INSPIRATION FOR A *RIDICULOUSLY* GOOD LIFE

LIFE WITHOUT LIMITS

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NICK VUJICIC

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Inspiration for a Ridiculously *Good Life*

Nick Vujicic

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GOD: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
I'd also like to dedicate this book to the Toth family in San Diego, California, as I will never forget the cornerstone of faith Phil placed in my life. His contagious flame for evangelism marked the beginning of mine.

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Introduction

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My name is Nick Vujicic (pronounced Voy-a-chich). I am twenty-seven years old. I was born without any limbs, but I am not constrained by my circumstances. I travel the world encouraging millions of people to overcome adversity with faith, hope, love, and courage so that they may pursue their dreams. In this book I will share with you my experiences in dealing with adversity and obstacles, some of them unique to me but most universal to us all. My goal is to encourage you to overcome your own challenges and hardships so you can find your *own* purpose and pathway to a ridiculously good life.

Often we feel life is unfair. Hard times and tough circumstances can trigger self-doubt and despair. I understand that well. But the Bible says, "Consider it pure joy, whenever you face trials of any kinds." That is a lesson I struggled many years to learn. I eventually figured it out, and through my experiences I can help you see that most of the hardships we face provide us with opportunities to discover who we are meant to be and what we can share of our gifts to benefit others.

My parents are devout Christians, but after I was born with neither arms nor legs, they wondered what God had in mind in creating me. At first they assumed that there was no hope and no future for someone like me, that I would never live a normal or productive life.

Today, though, my life is beyond anything we could have imag-

ined. Every day I hear from strangers via telephone, e-mail, text, and Twitter. They approach me in airports, hotels, and restaurants and hug me, telling me that I have touched their lives in some way. I am truly blessed. I am *ridiculously* happy.

What my family and I could not foresee was that my disability—my "burden"—could also be a blessing, offering me unique opportunities for reaching out to others, empathizing with them, understanding their pain, and offering them comfort. Yes, I do have distinct challenges, but I also am blessed with a loving family, with a keen enough mind, and with a deep and abiding faith. I'll be candid here and throughout the book in sharing that neither my faith nor my sense of purpose grew strong until I went through some very scary times.

You see, as I entered those difficult adolescent years when we all wonder where we fit in, I despaired over my circumstances, feeling that I never would be "normal." There was no hiding the fact that my body was not like my classmates'. As much as I tried to do ordinary activities like swimming and skateboarding, I would only become more and more aware that there were simply some things I would never be able to do.

It didn't help that a few cruel kids called me a freak and an alien. Of course, I'm all too human and wanted to be like everyone else, but there seemed little chance for that. I wanted to be accepted. I felt I wasn't. I wanted to fit in. It seemed I didn't. And I hit a wall.

My heart ached. I was depressed, overwhelmed with negative thoughts, and didn't see any point in my life. I felt alone even when I was surrounded by family and friends. I worried that I would always be a burden to those I loved.

But I was so, so wrong. What I didn't know back in those dark days could fill a book: the one you're holding, actually. In the pages that follow, I will offer you methods for finding hope even amid arduous trials and heartbreaking tribulations. I'll light the path to the other side of grief where you can emerge stronger, more deter-

mined, and empowered to pursue the life you want, and perhaps even to find a life beyond any you could have imagined.

If you have the desire and passion to do something, and it's within God's will, you will achieve it. That's a powerful statement. To be honest, I didn't always believe it myself. If you've seen one of my talks posted on the Internet, the happiness I have that shines through in those videos is the result of the journey I've made. I didn't have everything I needed at first and had to pick up several important attributes along the way. To live without limits, I found I needed:

A powerful sense of purpose

Hope so strong that it cannot be diminished

Faith in God and the infinite possibilities

Love and self-acceptance

Attitude with altitude

A courageous spirit

Willingness to change

A trusting heart

Hunger for opportunities

The ability to assess risks and to laugh at life

A mission to serve others first

Each chapter in this book is devoted to one of those attributes, explained in such a way that I hope you can put them to use in your own journey toward a fulfilling and meaningful life. I'm offering them to you because I share God's love for you. I want you to experience all the joy and fulfillment He intended for you.

If you are one of the many people struggling each day, keep in mind that beyond my own struggles there was a purpose for my life awaiting me. And it has proven to be far, far, *far* beyond anything I ever could have imagined.

You may hit hard times. You may fall down and feel as though you don't have the strength to get back up. I know the feeling, mate. We all do. Life isn't always easy, but when we overcome challenges, we become stronger and more grateful for our opportunities. What really matters are the lives you touch along the way and how you finish your journey.

I love my life just as I love yours. Together, the possibilities for us are just ridiculous. So what do you say? Shall we give it a go, mate?

