

## STAYING ALIVE

In a compelling interview on a recent news program, a father who made a Herculean effort and saved his teenaged son from death by drowning explained why he had written a book called *I Saved my Son, Now How Do I Kill Him?*

Once the young man was assuredly alive, he and his family learned that he was paralyzed from the chin to the toes, that he might never again be the same mentally as well as physically, that he might never again be able to eat solid food, and that he would require a lengthy and complex rehabilitation in order to live a minimal life. His father wished he had let him die by the side of the swimming pool. He began to wonder how to get the doctors to pull the plug on his son's life-support systems.

The young man, his handsome face filled with expression, sat unmoving in his wheelchair next to his father as the story unfolded. The father tried many ways, in vain, to end his son's life in the hospital. The son said he felt no judgment or ill will towards his father for doing that because he, too, did not want to live the life he was facing. He hoped to die. He knew what his father was doing, and he wanted his father to succeed in killing him because he was helpless to kill himself.

"What changed?" the interviewer asked. "How did you both decide on life?"

The son's answer was immediate. He said for so many weeks he had been thinking and thinking and thinking about everything he had lost, everything he could never do, everything he had dreamed of that would no longer be possible for him. Then, he said, one day, he had an unexpected and strange thought. "I thought to myself, why not just look into the unknown and see what might be there for me?" This, he said, instantly soothed his sadness, and suddenly he found much to be grateful for, much to live for, and the desire to stay alive and explore his new possibilities.

The father's answer was equally immediate. At about the time his son changed his mind, his father came into his room one morning to find the boy laughing out loud. "You just can't even conceive of ending the life of a person who can laugh," the father said. "That laughter, it was something. It was inspiring. In that moment, I knew I wanted him to live to enjoy himself like that."

This is a true story. This is a touching story. This is a spiritual story.

This is not a medical story. This is not a coming-to-terms-with-circumstances story. Most importantly, this is not a story about coping.

No medical miracles occurred; the young man is indeed a quadriplegic. Yet, these people did not have to come to terms with their circumstances. They did not learn and hone coping mechanisms. In a moment of absolute change, they completely transcended their circumstances and any need to cope, for no particular reason. Out of the blue, the son had an insight. In the presence of unreasonable happiness, the father had an insight. Both father and son looked in a direction they had not looked before. And what they saw - those moments of insight - set them free. Their insights drew them beyond the life they had had prior to the accident, and lifted them past the troubles they had been facing since the accident, and initiated them into a vision for life animated by the possibility of discovery and joy unrelated to circumstances.

They still had to face those circumstances. But the circumstances did not appear formidable or depressing or insurmountable in relation to the potential they could see for happiness intrinsic to staying alive and looking to see what might happen.

Life is filled with stories like this, stories of ordinary people going about their lives and being confronted with obstacles, illnesses, tragedy, grave circumstances. Some people give up. Some people struggle. And some people fall into silent wonder about what lies beyond their circumstances and find peace and hope. Any of those alternatives is always available, to all people.

Of course, many who give up are comfortable with resignation. For some, there is always the promise of better things in the next life. For some, there is a willingness to accept what is given and do whatever is asked of them without question.

Of course, many who struggle succeed in that struggle. For many, struggle is ennobling and character-building. Many people have come to terms with awful circumstances, found the means to cope, and gone on with life, feeling proud and feeling strong. Struggle, coming to terms and coping look like the best choices possible for those who believe that their circumstances exert control over their experience. In a life view ruled by unpredictable and uncontrollable external events, only the lucky thrive in fortuitous circumstances, and only the strong survive in tough circumstances.

In the story of the father and son, certainly one could readily imagine that both ultimately might have given up the idea of death and embraced their fate, resigned to suffer. And one could also readily imagine they might have gotten to work doing as much they possibly could to struggle against that fate. One could imagine them in a heroic duet, the father offering gritty guidance to other parents confronting similar circumstances, the son steadfastly striving to make the most of his severely inhibited life.

But their actual story demands that we imagine something much more stirring than that scenario. It demands that we contemplate a wholly remarkable elevation in their quality of life, unrelated to the courage of bringing home a crippled son, unrelated to the effort of

undergoing complex rehabilitation. Their story describes a happy assertion of life's unconsidered possibilities. Their story describes the human spirit ascending to joy.

The events they relate call us to question how readily we link life circumstances to life itself. They call us to notice how often we write off what is beyond our present knowledge and issue pat statements about how much circumstances limit or prohibit delight in being alive and seeing life fresh. We don't expect very much of people in difficulty, and we cheer for them when they make a great effort nonetheless. But we are sometimes baffled and even disbelieving when they simply discover the power of unconditional happiness inside themselves. Shouldn't it be more complicated and grueling than that?

We have trouble taking stories like this father and son's at face value and looking to see what they might mean for us. These people were engaged in a sad and desperate conspiracy of death. They were not special. They were not hopeful. They had no faith that their circumstances could appear to be improved. They were not looking for deeper insight into the human condition. They were just like all of us, doing the best they could with life as they knew it. And they received a blessing -- unsought, unexpected, unexplained. It arrived in the form of a simple, wise and helpful thought that entered their minds and emerged in their own words, plainspoken and obvious.

The cold knot of pain melted away, just as an ice chip disappears into the warmth of a sunbeam.

Why would this happen for them, especially? Why wouldn't it happen for any of us?

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