

My Life Transformation

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There are many defining moments in one's life. Never has one moment affected me so deeply as the morning of January 25, 2018. One phone call brought my entire world to a halt.

I'll begin a few months earlier, in the fall of 2017. I had been experiencing pain in my lower stomach for quite some time. I remember one particularly uncomfortable exam. After the exam, the nurse handed me information for my next round of tests. As I sat in my car in the hospital parking lot, I unfolded the white papers and read the word "cancer." I was being tested for cancer. I can't recall anything else written on the paper but that one word.

My new life was just starting. Both kids were grown and living on their own. Bob and I were settling down into a life of empty nesters. We had traveled to Italy the year before and had booked our next flight to Paris for the upcoming Spring. Life was good, and we had many adventures planned.

Then, on the morning of December 21, my marriage of twenty-seven years fell apart. I found out my husband had been seeing a woman from his work, and no longer wanted to be married. I was crushed and humiliated. I laid on my bedroom floor, unable to get up. I thought life couldn't get any worse. I had lost my best friend, and I was terrified of going through a battle with cancer all alone. The days were all a blur. I remember walking across the parking lot of Morgan Hall the morning of January 11, my mind completely focused on how to get my husband back, then suddenly realizing this was the day my doctor would be calling with my cancer

results. My life had been so consumed by trying to keep a man that threw me away that cancer was an afterthought. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, I would look back on that morning as a defining moment. Little did I know that two weeks later, my world would explode.

On the morning of January 25, 2018, I was leaving for work around 7:30 a.m., when my phone rang. Since I didn't recognize the number, I let it go to voicemail. When the phone immediately rang again, I saw the same unrecognized number. When I answered, I was not expecting to hear my son's voice. I could hear the fear in his voice, as he said, "Mom, I've been in a car wreck. I need you to come quick. I can't feel my legs."

What I thought had been the darkest moments of my life would not begin to compare to the fear, the anguish, the terror, that I felt that day. Jake, while driving to work, had hit a patch of black ice. He was thrown from his truck, headfirst, through the windshield. His body hit the cold frozen ground more than fifty feet away. A woman, who had been driving behind him, stopped to help. After calling 911, she dialed my number so Jake could talk to his mom. It had to be sheer adrenaline that kept him conscious long enough to call me. Jake told me later that he remembered flying out of his truck and feeling more pain than he's ever felt. He remembered his face stuck in the dirt of the frozen field, and strangers, knowing the seriousness of his situation, carefully scooping away the dirt from his face, just enough so he could breathe.

When arriving at the hospital, we were told our son may not live. We were told that Jake's spine had exploded and was pinching his spinal cord. Jake was paralyzed, possibly from the neck down. We were told to call our daughter Beth, who was in Boston, to come home as soon as possible, so she could say her goodbyes.

Jake spent almost a month in the ICU unit of OSF St. Francis Hospital in Peoria. He underwent extensive surgery to have metal rods put on both sides of his spine. He spent twelve days with a breathing tube down his throat, unable to eat or drink on his own. From Peoria, he went to Chicago for intensive therapy for another month.

It's hard for me to explain how that time in my life felt. I don't know if words even exist to describe how a mother feels for her child. Jake was twenty-four years old when this happened. He is now paralyzed from below his chest. Even recalling these moments are so unbearably painful. Life didn't just knock us down, it ripped us open and left us alone in the street. Life can be a mean son of a bitch. There was no one to turn to for comfort. My best friend of twenty-seven years was gone. It felt like I had lost everything. Every part of my life was broken. Those were dark times.

Women have many parts to their soul. My whole life, I've been an optimist. I was born with the ability to see the light in the storm. Our family spent nearly two years in what felt like a tornado. You can choose to lay down or you can choose to fight. There was never a defining moment when it came to Jake. I always knew I would fight for him. When your children are broken, you are broken. Life can change in so many ways. The "mother" side of my soul saw how beautiful life can be. My son was alive. It never left my mind that the moments I spent with him in the hospital, and every day after, could have been spent visiting him in the cemetery.

The "spiritual" side of my soul made me start looking at God in a different way. I had only known Him through my religion. I began to leave the religious part behind and look at God, and life, in a more spiritual way. I saw God in my children, in the trees, in my own backyard. I

recall seeing a butterfly in the backyard one quiet morning and being absolutely mesmerized by its beauty. There is beauty all around us, if we will open our eyes.

It was during Jake's time in Chicago that the "blind" part of my soul would begin to see. This moment is so clear. I think it's rare to completely recognize an exact turning point in one's life. But I recall that moment so vividly. It was one morning, when Bob came over to the house, and we were sitting across from one another at the dining table. I was still trying to win him back. I had never been alone, and I was afraid. I'm the exact reason why you should never get married right out of high school. I had always put him on a pedestal and did not want to go through life without him. As we sat there and I pleaded my case, like I had many times in the past couple of months, he said something to me that opened my eyes for the first time in almost thirty years of being married to him. "You're like a dog," he said. "I can keep kicking you and you'll always keep coming back." When these words were said, instead of sucking the life out of me, it was like coming up from the water, when you thought you were drowning, and taking that first gasp of air. You're like a dog.... You're like a dog.... I'm a dog.... kept playing in my mind. "When someone shows you who they are, and they always do, you should see them for what they are," were the words of my therapist. I saw for the first time that day. I had fought for a man who valued me as much as a four-legged animal.

I remember standing in my kitchen after Bob left, and saying out loud "Jen, he showed you who he is. Now see it." That day, the pedestal that I placed him on crumbled. I was at the bottom that day and stood up to see reality. I finally could see that after all the years of never feeling like I would ever be good enough, HE wanted me to feel this way. He wasn't the prize. I was the prize.

I had spent so much time being a mother and a wife, that I was empty. The “invisible” part of my soul started over. I had time to think about what I wanted for my life. When you’ve lost everything, there’s nothing more to lose. When you’ve been nothing, you have to decide what you want to be. There were several remarkable women that came running to help me. Because of the many conversations we had, I began to dream about what I wanted for my life. I began to take classes again. I thought about what I want my future to be and came up with goals and a plan for a new career. I quit looking at what Bob was doing and began to focus on my life and my dreams.

I spent a lot of time being angry and feeling out of control. So much had changed in so little time. I didn’t want to hate or be angry all the time. It was exhausting. I’ve always had the ability to have hope in any situation. I will always have hope that my son will one day walk again. I’m working to forgive the ones that have hurt me.

I’m a person who always had to be in control. Life has taught me to just let go. I was so busy taking care of everyone else, I forgot to take care of myself. I’ve learned to be gentle with myself. The thoughts I tell myself should be as encouraging as the ones I would say to my best friend.

I’ve realized the truly important things in life. Your child’s laughter is the most beautiful sound in the world, no matter how old they are. Let your soul smile when you hear it.

My son inspires me every day. He has helped me see the amazement of a simple breath of air. And the strength within us, to keep moving forward and creating a life full of adventure, promise and hope.