Life Without Limits

ONE

If You Can't Get a Miracle, Become One

One of my most popular videos on YouTube shows footage of me skateboarding, surfing, playing music, hitting a golf ball, falling down, getting up, speaking to audiences, and best of all, receiving hugs from all sorts of great people.

All in all, those are pretty ordinary activities that just about anybody can do, right? So why do you think that video has been viewed *millions* of times? My theory is that people are drawn to watch it because despite my physical limitations, I'm living as though I have no limits.

People often expect someone with a severe disability to be inactive, maybe even angry and withdrawn. I like to surprise them by showing that I lead a very adventurous and fulfilling existence.

Among the hundreds of comments on that video, here's one typical remark: "Seeing a guy like this being happy makes me wonder why the hell I feel sorry for myself sometimes . . . or feel that I'm not attractive enough, or funny enough, or WHATEVER. How can I even think thoughts like that when this guy is living without limbs and still being HAPPY!?"

I'm often asked that very question: "Nick, how can you be so happy?" You may be dealing with your own challenges, so I'll give you the quick answer up front:

I found happiness when I realized that as imperfect as I may be, I am the perfect Nick Vujicic. I am God's creation, designed according to His plan for me. That's not to say that there isn't room for

improvement. I'm always trying to be better so I can better serve Him and the world!

I do believe my life has no limits. I want you to feel the same way about your life, no matter what your challenges may be. As we begin our journey together, please take a moment to think about any limitations you've placed on your life or that you've allowed others to place on it. Now think about what it would be like to be free of those limitations. What would your life be if *anything* were possible?

I'm officially *disabled*, but I'm truly *enabled* because of my lack of limbs. My unique challenges have opened up unique opportunities to reach so many in need. Just imagine what is possible for you!

Too often we tell ourselves we aren't smart enough or attractive enough or talented enough to pursue our dreams. We buy into what others say about us, or we put restrictions on ourselves. What's worse is that when you consider yourself unworthy, you are putting limits on how *God* can work through you!

When you give up on your dreams, you put God in a box. After all, you are His creation. He made you for a purpose. Therefore your life cannot be limited any more than God's love can be contained.

I have a choice. You have a choice. We can choose to dwell on disappointments and shortcomings. We can choose to be bitter, angry, or sad. Or when faced with hard times and hurtful people, we can choose to learn from the experience and move forward, taking responsibility for our own happiness.

As God's child, you are beautiful and precious, worth more than all the diamonds in the world. You and I are perfectly suited to be who we were meant to be! Even still, it should always be our goal to become an even better person and stretch our boundaries by dreaming big. Adjustments are necessary along the way because life isn't always rosy, but it is always worth living. I'm here to tell you that no matter what your circumstances may be, as long as you are breathing, you have a contribution to make.

I can't put a hand on your shoulder to reassure you, but I can speak from the heart. However desperate your life may seem, there is hope. As bad as circumstances appear, there are better days ahead. No matter how dire your circumstances may appear, you can rise above them. To wish for change will change nothing. To make the decision to take action right now will change everything!

All events come together for the good. I'm certain of that because it's been true in my life. What good is a life without limbs? Just by looking at me, people know that I faced and overcame many obstacles and hardships. That makes them willing to listen to me as a source of inspiration. They allow me to share my faith, to tell them they are loved, and to give them hope.

That is my contribution. It's important to recognize your own value. Know that you also have something to contribute. If you feel frustrated right now, that's okay. Your sense of frustration means you want more for your life than you have right now. That's all good. Often it's the challenges in life that show us who we are truly meant to be.

A LIFE OF VALUE

It took me a long time to see the benefits of the circumstances I was born into. My mum was twenty-five years old when she became pregnant with me, her first child. She'd been a midwife and worked as a pediatric nurse in charge in the delivery room where she provided care for hundreds of mothers and their babies. She knew what she had to do while she was pregnant, watching her diet, being cautious about medications, and not consuming alcohol, aspirin, or any other pain-killers. She went to the best doctors and they assured her everything was proceeding smoothly.

Even still, her apprehension persisted. As her due date approached, my mum shared her concerns with my father several times, saying, "I hope that everything's okay with the baby."

When two ultrasounds were performed during her pregnancy, the doctors detected nothing unusual. They told my parents that the baby was a boy but not a word about missing limbs! At my delivery on December 4, 1982, my mother could not see me at first, and the first question she asked the doctor was "Is the baby all right?" There was silence. As the seconds ticked by and they were still not bringing the baby for her to see, she sensed even more that something was wrong. Instead of giving me to my mother to hold, they summoned a pediatrician and moved off to the opposite corner, examining me and conferring with each other. When my mum heard a big healthy baby scream, she was relieved. But my dad, who had noticed I was missing an arm during the delivery, felt queasy and was escorted out of the room.

Shocked at the sight of me, the nurses and doctors quickly wrapped me up.

My mother, who'd participated in hundreds of deliveries as a nurse, wasn't fooled. She read the distress on the faces of her medical team, and she knew something was very wrong.

