

## ABSTRACT

Examining Disability in the Lives of Franklin D. Roosevelt,  
Christopher Reeve, and Joni Eareckson Tada

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In today's society, disability is often viewed as a problem in need of a medical solution, and suffering is seen as an aspect of life that needs to be eliminated. This thesis examines the lives of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Christopher Reeve, and Joni Eareckson Tada, all of whom became paralyzed, to show that disability and suffering could behold the key to how life should truly be lived, in order to develop better relationships with God. These three individuals faced many trials on their journeys, yet each ultimately became an advocate for people with disabilities, whether that be focused in disability rights, medical research, or spiritual healing. Lastly, the effect of disability on their purposes in life and on their abilities to fully accept themselves in their 'broken' bodies will be discussed.

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EXAMINING DISABILITY IN THE LIVES OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT,  
CHRISTOPHER REEVE, AND JONI EARECKSON TADA

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction to Disability and Suffering

#### *Introduction*

When considering what it must be like for an individual who lives half his or her life in an ambulatory state to encounter a force greater than himself that causes the individual to surrender mobility to the power of a wheelchair, it is easily assumed that such a dramatic shift would cause great character transformation. Whether that be a strengthening of a trait that is already present within the individual or the development of a completely new attribute, a person's character is definitely altered. In some people, this shift can be seen as lifesaving, in which they believe they have been changed for the better. Others may never stop dreaming of one day returning to their old selves, the version that could walk and was not considered 'disabled.'

This thesis will delve into the lives of three people who acquired disabilities during their lifetimes and investigate how their lives were changed as a result of disability. Many factors affected their respective journeys, but they are united in having found new quests to serve as advocates for others with disabilities. This first chapter will delineate a history of disability in the twentieth century, to give context for the effect of society on these individuals' lives. It will also discuss suffering, its importance, and how it can be managed. The next three chapters will cover the lives of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Christopher Reeve, and Joni Eareckson Tada. Each of their childhoods, lives with disability, advocacy efforts, and faiths will be discussed. In the concluding chapter, their perspectives will be reflected on, in order to show common threads in how their

characters were transformed and how they managed the suffering that accompanied their disabilities. Overall, I hope to show that people with disabilities are valuable individuals to society, and their perspectives are essential to helping people become more caring, loving, faithful humans. My goal is to explain that suffering does not always have to be seen as wholly tragic, rather it can be valued as helpful in developing closer relationships to God.

### *Defining Disability*

Disabilities can come in many different forms, ranging from intellectual to physical, and they can affect people in very different ways. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act's website, "It is important to remember that in the context of the ADA, 'disability' is a legal term rather than a medical one...The ADA defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity."<sup>1</sup> Because it can affect a person in such a variety of ways, the term disability is not meant to define a person, instead it is intended to help people with disabilities access resources that will help improve their quality of life. The goal of defining disability is stated: "Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a broad perspective has begun to take shape that goes significantly beyond delineating norms to guide the assessment of disability, focusing instead on what needs to be done so that people, whatever their personal challenges and social and economic disadvantage, can exercise

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1. ADA National Network. "What Is the Definition of Disability under the ADA? | ADA National Network," March 2020. <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>.

their human rights and full citizenship.”<sup>2</sup> Having a disability does not limit life to incapacitation; it just puts a person in a position where a little help in certain areas of life could offer a large improvement. However, disability often carries with it, even just considering the literal word itself, a connotation of a lack of ability and a complete reliance on others for support. Thus, people typically interpret those who have disabilities in a manner that assumes they are incapable of doing what others can, which has the potential to limit a person more than a disability could.

### *Disability in the Twentieth Century*

Thought about disability has changed markedly over time. In the early twentieth century, institutionalization became the widely regarded ‘right’ thing to do for people with disabilities. Many institutions were created and expanded to house an increased number of people: “An enormous social and economic investment—which was supported by political, scientific, religious, medical, and other leaders of the time—had gone into establishing these settings as an integral part of society.”<sup>3</sup> The goal of doing this was to provide a better place of care for people with disabilities, as it was thought to be beyond the family’s capacity to provide adequate care. Institutions were supposed to provide housing, schooling, medical care, and training to help these individuals better function in

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2. Bach, Michael. “Changing Perspectives on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.” In *A Comprehensive Guide to Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, Second. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2017, 42.

3. Brown, Ivan, John P. Radford, and Michael L. Wehmeyer. “Historical Overview of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.” In *A Comprehensive Guide to Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, Second. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2017, 27.



society. Families actually wanted to send their loved ones to these places. Though this plan was crafted with good intent, “This had a tremendous impact on the way people thought of the ‘unfortunates.’ They were seen as people unable, unworthy, or unfit to contribute to society and who were therefore best housed apart from society.”<sup>4</sup> People were less exposed to individuals with disabilities, which caused them to often be overlooked. Shut away, they were not thought about, and the problems that arose were not recognized, which meant that they were consequently not fixed.

One of these major problems with institutions is that they quickly became overcrowded due to the overwhelming number of people being sent to them. This caused a huge decrease in the quality of care. A decrease in funding caused a shortage of caretakers, which meant the caretakers had too many people to take care of in too little time, which resulted in a diminished level of care: “Staff accounts, official reports, academic research and the testimonies of disabled people themselves all provide plentiful evidence of inhumane practices and violations of fundamental human rights.”<sup>5</sup> Continuing for the majority of the twentieth century, institutions did not start to improve until the major injustices were exposed to the public, around the time of the end of World War II. Once people knew what was happening in the facilities, advocates began working to improve conditions: “From the 1960s to the 1990s, many hospitals and psychiatric institutions shut down, giving way to state-funded programs and services in place of these

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4. Brown, et al., 27.

5. Brignell, Victoria. “When the Disabled Were Segregated.” *New Statesman America*, March 29, 2020. <https://www.newstatesman.com/society/2010/12/disabled-children-british>.

hospitals. These services strive to address an individual's needs on a case-by-case basis, rather than aiming to 'cure' patients with blanket treatments."<sup>6</sup> It was determined that care for people with disabilities had to get better, sparking the formation of the disability rights movement and the push for deinstitutionalization. Families, in addition to individuals with disabilities themselves, began to lobby for better treatment. Such advocacy led to the eventual enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990: "The ADA is one of America's most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life."<sup>7</sup> This piece of legislation allowed more people with disabilities to be active in society like the 'typical American citizen,' yet receive protections in doing so.

### *Society*

Even though advocates were working hard to get legislation passed that would ensure better treatment for people with disabilities, they learned it was a much more difficult task to gain acceptance from society. Those many years of institutionalization, where people with disabilities were hidden from public view, made it very difficult for society to accept the emergence of people with disabilities into their everyday lives. Because people with disabilities are 'different,' society implies this difference to be

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6. Meldon, Perri. "Disability History: Early and Shifting Attitudes of Treatment (U.S. National Park Service)." Accessed March 29, 2020. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/disabilityhistoryearlytreatment.htm>.

7. ADA.gov. "Introduction to the ADA." Accessed March 29, 2020. [https://www.ada.gov/ada\\_intro.htm](https://www.ada.gov/ada_intro.htm).

negative. Parents often struggle with learning their child will have a disability, because they don't want their child to be seen as anything other than 'perfect': "Parents still feel it is a stigma if their child is born with a defect – it means that something is wrong with them as parents."<sup>8</sup> Often the only knowledge parents have about disability is from the media, distant interactions, or the information provided by their physicians or genetic counselors. This information is often heavily stereotyped and biased, and it does not afford a real picture of what life is like for people with disabilities and their families. The popular media is an example of an unreliable source because, "In the 20th century, stereotypes and misgivings about disabled people were carried on in motion pictures and television"<sup>9</sup> (*Stanford News*). The only way to truly understand how individuals with disabilities can affect one's life is to personally interact and befriend someone with a disability. Firsthand experience allows one to see the true nature of things, instead of relying on the opinions of others, which are often easily biased and inaccurate. According to Millar, "It is the responsibility of all Americans to make sure that this stigma is removed and that respect is given to all people without preconceived notions about which characteristics are more preferable in a child. The only way for real change to occur is for us all to unconditionally love and accept all children who are by birth different."<sup>10</sup> People

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8. Millar, Damon. "Evolving Attitudes Regarding Eugenics and Disability in 20th Century American Society." California State University Stanislaus. Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/elements/Millar.pdf>.

9. Stanford News. "Scholar Uncovers Hidden History of People with Disabilities," May 15, 1991. <https://news.stanford.edu/pr/91/910515Arc1373.html>.

10. See note 8 above.

must interact with others in order to understand them. Every person is valuable to society; they just must be given the opportunity to participate.

### *The Models of Disability*

There are several models from which views of disability can be examined, and they serve to help provide different perspectives that allow for a more encompassing view. The most common of these is the medical model. This model looks at disability from the standpoint of the typical medical professional, in which disability is a problem that is in need of a medical cure. It is beneficial in helping people with disabilities receive treatment for aspects of their disability that need medicine, as their problems are taken seriously as being things medicine can help. However, the medical model poses problems in its attempt to eliminate disabilities, and effectively the people who have them, with its overreliance on medicine's healing power and determination that disability itself is a problem:

A standard medical approach, indeed a common lay-person's approach, to thinking about disability involves viewing it as a problem that exists in a person's body. As a consequence, that individual is thought to require treatment or care to fix the disability, to approximate normal functioning, or perhaps as a last measure, to help the individual adapt and learn to function despite the disability.<sup>11</sup>

It renders people with disabilities feeling as though they themselves are a problem, and it allows society to treat them in the same way. It does not recognize any of disability's problems as being caused by society.

The second model to be discussed is the social model of disability. It views

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11. Goering, Sara. "Rethinking Disability: The Social Model of Disability and Chronic Disease." *Current Reviews in Musculoskeletal Medicine* 8, no. 2 (April 11, 2015): 134–38. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12178-015-9273-z>.

disability as a social construct, in that society is at fault for excluding people with disabilities from achieving their full potential. It is helpful, because it recognizes the limits society places on people with disabilities, instead of just placing the problem with the individual:

It identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) as contributory factors in disabling people...while physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological variations may cause individual functional limitation or impairments, these do not have to lead to disability unless society fails to take account of and include people regardless of their individual differences.<sup>12</sup>

The social model was originally an attempt by disability rights activists to move away from disability being viewed as a medical problem, which also helped to increase accommodations. This model began to receive criticism due to its failure to acknowledge the fact that disability does have a biological component that can sometimes be ameliorated by medical assistance. There is a real experience of having a disability that is not addressed by the social model: “We should not, however, lose sight of the fact that people living with impairments can experience negative effects tied more directly to their bodily conditions.”<sup>13</sup> While it does provide a different perspective that addresses important aspects of the disability experience, it does not encompass all that is felt by people with disabilities.

A third model of disability is the religious model, which was more common prior

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12. “Disability and Inclusion – Social and Medical Models of Disability: Paradigm Change.” Accessed March 31, 2020. <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/dic/definition-of-disability-paradigm-change-and-ongoing-conversation/>.

13. See note 11 above.

to the twentieth century, yet it still influences the thought of some people today. It places the problem of disability as having arisen out of sinfulness, and it implies that disability would not have occurred had the individual or their family been more pure: “The Religious Model views disability as a punishment inflicted upon an individual or family by an external force... Sometimes the presence of ‘evil spirits’ is used to explain differences in behavior.”<sup>14</sup> Religion can be helpful in coping with problems associated with disability, yet as explanatory of disability, it can create a negative view. For example, individuals with disabilities are often told that if they just prayed more or had more faith, they would be cured of their disability. This still places disability as a problem that the individual needs to be cured of, instead of viewing disability in a positive light.

There are many other models from which disability can be examined. Due to there being so many different factors that influence the life of one with a disability, no model is perfect in describing the experience. It is helpful to consider the effects of each of the above models, while also knowing that there are many more, when interacting with individuals with disabilities and reflecting on their decisions in life. These models will be referenced throughout this study, as they will guide interpretations of the effects of disability on Roosevelt, Reeve, and Eareckson Tada’s lives.

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14. “Models of Disability: Key To Perspective.” Accessed March 31, 2020. [https://www.theweb.ngo/history/ncarticles/models\\_of\\_disability.htm](https://www.theweb.ngo/history/ncarticles/models_of_disability.htm).

## *Suffering*

Suffering is a necessary part of the human condition; it is something every person will encounter in the course of his or her life. How much one suffers varies and depends on each person's interpretation of suffering. People with disabilities are often interpreted as having to suffer, whether it be from physical pain, social challenges, or other emotional stimulation. Contrary to expectation, many individuals with disabilities believe that their suffering is beneficial, as it enables them to grow closer to God and show God's goodness to others. As Joni Eareckson Tada states:

Scripture presents us with this eternal perspective...What is transitory, such as physical pain, will not endure, but what is lasting, such as the eternal weight of glory accrued from that pain, will remain forever...Mind you, I'm not saying that my paralysis is light in and of itself; it only becomes light in contrast to the far greater weight on the other side of the scale.<sup>15</sup>

Suffering allows people to better appreciate the joy that can only be found in close relationship with God. Viewing her disability in this way, she shows there is a purpose for her pain in helping people learn to appreciate life. Eareckson Tada shows that even though suffering is difficult and painful, it is helpful in its ability to bring people into reverence of the healing power of God. Suffering additionally teaches people to foster closer relationships with each other. Kay Toombs writes: "God's power is made perfect in human weakness, for it is in weakness that we concretely feel our need for God and for

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15. Tada, Joni Eareckson. "Joni Eareckson Tada: Suffering Helps Me See Heaven." CT Women. Accessed April 2, 2020.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2018/november/joni-eareckson-tada-suffering-helps-me-see-heaven.html>.

each other.”<sup>16</sup> Such a position can be found more easily by people who acquire disabilities, particularly those with physical limitations, as they struggle with the loss of physical strength. Personal experience with gaining weakness causes people to be better able to see God’s greatness.

God’s use of disability for the betterment of human lives gives it value. Referring to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, Swinton states: “We cannot be sure exactly what Paul’s disability was...Rather than being healed, Paul discovered great strength in the disabling condition. While he and perhaps those around him initially thought it was a weakness, God considered it to be a strength.”<sup>17</sup> God uses disability to teach lessons about how life can be better lived and make us better people. It helps people understand what it truly means to be human: “Disability is a mode of human experience within which our accepted norms are challenged and reshaped as we encounter the fullness of what it means to be a human being in the rich diversity of God’s image.”<sup>18</sup> It is a difficult process to adapt to a new life as a person with a disability, especially for people like the three this thesis focuses on, as one must develop new ideas of what a meaningful life is. Each of the three people to be featured was extremely physically active prior to acquiring their disabilities, and they all had to adjust to finding a new purpose. While each of these

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16. Toombs, S. Kay. *How Then Should We Die?* Elm Mott, TX: Colloquium Press Trust, 2018, 99-100.

17. Swinton, John. “Many Bodies, Many Worlds.” In *Disability*, 18–24. Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics. Waco, Texas: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2012, 19.

18. Swinton, 18.



people found ways to be active in society, it is crucial for people to simply realize the importance of being over doing:

In stressing that the most important question is, ‘What kind of a person am I?’ we affirm that qualities of character, such as compassion, kindness, patience, humility and courage, relate to a way of being in the world that is not dependent on physical or mental attributes and abilities and that does not look to the world’s criteria of success. This means, among other things, that it is possible to retain personal integrity no matter how severe the reductions of illness and disability are.<sup>19</sup>

The realization that a person is still valuable despite the inability to contribute to society in the typically expected ways helps with acceptance of disability. People who never realize this have a harder time accepting themselves completely with their disabilities.

Suffering also allows people to grow closer to their loved ones. Particularly when family members learn to be with their loved ones instead of constantly feeling as though they must do something for them, the shared experience of suffering can form stronger bonds. Dutch theologian Hans Reinders argues that simple friendship is the main goal of human life, as it is modeled after the gift of friendship with God: “The human good must be what we all can participate in. Friendship is this kind of good. It is constituted by what is most desirable for being human regardless of its state or condition.”<sup>20</sup> Also referring to Toombs’s idea of being rather than doing, friendship with people with disabilities is the best way to relieve the negative effects of their suffering. Families and friends will prove to be essential in helping establish the will to live for the people featured in the upcoming

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19. Toombs, 99.

