to leave a legacy what we must do is teach those lessons to the younger generations. You can teach lessons to your children that they will pass on to their children. You can teach lessons to strangers that they will pass on to the people around them and those lessons will carry on.

If you really want to leave a legacy behind look no further than a child. It does not mean that you must have your own child. We are all capable of making an impact on the life of a child. There is no greater impact you can make than the impact on the life of a child. Children are thirsty for knowledge. They are new to this world. They have so much to learn. So, if you can mold a child and prepare them for the future that lies ahead of them then that is a very powerful legacy you can leave behind. That, in turn, prepares that child to have the ability to leave an impact on another child and that cycle can continue.

So we are all scared that we are not going to leave this huge legacy behind when we pass, but as I am trying to explain is all you have to do to build your legacy is living each day one by one with positivity, spreading love, learning through your adversity and teaching the younger generations that are going to be there long after you are gone. We can create change to people in the present while we are alive and to people in the future if we choose to teach our lives greatest lessons to others while we are on this Earth. So, does leaving a legacy seems so hard to do if we just spell it out in a few simple steps? I don't think so. We all will leave a legacy behind in one way or another. It is just the harder you work for it and the greater you love while on this Earth the larger your legacy will be. It is all about creating human connection while you are on this Earth.

So, death may still seem scary. Although when you do these things to truly leave something special behind to be remembered as someone that spread love and positivity to this world then it will be harder to be forgotten. That is what we all want. We all want to be remembered. So, if you do not want to fear death then start living to spread peace and love and teach powerful lessons to those that are going to be there long after you are gone. In this way, you will never be forgotten and at the end of your life, you will be celebrated.