"What is it? What's wrong with my baby?" she demanded.

Her doctor would not answer at first, but when she insisted on a response, he could offer my mother only a specialized medical term.

"Phocamelia," he said.

Because of her nursing background, my mother recognized the term as the condition babies have when they are born with malformed or missing limbs. She simply couldn't accept that this was true.

In the meantime, my stunned dad was outside, wondering whether he had seen what he thought he saw. When the pediatrician came out to speak to him, he cried out, "My son, he has no arm!"

"Actually," the pediatrician said as sensitively as possible, "your son has neither arms nor legs."

My father went weak with shock and anguish.

He sat stunned, momentarily unable to speak before his protective instincts kicked in. He rushed in to tell my mother before she saw me, but to his dismay he found her lying in bed, crying. The staff had already told her the news. They had offered to bring me to her but she refused to hold me and told them to take me away.

The nurses were crying. The midwife was crying. And of course, I was crying! Finally they put me next to her, still covered, and my mum just couldn't bear what she was seeing: her child without limbs.

"Take him away," she said. "I don't want to touch him or see him."

To this day my father regrets that the medical staff did not give him time to prepare my mother properly. Later, as she slept, he visited me in the nursery. He came back and told Mum, "He looks beautiful." He asked her if she wanted to see me at that point, but she declined, still too shaken. He understood and respected her feelings.

Instead of celebrating my birth, my parents and their whole church mourned. "If God is a God of love," they wondered, "why would He let something like this happen?"

MY MUM'S GRIEF

I was my parents' firstborn child. While this would be a major cause for rejoicing in any family, no one sent flowers to my mum when I was born. This hurt her and only deepened her despair.

Sad and teary-eyed, she asked my dad, "Don't I deserve flowers?"

"I'm sorry," Dad said. "Of course you deserve them." He went to the hospital flower shop and returned shortly to present her with a bouquet.

I was aware of none of this until the age of thirteen or so, when I began to question my parents about my birth and their initial re-

action to my lack of limbs. I'd had a bad day at school, and when I told my mum, she cried with me. I told her I was sick of having no arms and legs. She shared my tears and said that she and my dad had come to understand that God had a plan for me and one day He would reveal it. My questions continued over time, sometimes with one parent, sometimes with both. Part of my search for answers was natural curiosity and part of it was in response to the persistent questions I'd been fielding from curious classmates.

At first, I was a little scared of what my parents might tell me, and, since some of this was difficult for them to delve into, I didn't want to put them on the spot. In our initial discussions my mum and dad were very careful and protective in their responses. As I grew older and pushed harder, they offered me deeper insights into their feelings and their fears because they knew I could handle it. Even so, when my mum told me that she didn't want to hold me after I was born, it was hard to take, to say the least. I was insecure enough as it was, but to hear that my own mother could not bear to look at me was . . . well, imagine how you might feel. I was hurt and I felt rejected, but then I thought of all that my parents have done for me since. They'd proven their love many times over. By the time we had these conversations, I was old enough to put myself in her situation. Other than her intuitive feelings, there'd been no warning of this during her pregnancy. She was in shock and frightened. How would I have responded as a parent? I'm not sure I would have handled it as well as they did. I told them that, and over time we went more and more into the details.

I'm glad that we waited until I was secure, knowing deep in my heart of hearts that they loved me. We've continued to share our own feelings and fears, and my parents have helped me understand how their faith enabled them to see that I was destined to serve God's purpose. I was a fiercely determined and mostly upbeat child. My teachers, other parents, and strangers often told my parents

that my attitude inspired them. For my part, I came to see that as great as my challenges were, many people had heavier burdens than mine.

Today in my travels around the world, I often see incredible suffering that makes me grateful for what I have and less inclined to focus on what I may lack. I have seen orphaned children with crippling diseases. Young women forced into sexual slavery. Men imprisoned because they were too poor to pay a debt.

Suffering is universal and often unbelievably cruel, but even in the worst of slums and after the most horrible tragedies, I have been heartened to see people not only surviving but thriving. Joy was certainly not what I expected to find in a place called "Garbage City," the worst slum at the edge of Cairo, Egypt. The Manshiet Nasser neighborhood is tucked into towering rock cliffs. The unfortunate but accurate nickname and the community's rank odor come from the fact that most of its fifty thousand residents sustain themselves by combing through Cairo, dragging its garbage there, and picking through it. Each day they sort through mountains of refuse pulled from a city of eighteen million residents, hoping to find objects to sell, recycle, or somehow make use of.

Amid streets lined with garbage piles, pig pens, and stinking trash, you would expect people to be overcome with despair, yet I found it to be quite the opposite on a visit in 2009. The people there live hard lives, to be sure, but those I met were very caring, seemingly happy, and filled with faith. Egypt is 90 percent Muslim. Garbage City is the only predominantly Christian neighborhood. Nearly 98 percent of the people are Coptic Christians.