20. Reinders, Hans S. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008, 150.

chapters. As C.S. Lewis states, “When pain is to be borne, a little courage helps much more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.”<sup>21</sup> Having people in life that are willing to walk with a person in his or her time of suffering makes the suffering much more bearable. As Joni Eareckson Tada’s chapter will later show, having faith in God helps suffering to have meaning, and it shows what immense joy a life with God can bring. Until then, the journey of life with disability for Roosevelt and Reeve will be closely examined to show how their lives were changed by paralysis.

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21. Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940, xii.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Franklin Delano Roosevelt

#### *Introduction*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was born in 1882, and would live until 1945, making him present for one of the most difficult times in both America and the world's history, the Great Depression and both World Wars. For much of this period, Roosevelt played a large role in trying to mitigate the pain felt by many, as he served as America's president from 1933 until his death, which was effectively the longest term held by anyone serving in this position in the country's history. Though he faced many challenges in his life, perhaps the greatest is that he contracted poliomyelitis in 1921, subsequently altering much of his thought, actions, and way of living. His tremendous accomplishments in his time as president are often perceived as even more impressive when his personal struggles with disability are considered, yet this is not necessarily how Roosevelt would have wanted to be remembered. This chapter will delve into Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life both before and after being affected by polio. It will focus on how his life was altered by the disease and especially how it affected his journey to becoming arguably one of the best presidents in United States' history. Additionally, it will discuss whether or not Roosevelt tried to hide his disability, and what that meant for the future of disability. Lastly, it will showcase the president's advocacy efforts, discuss the work he did to help others in situations similar to his own, and look into his faith and how that affected his view of life with a disability.

### *Roosevelt's Early Years*

In his childhood, Roosevelt was noted to be a very adventurous, explorative boy. He spent much of his time outdoors. Roosevelt was born into a wealthy family in 1882 and remained an only child, which is suspected to have played a role in his contraction of poliomyelitis later in his life, as he was not often in contact with other children and had not developed a strong immune system. He was reported to have often been sick in his childhood, contracting many conditions from common colds to typhoid fever.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, his love for being active developed in his childhood, and he became interested in a variety of sports and hobbies. He continued this in his adult life, particularly with his children. They often went on strenuous outings and were busy with activities: "At his family's summer home on the island of Campobello, New Brunswick, he loved to lead his five children through a risky chase game called Hare and Hounds, which involved racing up and down rocky escarpments."<sup>2</sup> The difficult combination of his susceptibility to illness and desire to be excessively active would return as likely factors contributing to his seemingly sudden contraction of polio.

As a young adult, Roosevelt was often seen as rather arrogant and skilled at getting what he wanted with minimal effort. According to Tobin: "he affected an air of such upright gentility...the odds had always favored him."<sup>3</sup> He was disliked by some for

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1. Gallagher, Hugh Gregory. *FDR's Splended Deception*. Third Edition, FDR Memorial Edition. St Petersburg, FL: Vandamere Press, 1999, 6.

2. Tobin, James. *The Man He Became: How FDR Defied Polio to Win the Presidency*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2013, 17.

3. Tobin, 19-21.

his level of self-confidence, yet many others attributed it to his impressive nature. A firsthand account of his arrogance is given by his later Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, who stated of her first encounter with him: “[He had] an unfortunate habit—so natural that he was unaware of it—of throwing his head up. This, combined with his pince-nez and great height, gave him the appearance of looking down his nose at most people.”<sup>4</sup> She recounted this experience from a tea party in 1910, where Roosevelt was in the progress of making an entrance onto the political scene. Roosevelt was self-righteous in his opinions, and he was not afraid to share them with others. This caused him to be disliked by the majority of the people he encountered in his early career.

Developing himself as a proper politician, Roosevelt reined in his arrogance and became someone with a personality that was able to charm almost anyone. Perkins later stated: “He learned to be a politician...His habit of looking down his nose was greatly modified now—it was hardly noticeable. The toss of the head up and back was softened—it had become a gesture of cheerfulness, not arrogance.”<sup>5</sup> Observing the qualities of other politicians he encountered, he found ways to modify his own behavior to better please those around him. Roosevelt took note of qualities that he felt were not beneficial to political gain, such as Woodrow Wilson’s lack of joviality in communicating with representatives from other countries, and he used his skills in charming others to counteract such behavior, effectively becoming friendly with everyone he encountered. He used his refined personality to his advantage on his journey

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4. Perkins, Frances. *The Roosevelt I Knew*. Hightower Papers. New York: The Viking Press, 1946, 11.

5. Perkins, 20.

to become president, yet some say it spawned from his desire to please people. Tobin quoted Roosevelt as having “tried too hard to be liked.”<sup>6</sup> He claimed that Roosevelt seemed to be determined to make sure he was highly regarded by those around him. This shows a shift in personality from his previous lack of care for the opinions of others. Roosevelt’s possible strong desire to have others like him plays an interesting role when considering the debate as to whether he tried to hide his later disability from the public. Being so concerned about the perceptions of others, it can easily be interpreted that he would have been worried about the public’s affection for him if he were seen not as ‘healthy’ as he used to be.

### *Family Life*

Franklin married Eleanor in 1905. They had known each other essentially all their lives, as they were distantly related, yet their marriage is seen as interesting given their opposite natures. Where Franklin was confident, self-righteous, and boisterous, Eleanor was “reflective, kind, vulnerable, not beautiful by conventional standards but vividly appealing with ‘a very good mind,’ as [Franklin] put it.”<sup>7</sup> Despite their differences, in many ways, Eleanor turned out to be exactly what he needed. While many factors helped him to mold his character to what it needed to be, Eleanor certainly played a large role.

They had what was considered an unusual marriage for their time, as both partners were independently able to achieve their goals outside of the home. However, it worked very well for their dynamic. Prior to their marriage, Eleanor showed an interest in

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6. Tobin, 20.

7. Tobin, 36.

social reform by volunteering at settlement houses and exhibiting a strong care for individuals in poor living conditions: “Her work consisted of visiting the tenement apartments where workers both lived and worked under dangerous and unhealthy conditions.”<sup>8</sup> She would later use her experiences volunteering to influence great social change, and Franklin’s political career was greatly helped by the efforts of his wife. Even though having five children kept Eleanor busy, her desire to help others did not wane during their marriage, and she was able to make a tremendous difference in society with the help of her position. Though the Roosevelt marriage was, and still is, one of interest due to its different dynamic, its structure worked very well to allow each partner to achieve his and her individual goals. Eleanor’s talents would prove to be extremely helpful in the sixteenth year of their marriage, when Franklin fell victim to poliomyelitis.

### *Initial Life with Polio*

During the summer of 1921, Franklin Roosevelt found himself with a kind of illness that he had not experienced before, despite his wealth of contact with sickness. It started with an extreme tiredness, which he attributed to the many activities he had done with his kids the day before. The next day, Roosevelt knew something was really wrong: “When he awoke the next morning, Friday, both legs felt rubbery and flimsy...when he willed his legs to move, they were listless. Rays of pain spread through his back and legs and feet...By the time he tried to go to sleep that night, he was unable to stand up at all.”<sup>9</sup>

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8. Firstladies.org. “Eleanor Roosevelt Biography: National First Ladies’ Library.” Accessed October 19, 2019. <http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=33>.

9. Tobin, 51.

Doctors were summoned and diagnoses were made, but it would take nearly a month for Roosevelt to receive the accurate diagnosis of polio.

There is much speculation as to how Roosevelt contracted the disease. One of the most common beliefs is that it just happened to him by chance, likely during a trip he took to Bear Mountain with a group of Boy Scouts: “Perhaps [the virus] was suspended in a bucket of water or a pitcher of lemonade...Or the virus may have stuck to the finger of the infected boy from New York or New Jersey.”<sup>10</sup> This theory is also viewed as most likely by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library. Another theory is that it occurred due to his immune system having been compromised from physical and emotional exhaustion. Emotionally, Roosevelt was concerned about protecting his career from being ruined by scandal; “The politically ambitious Roosevelt was always anxious to avoid the slightest criticism and was easily upset by unfavorable publicity...In the summer of 1921, at Campobello, FDR was exhausted and under emotional strain—vulnerable to the polio virus.”<sup>11</sup> The scandal faced at the time of his polio’s onset concerned an issue of bad behavior from Roosevelt’s Navy, which he was serving as secretary of at the time. Both of these scenarios reflect the knowledge that Roosevelt was already prone to illness due to his frequently tormented immune system. No matter how he acquired poliomyelitis, the reality he now faced was that his life was to encounter a lot of changes. The man who had always had things in life handed to him was now to face intense physical struggles that would change the way he viewed the world.

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10. Tobin, 29.

11. Gallagher, 6-9.



Immediately following his sudden paralysis, Eleanor stepped up to fill the position of nurse. She took care of her husband's new basic needs and searched for doctors to figure out what had happened to Franklin. She was aided by Louis Howe, Franklin's political advisor. This time was extremely stressful for the Roosevelts, as both Franklin and Eleanor were fearful of what was to come, Howe was worried particularly for FDR's career, and the Roosevelt children were kept uninformed about what had happened to their father: "Franklin and Eleanor responded to the crisis in a manner typical of their class and background. They concealed their true feelings from others, from each other, and perhaps even from themselves. This took tremendous self-discipline."<sup>12</sup> Post-diagnosis, Franklin clung to the hope that he would one day be able to regain use of his legs, whereas Eleanor was convinced his current state would be permanent. Gallagher states of Roosevelt: "First of all, FDR had absolute confidence in his recovery. He would walk again. He would regain full use of his muscles. No matter how long, how painful, or how arduous, he would get better and eventually fully well. This confidence... was absolute and basic."<sup>13</sup> This unflinching determination would later be one of Roosevelt's best assets in his presidency. But at this time, while it might have provided him the strength to survive his diagnosis, this denial is also concerning considering Roosevelt's mental health. It is typically important to be able to accept the reality of one's future, especially one as grim as Roosevelt's, knowing that he was not likely to walk again, in order to be well-prepared for the challenges to come. However,

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12. Gallagher, 13.

13. Gallagher, 16-17.

this was not of concern to this powerful man. Facing reality was left to his wife: “Eleanor Roosevelt took charge of his initial medical care and encouraged his effort to seek various treatments though she was honest in disagreeing with his belief that he would eventually regain mobility.”<sup>14</sup> The next step for the Roosevelts was to find a treatment, though this would not prove to be a fruitful endeavor.

### *Trying to Find a Cure*

With his limitless determination intact, Roosevelt began the process of searching for a way to regain the use of his legs. He spent much time shortly after his paralysis in the hospital, working to improve his health and strengthen his muscles. Then, he worked to find alternate sources of treatment. Gallagher notes that: “In his search for an effective therapy, Roosevelt consulted expert medical opinion across America. He developed an extensive correspondence with polio victims and the doctors treating them, which he carried on throughout the rest of his life.”<sup>15</sup> Trying many different methods of treatment, Roosevelt made progress in the development of his new mode of living. Though it was not all he had hoped, he kept trying nonetheless. Roosevelt soon discovered that swimming would be the best hope for him. An encounter between Eleanor and Franklin is recorded by James Tobin:

“He never complained,” she said. “The only remark that I can remember that was in a way of complaint was...when we were discussing whether we would take a houseboat in Florida for the winter—because of the expense—and he said, ‘Well,

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14. See note 8 above.

15. Gallagher, 23.

I think I might as well do as much as possible in order to improve as much as I can, because I shouldn't be any greater burden than is necessary."<sup>16</sup>

This was a very rare acknowledgement by Roosevelt of there being a negative quality to a part of his life, as typically he shunned the thought of referring to any aspect of life with anything less than positivity. It shows that although Roosevelt relentlessly held onto his hope of curing himself, he inwardly knew that his condition was not improving as much as he wanted. His never-ending desire to show strength kept him from being able to share any inclination that he was not in control of his body, which should have been worrisome to those around him: "After the first two years, his single-minded concentration had begun to take on the characteristics of an unhealthy obsession...[he] seemed psychologically unable to acknowledge the permanence of his paralytic condition."<sup>17</sup> Thus, any hint that he was aware of the reality of his condition helps ease the concern for his mental health.

Three years after contracting poliomyelitis, Roosevelt sought a cure in Warm Springs, Georgia, where there was a hotel that was transformed into a facility dedicated to rehabilitation via water therapy. This facility would come to mean a lot to Roosevelt, and he would put forth much effort to improve its quality of operation, eventually purchasing the place. Roosevelt himself, with the help of the hotel owner, performed the transformation of the hotel. Resonating with the struggle of others with polio, Roosevelt wanted to help them as much as he could: "Some desperate polios simply packed their bags and set off for the Springs without so much as invitation, permission, or warning.

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16. Tobin, 169.

17. Gallagher, 27.

They had come drawn by Roosevelt's example, and he took an immediate and genuine interest in their plight."<sup>18</sup> He worked to create an accessible center for treatment, as many of his new friends used wheelchairs. He used his own personal experience with what therapies worked in order to create a treatment plan for the new patients. Roosevelt designed exercises, planned activities, and renovated the facility for the people who came seeking his help, yet he also took the time to make friends with them. He established the importance of having a supportive community to improve healing, especially with those who are experiencing the same problems: "What Roosevelt conceived at Warm Springs seems, on reflection, to be both sensible and obvious, but it was, in fact, revolutionary. So far as rehabilitation is concerned, Roosevelt grasped certain principles intuitively."<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt's efforts brought hope to people who had worried that they would never have meaningful lives again. His institute still functions today as a place where vocational assistance is provided to students with disabilities. Though Roosevelt was still trying to achieve the ability to walk, the Warm Springs experience helped him to understand that there were still many things he could accomplish without the use of his legs.

### *His Reentrance to Politics*

The whole time Franklin was pursuing rehabilitation at Warm Springs, Eleanor and Louis Howe were working to maintain his status in the political sphere. He was brought from his rehabilitation project by New York State Governor Al Smith: "Roosevelt was at Warm Springs. Mrs. Roosevelt was at the convention. Governor Al

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18. Gallagher, 39.

19. Gallagher, 53.

approached her and asked if she thought Roosevelt would consent to run...Roosevelt had said, 'I'm not well enough to run. It's out of the question.'"<sup>20</sup> After a few more phone calls and pleas, Roosevelt consented to run for governor of New York with Smith running for president. While he may have thought he was not ready to be back in the political sphere, he quickly discovered that he belonged there. Roosevelt learned that he loved connecting with the people of New York. His new care for others since his initial political start is showcased in Perkins's writing: "I remembered, in contrast, how he had walked away from bores a few years earlier when he was in the state Senate. Now he could not walk away when he was bored. He listened, and out of it learned what he later held with such conviction as a basis of action—that 'everybody wants to have the sense of belonging, of being on the inside.'"<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt's experiences at Warm Springs had taught him this truth. Now he was able to use these experiences that bettered his character to improve his politics. His success on the campaign trail won him the election for governor, even though Smith did not win the presidency.

A shocking difficulty for those close to Roosevelt was the process of transporting him to and from speaking platforms while on the campaign trail. He had to be physically carried up and down stairs and lifted over obstacles. Frances Perkins wrote: "Those of us who saw this incident, with our hands on our throats to hold down our emotion, realized that this man had accepted the ultimate humility which comes from being helped physically...He came up over that perilous, uncomfortable, and humiliating 'entrance,'

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20. Perkins, 41.

21. Perkins, 44.

and his manner was pleasant, courteous, and enthusiastic.”<sup>22</sup> It was so impressive to those witnessing his entrance to see such a dramatic change in the physical capacities of a man, yet especially to see him arrive through the trials with such a positive demeanor.

