

# *A Miracle in the Making: Finding the Meaning in Adversity*

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When I was a young adult, about the age of many of you in this room, I had my life carefully planned out. I was going to become a registered nurse, meet the most handsome and charming man, get married in the temple, and have four children and a wonderful life (whatever that meant). I was well on my way: I met and married a terrific man, I had two sons, and I was working as a nurse. My life was going according to my plan.

July 11, 1981, was a classic Utah summer day with blue sky and sunshine. It was one of those days that starts out cool and crisp but in which the temperature rapidly climbs to the unbearable heat of summer—a harsh reminder that Utah is part of the Southwest desert. I had been married to my husband, Scott, for over six years. I was twenty-five years old and the mother of two sons, ages two and four years. We were barbecuing with our neighbors in our backyard, and I remember thinking it was almost time to get ready to work the three to eleven p.m. shift as a nurse.

Out of the blue I heard someone yell, “There is a child pinned under your garage door!” Scott went through the garage to try to get our automatic garage door off the child, and I ran into the house and called 911. This small child was my oldest son, Joshua. Scott tried

to lift the heavy garage door but was unable to lift it alone. He continued to struggle to lift the bulky door with no success. Suddenly he saw hands slip under the garage door from the outside to help lift it off of Joshua. To this day we do not know to whom the hands belonged. Josh was not breathing and did not have a pulse; Scott yelled for me to come help him. I could tell by the tone of his voice that I needed to hurry. I dropped the phone, ran outside, and began CPR, which the paramedics continued as soon as they arrived.

Josh was transported to the hospital in extremely critical condition and, once stable, then taken by helicopter to Primary Children’s Medical Center in Salt Lake City. We were told that he had suffered severe anoxia, or lack of oxygen to his brain. The doctors did not know if he would live, and, if he lived, it was unclear if he would be “normal,” as the lack of oxygen likely had caused brain injury.

Joshua was admitted to the intensive care unit, where he remained for about six weeks. He came off the mechanical ventilator and

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*Ramona O. Hopkins was a professor of psychology and neuroscience when this devotion was given on 27 September 2011.*

began to breathe on his own, but he was still comatose and did not “wake up all at once and start talking” like you see in the movies.

One iconic day, one of Joshua’s physicians told Scott and me that Josh could be released from the hospital and be admitted to a long-term care facility. The doctor indicated that it was possible that Josh would not walk or talk again, and the doctor did not know if Josh would be able to attend a regular school—if he ever attended any school at all. Further, the doctor indicated to us that we might want to consider placing Josh in an institution that could provide the full-time care he would require. The doctor offered to provide us a list of appropriate facilities that Josh’s condition would demand. This hit us like a brick—we had not planned, nor had the thought crossed our minds, that our son would not be coming home with us and that we might need to place him in an institution. This was something we simply chose not to consider, and it certainly was not part of my newly modified life plan.

We were young, untrained, and unprepared for the drastic changes and extreme challenges that had come uninvited into our relatively calm life. Even though I was a nurse and thought I knew what to expect, I was wrong. We were completely overwhelmed, but we learned to manage our life by taking it one day at a time—thinking two days ahead was beyond our ability to cope or manage. We took Joshua home and proceeded to embark on a daily course of laborious physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and cognitive rehabilitation, not to mention having to feed, dress, bathe, and change diapers on a four-year-old. We had support from our families, neighbors, many friends, and even people we did not know, but still the days were long, hard, and exhausting. Progress for Joshua was slow. Occasionally I would wonder why this had happened to a small, fragile, four-year-old boy and to me and to our family.

Doctrine and Covenants 122:7 states:

*And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.*

All of us will experience difficult challenges in life. How you deal with and overcome adversity is what is important. Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University who was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, stated in his book *The Last Lecture*, “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand” (with Jeffrey Zaslow [New York: Hyperion, 2008], 17).