I've been to many of the poorest slums in all corners of the world. This was one of the worst as far as the environment, but it was also one of the most heart-warming in spirit. We squeezed nearly 150 people into a very small concrete building that served as their church. As I began speaking, I was struck by the joy and

happiness radiating from my audience. They were simply beaming at me. My life has rarely seemed so blessed. I gave thanks that their faith lifted them above their circumstances as I told them how Jesus had changed my life too.

I spoke with church leaders there about how lives in the village had changed through the power of God. Their hope wasn't put on this earth, but their hope is in eternity. In the meantime they'll believe in miracles and thank God for who He is and what He has done. Before we left, we presented some families with rice, tea, and a small amount of cash that would buy them enough food for several weeks. We also distributed sports equipment, soccer balls, and jump ropes to the children. They immediately invited our group to play with them, and we had a ball, laughing and enjoying each other even though we were surrounded by squalor. I will never forget those children and their smiles. It just proved to me again that happiness can come to us under any circumstance if we put our total trust in God.

How can such impoverished children laugh? How can prisoners sing with joy? They rise above by accepting that certain events are beyond their control and beyond their understanding too, and then focusing instead on what they *can* understand and control. My parents did just that. They moved forward by deciding to trust in God's Word that "all things work for the good of those who love God, who are called according to His purpose."

A FAMILY OF FAITH

My mum and dad were both born into strong Christian families in the part of the former Yugoslavia now known as Serbia. Their families immigrated separately to Australia while they were young because of Communist repression. Their parents were Apostolic Christians, and their faith included conscientious objection to bearing arms. The Communists discriminated against them and per-

secuted them for their beliefs. They had to hold services in secret. They suffered financially because they refused to join the Communist Party, which controlled every aspect of life. When my father was young, he often went hungry for that reason.

Both sets of my grandparents joined many thousands of Serbian Christians who immigrated to Australia and also to the United States and Canada after World War II. My parents' families moved to Australia, where they and their children could be free to practice their Christian beliefs. Other members of their families moved to the United States and Canada around the same time, so I have many relatives in those countries too.

My parents met in a Melbourne church. My mum, Dushka, was in her second year of nursing school at the Royal Children's Hospital in Victoria. My dad, Boris, worked in office administration and cost accounting. He later became a lay pastor in addition to his job. When I was about seven years old, my parents began considering a move to the United States because they felt there might be better access to new prosthetics and medical care to help us deal with my disabilities.

My uncle Batta Vujicic had a construction and property management business in Agoura Hills just 35 miles outside Los Angeles. Batta always told my father he'd give him a job if he could obtain a work visa. There was a large community of Serbian Christians with several churches around Los Angeles, which also appealed to my parents. My father learned that obtaining a work visa was a long, drawn-out process. He decided to apply, but in the meantime my family moved a thousand miles north to Brisbane, Queensland, where the climate was better for me, as I had allergies along with my other challenges.

I was approaching ten years old and in my fourth year of elementary school when everything finally fell into place for a move to the United States. My parents felt that my younger siblings—my brother Aaron and sister Michelle—and I were at a good age for

assimilating into the United States school system. We waited in Queensland for over eighteen months for Dad's three-year work visa to be arranged, finally moving in 1994.

Unfortunately, the move to California did not work out for several reasons. When we left Australia, I had already started sixth grade. My new school in Agoura Hills was very crowded. They could only get me into advanced classes, which was difficult enough, but in addition the curriculums were very different. I'd always been a good student, but I struggled to adapt to the change. Due to different school calendars, I was literally behind before I even started my classes in California. I had a difficult time catching up. The junior high I attended also required students to change classrooms for each subject, which was unlike Australia and added to the challenges of my adjustment.

We'd moved in with my uncle Batta, his wife Rita, and their six children, which made for a pretty crowded house even though they had a large home in Agoura Hills. We had planned to move into our own home as soon as possible, but home prices were much higher than in Australia. My father worked for Batta's real estate management company. My mother did not continue her nursing career because her first priority was to get us settled into our new schools and environment, and so she had not applied to become licensed to practice nursing in California.

After three months of living with Uncle Batta's family, my parents concluded that the move to the United States just wasn't working out. I was struggling in school, and my parents had difficulty arranging for my health insurance and overall handling the high cost of living in California. There were also concerns that we might never be able to secure permanent residency in the United States. A lawyer advised my family that my health challenges might make it more difficult to win approval because of possible doubts about my family's ability to keep up with medical costs and other expenses related to my disabilities.

With so many factors weighing on them, my parents decided to move back to Brisbane after only four months in the United States. They actually found a house in the same cul-de-sac where we'd lived before the move, so all of us kids could return to our same schools and friends. My dad went back to teaching computing and management in the College of Technical and Further Education. My mum devoted her life to my brother and sister and, mostly, me.