Roosevelt had taken time to strengthen his character. The humility mentioned by Perkins is noteworthy, as this is a quality Roosevelt was thoroughly lacking prior to his being affected by polio. One of the hardest things for many people to do, especially someone as strong-willed as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is accept help. However, his position forced him to do just that. Being able to do so required him to understand that requiring assistance does not make someone weak, rather being able to graciously ask for help exhibits a quality of humility that is a sign of great strength. Hugh Gregory Gallagher, a person who had polio himself, wrote of the process of Roosevelt’s delivery to the platform: “It was an extraordinary event, completely without precedent. Roosevelt showed his party that he was, legs or no, an able contender. By so doing he helped to alter the way American society viewed the handicapped, and he helped to alter the way the handicapped see themselves.”<sup>23</sup> Roosevelt’s reentrance into the world of politics was a success in more ways than simply his victory in the polls.

### *The Presidency*

From his experience as governor of New York, Roosevelt gained the capacity to understand how to best help the people of America. He learned how to better connect with people, and he learned that his role as president would be to represent their

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22. Perkins, 44.

23. Gallagher, 63.

individual ideas in order to enact the change they needed to see:

His power to associate himself with others came to him rather gradually. One could see it develop from his start as Governor and later as President. His early life did not show much of this ability, but as he grew older, as he went through the horror of his illness and crippling, as he met many persons on many levels, he developed the capacity to associate himself with great numbers of people.<sup>24</sup>

Roosevelt's own struggles with his disability made him more understanding of the struggles of his people during such a difficult time in history. He learned how important it was to be able to relate to people in his career. Tobin attributes this to his experience with having a disability: "His greatest gift—his extraordinary ability simply to *talk* persuasively and winningly, with uncanny charm—surely had been enhanced by his need to use language to distract listeners from his paralysis."<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt's experiences refined his natural social abilities to where they reflected his genuine care for the people. Due to this care, Roosevelt won the 1932 election in a considerable landslide, a tradition he would continue for his next three elections.

Roosevelt's care for the American people continued in his work to relieve the stress of the Great Depression. After having met with many people across America, he was able to develop plans that would benefit the situations they faced. He was determined to ensure each person had certain rights: "Among these rights, he said, were the right of a laborer to a useful and remunerative job; of a farmer to a fair return for his produce; of a businessman to protection from unfair competition; of every family to a decent home; of every person to adequate medical care, good education, and protection against privation

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24. Perkins, 69.

25. Tobin, 242.

in old age.”<sup>26</sup> Roosevelt cared about the problems his people were facing, and he wanted to do his best to make sure these problems were limited. His policies reflect his idea that all people had value and that certain things in life were needed to help people regard themselves as valuable: “Roosevelt thought of social and economic problems and reforms not in the abstract but in terms of people and how people would benefit.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of thought was necessary in such a tragedy as the Great Depression. The people trusted Roosevelt to protect their interests. He had a talent for making things understandable to the American people, which is what they needed in a time of such confusion. His manner of presenting issues with much-needed optimism was particularly impressive, as stated by one of his speech writers: “Well, no one is as good as the President in fixing the line between keeping up morale and confidence on the one hand, and being too optimistic on the other. I’d take his judgment any time.”<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt’s skill in bonding with everyone, even though he could not personally meet them all, was essential to his success. Many of those closest to him thought this was a skill he was able to hone as a result of his personal understanding of disability and how important human connection is.

As part of Roosevelt’s efforts to better the economic situation of the U.S., he established the New Deal, which contained a variety of policies and improvement strategies. A few of these policies, such as Social Security, minimum wage, and the

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26. Greer, Thomas H. *What Roosevelt Thought: The Social and Political Ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1958, 13.

27. Rosenman, Samuel I. *Working with Roosevelt*. First. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952, 34.

28. Rosenman, 5.



Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, still exist today. They all had the common goal of betterment of the economic status and condition of life of Americans: “the New Deal emphasized the commonweal over private gain, setting a new standard for public service, public welfare, and concern for all the people, including the losers in the great competitive race.”<sup>29</sup> These benefits were representative of Roosevelt’s ideals and values, what he considered essential to a good life. He thought all people deserved to be stable and happy, which is exemplified in his protection of the rights of the elderly:

In a message to lawmakers [Roosevelt] declared, ‘We can no longer be satisfied with the old method of putting them away in dismal institutions with the accompanying loss of self-respect, personality, and interest in life.’ Old people should be helped to maintain themselves in their own homes, where they could hold up their heads as citizens. He did not have extravagance in mind...The important thing was the principle of personal worth which the pension upheld.<sup>30</sup>

Roosevelt did not himself want to be seen as someone who needed to be taken care of, so he was able to protect others who were often put in similar situations. His policies showed that he valued more than just a flourishing economy for the sake of business; instead he genuinely valued the lives of the people he swore to protect. As Tobin concludes, “He was that man before he became sick, but he only discovered who he really was through the ordeal of polio. So it gave him a kind of confidence in his own strength that perhaps no one can have until you’re tested. I also think it inevitably gave him a kind of compassion for people who are suffering that he couldn’t have had if he

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29. Walker, Richard. “New Deal in Brief.” Pdf. Accessed October 28, 2019, 9. <https://livingnewdeal.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/New-Deal-in-Brief.pdf>.

30. Greer, 11.

had not suffered deeply himself.”<sup>31</sup> This is what made him such a revered leader, and this might not have been possible if Roosevelt hadn’t experienced the vulnerability caused by disability firsthand.

### *Keeping the Secret?*

While much of Roosevelt’s life is well-known, there is significant speculation about two things: his faith and whether he tried to hide the fact that he was not ambulant. This section will tackle the debate of the latter. Immediately after becoming ill with what he would find out to be polio, Roosevelt and his family took careful precautions to make sure the news was kept as secret as possible: “But what to say, and to whom, was a highly delicate matter...Howe and Eleanor steered a cautious course between secrecy and full disclosure.”<sup>32</sup> They wanted to ensure they knew what the diagnosis and effects on his life would be before allowing anyone outside of their trustworthy circle to find out. Considering Roosevelt was known in the political sphere prior to being affected by polio, it is expected that his trusted advisors would recommend staying quiet in order to make sure they did not ruin his career goals with a hasty release of information: “As Dr. Keen put it, the need was seen to announce ‘the fact of his illness...to the press in order to

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31. Tobin, James. Roosevelt’s Polio Wasn’t A Secret: He Used It To His “Advantage.” Interview by Dave Davies. September 9, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/09/19/349853853/roosevelts-polio-wasnt-a-secret-he-used-it-to-his-advantage>.

32. Tobin, “The Man He Became: How FDR Defied Polio to Win the Presidency,” 76-77.

prevent misinformation being spread about a prominent man.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, when it was time, information would be given to the press. Louis Howe took time to figure out how to best release this information to protect Roosevelt’s career interests. Thinking of how his career would be affected, Tobin writes:

It would affect not just the fortunes of a famous family but the future of the Democratic Party in the state of New York, perhaps even the national ticket in 1924. Howe could visualize the words his old comrades would deploy in the next day’s editions as clearly as if he were typing them himself: ‘invalid’... ‘paralyzed’... ‘cripple.’ Any of those words held the power of a bomb if tossed into the career of a major politician.<sup>34</sup>

It is understandable that they would be hesitant to let the public find out about Roosevelt’s condition, because such words had very negative connotations. While Eleanor and Howe tried to figure out how to work with the new diagnosis and Franklin’s political future, Roosevelt became determined to walk again, and thus spent a lot of time at Warm Springs, trying to recover the use of his legs. He did not want to be someone seen as anything less than fully capable, healthy, and strong. He worked very hard to build up his arm strength to help him move around in a new way, all the while trying to make his legs work. As a politician, one’s public image is extremely important to gaining voters’ support, and Roosevelt was very aware of this, so he tried his best to improve his physical condition.

As stated earlier, Roosevelt was encouraged to reenter politics by running for governor of New York as Al Smith’s supporter for president sooner than he was mentally ready. However, his reentry was marked by the presence of his disability: “Roosevelt

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33. Tobin, 76.

34. Tobin, 91-92.

took the stage on crutches at the 1924 Democratic National Convention to nominate New York governor Alfred E. Smith for president.”<sup>35</sup> Appearing with crutches at such a large convention would have been unlikely if he was trying to hide his disability. He chose not to use his wheelchair when giving speeches, instead wanting to literally stand as a symbol of strength for the American people, and he did so with the help of his crutches, braces, and son James:

But the president’s disability was never a secret. Prior to entering the White House, he had been profiled in major publications like *Time* and *Liberty*, which displayed his heavy leg braces and detailed the excruciating efforts he underwent to hoist himself around on unresponsive legs. The *Liberty* article, in particular, addressed the elephant in the room of whether a ‘cripple’ was fit to be president, concluding that FDR was more physically sound than most men half his age.<sup>36</sup>

The public was aware of his disability, and the media made effort to address any concerns people might have had about his strength. Also, given the nature of how Roosevelt had to reach the platform for speaking discussed earlier, it would have been an added difficulty to try to navigate a wheelchair up to the platform as well. Thus, the lack of presence of Roosevelt’s wheelchair in public dissertation is not indicative of him trying to hide his disability; rather the presence of his braces, crutches, and aide indicate he was aware that the public would perceive its presence.

Some historians even say Roosevelt used his disability to his advantage in trying

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35. Clausen, Christopher. “FDR’s Hidden Handicap.” *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2005. <http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/fdrs-hidden-handicap>.

36. Ott, Tim. “How Franklin Roosevelt’s Health Affected His Presidency.” *Biography*. Accessed October 29, 2019. <https://www.biography.com/news/franklin-roosevelt-health>.

to become president. However, this was not the case, as Roosevelt never mentioned his disability or tried to appeal for pity in his campaign. He campaigned for and won the presidency due to his promise of a ‘new deal’ for America’s people. His personality, particularly his love for direct action, ensured them that he would be able to get them out of the awful hardships they were facing. He lived with a level of strength and vitality that inspired Americans, and they knew that he was a man who would enact change: “During a speaking engagement in 1932, Steve Neal notes that Roosevelt moved away from the podium, lost his balance and fell. Aides got him to his feet and Roosevelt immediately resumed the speech at the point he had been cut off. The crowd was very impressed.”<sup>37</sup> Any notice of Roosevelt’s disability only provided inspiration, as he did not let it stop him from achieving his goals. He showed that physical differences and difficulties did not have to limit one from living a full life: “‘To F.D.R., this was not ‘a sickness’ – one of the reasons he is an icon for people with disabilities. He educated Americans to understand that disability is not illness and that we can master the limitations caused by disability,’ Vanden Heuvel added.”<sup>38</sup> Roosevelt was a living example of achievement, and he consequently served as someone to model behavior after, especially for others with disabilities.

In the 1990s, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial was created in

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37. Arizona Health Sciences Library. “Franklin D. Roosevelt - Disability and Deception.” Accessed October 29, 2019. <http://ahsl.arizona.edu/about/exhibits/presidents/fdr>.

38. UCP Wheels. “Franklin Delano Roosevelt: The Only Physically Disabled President.” *UCP Wheels* (blog), February 17, 2014. <https://ucpwheels.org/franklin-delano-roosevelt-the-only-physically-disabled-president/>.

Washington, D.C. This memorial created a lot of controversy, as there was much debate as to whether Roosevelt should be depicted in his wheelchair. Those arguing that he tried to keep his disability a secret thought that the president would not have wanted to be memorialized in any way showing his disability. However, disability rights activists and those who knew Roosevelt did not try to hide his impairment argued that he needed to be pictured as he actually was: seated in his homemade wheelchair. While disability rights activists were cautious of portraying Roosevelt as a hero simply because of his disability, they saw it was important for him to be memorialized accurately, and his struggles with polio honestly helped shape him to be the caring man America loved so much: “They discover a man much like themselves. And in that discovery is the key to the statue: visitors can relate to it. The statue sits *among* visitors, not *above* them. It tells the humanizing story of an essential American President who dealt with challenges of his own while dealing with those of the nation.”<sup>39</sup> Just as Roosevelt journeyed across the country to talk to, befriend, and understand the struggles of the American people, his statue in his wheelchair allows for people to relate to him and his struggles better. Roosevelt wanted no memorial to be erected in his honor, as he did not feel himself deserving a huge statue, but if one was to be created anyway, he would probably have been happy to know it was one that presented him as a humble man like any other, to which people could easily relate. Were he to have hid his disability from the world, this would have caused some people with disabilities to feel that their disabilities needed to be

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39. Waples, Eric R. “Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Media, His Physical Image, and Teaching Implications,” n.d., 111.

hidden as well, rather than exposed as Roosevelt's was. This not being the case allows for Roosevelt to serve as a positive image of someone who was not afraid to accomplish his goals, even from the position of being seated in a wheelchair, which is why many see him as such an inspiration.

### *Advocacy*

Roosevelt's personal experience with disability gave him interest in trying to help others who were in situations similar to him. Thus, his work at Warm Springs was his first advocacy effort, and he ended up purchasing the resort to convert it into a treatment facility. Next, Roosevelt turned the occasion of his birthday into a cause for raising money for Warm Springs: "At the suggestion of a public relations consultant, business magnate and FDR political ally Henry L. Doherty launched the National Committee for Birthday Balls that sponsored a dance in every town across the nation, both to celebrate the President's birthday but also to raise money for the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation."<sup>40</sup> The president wanted to allow everyone to celebrate, and if they were going to do so, he wanted the celebration to be in spirit of supporting the place that helped him so much on his journey of recovery. Continuing this was Roosevelt's establishment of the March of Dimes. Trying to raise money to find a cure for poliomyelitis, Roosevelt asked for the mere donation of a dime from the American people:

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40. FDR Library. "From the Museum – Infantile Paralysis Wishing Well." Forward with Roosevelt, April 19, 2011. <https://fdr.blogs.archives.gov/2011/04/19/from-the-museum-infantile-paralysis-wishing-well/>.

In 1938, FDR created the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to support the rehabilitation center at Warm Springs and also to aid the victims of polio throughout the country. To increase awareness of the Foundation's campaign, radio personality and philanthropist Eddie Cantor took to the air waves and urged Americans to send their loose change to President Roosevelt in 'a march of dimes to reach all the way to the White House.'<sup>41</sup>

Roosevelt did not ask for much from Americans, instead asking for a small contribution from each person that would culminate in a huge sum. These funds raised allowed for the eventual eradication of polio with the creation of Jonas Salk's vaccine: "By meeting his disease head-on, Roosevelt turned it into a non-issue when it came to doing his job while spearheading a way to stamp it out as a public menace."<sup>42</sup> Instead of hiding his disability from Americans, FDR was able to use his experience and position as a public figure as motivation asking people to help him find a cure. He knew the importance of research to the ability to find a cure: "He thought that, above everything else, there should be medical research into the causes of paralysis and into the methods of preventing it or curing it in the early stages."<sup>43</sup> Roosevelt's advocacy was essential to the eventual cure of the disease.

### *The President and His Faith*

Roosevelt, being a very reserved man when it came to his personal convictions, thoughts, and beliefs, creates a lot of speculation when trying to determine what exactly his perspective was concerning his faith. Roosevelt grew up in an Episcopalian

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41. See note 40 above.

42. See note 36 above.

43. Perkins, 35.



household, where he was a member of St. James Church at Hyde Park. He then was sent to Groton School for his teenage education, where he was able to further develop his Episcopalian faith under the leadership of Reverend Endicott Peabody.<sup>44</sup> Roosevelt would remain committed to the St. James Church for the rest of his life, serving as Senior Warden in his presidency. His political opinions would later prove to be shaped by his upbringing: “His political ideology, in this way, was founded upon religious values he had learned as a young man.”<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt’s convictions being formed so early in life allowed him to remain true to them throughout the hardships faced in his life, and he was then able to build upon them to create a stronger, well-formed faith.

