

# *Achieving*

# NO LIMITS

## Chapter 2

### Never Walk? Never Drive?

*Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.*

—M. Kathleen Casey

**HAVE YOU EVER** asked for something you ended up not wanting? I not only asked to see Harborview Hospital’s chief neurosurgeon, I insisted on it. Finally he visited my room.

He was a big and self-assured man, but as he stood beside my bed, he seemed uncomfortable. Neurosurgeons have outstanding communication skills. They learn to speak clearly and directly in the operating room. This skill comes in handy when explaining the operating procedures and consulting with patients about their health. Many physicians will experience intense emotions of their own when they communicate bad news to a patient.

As I saw him begin to speak, he looked the way I felt when the vet told me my cat was dying from kidney failure and I told him to put her to sleep. While my mind worked slower than before, the adrenaline started pumping and my mind sprinted in slow motion to the worst case scenario. My fight or flight response was preparing to kick in.

My speech was even more garbled from my agitated state of mind. I had to point to letters on an alphabet board to ask him how long he thought it would take before I could walk and drive again. The noises coming from the hospital hallway seemed to fall silent. I held my breath. My beating heart pounded nails into my coffin. Why didn’t he answer? His eyes went from looking at the alphabet board to my face as he slowly told me, “You will never be able to walk or drive again.”

Most patients want a straightforward honest discussion with their physicians, but also want them to be sensitive enough to provide hope. *Never* seemed like a long time to me.

I panicked. Never walk!? Never drive!? I'm a nineteen-year-old roofer. I have to walk. I have to drive. Talk about being handed a set of limits. Frantically, I threw the bed clothes aside with my one good arm, pushed my paralyzed leg off the bed and tried to stand up.

Why was the room tilted? I reached out to balance myself on the bedside table but missed and fell on my face. The doctor and two nurses put me back in bed like I was some kind of weak, disease-ravished old man. How humiliating. I couldn't leave it there! As soon as they turned around, I climbed back out and fell on my face again. This time they put me back in bed and strapped me in.

Initially, I was in shock and felt numb and did not want to believe it. Slowly I digested the information. As I lay staring at the ceiling, I could see the writing on the wall (which is quite a feat). The belt strapping me to the bed was redundant. Horror swirled in my head and then to my heart and my stomach as I lay frozen to the mattress, wondering what kind of life I'd have. I was too scared to even think about the changes I faced, but an invisible force pulled my mind to where it had never gone before.

The writing on the wall finally stood out clearly: It was like a lightening bolt that came and shook the foundation of the ground around me: instead of hanging out with friends—backpacking, parachuting, snow and water skiing, going to rock concerts and to the beach—I'd be spending my time in rehabilitative therapy—physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and psychotherapy.

What kind of life was that? I had always pitied people who had life-changing accidents. Now, understanding the basis of pity, I realize in some way I had felt the person with the misfortune had no recourse or possibility to reverse the situation. Some people who dish out pity even feel inferior to the individual with the bad luck. I could never even imagine it happening to me, but now it had. The impossible had happened: I absolutely did not want to believe it, but I was handed a life-sentence of limitations. I did not want anyone pitying me. I wanted to be "normal" like all my friends. Little did I know then that most of my friends would leave me behind, not so much because they pitied me, but more because I could no longer participate in the things we had once shared.

How would I react to this new life? What did I do to deserve this? What could I have done differently to have altered this miserable outcome? Resolution came slow. The denial stage of grief held me captive.

Life since my motorcycle crash has been unlike anything I have ever known. Having my strong, capable body replaced by a shell of what it had been was like being plucked from a jungle of luscious, colorful fruit and thrown into a desert of heat-blasted sand. Even more dramatic were the changes going on inside my head. My thoughts used to arrive with the speed of Indy cars. Now they plodded along with the sluggishness of mule-drawn wagons on the Oregon Trail. The person I had been was gone. So who was I now?

At Harborview Hospital, nothing mattered but my memory of the great life I'd enjoyed. The doctor's words echoed in my ears: "Never walk or drive again." The dismal future I faced glowed on the wall where the bloodless hand had written its prediction. My life had exploded like a torpedoed battleship. All that remained were bubbles floating on the ocean's surface—the ocean of my life.

All the things that had made me feel like a winner were gone. No high-paying job, no customized Camaro, no beautiful motorcycle. I couldn't even get out of bed! Any possessions I owned were meaningless since I couldn't use them anyway. I did have things of value in my life, but all I focused on was what I had lost.

Initially, the losses made me feel sad, lonely and depressed, even angry at the injustice of my loss for many years to come. I reacted to having a life I loved yanked away and replaced with a life I despised. If I were to put into a nutshell what 30+ years of rehab and hindsight have taught me about great loss, I would say: Be patient with yourself while you heal through the grieving process.

Recognize that grief needs time and space for the process to unfold, but allow light in the middle of it all. Although there were years of despair that seemed to bleed together like a faded diary dropped in a hot bath, there were days that I experienced joy. I should have embraced those days more often instead of allowing my negative emotions to sabotage my life for so long.

I have become better at getting through loss. As a whole, we all become stronger to better withstand the stress of life by taking these negatives, feeling their impact and growing stronger from them, allowing us to deal with all the feelings that come as a result of loss. It's too bad I didn't know when I was younger the things I know now.

When we lose something precious to us, the grief can be intense. Pain and unanswered questions can haunt us. We will even tell ourselves we'll never get over it, that we'll never laugh or be whole again. Take heart, though there is no way to grieve without pain, there are healthy ways to grieve which allow us to constructively move forward. Don't settle for a life drained of joy. Patiently work through your loss and, slowly but surely, you will get better. Don't sabotage your recovery through impatience or laziness, like I did so many times.

After a serious loss, we sometimes want to do something, anything to dull the pain. Submitting to harmful habit like drug use, alcohol abuse, oversleeping, Internet overuse, or wanton promiscuity threatens our well-being and leaves us vulnerable to addiction and further pain. Only by acknowledging our grief, not sedating it or hiding from it, can we begin to defeat it.

My biggest challenge ahead was learning the ability to overcome my loss and appreciate what I already had instead of wishing I had more. It didn't occur to me until much later in life that some of the very best things in life are intangible; and that I could experience them at any time by opening my heart and mind and letting them in.

At nineteen years, a motorcycle crash forced me to completely reinvent myself physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. Plan A was no longer an option and I didn't have a Plan B. Many folks let these life-changing circumstances define them, but for others, they excel and beat the statistics. Somehow, I was going the beat this and be able to talk, walk and drive again!