A CHALLENGING CHILD

In recent years my parents have been candid in describing their fears and nightmares immediately following my birth. As I was growing up, of course, they did not let on that I was not exactly the child of their dreams. In the months following my arrival, my mum feared she could not look after me. My dad could not see a happy future for me and worried about the kind of life I would have. If I was helpless and unable to experience life, he felt I would be better off with God. They considered their options, including the possibility of giving me up for adoption. Both sets of my grandparents offered to take me and care for me. My parents declined the offers. They decided it was their responsibility to raise me as best they could.

They grieved, and then they set about raising their physically challenged son to be as "normal" as he could possibly be. My parents are people of strong faith, and they kept thinking that God must have had some reason for giving them such a son.

Some injuries heal more quickly if you keep moving. The same is true of setbacks in life. Perhaps you lose your job. A relationship might not work out. Maybe the bills are piling up. Don't put your life on hold so that you can dwell on the unfairness of past hurts. Look instead for ways to move forward. Maybe there is a better job awaiting you that will be more fulfilling and rewarding. Your relationship may have needed a shake-up, or maybe there is someone

better for you. Perhaps your financial challenges will inspire you to find new creative ways to save and build wealth.

You can't always control what happens to you. There are some occurrences in life that are not your fault or within your power to stop. The choice you have is either to give up or to keep on striving for a better life. My advice is to know that everything happens for a reason and in the end good will come of it.

As a child, I just assumed I was a perfectly adorable baby, naturally charming and as lovable as any on earth. My blissful ignorance was a blessing at that age. I didn't know that I was different or that many challenges awaited me. You see, I don't think we are ever given more than we can handle. I promise you that for every *disability* you have, you are blessed with more than enough *abilities* to overcome your challenges.

God equipped me with an amazing amount of determination and other gifts too. I soon proved that even without limbs I was athletic and well coordinated. I was all trunk but all baby boy too; a rolling, diving daredevil. I learned to haul myself into an upright position by bracing my forehead against a wall and scooting up it. My mum and dad worked with me for a long time trying to help me master a more comfortable method, but I always insisted on finding my own way.

My mum tried to help by putting cushions on the floor so I could use them to brace myself and get up, but for some reason I decided it was better just to bash my brow against the wall and inch my way up. Doing tasks my way, even if it was the hard way became my trademark!

Using my head was my only option in those early days; a fact that developed my massive intellect (kidding!) while also giving me the neck strength of a Brahma bull and a forehead hard as a bullet. My parents worried about me constantly, of course. Parenthood is a shocking experience even with full-bodied babies. New mothers

and fathers often joke that they wish their first child came with an operating manual. There was no chapter even in Dr. Spock for babies like me. Yet I stubbornly grew healthier and bolder. I closed in on the "terrible twos" stage, packing more potential parental terrors than a set of octuplets.

How will he ever feed himself? How will he go to school? Who would take care of him if something happened to us? How will he ever live independently?

Our human powers of reasoning can be a blessing and a curse. Like my parents, you have probably fretted and worried about the future. Often, though, that which you dread turns out to be far less a problem than you imagined. There is nothing wrong with looking ahead and planning for the future, but know that your worst fears could just as easily prove to be your best surprise. Very often life works out for the good.

One of the best surprises of my childhood was the control I had over my little left foot. Instinctively I used it to roll myself around, to kick, shove, and brace myself. My parents and doctors felt that the handy little foot might be of greater use. There were two toes, but they were fused together when I was born. My parents and doctors decided that an operation to free the toes might allow me to use them more like fingers to grip a pen, turn a page, or perform other functions.

We then lived in Melbourne, Australia, which offered some of the best medical care in the country. I did present challenges beyond the training of most health care professionals. At the time when doctors were preparing me for foot surgery, my mum kept emphasizing to them that I ran hot most of the time and that they would have to be especially attentive to the possibility of my body overheating. She knew about another child without limbs who overheated during an operation and was left with brain damage after suffering a brain seizure.

My self-roasting tendencies prompted an oft-repeated family saying: "When Nicky's cold, the ducks must be freezing." Still, it is no joke that if I exercise too much, get stressed out, or stay too long under hot lights, my body temperature will rise dangerously. Avoiding a meltdown is one of the things I have to always be on guard against.

"Please monitor his temperature carefully," my mum told the surgical team. Even though the doctors knew my mother was a nurse, they still didn't take her advice seriously. They managed a successful surgery separating my toes, but what my mum had warned them about came to pass. I emerged from the operating room soaked because they hadn't taken any precautions for keeping my body from overheating, and when they realized that my temperature was getting out of control, they tried to cool me with wet sheets. They also put buckets of ice on me to avoid a seizure.

My mum was furious. No doubt the doctors felt the wrath of Dushka!