While many fail to recognize his commitment to religious thought, those closest to him comment often about the presence of his faith. Frances Perkins believed his religious thought to have come from his experiences with disability: “In occasional asides he revealed that he had also had a great strengthening of religious faith. He believed that Divine Providence had intervened to save him from total paralysis, despair, and death. His understanding of the spiritual laws of faith and of the association of man’s feeble powers with God’s great power must have come at this time. It was a solid basis for his future inner security in times of stress.”<sup>46</sup> Roosevelt was well-known for his endless positivity and optimism, even when he faced tremendous hardships. This joyful

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44. Gustafson, Merlin, and Jerry Rosenberg. “The Faith of Franklin Roosevelt.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3: The Congress, the Court, and Presidency at 200 Years (Summer 1989), 560.

45. Gustafson, 565.

46. Perkins, 29.

confidence could be attributed to his convictions of faith. Perkins also commented: “I realized his Christian faith was absolutely simple. As far as I can make out, he had no doubts. He just believed with a certainty and simplicity that gave him no pangs or struggles...It was more of a code of ethics to him. It was a real relationship of man to God, and he felt as certain of it as of the reality of his life.”<sup>47</sup> Roosevelt’s simplicity of beliefs allowed him to easily relate to people of all denominations of Christianity, as he felt they had a common respect for God and man’s position in relation to God. In addition to his overwhelming care for the situations people faced, Roosevelt was able to connect with people on the basis of shared religious beliefs.

Roosevelt’s beliefs heavily influenced his policy decisions and the things he considered important in his presidency. As stated by John F. Woolverton:

Franklin Roosevelt’s three Christian principles were faith, hope, and charity. Hope served as his leading theme from his fall to polio in 1921 through the first phase of the New Deal. Then charity took over, defining the ideal structure for reform that Roosevelt hoped to implement. Faith would emerge more prominently in the grim years leading into World War II, 1938-1942. But hope was never left behind. It provided the enduring inspiration for Roosevelt and the leadership he sought to lend.<sup>48</sup>

His speeches during the wartime effort reflect this more prominent emergence of faith. Roosevelt often calls upon the strength of God to help America win the war. His great care for every American stemmed from his foundation in Christianity. He used his Christian principles to make necessary change happen that improved the condition of life

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47. Perkins, 135.

48. Woolverton, John F., and James D. Bratt. *A Christian and a Democrat: A Religious Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019, 106.

for his people: “He saw the betterment of life and people as part of God’s work, and he felt that man’s devotion to God expressed itself by serving his fellow men.”<sup>49</sup> His beliefs made it crucial for him to protect the humanity of the American people and seek an end to the poor conditions caused by the economic downfall of the Great Depression.

Woolverton states his success is rooted in his beliefs: “He rallied a solid majority of American citizens to a vision of justice and democracy that came right out of Scripture—and his heritage of liberal Protestantism.”<sup>50</sup> Roosevelt used his position as President of the United States to do his Christian duty in caring for all of his neighbors.

### *Conclusion*

Franklin Roosevelt accomplished many things in his life, the most notable of which occurred during his time as President of the United States, from 1933 until his death in 1945. Progressing from a young, overconfident politician into a compassionate, strong president, one might question what exactly caused his transformation. While not entirely a result of the difficulties he faced from having poliomyelitis, his struggles certainly had an effect on his character. According to Franklin’s wife, Eleanor, he became more understanding of people’s struggles: “Eleanor said later she thought the experience had taught him patience. She thought it had given him an understanding of the suffering of others. She called it ‘perhaps a blessing in disguise.’”<sup>51</sup> Throughout his struggles, Roosevelt remained a positive, hopeful, and faithful man devoted to bettering the lives of

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49. Perkins, 137.

50. Woolverton, 6.

51. Gallagher, 27.

the American people. Despite the opinion that Roosevelt tried to hide his disability from the world, his presence as such an influential public figure allowed him to become an advocate for people with disabilities. He created the Warm Springs Rehabilitation Institute and the March of Dimes to help make life with polio better and raise funds to eradicate the disease. Though not frequently discussed in the literature, Roosevelt's faith influenced his policy decisions, gave him the ability to stay hopeful during such hard times, and provided him with values to uphold in serving Americans. Roosevelt's life, especially concerning his life after being affected by polio, will be compared to the lives of Joni Eareckson Tada and Christopher Reeve in the final chapter, after their particular experiences with disability are individually explored in order to show common threads of thought, behavior, and action as a result of their lives.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Christopher Reeve

#### *Introduction*

An icon known around the world as Superman, due to his starring in the 1978 version of the film, Christopher Reeve developed a passion for acting early in his childhood. His most memorable role would come to serve as a source of emotional conflict for him, due to his becoming paralyzed in a 1995 equestrian accident. He struggled immensely with the emotional impact of the state of his body in paralysis, thinking that he was supposed to be perceived as a person of superhuman strength. He thought that he must overcome his paralysis and regain the ability to walk, even if many people deemed it an impossible task. After a time of grieving in which Reeve sought a new purpose, he and his wife, Dana, started the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, which has the goal of trying to find a cure for paralysis by spinal cord injury. Reeve's injury sparked his interest in science, so he threw himself behind the goal of funding research to discover how to repair damaged spinal cords. He became very politically active in order to acquire funding from the government to support research for cures to paralysis. From this focused goal, Reeve expanded the foundation to include the goal of improving the quality of life for people who are paralyzed. This difference will be explored, as it marks a distinct contrast in thought from his view that disability was something he needed to be rid of to the outlook that disability was permanent and that life could be improved with help. This chapter will additionally look into Reeve's life prior to his accident, during the time where he struggled to adjust to life with a disability, and the

final period where he grew closer to accepting himself as a person with paralysis and changed his mind about what it meant to be a hero. The role of his family, particularly his wife, in his healing process will be a particular focus of study, in addition to the role faith may have played on his road to acceptance.

### *Early Life and the Beginning of Acting*

Reeve grew up in a divorced household, with his parents, Franklin D. Reeve and Barbara Pitner, separating when he was three years old. He loved both of his parents, but he and his brother lived primarily with their mother. The lack of presence of his father during his childhood left him working hard to receive his father's attention, which is part of the reason why he became involved in the theater. Reeve refers to his father: "He had a special talent for communicating with each child based on age and skill...My special interest was the theater...No one in our family had ever been an actor, which made me feel truly unique."<sup>1</sup> Each of Franklin Reeve's children had to find ways to obtain their father's attention, and Reeve found acting as his method. Both of his parents were writers, thus they encouraged Reeve to be involved in academics. Reeve recalls that he received extra praise from his father for his academic accomplishments: "Often he would compliment me for a paper I'd written in school...Franklin praised that story and my writing to the skies. Sometimes he would read my papers out loud at the dinner table.

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1. Reeve, Christopher. *Nothing Is Impossible*. Ebook. New York: Cambria Productions, Inc., 2002, 50-54.

Later he would come to see me perform.”<sup>2</sup> He thrived on this attention. Reeve was also very skilled at sports, and it grew to be a theme in his life that Reeve excelled at nearly everything he tried: “‘Chris was extraordinary,’ his mother recalled to an *Asbury Park Press* reporter. ‘He was endowed with a great many extraordinary talents. He had a wonderful mind, wide-ranging interests, a willingness to take risks.’”<sup>3</sup> He was involved in many organizations and sports at school, and he was always active. One of his favorite sports was hockey, and he found joy in being successful in school and extracurricular activities.

This success translated to almost every part of his life, as Reeve tried to reach perfection in everything he did. Part of the reason for this was his desire to continue receiving his father’s praise and outcompete his brother and stepsiblings. Reeve recalls: “much of my time and energy went into trying to be as perfect as possible. I thought this would set me apart from all the half brothers and stepbrothers who became a part of my life when my mother and father both remarried...On the other hand, I took secret risks to see how much I could get away with.”<sup>4</sup> Risk-taking would prove to be an essential part of Reeve’s idea of what it means to truly live, as will be shown later in this chapter. Reeve did not like to be embarrassed, and if there was something he did wrong, he made sure never to do it again. After an incident in which he found himself embarrassed during a

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2. Reeve, Christopher. *Still Me*. New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1998, 61.

3. Younis, Steven. “Biography (Christopher Reeve Homepage).” Christopher Reeve, 2006. <http://www.chrisreevehomepage.com/biography.html>.

4. Reeve, “Still Me,” 62.

sailing event, he never sailed again. Reeve said, “I put a lot of pressure on myself.”<sup>5</sup> He claims this was due to his never-ending effort to acquire his father’s approval.

Reeve had decided he loved acting by the time he was nine years old. He knew it was what he wanted to do in his career: “It was one thing to be a good student-athlete, but acting was even better...On opening night...I got applause from the audience. Right in the middle of the first act. It went straight to my head, and I thought, This is wonderful. I found every excuse I could to get down to the theater.”<sup>6</sup> He sought attention and knew he would receive it from an audience. Reeve graduated from college at Cornell before being selected to attend at Julliard. He began acting in plays and smaller films, and he found his first major role starring in *Superman*. While this role gave him immediate success in his career, it was not how he wanted to be recognized. Reeve did his best to make his character seem more down-to-earth in the film, in response to the shifting attitudes towards masculinity that emerged in the 1970s: “For me this scene illustrates the difference between the two eras. When Lois Lane asks, ‘Who are you?’ Superman simply responds, ‘A friend.’ I felt that was key to the part: I tried to downplay being a hero and emphasize being a friend.”<sup>7</sup> Yet no matter how hard he tried to portray Superman as a typical man who just happened to have special powers, he could not escape the connotations of this role. In nearly every article about him, he is referred to as Superman. His thoughts on the character are given in an interview:

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5. Reeve, “Still Me,” 66.

6. Reeve, “Still Me,” 68.

7. Reeve, “Still Me,” 193.



*Superman* is nothing more than a popular retelling of the Christ story, or Greek mythology. It's an archetype, watered down and made in vivid colors for twelve-year-old's mentality. It's pop mythology, which extends to the actor, then seeps over to a demand that that actor reflects the needs of the worshipers. The worship doesn't only go on in the temples—it goes on in the streets, and restaurants, in magazines. But, you know, I'm from New Jersey, I'm not from Olympus or Krypton.<sup>8</sup>

Reeve's comparison of Superman to gods shows the magnitude of the added pressure he felt to be perfect, not just for himself in pursuit of his father's affection, but additionally in the eyes of the public, to uphold their ideal of the 'perfect' man.

In trying to escape the Superman persona, Reeve turned down a couple of starring roles in major films that he was offered due to his connection to the 1978 movie, instead pursuing smaller films that were more meaningful to him. He wanted to emphasize the fact that he was merely an actor, and his personal life and entire acting career should not reflect one role that he happened to play. Having been a student at Julliard, he knew he had more skills to showcase than those required to play a superhero. A New York Times article states: "Mr. Reeve was increasingly frustrated because he seemed frozen in time, forever Superman in the eyes of the world as a result of popular movies."<sup>9</sup> Reeve wanted to continue his career as an actor, but he didn't want it to be under the shadow of his first success.

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8. See note 3 above.

9. Smith, Dinitia. "A Life With a Before and an After; For Christopher Reeve, It Isn't as Simple as Superman or Victim." *The New York Times*, April 30, 1998, sec. Books. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/30/books/life-with-before-after-for-christopher-reeve-it-isn-t-simple-superman-victim.html>.

### *Life with Paralysis*

In the time period following *Superman*'s success, while searching for new roles in movies that suited him, Reeve found himself pursuing other hobbies. One of his favorites was horseback riding. He worked hard to become successful at equestrian competitions, until one competition changed his life forever: "He was the actor who played Superman in the movies and, in real life, he fit the part: handsome, strong, always striving toward a goal, chasing his best time, or learning a new skill. And then, in an instant, everything changed. [His horse,] Eastern Express balked at a jump, sending Christopher crashing to the ground."<sup>10</sup> This accident severed his spinal cord at the C1 and C2 levels, leaving him paralyzed. He was instantly unconscious at the time of the injury, so he did not know what had happened to him until he later awakened in the hospital, unable to breathe on his own or move any of his limbs. Like many who face severely life-altering diagnoses, Reeve was angry at the world. He did not understand why this had happened to him: "The thing that made me most angry was that I was never reckless... The outcome of any maneuver must never seriously be in doubt. That was the rule I lived by in all the sports I did."<sup>11</sup> He had thought he lived his life so carefully that nothing dangerous could happen to him, but he found out life was not as predictable as he wanted it to be. It would take a long time for him to overcome the anger and unhappiness about his situation.

Reeve sought many doctors' opinions, trying to find someone who would be able

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10. Unitarian Universalist Association. "A Different Kind Of Superhero Christopher Reeve," November 7, 2014.

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/journeys/session3/132246.shtml>.

11. See note 9 above.

to cure him of his paralysis. He soon discovered that there had not been much research conducted concerning spinal cord injuries, which sparked his desire to fund his own plan of research. Before he found this new purpose, he suffered through a period of despondency about the outcome of his life. He thought life was not worth living without the ability to physically do anything: “Despair washed over Christopher. If he could not do anything, could not be useful to anyone, why not put him out of his misery, like they did with horses that were injured too badly to walk again? ‘Maybe,’ he said to his wife, Dana, ‘we should just let me go.’”<sup>12</sup> He did not see how he could make a difference in the world if he was paralyzed, and he did not want to be a burden to his wife and children. He claims that he would have decided to end his life had Dana not helped him see the value his life held to his family: “She said, ‘I am only going to say this once: I will support whatever you want to do, because this is your life, and your decision. But I want you to know that I’ll be with you for the long haul, no matter what.’ Then she added the words that saved my life: ‘You’re still you. And I love you.’”<sup>13</sup> In his autobiography and in many articles written about him, Reeve continually claims that his wife’s spoken words are what moved him to make the decision that life was worth living.

After this pivotal moment for him, Reeve began to understand that his children still needed him, even if not in the ways he had previously thought. He started to foster much closer relationships with them than he had, which gave him more reason to live. Without having the stress of worrying about his acting career, now having the time to

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12. See note 10 above.

13. Reeve, “Still Me,” 28.

care for his children, he learned how to be a better father: “Now I gave them my full attention, and I soon learned to listen more than talk. That began a process of discovering that, in bringing up children and relating to others, sometimes *being* is more important than *doing*. I was also to learn that even if you can’t move, you can have a powerful effect with what you say.”<sup>14</sup> As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Reeve’s realization is one that can be easily reached from interaction with people with disabilities. In society, value is so often placed on what one can physically do for another. People with disabilities allow people to see how important it is to simply be present in each other’s lives, through the struggles and difficulties, even if they are not actively doing things to help each other. Reeve recalls the actions of his children following his accident: “I kept telling them that I was okay, and that they should go enjoy the summer instead of hanging around a depressing rehab center. But they wanted to be with me. Even if they could only see me two or three hours each visit, they wanted to be nearby.”<sup>15</sup> Presence alone, especially a continued dedication to remaining present, shows a person that he or she is valued. Seeing that he benefitted his children instead of hindering them allowed Reeve to focus his attention on being a better parent by giving them more of his attention. He further states that he gained this capacity from his position as a patient: “The experience of feeling like a child gave me a new perspective on being a father. I became acutely aware that virtually everything that parents say and do has a powerful effect on

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14. Reeve, “Nothing is Impossible,” 59.

15. Reeve, “Nothing is Impossible,” 60.

our children, even when we think they're not paying attention."<sup>16</sup> His experiences of being cared for by others taught him how to better care for those closest to him. Interactions with his family led him closer to a semblance of acceptance.