Approximately one year after Josh’s accident he attended his first day of kindergarten. Even though now Josh was walking using a walker, he couldn’t be considered sure on his feet. He was talking, although his speech was very slurred and difficult to understand. His kindergarten teacher, upon meeting Josh, asked if he was supposed to attend our neighborhood school or the district school for children with disabilities. We assured her that Josh was at the correct school, and she was at the very least a bit taken aback. However, she quickly regained her composure and over time became one of Josh’s greatest champions.

Joshua continued to improve slowly as he attended therapy. As his physical abilities improved, we added swimming, horseback riding, and skiing to our “therapy” schedule. Even though the rehabilitation regime seemed to be working, it was absolutely tiring to a small, skinny child. My days were full as a chauffeur, therapist, and nurse.

During this time I researched the effects of anoxia on the brain. I searched the rehabilitation research literature trying to find

the therapy we needed to help Josh. I was surprised to learn that there was very little practical information regarding rehabilitation following anoxic brain injury. Further, the existing literature stated that the outcomes following anoxic brain injury were bad—dismal, to be exact. I thought that maybe I needed to look at the basic science literature on anoxia. There were scientific articles that discussed the possible mechanisms of anoxic brain injury and a few articles that provided information about anoxia and associated cognitive, neurological, behavioral, and motor morbidities—with which I was already well acquainted. None of the articles provided information regarding how to best help Joshua. I was frustrated and tired and felt I had reached a dead end.

A typical daily schedule for me involved getting myself up and ready, feeding and dressing my two-year-old, then feeding and dressing Joshua so we could drive to Primary Children's Medical Center for physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. We would spend four to six long hours at the hospital every day and then come home to start dinner, do laundry, clean the house, and do our "therapy homework"—yes, more therapy.

One day I was home at noon eating lunch, and I turned on the TV. I have no idea why I was home that day. There on one of the channels was Jane Russell, an actress from the 1940s and 1950s—but I knew her from the TV commercials that she did for the Cross Your Heart bra, and, frankly, that did not inspire much respect or confidence. Jane Russell was on a TV talk show talking about the adoption agency she had founded: the World Adoption International Fund, which helps find homes for children. In the program Jane Russell stated something to the effect that "if God wants you to do something, sometimes He rubs your nose in it." I knew at that moment that I needed to return to school and earn a doctorate degree so

I could study the effects of the lack of oxygen on the brain. This was a startling thought, since I had no idea where to begin.

A friend suggested I talk to a professor at the University of Utah. I called and made an appointment. The professor and I had a long conversation about my interests in graduate school. He encouraged me to apply to the doctoral program in psychology. This was madness. We had no time, little money, and mounting medical bills, and I had the equivalent of a full-time job taking care of Joshua and taking him to therapy every day. Scott and I discussed it, thought it over, and prayed about it, and the feeling remained that I should attend graduate school.

I applied to the PhD program. I was not accepted. I was very depressed by this news. I knew this was what I was supposed to do. When I asked why I was not accepted to the program, I was told I had no psychology background and they had no basis on which to judge whether or not I could succeed in the graduate program. It was true. These were facts—I was a nurse.

When I visited again with the faculty member, he suggested that over the next year I take some undergraduate psychology courses and a graduate course and then reapply to the doctoral program. I followed his advice, did well in my course work, reapplied, and was admitted to the psychology doctoral program the following fall. This was the beginning of a long journey, and along the way I have learned many important lessons.

### **Education and Learning**

One lesson that was reinforced by this experience was the importance of education and lifelong learning. My father, a former BYU professor, had five daughters and two sons. I am sure he would have preferred five sons, but life sometimes gives you what you need, not what you think you want. Education was always very important to my father, and

he taught all of his children the importance of obtaining an education. All seven of his children have earned bachelor's degrees, and three of us have earned advanced degrees. When Scott asked for my father's permission to marry me, my father's response was not "How will you provide for my daughter?" but rather "How will you see that she completes her education?" Scott assured him that he would see that I did.

Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 reads, "Seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith." Education includes formal classroom education and lessons learned from missions, Church callings, travel, parenting, and experiences in both secular and gospel knowledge. Elder Monte J. Brough, in a message published in the *Ensign*, stated:

*Many of the most important principles of intelligence cannot be taught at universities, from books, or through other temporal learning processes. Often these great principles are learned from afflictions, tribulations, and other mortal experiences. All that we learn in this manner will benefit us not only in this life but also in the next, for "whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection" (D&C 130:18). ["Adversity, the Great Teacher," Ensign, August 2006, 10]*

I completed my doctorate degree and continued to study the cognitive, psychological, and quality-of-life outcomes following anoxia and other medical disorders in order to improve outcomes for individuals and their families.

### **Laugh Often**

An important lesson that Scott and I have learned from the changes and challenges brought to our lives after Josh's accident is to keep a sense of humor. When life gets difficult, the tough find the humor. In an article entitled

"If We Can Laugh at It, We Can Live with It," Brad Wilcox writes that humor can help us cope with adversity, help us heal, improve our relationships with each other, and provide a needed perspective on life (see *Ensign*, March 2000, 26–30).

My mother had a wonderful sense of humor. When I was in high school, unbeknownst to any of us children, Mom and Dad decided to redecorate the living room and kitchen. Upon returning from school one day, we arrived home to find royal purple carpet in the living room and bright blue, green, and yellow flowered drapes in the kitchen. They were not just bright, they were very bright—the Provo version of Hawaiian aloha floral. My mother loved the floral drapes. While none of us children were particularly fond of the drapes, my sister Kristi was very vocal about it and made it quite clear that she thought the drapes were especially ugly.

On most of her visits home to see Mom and Dad, Kristi would tell Mom that she should definitely replace those hideous drapes. Mom in return told Kristi that the kitchen drapes were to be a large part of her inheritance and to be sure to remember to take them when the time came. One day in May 2003, about two weeks before my mother passed away unexpectedly, Mom and I were making plans to redecorate her kitchen. Mom said that when we purchased the new drapes, we should take the old ones down and make shorts out of them for everyone in Kristi's family, just like Maria did for the von Trapp children in the Rodgers and Hammerstein 1959 musical *The Sound of Music*.

After Mom passed away, Kristi did in fact receive the drapes as part of her inheritance as Mom had wished, even though it was a joke. At a family reunion the following summer, when Kristi, Jim, and their children arrived at the reunion and got out of their car, they all were wearing "stylish" bright blue, green, and yellow floral, handmade shorts.

### Serve Where Called

The importance of service is another lesson I have learned. An act of service can have long-lasting effects and touch many lives. I learned service from my parents, a lesson that was refined and enlarged by Josh's accident as we received service and later as we served my parents after their health failed due to Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease. There was rarely a day that went by in which my mother didn't call, checking on each one of her children—particularly her daughters. She would always start the phone conversation with "Ramona, it's your mother"—a statement that was not needed, as I knew immediately who was calling.

President Henry B. Eyring of the First Presidency said:

*The Lord and His Church have always encouraged education to increase our ability to serve Him and our Heavenly Father's children. For each of us, whatever our talents, He has service for us to give. And to do it well always involves learning, not once or for a limited time, but continually. ["Education for Real Life," Ensign, October 2002, 17; see also "Real-Life Education," New Era, April 2009, 4]*

Mom was always serving others, especially her family. She was a registered nurse and frequently used her nursing skills to help people in our family, ward, and neighborhood. For several years two neighborhood boys would stop by the house in the morning before school to receive their required injections.

Mom always found ways to serve, often without being asked. During Josh's rehabilitation, our two-year-old son, Travis, was faced with the difficult choice of going with me to the hospital for long, tedious hours of rehabilitation for his brother or spending the day with Grandma. Most of the time he chose Grandma. Travis was a very talkative two-year-old, and, like most two-year-olds, much of what he said was understandable only to him.