Even still, once I chilled out (quite literally), my quality of life received a big boost from my newly freed toes. They didn't work exactly as the doctors had hoped, but I adapted. It's amazing what a little foot and a couple of toes can do for a bloke with no arms and no legs. That operation and new technologies liberated me by giving me the power to operate custom-built electronic wheelchairs, a computer, and a cell phone too.

I can't know exactly what your burden is, nor do I pretend that I've ever been through a similar crisis, but look at what my parents went through when I was born. Imagine how they felt. Consider how bleak the future must have looked to them.

You may not be able to see a bright light at the end of your own dark tunnel right now, but know that my parents could not envision what a wonderful life I would have one day. They had no idea

that their son would be not only self-sufficient and fully engaged in a career but happy, and full of joyful purpose!

Most of my parents' worst fears never materialized. Raising me was certainly not easy, but I think they'll tell you that for all the challenges, we had plenty of laughter and joy. All things considered, I had an amazingly normal childhood in which I enjoyed tormenting my siblings, Aaron and Michelle, just like all big brothers!

Life may be kicking you around right now. You may wonder if your fortunes will improve. I'm telling you that you can't even imagine the good that awaits you if you refuse to give up. Stay focused on your dream. Do whatever it takes to stay in the chase. You have the power to change your circumstances. Go after whatever it is you desire.

My life is an adventure still being written—and so is yours. Start writing the first chapter now! Fill it with adventure and love and happiness. Live the story as you write it!

SEARCHING FOR MEANING

I'll concede that for a long time I did not believe that I had any power over how my own story would turn out. I struggled to understand what difference I could make in the world or what path I should take. I was convinced while growing up that there was nothing good about my abbreviated body. Sure, I never had to get up from the dinner table because I hadn't washed my hands, and yes, I'd never known the pain of a stubbed toe, but these few benefits didn't seem like much consolation.

My brother and sister and my crazy cousins never let me feel sorry for myself. They never coddled me. They accept me for who I am, yet they also toughened me up with their teasing and pranks so that I could find humor instead of bitterness in my circumstances.

"Look at that kid in the wheelchair! He's an alien," my cousins would scream across the shopping mall, pointing at me. We all

laughed hysterically at the reactions from strangers who had no idea that the kids picking on the disabled boy were really his strongest allies.

The older I become, the more I realize what a powerful gift it is to be loved like that. Even if at times you feel alone, you should know that *you* are loved too and recognize that God created you out of love. Therefore you are never alone. His love for you is unconditional. He doesn't love you *if* . . . He loves you always. Remind yourself of that when feelings of loneliness and despair come over you. Remember, those are just feelings. They are not real, but God's love is so real that He created you to prove it.

It is important to hold His love in your heart because there will be times when you feel vulnerable. My big family couldn't always be there to protect me. Once I went off to school, there was no hiding that I was so very different from everyone else. My dad assured me that God didn't make mistakes, but at times I couldn't shake the feeling that I was the exception to that rule.

"Why couldn't You give me just one arm?" I'd ask God. "Think what I could do with one arm!"

I'm sure you've had similar moments when you've prayed or simply wished for a dramatic change in your life. There is no reason to panic if your miracle doesn't arrive, or if your wish doesn't come true right this minute. Remember, God helps those who help themselves. It's still up to you to keep striving to serve the highest purpose for your talents and your dreams in the world around you.

For the longest time I thought that if my body were more "normal," my life would be a breeze. What I didn't realize was that I didn't have to be normal—I just had to be me, my father's child, carrying out God's plan. At first I was not willing to confront that what was really wrong with me wasn't my body, it was the limits I put on myself and my limited vision of the possibilities for my life.

If you aren't where you want to be or you haven't achieved all

you hope to achieve, the reason most likely resides not around you but within you. Take responsibility and then take action. First, though, you must believe in yourself and your value. You can't wait for others to discover your hiding place. You can't wait for that miracle or "just the right opportunity." You should consider yourself the stick and the world your pot of stew. Stir it up.

As a boy, I spent many nights praying for limbs. I'd go to sleep crying and dream that I'd wake up to find they had miraculously appeared. It never happened, of course. Because I did not accept myself, I went off to school the next day and as a result found that acceptance from others was hard to come by.

Like most kids, I was more vulnerable in my pre-teen years, that time when everyone is trying to figure out where they fit in, who they are, and what the future holds. Often those who hurt me didn't set out to be cruel; they were just being typically blunt kids.

"Why don't you have arms and legs?" they'd ask.

My desire to fit in was the same as for any of my classmates. On my good days I won them over with my wit, my willingness to poke fun at myself, and by throwing my body around on the playground. On my worst days I hid behind the shrubbery or in empty classrooms to avoid being hurt or mocked. Part of the problem was that I'd spent more time with adults and older cousins than with kids my own age. I had a more mature outlook, and my more serious thoughts sometimes took me into dark places.