### *Using His Fame for Good*

Even before his accident, Reeve found himself using his Superman persona to support a variety of causes. He particularly enjoyed caring for children and he helped raise a significant sum of money to help them. Reeve states:

I wasn't about to let Superman interfere with the progress of my career, but I was willing to make productive use of the Superman image in certain circumstances. Through the Make-a-Wish Foundation, I visited terminally ill children whose last request was to meet Superman. I joined the board of directors of Save the Children, a charity dedicated to helping needy children all over the world. In 1979 I served as a track and field coach at the Special Olympics in Brockport, New York.<sup>17</sup>

Though he was not fond of the effect Superman was having on his life, he understood that the character meant a lot to the children who watched the movie, and he was willing to use it to benefit them. He learned the power his role had available for him, and it led him to become passionate about helping better the lives of others. Reeve used his fame in the realm of politics in order to get laws passed to improve the lives of people with disabilities and help fund research. A CBS News article quotes Reeve: "It is also important to Reeve to pass down a political legacy to his children: 'That, basically, part of being a citizen is not just going for a free ride, that you've got to give back,

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16. Reeve, "Nothing is Impossible," 60.

17. Reeve, "Still Me," 196-197.

particularly if you have the means to do so.”<sup>18</sup> He thought it necessary to vocalize his thoughts as to how to improve lives, yet he also wanted to inspire others to use their voices as well. He stated that government is a tool that can be used “to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people.”<sup>19</sup> Reeve knew people would listen to his opinion due to his position, and he chose to use his voice to stand up for people who were not able to represent themselves.

Reeve’s advocacy began after his acting success, and following his accident, it would only grow to become one of his main focuses in life. He threw himself into spinal cord research, because he was determined to find a cure that would enable him to walk again. Using his connections, he was able to make a great impact in the amount of research being conducted about paralysis. His work earned him the Mary Woodard Lasker Public Service Award in 2003: “With bravery and perseverance, Christopher Reeve has worked tirelessly to bolster support for medical research in general and victims of disability in particular. His knowledge of the science and personal heroism have allowed him to wield tremendous influence as an advocate.”<sup>20</sup> With his experience as an advocate, Reeve knew he could enact change for people with disabilities if he simply included it as one of his causes. He worked with many organizations to make great progress in protection of individuals with disabilities, as stated in an interview for the

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18. Chan, Sue. “The Political Christopher Reeve.” CBS News, October 31, 2000. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-political-christopher-reeve/>.

19. See note 18 above.

20. Strauss, Evelyn. “Spinal Cord and Other Disabilities Advocacy.” The Lasker Foundation, 2003. <http://www.laskerfoundation.org/awards/show/spinal-cord-and-other-disabilities-advocacy/>.

Library of Congress: “Now his passion is aimed at calling attention to the population explosion and fighting ‘medical injustices.’ As vice chairman of the National Organization for Disabilities (NOD), he works to improve the quality of life for the disabled. NOD helped to pass the 1999 Work Incentives Improvement Act, which allows people with disabilities to return to work and still receive disability benefits.”<sup>21</sup> Being able to see things from the perspective of someone with a disability, Reeve has been better able to advocate for necessary change. His impact would not have been as easily achieved had he not been operating from the position of a celebrity: “Reeve has informed himself about the scientific as well as political aspects of his mission; this approach, along with his role as a public figure, have earned him unique status with researchers, lawmakers, and private citizens alike.”<sup>22</sup> His position in the public view gave him the ability to make a difference, which he did after researching to discover where his help was most needed.

Most closely associated with Reeve is the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. After his injury, Reeve took over the American Paralysis Association and used it to enact his plan for gaining knowledge about spinal cord injury through research and scientific advancement. He worked hard to push these advances: “Christopher and Dana were never celebrity figureheads. They were hands-on, activist leaders, who rallied a swelling chorus of voices advocating for people living with paralysis. They recognized

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21. Cassidy, Kathleen. “Challenges of Endurance (December 1999) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin.” Library of Congress, December 1999. <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9912/reeve.html>.

22. See note 20 above.

that the true heroes in the spinal cord injured community are those living with paralysis and their families.”<sup>23</sup> Reeve’s work sparked the possibility of curing paralysis, because prior to his investigation, it was thought that spinal cords were irreparable. His encouragement for research opened a window of hope for people with spinal cord injuries, where they previously only saw hopelessness. However, many people worried that this was false hope, as spinal cord injuries have only been proven to be permanent. He received some negative feedback about his goal of regaining the ability to walk from his research: “This claim was not always well received by doctors, scientists and disability advocates as they said it raised false hopes for others who had spinal cord injuries. This is because when most body parts get injured, they’re able to regenerate – but this isn’t the case for the spinal cord. Even so, Reeve did make some surprising progress.”<sup>24</sup> Reeve had a very difficult time learning to accept his fate of being confined to his wheelchair. While his work did allow for some scientific advancement, it can be speculated as to what cost to his mental health this came, as it limited his ability to make true peace with his condition. He would hope for full recovery of mobility until his death in 2004, instead of learning how to value himself in his state of paralysis.

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23. Reeve Foundation. “Our Story.” Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://www.christopherreeve.org/about-us/our-story>.

24. Aruma Disability Services. “Christopher Reeve: The Life of the Man of Steel | Aruma,” October 5, 2018. <https://www.aruma.com.au/about-us/blog/christopher-reeve-the-life-of-the-man-of-steel/>.



### *Purpose through Research*

The main part of his life that led Reeve toward acceptance of his new reality was the passion he developed for research. Almost immediately after his paralysis, while still in the hospital, Reeve focused on learning as much as he could about spinal cord injuries.

His daughter, Alexandra Reeve Givens, recounts:

“To be honest, it’s the only way he knew how to deal with it,” said Givens. “He just started to get educated as fast as he could. I have such strong memories of him sitting in the rehab hospital a couple months after his accident, and he would have these huge tomes on the spinal cord and the latest research...But that was his answer,” Givens continued. “To get smart, to start talking to the researchers, to start talking to people in the community to figure out how to navigate this new world.”<sup>25</sup>

Research gave him an activity, something to focus on and something to hope for, instead of remaining disappointed about the current state of his life. He thought that if he could learn as much information as possible, he would then be able to start applying his knowledge to the possibility of a cure. Knowledge gave him the ability to interact with researchers directly: “[His] capacity to fully comprehend the complex political and scientific realities of medical research [has made] Reeve a forceful advocate for scientific research...His insistence on understanding the science reinforces his credibility with researchers and renders his arguments particularly compelling.”<sup>26</sup> Reeve was not just a celebrity who pushed a cause without information; he was a scholar who made sure to

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25. Nolasco, Stephanie. “Christopher Reeve’s Daughter Talks Growing up with ‘Superman,’ Keeping His Legacy Alive.” Text.Article. Fox News. Fox News, January 30, 2019. <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/christopher-reeves-daughter-talks-growing-up-with-superman-keeping-his-legacy-alive>.

26. See note 20 above.

gain as much knowledge as possible before trying to enact change.

Through his process of gaining information, Reeve talked to many people with a variety of disabilities and witnessed the struggles they faced in their daily lives. He realized that he was very lucky to have the benefit of his wealth to support his medical costs, as most people who face life-altering disabilities also face the enormous challenge of trying to pay for the overwhelming expenses of medical care. This realization pushed his passion for research to include a passion for advocacy and fundraising, in which he worked hard to help others like himself to better manage the accompanying problems of disability: “I spend much of my time planning events to raise money for the Christopher Reeve Foundation. In our first year of operation we raised more than \$750,000; 70 percent of it went to the APA (American Paralysis Association) and the rest to groups dedicated to quality of life issues of the disabled.”<sup>27</sup> Fundraising became an activity that Reeve discovered he was very good at, and he enjoyed doing it, as it allowed him a distraction from thinking about himself. In his two books, he often mentioned that he looked for activities that would keep him busy, as he much preferred to think of how he could help others than be left alone to only think about selfish causes. He wanted to preserve his public image:

Christopher didn't want people to feel sorry for him...But he knew this was a special chance to use the power he had and make the world a better place. So Christopher started speaking. He asked Congress to support stem cell research that might lead to a cure for spinal cord injuries. He asked groups of people to get involved and donate money. He talked with others who had experienced injuries like his. He even spoke, on television, to millions of people during the Academy

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27. Reeve, “Still Me,” 260.

Awards, showing everyone that, although his abilities had changed, his heart and his soul were strong and capable.<sup>28</sup>

Though it was difficult for him to overcome his fear that the public would view him differently, Reeve knew it was necessary that he do so in order to use his image to help as many people as he could. Through it all, he still wanted his fans to view him as an individual who could accomplish his goals, despite those goals being different than they were before his accident.

### *Reeve's New Idea of a Hero*

Reeve's interactions with people in the hospital and rehabilitation centers caused him to change his mind as to what kind of person defined a hero. Constantly trying to seek his father's approval since childhood, he always worked hard to be as perfect as he could be. Then after becoming Superman, he was told by many that he himself was viewed as a hero. However, Reeve's experiences following his accident showed him that true heroism is not exemplified in someone who saves the world with his superhuman strength. Instead, he gained a new definition of heroism:

While Mr. Reeve has been identified with the hero Superman, his own heroes are very different. They are the people he has met in the hospitals and rehabilitation centers. They are "people who have had to endure terrible catastrophes in their lives, and do not have the resources they need to overcome them. Yet they fight everyday for the best quality of life they can manage," he explained. "They aren't larger than life, they cannot walk through walls. In fact, they have got walls all around them, yet they accept, and they go forward to meet incredible challenges of endurance... These people are my heroes."<sup>29</sup>

Reeve learned that the movies portrayed heroes all wrong, and he found new inspirations

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28. See note 10 above.

29. See note 21 above.

to model his behavior after. Heroism is shown in overcoming problems despite the difficulty one might face in doing so. Concerning his changed perspective, Reeve states: “My answer was that a hero is someone who commits a courageous action without considering the consequences... Now my definition is completely different. I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”<sup>30</sup> Under this new definition, Reeve allows anyone to be capable of being called a hero, instead of limiting the definition to just those who fit the typical superhero persona. His interactions with others with disabilities taught him that he could still be a hero to people, even though he no longer had the ability to walk. The Unitarian Universalist Association puts Reeve’s perspective on heroism into words: “Christopher Reeve showed what a real-life hero is: a person who listens to the voice inside them, and acts when that voice tells them the right thing to do.”<sup>31</sup> Reeve tried to exemplify his idea of heroism in his daily life, by advocating to help people with disabilities and by helping fund research.

### *Acceptance?*

As mentioned in the previous section, Reeve thought of a hero as a person who ‘accepts’ and then ‘endures’ the challenges he or she is presented with. In considering whether Reeve aspired to meet his own definition of a hero for himself, it is questionable whether Reeve ever reached a state of full acceptance of his condition before his death in 2004. He often spoke of his goal to regain the ability to walk by his fiftieth birthday:

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30. Reeve, “Still Me,” 267.

31. See note 10 above.

“Reeve is determined to walk again; one of his fondest dreams has been to stand up on his fiftieth birthday in 2002 and offer a toast to all of the people who helped him get to that point.”<sup>32</sup> Despite being repeatedly told by his doctors that it was not likely that he would be able to walk again, Reeve nonetheless dedicated himself to researching possible scientific improvements that he thought could enhance his chances of being able to walk. He never stopped hoping for a cure and doing everything he could to try to make one possible. In his last book, Reeve wrote of his thoughts about acceptance:

Occasionally I hear from people with spinal cord injuries who have been sitting in a wheelchair for as much as twenty-one years. Some tell me that there is no point in searching for a cure; others even say they are happy with life the way it is and don't want to be cured. It's difficult for me to understand their point of view, but I completely respect these individuals as long as they don't try to interfere with progress. Less than a generation ago it would have been almost irrelevant to ask a patient with Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, ALS, or a spinal cord injury not to stand in the way of progress, simply because there wasn't much. Today all that has changed. Since the time of my injury, scientists all over the world have been steadily moving forward, although they are not progressing as rapidly as many patients would like. At least they have been saying publicly, and most of us believe privately, that it is no longer appropriate or necessary to use the word “impossible.”<sup>33</sup>

Reeve's overwhelming dedication to scientific progress left him missing the ability to accept himself as a person with a disability, and further, he could not understand others who were able to accept themselves. He believed that a cure was attainable for his disability, even though scientific research has not yet indicated such, and he wanted to inspire others to believe the same.

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32. Notable Biographies. “Christopher Reeve Biography - Life, Childhood, Children, Parents, School, Mother, Old, Information, Born, Movie, Husband.” Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.notablebiographies.com/Pu-Ro/Reeve-Christopher.html>.

33. Reeve, “Nothing is Impossible,” 17.

Dissenters with Reeve believe that he places too much reliance on the ability of science to find a cure for paralysis and other disabilities. It is thought that his emphasis on trying to help find a cure stood in the way of his ability to accept his condition. Joni Eareckson Tada, who is featured in the next chapter of this thesis, believes that Reeve's advocacy for stem cell research causes problems for people with disabilities in gaining acceptance as they are by society: "People are curious about where I stand regarding the paralyzed actor's hope for a cure through what he calls therapeutic cloning. After all, I'm disabled. Don't I want a cure? I would love to walk. But 35 years of quadriplegia since a diving accident in 1967 has honed my perspective. I look at the broader implications of medical research as a double-edged sword."<sup>34</sup> Joni's writing shows that too much of a reliance on trying to 'fix' disabilities causes them to be perceived by others as conditions that are undesirable or not worth living with. If individuals who have a disability themselves cannot find value in their own lives, how are they supposed to show others that they are worth being valued, disability and all? Particularly concerning Reeve's support of embryonic stem cell research, Eareckson Tada states: "A society that honors life will safeguard the rights of the disadvantaged, the weak, and the small. But the weak are in mortal danger if a society allows scientists to create a class of human beings (as in cloning for research) in order to kill them and use their cellular tissue. A world in which the biotech industry sets the moral agenda is a threat to me as an adult and a

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34. Tada, Joni Eareckson. "The Threat of Biotech: Joni Eareckson Tada Responds to Christopher Reeve and Others." *Christianity Today*, March 2003. Gale Academic OneFile.

quadriplegic.”<sup>35</sup> Looking out for her fellow members of the disability community, Eareckson Tada shows that it puts their lives in danger for scientists to use embryonic stem cells for research that works to cure individuals of their disabilities. Eareckson Tada values her life and the purpose she serves, as her goal is to glorify God in helping others, which is something she does best from her wheelchair. Reeve did not view his life in the same way; he struggled to understand her perspective on the dangers of research to the disability community, and further, he struggled to find value in himself, as a person with a disability.

#### *Reeve's Faith*

Christopher Reeve grew up in a household that was not religious, and he never found himself really committed to the practice of any religion. He refers to the practices of his father, regarding religion, and the effect they had on his childhood: “My father’s atheism was an important factor. Not only did I grow up without a foundation in religion, but I lacked any sense of spirituality as well.”<sup>36</sup> As he adored his father, he did not grow up seeing the value religious practice could hold for him. He lived his life without thought given to how he should behave from a religiously ethical perspective. Following his accident, Reeve thought that prayer could possibly bring him healing: “I’m not a religious person, but I thought: I have to develop a relationship with God right now, otherwise I’m lost.”<sup>37</sup> He did not try too hard to get close to God, before he came to

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35. See note 34 above.

36. Reeve, “Nothing is Impossible,” 70.

37. Reeve, “Still Me,” 47.

another conclusion. He decided it did not matter as much about the existence of God, but rather it was more important to simply believe in a higher power: “I began to think: Whether or not there is a God is not so important. Spirituality itself, the belief that there is something greater than ourselves, is enough.”<sup>38</sup> While this may have given him peace at present, it was not enough to help him accept his condition as beneficial to his spiritual health. It was just enough to give him an understanding that sometimes events occur that are beyond human control.

Eventually, his practice of spirituality led him to the Unitarian church. He found it best fit his views about being spiritual and helping him to practice a spiritual life. Reeve stated: “Gradually I have come to believe that spirituality is found in the way we live our daily lives. It means spending time thinking about others...As these thoughts unfolded in the process of learning to live my new life, I had no idea that I was becoming a Unitarian.”<sup>39</sup> He lived with the daily purpose of trying to do good, with a moral backbone given to him by his spirituality. Reeve believed that spirituality leads people to be the best versions of themselves, and it enables a greater level of caring for others. Spirituality helped him to recognize his purpose in advocacy, as he thought it was the morally right thing to do, given his position and resources.

