



Ask The Coach

By Scott Chesney

Mother Night

Last year I devoted one of my columns to the subject of suicide and received an overwhelming response from my readers. I want to share one of the most powerful, honest and heartfelt stories that I have ever read. It comes from, Marylyn Schwartz, the mother of a young man I knew named Clayton who, at 31, took his life. Marylyn bravely faced and accepted her son's suicide.

After reading this for the first time, I come away neither condoning nor condemning suicide. Rather, I am relieved that a mother has been able to find peace in possibly the most troubled of waters. Being a parent of two young children, I can only hope that if one of my children were to travel on this same path that Clay did, that I would be able to find the strength and peace of mind that Marylyn has found.

He believed there was nothing after death. It would be simple annihilation. Death would come and pleasantly gorge herself on his ten-times daily catheterizations, embarrassing defecations in the midst of others, two-hour routine to complete the bowel cleansing, to wash, dress and simply come whole enough to leave the house. He knew that death was not the enemy of his paralyzed limbs. She was a kind, caring mother who would bear him from a world wanting of joy into a moonless night.

The call came on Memorial Day 2006, 8:00 p.m. I hear his words in my dreams, awake, in nightmares. "Mom, I need your help. I had an accident. I broke my back." "Oh, God, son, please tell me you can feel your legs." "No, I can't." And then the line went dead...

An hour passed before we were able to connect again. It felt as if no air entered or left my lungs in that hour. Praying, *take me God, take me...* I remembered days afterward my mother telling me that if mothers could change places with paralyzed children, there would be countless paralyzed mothers.

Hours later we learned that while traveling

40 miles per hour on a rural two-lane highway in Oaxaca, Mexico, he struck the left side of a donkey's head as the animal froze in fear on the road before him. He said he knew he should have stopped rather than to slow down. He wondered why he didn't walk his motorcycle around the donkey. Why did he trust that he could glean its next move and outmaneuver it? He said perhaps it was because he knew nothing about donkeys. They were foreign. In a hurry, he wanted to reach his destination. He was stubborn, driven and indestructible.

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Farmers found him unconscious at the side of the road. He'd lost a great deal of blood. The medical facility in the area amounted to a walk-in clinic. We were told by the American Embassy that it was not possible to get the lights on at the local runway till the next morning. We learned when we spoke with our son again that he had medical assist insurance. Somehow, after countless attempts, we contacted his insurance provider. The small jet, doctor on board, air-lifted him out of Mexico, and 24 hours after impact he arrived at the Methodist Hospital trauma center, Houston, TX.

Making arrangements for his transport and finding the right facility for treating his injuries were followed at break-neck speed by arranging to meet him in Texas. Two dogs to board; family to contact; cancel my classes; book the first morning flight; did we remember everything?

We were leaving for La Guardia at 5:00 a.m. At 3:30, I lay on my bed and closed my eyes. Unaware that I'd dozed, I awoke unable to catch my breath. My husband was sitting beside the bed. "Oh, my God, I had the most horrible nightmare." I saw the fear

in his face before I understood the truth of it. That moment is one of my most painful memories.

The accident left him paralyzed from the nipples down. Thirty years old, accepted into a top-ten law school, athletic, brilliant, handsome and enjoying a last hurrah before classes began in August. And, despite his horrifying circumstance, he never blamed the donkey. He said of the dead animal, "I hope it had a good donkey life."

Communication with the embassy was difficult, and for many reasons his plane was delayed. We waited, hyper alert, for eight hours in the emergency room watching for the ambulance, believing that every minute he was not treated could be the difference between paralysis and walking. It was oddly comforting to learn after he was evaluated, that his paralysis had been immediate and irrevocable. Nothing could have spared him.

Ten days in intensive care, three of which his life hung in the balance. Sixty days in rehab. There were many classes to attend. Today we'll learn how to put on a shirt and button it without falling over. Now you're ready to put on pants, and if successful, we'll teach you how to get in and out of bed, drag yourself up into your wheelchair, shower, get in and out of a car, don a diaper and learn to live anew as what he said he was: two arms and a head upon a corpse. He was brave. He was sad. He was so damaged.

He started law school nearly 90 days from the date of injury. Some doctors told him to go for it. Others said that he was too emotionally fragile. He needed time to adjust. There was no good solution. Stay and suffer? Go and suffer but perhaps be distracted with school, routine, and a new life? It is what he wanted to do: go.

We fought before he left. It was easier to be angry. Anger was a practiced coping mechanism. That haunts me and diminishes all we accomplished advocating and caring for him in every imaginable way.

True to his determination, he did more to distinguish himself in his remaining eighteen months than many do in a lifetime. But he wanted more; and there was no more. It is said that he took his life. I now understand that he took nothing. He restored his autonomy. I make no judgment. No one should judge (but doubtless many do) who has not been a party to this thieving injury.

His personal effects were sent to me. As I went through the box, I found his childhood friend, Elmer, a three-foot tall bear bereft of stuffing. I'd not

thought of Elmer in many years; not since I'd sent him to my son's college dorm as a joke. My son had taken the now-limp Elmer, carefully folded him and packed him away. Holding Elmer, I remembered taking my nieces to a store in the mall where they take the shells of bears, attach them to mouths that breathe life into them, give them substance and ready them for outstretched, loving arms. Why not bring Elmer's arms and legs back to life? Why not all the sons and daughters whose parents' arms ache to lift them out of their chairs to walk once more?

We can. We must.

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