I'll never get a girl to love me. I don't even have arms to hold a girlfriend. If I have children, I'll never be able to hold them either. What sort of job could I ever have? Who would hire me? For most jobs, they'd have to hire a second person just to help me do what I was supposed to do. Who would ever hire one for the price of two?

My challenges were mostly physical, but clearly they affected me emotionally as well. I went through a very scary period of depression at a young age. Then, to my everlasting shock and gratitude, as

I moved into my teen years, I gradually won acceptance, first from myself and then from others.

Everyone goes through times when they feel excluded, alienated, or unloved. We all have our insecurities. Most kids fear they'll be mocked because their noses are too big or their hair is too curly. Adults fear that they won't be able to pay the bills or that they will fail to live up to expectations.

You will face moments of doubt and fear. We all do. Feeling down is natural; it is part of being perfectly human. Such feelings pose a danger only if you allow negative thoughts to stick around instead of just letting them wash over you.

When you trust that you have blessings—talents, knowledge, love—to share with others, you will begin the journey to self acceptance even if your gifts are not yet apparent. Once you begin that walk, others will find you and walk with you.

SPEAKING UP

I found the path to my purpose while trying to reach out to my classmates. If you've ever had to be the new kid in the corner, eating lunch all by yourself, I'm sure you understand that being the new kid in the corner in a wheelchair could be all the more difficult. Our moves from Melbourne to Brisbane, to the United States, and back to Brisbane forced me to make adjustments that added to my challenges.

My new classmates often assumed I was mentally as well as physically disabled. They usually kept their distance unless I summoned the courage to strike up conversations in the lunchroom or in the hallway. The more I did this, the more they accepted that I really wasn't an alien dropped into their midst.

Sometimes, you see, God expects you to help out with the heavy lifting. You can wish. You can dream. You can hope. But you must

also act upon those wishes, those dreams, and those hopes. You have to stretch beyond where you are to reach where you want to be. I wanted people at my school to know that I was just like them on the inside, but I had to go outside my comfort zone to do that. Reaching out to them in this way brought out awesome rewards.

In time these discussions with classmates about coping in a world made for arms and legs led to invitations for me to speak to student groups, church youth groups, and other teen organizations. There's a wonderful truth that's so central to living. I find it extraordinary that schools do not teach it. The essential truth is this: Each of us has some gift—a talent, a skill, a craft, a knack—that gives us pleasure and engages us, and the path to our happiness often lies within that gift.

If you are still searching, still trying to figure out where you fit in and what fulfills you, I suggest you do a self-assessment. Sit down with a pen and paper or at a computer and make a list of your favorite activities. What do you find yourself drawn to do? What can you spend hours doing, losing track of time and place, and still want to do it again and again? Now, what is it that other people see in you? Do they compliment your talent for organization or your analytical skills? If you're not really sure what others see in you, ask your family and friends what they think you are best at.

These are the clues to finding your life's path, a path that lies secreted within you. We all arrive on this earth naked and full of promise. We come packed with presents waiting to be opened. When you find something that so fully engages you that you would do it for free all day every day, then you are on course. When you find someone who is willing to pay you for it, then you have a career.

At first my informal little talks to other young people were a way to reach out to them, to show that I was just like them. I was focused inward, grateful for a chance to share my world and to

make connections. I knew what speaking did for me, but it took a while to realize that what I had to say might have an impact on others.

FINDING A PATH

One day I gave a talk to a group of about three hundred teenage students, probably the biggest group I'd ever addressed. I was sharing my feelings and my faith when something wonderful happened. Now and then students or teachers would shed tears when I told them about challenges I'd faced, but during this particular talk a girl in the audience completely broke down sobbing. I wasn't sure what had happened—perhaps I'd triggered some terrible memory for her. I was amazed when she then summoned the courage to raise her hand to speak, despite her sadness and tears. Bravely, she asked if she could come forward and give me a hug. Wow! I was floored.

I invited her up, and she wiped away her tears as she walked to the front of the room. She then gave me this huge hug, one of the best of my life. By then nearly everyone in the room was teary-eyed, including me. But I lost it entirely when she whispered in my ear:

"Nobody has ever told me that I'm beautiful the way that I am. No one has ever said that they love me," she said. "You've changed my life, and you are a beautiful person too."

Up to that point, I was still constantly questioning my own worth. I'd thought of myself as someone who simply gave little talks as a way of reaching out to other teens. First of all she called me "beautiful" (which didn't hurt), but more than anything she gave me that first real inkling that my speaking could help others. This girl changed my perspective. *Maybe I really do have something to contribute*, I thought.

Experiences like that helped me realize that being "different" just might help me contribute something special to the world. I found that people were willing to listen to me speak because

they had only to look at me to know I'd faced and overcome my challenges. I did not lack credibility. Instinctively, people felt I might have something to say that could help them with their own problems.