### *Conclusion*

Though Reeve did not ultimately view his paralysis as a positive outcome, he did come to recognize positive aspects of life with a disability that he would not have

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38. Reeve, “Still Me,” 48.

39. Reeve, “Nothing is Impossible,” 151.



experienced without the accident. He realized how to be a better, more present father in his children's lives. He used his fame to pass important legislation concerning rights and benefits for people with disabilities, and he raised a lot of money that helped people with disabilities better their quality of life. Reeve became a spiritual person who finally had a morality in which to ground his thoughts and actions. He met and found himself admiring many people with disabilities who helped change his mind as to what heroism truly means, thus helping him to reshape society's idea of what defined a true hero. Through it all, he found that the most important factor ensuring survival for him was to maintain hope, which he believed required consistent dedication: "When the unthinkable happens, the lighthouse is hope...When we have hope, we discover powers within ourselves we may have never known—the power to make sacrifices, to endure, to heal, and to love. Once we choose hope, everything is possible."<sup>40</sup> The unfailing support of his wife and children gave him the hope that he would still be loved and valued, even if he was no longer able to do the things he used to do. Hoping for a cure to paralysis gave him a purpose in research, because he had a way to invest his time and money. Even though his dedication to research was not fully supported by the disability community, Reeve was able to positively impact the lives of many individuals with disabilities who were in need of funding for medical supplies or scientific advancement gained through research. Despite his death at the age of fifty-two, Reeve left a legacy showing people the importance of staying strong through challenges and how to endure hardship, all the while hoping for his idea of a better life. Next to be explored is Joni Eareckson Tada's

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40. Reeve, "Nothing is Impossible," 175.

view on disability, before the three individuals' perspectives will be compared in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Joni Eareckson Tada

### *Introduction*

A very athletic and active person for the majority of her childhood and teenage years, Joni Eareckson Tada's life was changed when she found herself paralyzed after a diving accident when she was seventeen years old. Whereas many people would view this as a tragedy, Eareckson Tada posits that her accident gave her the ability to become the person she was truly meant to be: a woman in close companionship with God. Throughout her life in her wheelchair, Eareckson Tada has worked to better the lives of others with disabilities and their families through a Christian ministry she created entitled Joni and Friends. She became an advocate for people with disabilities, even helping to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act, a document detailed in Chapter One as being critical in helping individuals with disabilities by lessening discrimination and bettering accommodations. This chapter will first relate a history of Eareckson Tada's disability, detailing her life before the accident and the first few years after. Then her journey to finding her purpose, especially considering the impact her faith had, will be detailed. Lastly, her advocacy efforts and impact on others will be shown through a look into her writings and work through the ministry she created.

### *Joni's Childhood*

Joni Eareckson Tada grew up in a very active household. Her father loved to travel and go on adventures, and he had many hobbies which she found interesting. In her

first book, *Joni*, an autobiography that chronicles her life in response to her accident, she describes her love of being active through sports: “Lacrosse was the sport I loved most. In fact, being named captain of our girls’ lacrosse team in my senior year meant more to me than my nomination to the Honor Society.”<sup>1</sup> She felt at home in competition and thought at the time that her purpose was to be an athlete. She pursued many sports in her teenage years:

For as long as I can remember, I was into sports. Whether racking up swimming medals, slamming a tennis ball with my wicked backhand, or being voted “best athlete” in my senior class, I had found my niche, my life. I was an athlete, and it defined everything about me, even the major I planned on declaring in college.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of seventeen, her life revolved around physical activity; she was always involved in something.

However, she felt as though something was missing from her life. She joined a youth group in high school to try to fulfill the missing piece, thinking she might find it in a community of friends sharing in the study of God’s word. This brought her much joy, yet she later thought that she was misinterpreting much of what God wanted her to do: “In my immature mind, the abundant life meant I’d lose weight or have new popularity and dates at school, lots of friends, and good grades...My whole focus was on these things, not on God. My life revolved around temporal values, my own ego and desires.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Eareckson, Joni. *Joni*. Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1976, 26.

2. Tada, Joni Eareckson. “Why Joni Eareckson Tada Praises God for Not Healing Her.” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog). Accessed January 26, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/joni-eareckson-tada-praises-healing/>.

3. Eareckson, “Joni,” 28.

She found herself more focused on trying to obtain leadership in her new group instead of gaining spiritual guidance from the things she was learning. Though this would be expected to be a view from hindsight, Eareckson Tada was aware of her lack of spiritual fulfillment at the time. She longed for a sign: “I was accepted for the fall term at Western Maryland College on academic recommendations. My life seemed to be falling in place, going somewhere—and yet it wasn’t...It was obvious to me that I had not made much spiritual progress in the two years I’d been a Christian. It seemed no matter how hard I tried to improve, I was always a slave of my desires.”<sup>4</sup> Eareckson Tada further describes how she prayed for God to cause a change in her life so that she could become a better person. Despite her success academically, athletically, and socially, she wanted to be better spiritually. Though she tried to be a well-rounded person, she was convinced that she had improvements to make. Even more impressive is how she knew at such a young age, and so early in her Christian journey, that she could not do it alone and that she was in need of God’s guidance. She just was unaware that His help would come in such a form that would alter her way of life forever.

#### *The Accident and Aftermath*

In accordance with her extremely active lifestyle, Eareckson Tada was spending the summer after her high school graduation outdoors, under the sun. Expecting merely a normal summer day, “On July 30, 1967, Joni (pronounced “Johnny”) Eareckson, her

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4. Eareckson, “Joni,” 30-33.

sister, and some friends decided to go swimming at a beach in the Chesapeake Bay.”<sup>5</sup> Eareckson Tada decided to dive into water that was shallower than she realized, and she ended up hitting her head on the ocean floor, rendering her paralyzed from her shoulders down. After much confusion, panic, and distress, she and her sister arrived at the nearest hospital and received the diagnosis that she had fractured her spine between the fourth and fifth cervical levels, which caused her current state of quadriplegia. She stayed in the hospital and subsequent rehabilitation facility for almost two years: “When they rushed me to the hospital on that hot July afternoon, I had no idea I wouldn’t be discharged until April 1969.”<sup>6</sup> The process of arriving to the hospital and going through testing and analysis was excruciating for Eareckson Tada. She was confused as to what had happened to her, and the doctors were not explaining anything or helping her feel reassured: “I knew I was paralyzed but didn’t know why. Or for how long. No one ever explained anything to me about my injury.”<sup>7</sup> Had things been explained to her, she might have been better able to cope with the resulting difficulties. Instead, her confusion and fear pushed her into a depression that took much strength and determination to escape. She thought her best option was to die: “Several other times, though, in similar spells of

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5. Garfield, Donna M. “In Sickness and in Health.” *The North Star Monthly*. Accessed February 7, 2020. [http://www.northstarmonthly.com/opinion/in-sickness-and-in-health/article\\_00e01ccc-42a3-11ea-bf71-832fbc81f775.html](http://www.northstarmonthly.com/opinion/in-sickness-and-in-health/article_00e01ccc-42a3-11ea-bf71-832fbc81f775.html).

6. Taylor, Justin. “Joni Eareckson Tada on John Piper’s Lessons from a Hospital Bed.” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog). Accessed February 7, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/joni-eareckson-tada-on-john-pipers-lessons-from-a-hospital-bed/>.

7. Eareckson, “Joni,” 18.

depression and frustration, I begged Jackie to help me commit suicide. I was angry because I couldn't do it by myself.”<sup>8</sup> Eareckson Tada spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way to commit suicide and often hoped for a medical accident by the nurses that would result in her death. This time in her life was filled with emotional, psychological, and spiritual struggles that often were even worse than what she faced physically. Her own issues with overcoming the desire to end her life would motivate her to become an activist against physician-assisted suicide in her future.

Eareckson Tada found it difficult to learn how to deal with her suffering in a healthy manner. She often lashed out at her friends, especially as she tried to save her positivity for her family, knowing they suffered greatly from seeing her in her new state of physical incapacity. Knowing this was not helping her have positive relationships, she prayed for help to overcome her anger and frustration: “*I need to have my friends, or I'll lose my mind*, I said to myself, so I promised myself never to lose my cool with mom, dad, Jackie, or the others when they came to visit. No matter how bitter I was, I wouldn't let it show.”<sup>9</sup> She became determined to hide her negativity and only show a happy disposition to those around her. She knew that her relationships with others were the key to her ability to heal her emotional wounds sooner. Her visits with friends and family gave her the strength to keep going, as emphasized in her reflection upon a late-night visit with her friend Jackie: “She gave me something that night that was priceless. She helped me encounter Jesus Christ in a warm and personal way. That's how precious the body of

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8. Eareckson, 47.

9. Eareckson, “Joni,” 62.

Christ is to healing the hearts of those who are hurting, to come up close to them, to infuse into their spiritual veins life, hope, healing, health.”<sup>10</sup> Eareckson Tada learned that having others to walk alongside her in her suffering was a necessary reflection of Jesus’s presence in her life.

During her time in rehabilitation, Eareckson Tada had the inaccurate impression that healing for her would result in her regaining the ability to walk. It would be a very long time before she would realize this was not to be the case. She thought that the power to provide her healing would be found in the Bible: “So, after my accident, I dug into my Bible for help, hoping that Jesus would give me back all that I’d lost. I wanted—I needed—my body back...As far as I was concerned, if I kept my nose clean and stayed out of trouble, Jesus would have no reason *not* to heal me.”<sup>11</sup> She later found she was right to have sought answers in scripture; she just did not have the right idea of healing in mind. She prayed for the physical restoration of an idealized state of health, when what she truly needed was a spiritual reset. Her rehabilitation process involved the attempt of many different methods, including moving from her home in Baltimore to a facility in California called Rancho Los Amigos, where she spent several months learning how to be more independent and gain some use of her arm muscles. This time was very beneficial and full of much physical progress for Joni, yet she ended her time at this

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10. Olasky, Marvin. “Joni Eareckson Tada on Words That Hurt, Actions That Help.” Accessed February 7, 2020. [https://world.wng.org/2013/01/joni\\_eareckson\\_tada\\_on\\_words\\_that\\_hurt\\_actions\\_that\\_help](https://world.wng.org/2013/01/joni_eareckson_tada_on_words_that_hurt_actions_that_help).

11. See note 2 above.



rehabilitation center still confused as to why she had not regained the use of her hands. In response to the blunt verdict from her physician stating that she would never be able to use her hands, Joni had to face a whole new set of challenges to work through:

I had accepted the fate that I'd never walk again. But I had believed I could still join the ranks of those handicapped persons who drive cars, make meals, work with their hands, and put their arms around someone they love. That I'd be able to drink a glass of water, bathe myself, brush my hair, and put on my own make-up. Little things, to be sure, but things important enough to make the difference between one who is merely handicapped and one who is totally dependent.

Now, ever so slowly, the reality of my injury began to sink in—I was to be a quadriplegic *as long as I lived*.<sup>12</sup>

Her realizations sent her into another deep depression that she struggled to get herself out of, even after returning home to Baltimore. She was angry at God for not healing her as she wished. Unlike the majority of her time since the accident, Eareckson Tada was now hopeless, dispirited, and resentful. Her spirit was in great need of revival.

### *Reordering Her Life*

No matter what her friends and family tried, Eareckson Tada seemed to be in a permanent state of depression. She only found peace in daydreams, as her desire was to escape reality. Nearly two years after her accident, she made a discovery that was essential to her ability to change her outlook: “Sin wasn’t just all the bad things I did, but was an integral part of my makeup. Although there was no opportunity for me to physically rebel against God, I sinned nonetheless. It was a part of my nature.”<sup>13</sup> After realizing that she had sin that needed God’s attention much more than her

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12. Eareckson, “Joni,” 106.

13. Eareckson, “Joni,” 113.

physical impairments, Eareckson Tada gained the perspective that she should be grateful for God's gifts, instead of angry at His lack of healing her. She writes that "a 'no' answer to [her] request for a miraculous physical healing has meant purged sin, a love for the lost, increased compassion, stretched hope, an appetite for grace, an increase of faith, a happy longing for heaven, a desire to serve, a delight in prayer, and a hunger for His Word."<sup>14</sup> Instead of continuing on her path of despondency, she chose to devote herself to becoming a more spiritually well-rounded person. She would ultimately find her purpose in helping others who faced physical struggles come closer to God.

She realized even from her days in the hospital that it was important for her to make the most of her physical suffering by using it to get closer to God. She recalls that she had to take a moment to reorient her mindset in order to survive the trials of initial life in the hospital: "I was only seventeen years old, or maybe eighteen, but that moment defined how I would engage life in a hospital. My stay would not be a jail sentence. Come hell or high water, I determined that this hospital would be, well, a gymnasium for my soul, a proving ground for my faith, and a mission field for God."<sup>15</sup> This particular moment in her life, in which she faced a prolonged wait that caused her increased physical pain, was crucial to giving her the positivity and peace she needed to survive many of the hardships she was to face. Eareckson Tada, though quite young when she made this determination, stayed true to it throughout her life. She had a few instances of struggle, in which her faith was brought into question, but she always came back to the

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14. See note 2 above.

15. See note 6 above.

conclusion that she would use the physical pain she encountered to learn more about God's grace. On the fiftieth anniversary of her accident, Eareckson Tada was quoted in an article for *World News Group*: “‘It sounds incredible, but I really would rather be in this wheelchair knowing Jesus as I do than be on my feet without Him.’ She celebrates ‘that glorious but awful, beautiful but sad, terrible but wonderful day I broke my neck—because look what God has done.’”<sup>16</sup> She became a woman devoted to seeking grace in ways she had not known possible, prior to her accident. This led her to believe that her accident was worth all of the physical suffering she went through.

In trying to find her purpose post-accident, Eareckson Tada began to do as much as she could with the abilities she had. She found she could paint with a paintbrush in her mouth, and she ended up creating many beautiful works of art that she sold. She learned to read the Bible by having it placed on a music stand where she could flip through it with a mouth stick. Through these activities, her relationships with her friends and family, and her interactions with her Young Life group, she was able to see that her life was still worth living. One interaction she had with her friend Steve enabled her to see the value of her wheelchair: “Once it had been a terrible burden, a trial for me. Then, as I saw God working in my life, it became only a tool. Now, I could see it as a blessing. *For the first time in my paralyzed life, it was indeed possible for the wheelchair to be an instrument of joy in my life.*”<sup>17</sup> Steve helped her to see that God loved her for her whole self, including her wheelchair, and that she could glorify Him through her unfailing faith.

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16. Dean, Jamie. “More than Inspirational - WORLD.” Accessed February 7, 2020. [https://world.wng.org/2017/11/more\\_than\\_inspirational](https://world.wng.org/2017/11/more_than_inspirational).

17. Eareckson, “Joni,” 133.

These realizations helped her tremendously in her spiritual growth. Later, after losing a friend who had been important to her, Eareckson Tada stated: “I really began to see suffering in a new light—not as trials to avoid, but as opportunities to ‘grab,’ because God gives so much of His love, grace, and goodness to those who do.”<sup>18</sup> For someone who had suffered so significantly, her ability to see suffering this way is indicative of her immense devotion and strength of character. Being able to value herself as God values her was a pivotal moment for Eareckson Tada’s personal development.

### *Helping Others*

Due to her struggles accepting herself with her disability and embracing the new life she was to lead from her wheelchair, she determined she would do as much as she could to help others in positions similar to her own. Eareckson Tada decided this while in her twenties, writing in her autobiography: “I will be pleased if only one person is drawn to Christ. Even one person would make the wheelchair worth all that the past eight years have cost.”<sup>19</sup> This desire to inspire people and help them work through the stages of grief that naturally result from the acquisition of a disability is what motivated her to write her first book and many thereafter. Her books mostly discuss suffering and healing, as she views these experiences from the perspective of having grown spiritually through them. She delves into “foundational questions about life and healing, suffering and perseverance, heartbreak and hope” in her 2010 book, *A Place of Healing*, and she

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18. Eareckson, 169.