Travis was very inquisitive. He wanted to know how things worked and why, how birds fly, and why we breathe air. He could talk all day long without tiring. At the end of one such day Mom was pretty much worn out, but she still had to be a mother to my three youngest sisters. As my sisters arrived home from school, she told them firmly yet lovingly that no one was to talk to her for *at least 30 minutes*. She needed some quiet time to relax and reflect—and recuperate!

Josh's experience has taught us all that each individual needs some quiet time to think, ponder, and reflect. It is especially important to make time for reflection and gratitude, even when dealing with adversity, and to reflect on the many ways we are blessed in this life.

During the Second World War Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist and an Austrian Jew. He had a visa to immigrate to the United States but decided to stay in Austria to stay with and protect his parents from the Nazis and the concentration or extermination camps. Dr. Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* details his and others' experiences as prisoners in Auschwitz and other camps. Dr. Frankl described the shock, humiliation, apathy, and depersonalization that he and the other prisoners experienced and their reactions to their experiences in the concentration and extermination camps. He described their arrival at the camps in overcrowded cattle cars, the loss of all possessions including clothing and hair, starvation, overwork, and many other hardships that were endured for years—if they survived the camps. Dr. Frankl also wrote about some individuals who did not allow the situation and their treatment in the camps to dehumanize them:

*We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human*

*freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.* [Trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 65–66]

We can choose our response to adversity. We can be bitter and angry, and we can choose to let it fester, canker, and destroy who we are. Or we can learn to love, forgive, accept, and learn from our fate and forget ourselves in the service of others.

While the road was and is hard and long, it has been a little over thirty years since Joshua’s accident. We have gone through good times and bad, successes and failures; we have grown close as a family. The experience, although something I would never want to happen to anyone, has been one of refinement, change, and, I hope, improvement. We have learned patience and love. And as the day-to-day challenges present themselves to us, we realize that they are not that large, and although they are sometimes inconvenient and poorly timed, we are able to overcome them and move forward. Even when the occasional major stumbling block shows up on our doorstep, we face it head-on and realize it is probably not as difficult as something that we have already been through. The refiner’s fire burns bright. It is up to us to decide if it will consume us or mold us into something new, something better, something great.

You may be wondering what happened to our two sons. Joshua graduated from high school and served an honorable mission to the Oregon Portland Mission. He attended a singles ward, where he met and married a wonderful young woman, Calli. Josh and Calli have two children: our only granddaughter and a four-month-old son.

Travis used his “advanced conversational skills” while serving a mission to the Cambodian-speaking Pennsylvania

Philadelphia Mission. He too met his eternal companion, Marcie, at a singles ward, and they recently had their third son, our fifth grandchild.

Both of our sons and their families live close enough to us that we see them often, and we are able to watch and smile as the miracle continues.

In general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated:

*Healing blessings come in many ways, each suited to our individual needs, as known to Him who loves us best. Sometimes a “healing” cures our illness or lifts our burden. But sometimes we are “healed” by being given strength or understanding or patience to bear the burdens placed upon us. . . .*

*The healing power of the Lord Jesus Christ—whether it removes our burdens or strengthens us to endure and live with them like the Apostle Paul—is available for every affliction in mortality. [“He Heals the Heavy Laden,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 7–8]*

While a prisoner in Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph Smith received the following reassurance about adversities and the trials of life: “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment” (D&C 121:7).

Adversity in some form will likely come into all of our lives. For some of us it might be a light dusting while for others it may appear as an insurmountable, all-encompassing avalanche. If we rely on the Lord, we not only can survive adversity, we can learn, grow, and thrive. It is my hope and prayer that each of us will not only triumph over the adversity in our lives but will be able to serve and lighten others’ burdens. I say this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.