19. Eareckson, 190.

wrestles with these same topics in most of her other writing as well.<sup>20</sup> Being that suffering and how to manage it were, and still are, major concerns for her, she wanted to use her personal experiences to help others. Working with a few other authors, Eareckson Tada crafted a workbook for use in church groups to help them learn how to provide better care for individuals with disabilities. In it, the importance of allowing people with disabilities to undergo the stages of grief is highlighted: “In order to minister to people with special needs, we must understand the importance of ‘grief work’ . . . We must learn to be good listeners, but also know when to refer someone to a professional counselor. We can assure those who are struggling with pain and grief that our emotions are an aspect of the image of God within us.”<sup>21</sup> Eareckson Tada details in this writing that being with others in their time of suffering and learning how to properly care for them is essential to improving their grieving process. She writes to show others what she learned in the years following her accident and to help families care for their loved ones.

One of the important things she has thought differently about since her accident, due to her time spent with others in grief, is the importance of trying to maintain a positive attitude for the people around her. Earlier, Eareckson Tada had determined that doing this was necessary to make her friends and family want to come visit her in the hospital. However, her interactions with others have taught her that it is more important

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20. Tada, Joni Eareckson. *A Place of Healing*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010, 19.

21. Tada, Joni Eareckson, Steve Bundy, Kathy McReynolds, and Pat Verbal. *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry*. Joni and Friends, 2014, 14.

to deal with difficult thoughts and feelings, instead of suppressing them. One person she met serves as an example:

John, a successful businessman, seemed so quickly to move on with his life after a car accident left him confined to a wheelchair. He amazed his friends and colleagues as he resumed his regular business trips, managing his own wheelchair through airports and hotels with a strong determination to keep a positive attitude. However, eventually John realized he had some serious emotional problems and began seeing a counselor.<sup>22</sup>

Through lessons learned from others, Eareckson Tada has come to realize that instead of trying to be perceived as happy, it is much more beneficial to seek fulfillment in God, from which true happiness naturally results. This realization has given her the ability to better help people through their grieving processes, as their worries are addressed by prayer and love, instead of being pushed down to accumulate into larger problems. She herself has been helped by her discovery, as it has allowed her to better handle her own pain.

After writing her first book, Eareckson Tada knew she wanted to do everything she could to make life better for people with disabilities. In 1979, a mere twelve years after her accident, she started Joni and Friends ministries in California to support families of people with disabilities. She began the ministry at a time when people with disabilities were not very well cared for and were not often in public view. Thus, one goal of her ministry was to teach churches how to better accommodate and welcome people with disabilities to their congregations: “JAF affiliates help local churches consider how to help special needs families on an ongoing basis and encourage even the smallest churches

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22. Tada, et al., “Beyond Suffering,” 14.

to offer a welcoming environment for people with needs.”<sup>23</sup> Because faith played such a huge role in her recovery process, Eareckson Tada knew having the ability to become closer to God was necessary for those she was going to help. She also knew that churches were not always the most accommodating institutions for people who have disabilities. She determined this was due to a lack of education and awareness, so she began to do her best to help churches become acquainted with the skills they needed to help this underserved population: “Joni understood first-hand the loneliness and alienation many handicapped people faced and their need for friendship and salvation...JAF Ministries thus uncovered the vast hidden needs of the disabled community and began to train the local church for effective outreach to the disabled, an often overlooked mission field.”<sup>24</sup> Her work changed the way many churches treated individuals with disabilities and allowed many people to feel more welcomed in the church environment, thus giving them the new opportunity to worship with friends.

Another aspect of the Joni and Friends ministry is providing family retreats, which are camps where families and their loved one with a disability have different activities so that each member of the family is able to enjoy a fun summer getaway. She came up with this idea after seeing the impact that her disability had on her own family and after attending a conference led by the National Council on Disability. Since then, she has seen the necessity of her retreats for families’ spiritual health: “Our Savior says in Matthew 11, ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’

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23. See note 16 above.

24. “Joni Eareckson Tada – History’s Women.” Accessed February 7, 2020. <https://historyswomen.com/history-in-the-making/joni-eareckson-tada/>.

Sometimes He'll not only give rest, but He'll give fun and fellowship, new friends, and a chance to know Him better at a Family Retreat."<sup>25</sup> With this part of her ministry, Eareckson Tada started fulfilling a need that many had not thought of as necessary. While people with disabilities and their struggles are often overlooked, their families and the suffering they go through trying to make sure their loved one is cared for every hour of every day go typically even more unnoticed. Eareckson Tada's help in this area allows families to be reminded of the immense benefit of family, especially when a family member has a disability: "The presence of people with disabilities always enriches a community's life fabric, underscoring that vulnerability and weakness is a prime platform for strength, joy, and love. As each special-needs individual exercises his gifts, he contributes significantly to the community."<sup>26</sup> One of the reasons her ministry is so successful is that she doesn't only support people with disabilities; she reaches further, helping families, churches, and the community as a whole.

In developing her reach even further, Eareckson Tada started a project entitled Wheels for the World within her ministry. This project gathers used wheelchairs that are transported to prisons, where inmates work to restore the wheelchairs to a like-new condition. These wheelchairs are then distributed around the world to people who are in great need of wheelchairs to be mobile: "In many less resourced countries, having a

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25. "Family Retreat Call – Joni & Friends." Accessed February 15, 2020. <https://www.joniandfriends.org/family-retreat-call/>.

26. Pennsylvania Family Institute. "Joni Eareckson Tada Supports PA Down Syndrome Protection Act," June 30, 2018. <https://pafamily.org/2018/06/joniandfriends/>.



disability translates into a life of isolation and poverty, especially without mobility in the form of a wheelchair...[receiving a wheelchair] opens up whole new possibilities; children and adults are more readily accepted and able to attend school and become more active participants in their community.”<sup>27</sup> Her program helps to change lives in many ways, first by helping people in prisons to be a part of a meaningful project, and secondly by enabling people with disabilities to become mobile and members of society. Another part of this outreach is that Bibles are delivered with the wheelchairs, which is an additional way Eareckson Tada accomplishes her goal of spreading the Gospel. Wheels for the World has provided nearly 200,000 wheelchairs to people in need of them, and it continues to be a source of hope for those who wonder if they will be stuck in their homes, immobile, forever.

### *Using Her Voice*

Joni Eareckson Tada has been politically active in order to advance her goals of attaining better treatment and accommodations for people with disabilities since the founding of her ministry. In 1988, she was appointed to the National Council on Disability, which allowed her to use her experiences to encourage the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. She accomplished this goal and attended the signing of the document in 1990. She wrote of the act: “It was intended to guarantee the basic rights of Americans with disabilities. Many saw the ADA as a means of moving society beyond

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27. “Wheels for the World – Joni & Friends.” Accessed February 18, 2020. <https://www.joniandfriends.org/wheels-world/>.

the premise that one is ‘better off dead than disabled.’”<sup>28</sup> Eareckson Tada wanted to ensure that the lives of her friends and herself were protected under the law. Her work was essential to the passage of the act, as she had much experience with disability and people who have them, so she provided a valuable perspective to the council.

Since this occasion, Eareckson Tada has used her voice to advocate against extremely controversial issues, such as abortion, particularly on the basis of a baby who is predicted to be born with a disability. She wrote to Pennsylvania senators, pleading with them to pass the Down Syndrome Protection Act: “Please work toward the passage of the Down Syndrome Protection Act, as it will safeguard the lives of untold numbers of children with this particular disability. We want a society which safeguards its most vulnerable populations; a society that truly cares about those who are weak.”<sup>29</sup> This act serves to amend Title 18 to add that abortion cannot be considered necessary solely on the basis of a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome. Knowing that she touches many people across the world with her outreach efforts, Eareckson Tada chose to use her voice to protect those desperately in need of safety, especially since they, being unborn, are unable to do so themselves. She further argues against legal action taken discriminatorily concerning the birth of babies. She describes the problems with a lawsuit that ruled against a hospital that did not properly screen for a rare genetic mutation and resulted in a child being born with disabilities: “A double standard is now being applied to the most

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28. Tada, Joni Eareckson. “Joni Eareckson Tada: The Disability Double Standard - WSJ.” The Wall Street Journal, January 9, 2014. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-disability-double-standard-1389311313?ns=prod/accounts-wsj>.

29. See note 26 above.

vulnerable among us, infants with disabilities... The ruling nevertheless sends a clear message that a person with a disability may not have a life worth living.”<sup>30</sup> Eareckson Tada shows that one ruling can have severe impacts on more than just the law, as it provides connotations that govern the perception of individuals with disabilities by society. She goes on to state: “So while a disabled person’s civil rights are recognized under federal law, those rights are nullified when confronted with stereotypical notions about the ‘tragedy’ of a disabled person’s existence.”<sup>31</sup> Society’s perception of people with disabilities, especially for those who have never personally encountered disability before, cannot help but be negative if this is how the laws are written. She wants to combat these laws to improve society’s outlook on disability.

Another controversial issue Eareckson Tada fights against is physician-assisted suicide. She strongly remembers her time in the hospital, where she too wanted to commit suicide, yet knows that now she is at a place of such joy in her life that she could not have predicted from her Stryker frame (the hospital bed she spent a lot of time in following her paralysis) as it allowed her to be easily turned and moved. She wants to help others reach that point of joy, instead of cutting off the opportunity to ever reach it by being euthanized in their position of despair: “Life is the most precious and foundational right of humanity. Society’s unwritten moral law as always led us to save our children—and certainly not to allow them to destroy themselves.”<sup>32</sup> She hopes to help

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30. See note 28 above.

31. See note 28 above.

32. See note 28 above.

people realize the wrongness that surrounds the position that physician-assisted suicide is lawful by appealing to people's moral values. Eareckson Tada wants to protect as many people as she can from making a decision to end their lives when they unknowingly have such beautiful lives ahead of them. Reflecting on the ADA, she says: "You can provide for the curb cuts, provide for the elevators and the ramps and the Braille and the TTY machines, but it's going to require a change of heart in our society."<sup>33</sup> Despite the success of the ADA in providing accommodations for people with disabilities, she knows that it has failed in the aspect of helping people see the value in life with disability. She now views her reason for living as encouraging those with disabilities, to show them life is worth living, and to help everyone in the world see this value as well.

One of her main goals with her advocacy is to help everyone understand that no matter the circumstance, they are loved by God. She refers to the Bible and states:

Yet in the creation story, God says that all humankind is made in the image of God. We are all representatives of God on earth. That's why human life is sacred. And that's why you and I must be bold to affirm the value of all human life: born or unborn, high IQ or low, healthy or ill, walking or wheeling, young or old...our culture needs to hear that all human life has value.<sup>34</sup>

Eareckson Tada shows that all life deserves to be protected, as human life is used to glorify God. She wants society to understand that it is their job to welcome and

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33. Eareckson Tada, Joni. Joni Eareckson Tada | September 24, 2010 | Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | PBS. Interview by Kim Lawton. PBS, September 24, 2010. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/09/24/september-24-2010-joni-eareckson-tada/7074/>.

34. "The Reason for the Sanctity of Human Life – Joni & Friends." Accessed March 6, 2020. <https://www.joniandfriends.org/the-reason-for-the-sanctity-of-human-life/>.

appreciate those who suffer greatly, in order to help relieve some of their struggles. Interpreting Eareckson Tada's perspective about the need to accommodate people with disabilities in churches, Stonestreet states: "We will never be able to weather the ordeals that will come our way, neither as individuals nor as churches, unless we recover a theology, and practice, of suffering in Christ."<sup>35</sup> Every unique person is valuable, not only as members of a church body, but also as members of society. Eareckson Tada works to better society's views of disability. She asks, "What kind of society do we want? If we are seeking a good society, then we do well to defend the rights of the helpless—not nullify their rights in order to destroy them. It benefits all of us to minister to those who are hurting, not to agree with them that life isn't worth living."<sup>36</sup> She uses her position as a person with a disability who knows she is loved by God and is very active in the church to help others see the value in perspectives like hers. She shows that people all need each other to deal with the struggles they face and to use them to benefit God's glory. Stonestreet writes in amazement of Eareckson Tada's struggles and advocacy:

Still what continually stuns me, and convicts me, is how Joni understands—even now, even after fifty years in a wheelchair and even in the midst of a second battle with cancer—that her suffering is not about her. It has eternal potential. She knows (and she's told me herself) that the way she handles what's happening to her right now will send a message: not only that life with disability is worth living, but that God has a special place in His family for those our culture considers inconvenient. She understands that members of Christ's body who can't

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35. Stonestreet, John, and G. Shane Morris. "Joni Eareckson Tada and Suffering Well." Accessed March 6, 2020. <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/joni-eareckson-tada-and-suffering-well.html>.

36. See note 28 above.

walk, or see, or interact on the same level as others are not only indispensable parts of the Kingdom of God, but are needed by the rest of us for our own edification and sanctification.<sup>37</sup>

Suffering should serve as a lesson enabling people to unify in gratefulness for God's overwhelming goodness. Eareckson Tada continually uses her life to try to instill this lesson in the hearts of those she is able to touch.

### *Joni's Perspective on Suffering*

Throughout her life, Eareckson Tada has had much experience in working through suffering, which has given her the ability to see its benefit. She serves as an example of someone who has suffered, and continues to do so, yet shows in her daily life that it has just allowed her to grow closer to God. Though most of society's goals today center around trying to eliminate it, she shows that suffering has value:

But sometimes healing doesn't come, and you've got to live with it, and when you do you really do learn who you are. God uses suffering. He lobs it like a hand grenade and blows to smithereens these notions we have about our self and who we think we are. Blows it to smithereens until we are left raw, naked, and we have to let suffering do its work.<sup>38</sup>

She shows suffering can be beneficial in that it opens humans up to receive God's overwhelming love. Her personal experience with suffering has enabled her to arrive at the point in her life where she not only appreciates the struggles she had to face, but she also knows her current state of close friendship with God would not have been possible without her diving accident. Though suffering, particularly that which accompanies physical disability, leaves a person vulnerable, she shows that it is worth the result. She

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37. See note 35 above.

38. See note 33 above.

claims: “[His will is] That you and I be in the best position, the best place, the timeliest circumstance in which God can be glorified the most. For me, that place just happens to be a wheelchair. That happens to be my place of healing.”<sup>39</sup> Even though suffering is difficult and the adjustment to life in a wheelchair has not been easy, Eareckson Tada knows that her spirit has been healed on the journey. She also knows that her ability to help in the healing process of others has been given to her for use from her seated position in her wheelchair. She has found positive aspects to suffering where many only see the negative.

In *A Place of Healing*, Eareckson Tada fleshes out five benefits to suffering to answer the question many who suffer find themselves asking. She writes that the first benefit is suffering’s ability to turn people away from a wrong path and toward the right one. Speaking of a friend she helped who was struggling with his disability: “It suddenly dawned on him that the trouble in his life—sorrowful, upsetting, annoying, pressure-packed, or painful as it may have been at the time—had been good for him, and had been specifically allowed by God to benefit him.”<sup>40</sup> The man she mentions was facing hardships in his life, yet later came to realize that they were necessary to get him to a place of peaceful appreciation for God.

The second benefit Eareckson Tada sees to suffering is that it allows people to be reminded where their strength is, which is in God’s power. She writes: “To access that incomparable resurrection power, you and I must first be thoroughly convinced of our

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39. Eareckson Tada, “A Place of Healing,” 39.

40. Eareckson Tada, 93.

own utter bankruptcy and turn to Him with all our hearts.”<sup>41</sup> Even if not realized through a physical limitation, she shows that people must accept that as human beings, limitations are inescapable. With this realization, it is impossible not to see the necessity of our reliance on God. At first, for Eareckson Tada as for many others, learning to accept the vulnerability of disability was extremely difficult. She recalls her past: “I was really big on ‘being independent’ in those early days of my paralysis. I remember wheeling around that huge campus, my face a mask of determination, firmly resolved to ‘make my own way’... The truth is, I didn’t want anyone to see me as ‘weak’ or ‘needy.’”<sup>42</sup> She was determined to be viewed as strong, despite the visible limitation of her wheelchair. However, after accepting weaknesses and suffering as part of the human condition, she was made more open to embracing her strengths, instead of focusing on the parts of life that were made more difficult due to disability. Eareckson Tada then refers to 1 Corinthians 12 to further her point: “It’s not a pity-the-poor-disabled verse at all. On the contrary, I think the whole chapter makes the point that we are *all* weak, *all* needy, whether we like to admit it or not. And what is it that we need? We need each other in the body of Christ. It just happens the weaknesses of some people (like me) are more evident.”<sup>43</sup> Real strength is given by God, and it is accessible to everyone, especially those who seem physically unable to showcase it.

Her third benefit to suffering is that it reminds people of the beauty of Jesus’s

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41. Eareckson Tada, “A Place of Healing,” 96.

42. Eareckson Tada, 96.

43. Eareckson Tada, “A Place of Healing,” 97.



love. She claims that suffering can clean a person out of all the negative aspects of themselves until he or she is left with room to let God turn them into positives. She describes this process: “Heartache and physical pain reach below the superficial, surface places of our lives, stripping away years of accumulated indifference and neglect...But the beauty of being stripped down to the basics, sandblasted until we reach a place where we feel empty and helpless, is that God can fill us up with Himself.”<sup>44</sup> In this perspective, suffering makes one question life to the point where the only true answers can be found by being faithful. Eareckson Tada then states that this emptiness allows for a beauty to be brought out in oneself that reflects God’s love. Being filled with the Spirit, one cannot help but display it in his or her actions and way of life, which allows for new blessings to be shared with others. She shows that people need this cleanliness and that it can only be received from the process of having suffered: “Suffering doesn’t teach you about yourself from a textbook—it teaches you from experience. It empties you so that by faith you can be filled with His Spirit.”<sup>45</sup> Suffering helps people see how much better life is when centered on God.

Further, Eareckson Tada’s fourth perceived benefit to suffering is that it causes people to seek Christ more fully. She claims that people typically go about their lives being satisfied by worldly goods, but the only way to be truly, fully satisfied is to do things for the glory of God: “when trials or suffering overwhelm our lives, it dawns on us that all of our God-substitutes fall pitifully short of helping us...If we allow it, suffering

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44. Eareckson Tada, 101.

45. Eareckson Tada, 101.

will lead us to the bank of the stream, where we can always find a long, cold drink of the refreshing grace of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>46</sup> She shows that people don’t realize just how much they need Jesus until they are faced with pain that is larger than their capacity to handle. The only one capable of helping people through immense suffering is God. Without faith, suffering has no meaning and is simply unbearable.

The last benefit Eareckson Tada highlights as coming from suffering in this book is that it increases human flourishing. She says that people are able to accomplish much more with God in their lives, even though it is a painful process: “Apart from Him, you can do nothing. But *in Him*, with His life sap flowing through your branch and leaves, you have strength for everything. He said so. And somehow, the result of all that cutting and wounding, grafting, and healing will be fruit beyond what you have ever produced.”<sup>47</sup> She states that suffering is worth the outcome, as it brings people to a place where they can do God’s work on Earth. The pain is justified not only in Christ’s own suffering, but also in His redemptive healing: “there was no saving grace, no saving work apart from a wounding. Yes, wounding of Christ on His cross, but also a wounding when you and I suffer and, as a result, are set, let in, cut into the body of Christ through affliction and hardship.”<sup>48</sup> Learning of these five benefits to suffering, the reader is able to see a new perspective about suffering, rather than just viewing it as a tragedy. Growing close in friendship to God is only made possible when one understands that this is the

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46. Eareckson Tada, “A Place of Healing,” 103-104.

47. Eareckson Tada, 106.

48. Eareckson Tada, 106.

purpose of suffering. Though suffering is difficult to make peace with, doing so allows people to reap its benefits. Suffering allows people to see that “God’s plans for us really are full of hope and a future. Even when that path leads through pain.”<sup>49</sup> Eareckson Tada shows that suffering is not impossible to be borne. When faced with a hard time, her explanation of the benefits of suffering can help one see that there is supreme spiritual value in the trials to come.

### *Conclusion*

Joni Eareckson Tada, now seventy years old, has accomplished many things in the realm of disability advocacy, support, and protection in her lifetime. She continues to work with her ministry to help as many people as she possibly can by relating her personal story. As discussed in the above section concerning her advocacy efforts, she has been active in many areas of change, even working in the political sphere to help society see the value in disability. She shows there is goodness in having to be the person suffering, yet there is also value in choosing to walk with those who suffer, as both enable us to grow closer to God. Though she knows personally that the path through suffering is extremely difficult, she says that she would not change her life, should she have the opportunity to do so. It is what formed her into the person she is today, and she could not imagine how her life would have turned out had she not broken her neck in the diving accident. Eareckson Tada’s outlook on disability and suffering will be contrasted against FDR’s and Reeve’s outlooks in the following final chapter.

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49. Eareckson Tada, “A Place of Healing,” 99.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### *Summary*

The previous four chapters have detailed the lives of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Christopher Reeve, and Joni Eareckson Tada, in an attempt to show how disability has affected their purposes and outlooks on life. Each of them showed a new dedication to helping others with disabilities, due to his or her own personal experiences. They also faced varying levels of acceptance of themselves with their disabilities, which can be attributed to a combination of their upbringing, faith, and purposes prior to disability. Each of these three people showed strength in suffering through physical pain and many other challenges while trying to accomplish their goals.

#### *From Activity to Paralysis*

All three of these individuals had very active lifestyles prior to becoming paralyzed. Outdoor activities were a big part of their lives, thus the sudden knowledge that they would no longer be able to partake in their beloved hobbies was devastating for them. All three went through a time period following their paralysees in which they were determined to walk again or at least regain some of their ability to move. Each was extremely determined to make as much progress as he or she could. Reeve and Roosevelt possibly took this too far, as they developed organizations dedicated to researching how to make walking a possibility for people who were paralyzed. It was difficult for them to face the reality that they were going to spend the rest of their lives in wheelchairs. These

men placed their faith in science and medicine, hoping that with their support and funding, a cure would be found.

Where these two placed their hopes in science, Eareckson Tada placed hers in God. She did have a period where she was determined to regain the use of her muscles, but then she made peace with the fact that she would be living in her wheelchair for the rest of her life. She became appreciative of her wheelchair for its ability to provide her with movement, instead of detesting it for presenting her to society as ‘handicapped.’ Eareckson Tada also learned to appreciate her wheelchair for its ability to aid her on her quest to glorify God. She discovered that she was best able to impact the lives of others from the position of her wheelchair, and that brought her peace with her disability. She no longer had reason to desire a return to an ambulatory body, because she had bigger things to accomplish that required her to be exactly as she is. Reeve and Roosevelt, though they did become more accepting of their disabilities by the end of their lives, never reached a state of full acceptance and appreciation, like Eareckson Tada did. Even though the men did become more reliant on faith or spirituality throughout their lives, it is likely that their lack of acceptance was a result of their having comparatively less faith. Eareckson Tada posits the problem of people like Roosevelt and Reeve as being a lack of contentment: “Contentment is realizing that God has already given her everything she needs for her present happiness. It is the wise person who doesn’t grieve for the things he *doesn’t* have, but rejoices over the things he *does* have.”<sup>1</sup> Eareckson Tada’s ability to be truly content was given by her appreciation of God’s gifts. The other two individuals do

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1. Tada, Joni Eareckson. *A Place of Healing*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010, 233.

not seem to have ever reached a state where they considered their disability a gift; instead it was more of a hindrance they desired to overcome.

### *What Makes a Good Life?*

Part of the reason for their lack of contentment could lie in their differences in opinion as to what a life well-lived is. For Joni Eareckson Tada, this would consist of a life where she has the ability to glorify God and help others on their spiritual journeys: “But as difficult as it is, I need to remember in Whose image I am made. My body may be broken, but I am a God-reflector. That is what gives me human dignity – not my ability to walk or use my hands or toilet myself. And I want to pass on that encouragement to everyone, no matter what the age or ability.”<sup>2</sup> She views life as good in the simple fact of her existence as being made in the image of God.

Christopher Reeve viewed a life well-lived in the pursuit of adventure and activity. If he did not find a purpose after his accident and had his wife not encouraged him to stay alive, he probably would have found a way to end his life. He speaks of how he survives his daily life: “You know, the accident’s power is diminishing. Do I wish it hadn’t happened? Absolutely...but I find that it’s best to think, well, what can I do today? Is there something I can accomplish...that will move things forward? We have to learn to live a new life that would not have seemed possible.”<sup>3</sup> Reeve faced many struggles

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2. Eareckson Tada, Joni. “A Good Quality of Life.” *Joni & Friends* (blog), April 18, 2018. <https://www.joniandfriends.org/good-quality-life/>.

3. Burkeman, Oliver. “Christopher Reeve Talks about Life as a Quadraplegic.” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2002, sec. Education. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/sep/17/science.highereducation>.

throughout his life in trying to stay positive despite the hardships, because he did not view his life lived in a wheelchair as worth living.

Franklin Roosevelt sought to secure a good life for America in a time where such an ideal seemed unattainable. In his Four Freedoms speech, Roosevelt describes four ideals that he hoped would be reached by every person following the end of the war: freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship God, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.<sup>4</sup> In his mind, having these things would enable a life to be well-lived. Achieving these ideals would be difficult for Roosevelt, due to the ensuing involvement of the country in World War II. He would not find comfort in the achievement of these ideals, due to his death before the end of the war, but none of them are deemed impossible for a person with a disability. Roosevelt actually punctuates each of these freedoms with the claim that they must be accessible “everywhere in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Effects of the Limelight*

Roosevelt and Reeve became paralyzed while already in the public view. Each of these men was already famous, and thus had to worry more about the opinions of society, because they would affect their careers. Because Roosevelt’s life took place in a time period before the rise in media’s ability to portray every aspect of a public figure’s lifestyle, it was easier for his disability to be overlooked by the world. This is why it is speculated that he tried to hide his paralysis. Reeve did not have such an option. The

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4. Roosevelt, Franklin Delano. “Four Freedoms Speech.” FDR Library, January 1941. <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/four-freedoms>.

5. See note 4 above.

media knew about his equestrian accident the same day it occurred. Both of these men wanted to portray images of strength, showing that they would not be hindered from achieving the American ideal of autonomy on their own.

Being seen as a strong individual was probably more important for Roosevelt, as he was responsible for the entire country's wellbeing in a time of great distress for the world. He had to make sure Americans trusted him to take care of them and get them through the time of economic downfall and then war. As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, society often links disability with weakness, so Roosevelt thought he had to show the nation he was still strong. The struggle to maintain an appearance of strength while suffering through pain is extremely difficult and was made harder by his presence as the nation's leader. However, his experience with disability might have been the reason he was such a successful leader during this time of the nation's suffering. As noted by R. Harvard:

[Pain is] hard to bear... Yet if the cause is accepted and faced, the conflict will strengthen and purify the character and in time the pain will usually pass... [Those who overcome pain] often produce brilliant work and strengthen, harden, and sharpen their characters till they become like tempered steel... Pain provides an opportunity for heroism.<sup>6</sup>

Such a view was likely held by Roosevelt and his team, as he worked to portray an image of strength for society. Reeve modeled his actions after examples such as Roosevelt in his quest to preserve his public image as well.

Eareckson Tada, only becoming publicly known after her accident, was not in the same position where she had to uphold an image of physical strength. However, she is

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6. Harvard, M.D., R. "Appendix." In *The Problem of Pain*, by C.S. Lewis. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940, 161-162.



perhaps the strongest of the three featured, due to her ability to find value in suffering and herself as a person with a disability. Reeve and Roosevelt, while accomplishing much in the way of disability rights advancement, have not impacted lives in such a positive way as Eareckson Tada has. Her goal is acceptance of oneself, disability and all, whereas the others focused more on an overcoming model of operation. Eareckson Tada's view is more helpful for maintaining mental health of people with disabilities and for creating an environment of acceptance of differences in society. Reeve and Roosevelt, had they not started out as celebrities, might have been able to obtain a perspective like Eareckson Tada's, yet they were limited by their positions in society.

#### *Family and Friends Help*

Surviving difficulties brought by disability has been shown to be aided by family and friends in each of the three individuals. Roosevelt was cared for physically by his wife, Eleanor, and his sons, and politically by many trusted advisors. All worked together to help him preserve his image and deal with pain brought upon him by polio. Though he was largely an independent man, as his innermost thoughts were not often shared with anyone else, he did have help in managing the difficulties he faced. On the contrary, Reeve placed the whole reason for his vitality in the words of his wife, Dana, and the actions of his children. He stated that had they not shown love for him in his paralyzed state, he would have wanted to end his life. Seeing that he was valuable to them gave him a reason to live, which brought him closer to a state of acceptance. Eareckson Tada too placed much emphasis on the importance of loving friends and family in her healing process. She had many friends that served as spiritual guides, helping her to tackle many

of the big questions she faced. Her husband, Ken, helps her in many ways, from physical challenges to emotional struggles, and even helps her operate her ministry. Each of these individuals had strong support groups, which is crucial to maintaining a positive outlook on life in times of hardship.

### *The Value of Suffering and Disability*

Today, the predominant view of suffering for many people in society, and particularly the medical profession, is that it needs to be eliminated. While it is difficult both to suffer and to be with someone in suffering, Joni Eareckson Tada shows that there is value to suffering. It helps us become closer to each other, to God, and to our inner selves. Suffering is an essential part of the human condition, and without it, there would be many life lessons humans miss. Suffering has been shown to develop stronger character and help people develop compassion for others. Though suffering causes people to struggle through a process of grieving, reaching a state of acceptance can allow it to be valued as a beneficial tool for strong character formation.

Suffering, when put in terms of disability, often is not something that can be eliminated. People cannot be separated from their disabilities, and society should be ordered to where disabilities are appreciated, rather than thought of as better if removed. As Bill Gaventa states: “In a world that worships both physical and intellectual images of power and perfection, disability is a major tempest in that fragile teapot. Power and perfection both lead to assumptions of invulnerability and control, both of which are

ultimately illusions about our omnipotence and omniscience.”<sup>7</sup> The idea of accepting disability scares able bodied society, because society is typically too concerned about preserving its idea of perfection, which does not include room for things like disability. With a reimagined idea of what makes a good life, reflecting the image of God, all people are included in having the ability to achieve this ideal. This then mandates that people with disabilities be valued as much as every other able bodied human: “The moral implications of the doctrine of imago Dei are apparent in the fact that if humans are to love God, then humans must love other humans, as each is an expression of God.”<sup>8</sup> Perfection regarded in this way does not exclude anyone and allows every human to be considered as perfect, simply in being created by God.

Such an ideal, if upheld by all of society, could bring much needed love into the world. People would all learn the importance of being with others in times of hardship and develop better characters, like Reeve in his discovery of how to be a better father to his children. They would put aside their own difficulties to care for others who are often overlooked, such as Roosevelt’s creation of the March of Dimes, which today helps babies and their mothers survive. Society would join with those who have dedicated their lives to trying to show the value in disabilities, like Eareckson Tada, as she provides daily encouragement to people with disabilities, their families, and many others around the world. The three individuals featured in this thesis have faced many struggles in their

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7. Gaventa, William C. *Disability and Spirituality, Recovering Wholeness*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018, 268.

8. Christianity.com. “What Does ‘Imago Dei’ Mean? The Image of God in the Bible.” Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/image-of-god-meaning-imago-dei-in-the-bible.html>.

lives, yet none of them gave up when life did not turn out as they expected. They found new purposes or new ways to achieve their desired goals, and each was successful in his or her endeavors. They show that disability does not have to be negatively stereotyped, rather it can be viewed as an experience that can foster a strength of character, an appreciation for life and those you live it with, and a care for improving the lives of those who suffer.

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