God has used me to reach people in countless schools, churches, prisons, orphanages, hospitals, stadiums, and meeting halls. Even better, I've hugged thousands of people in face-to-face encounters that allow me to tell them how very precious they are. It's also my pleasure to assure them that He does have a plan for their lives. God took my unusual body and invested me with the ability to uplift hearts and encourage spirits, just as He says in the Bible: "For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Life can seem cruel, no doubt about it. Sometimes the bad breaks pile up and you just can't see a way out. You may not like the sound of that, but maybe you still aren't convinced that it can happen for you right now.

The fact is that as mere mortals, you and I have limited vision. We can't possibly see what lies ahead. That's both the bad news and the good news. My encouragement to you is that what lies ahead may be far better than anything you ever thought possible. But it's up to you to get over it, get up, and show up!

Whether your life is good and you want to make it better, or whether it's so bad you just want to stay in bed, the fact is that what happens from this very moment is up to you and your Maker. True, you can't control everything. Too often bad stuff happens to people no matter how good they are. It may not be fair that you weren't born into a life of ease, but if that is your reality, you have to work with it.

You may stumble. Others may doubt you. When I focused on

public speaking as a career path, even my parents questioned my decision.

"Don't you think that an accounting career, with your own practice, would be more appropriate for your circumstances and provide a better future?" my dad asked.

Yes, from most perspectives a career in accounting probably made more sense for me because I do have a talent for number-crunching. But from an early age I've had this absolute passion for sharing my faith and my hope of a better life. When you find your true purpose, passion follows. You absolutely live to pursue it.

If you are still searching for your path in life, know that it's okay to feel a little frustration. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Your yearning for more meaning is a sign that you are growing, moving beyond limitations, and developing your talents. It's healthy to look at where you are from time to time and to consider whether your actions and priorities are serving your highest purpose.

LIGHTING THE WAY

At fifteen years old I made my life right with God, asking Him for forgiveness and for direction. I asked Him to light my path of purpose. After being baptized four years later, I began speaking about my faith to others and knew I had found my calling. My career as a speaker and evangelist grew into a global ministry, and just a few years ago, quite unexpectedly, something happened that lifted my heart even higher and confirmed for me that I'd chosen the right path.

Nothing felt out of the ordinary on that Sunday morning when I rolled into a California church for a speaking engagement. Unlike most of my appearances, which happened in far-off corners of the world, this one was close to home. The Knott Avenue Christian Church in Anaheim is just down the road from my house.

As I entered in my wheelchair, the choir was beginning its open-

ing song, and the service was starting. I took a seat on a bench at the front as the congregation filled the large church, and I began to mentally prepare for my speech. This would be my first time talking to the people at Knott Avenue, and I didn't expect they knew much about me, so I was surprised to hear someone calling, "Nick! Nick!" over the singing voices.

I didn't recognize the voice and was not even sure that I was the "Nick" being summoned. But when I turned around, I saw an older gentleman waving directly at me.

"Nick! Over here!" he shouted again.

Now that he had my attention, he pointed to a younger man standing next to him in the packed church who appeared to be holding a child. There were so many people crowded together that at first I could see only a flash of the toddler's bright eyes, a thatch of shiny brown hair, and a big gap-toothed baby smile.

Then the man held the little boy higher above the crowd so I could see him more clearly. The full view sent a wave of feeling through me so intense that (if I'd had them) it would have made my knees buckle.

The bright-eyed boy was just like me. No arms. No legs. He even had a little left foot like mine. Though he was only nineteen months old, he was *exactly* like me. I understood why the two men were so eager for me to see him. As I later learned, this boy's name is Daniel Martinez, the son of Chris and Patty.

I was supposed to be preparing for my speech, but seeing Daniel—seeing myself in that child—triggered such a swirl of feelings that I couldn't think straight. I first felt compassion for him and his family. But then sharp memories and anguished emotions bombarded me as I was vividly brought back to how I had felt at about that age, and I realized that he must have been going through the same things.

I know how he feels, I thought. *I've already been through what he will experience.* Looking at Daniel, I felt this incredible con-

nection and a surge of empathy for him. Old feelings of insecurity, frustration, and loneliness flooded back, pulling the air out of my lungs. I felt like I was baking under the stage lights. I felt woozy. It wasn't a panic attack exactly; the vision of this boy in front of me touched the boy inside me.

Then I had a revelation that brought a sense of calm. *When I was growing up, I had no one who shared my situation who could help guide me, but now Daniel has someone. I can help him. My parents can help his parents. He doesn't have to go through what I went through. Perhaps I can spare him some of the pain that I had to endure.* Here I could clearly see that as difficult as it might be to live without limbs, my life still had value to be shared. There was nothing I lacked that would prevent me from making a difference in the world. My joy would be to encourage and inspire others. Even if I didn't change this planet as much as I would like, I'd still know with certainty that my life was not wasted. I was and am determined to make a contribution. You should believe in your power to do the same.

Life without meaning has no hope. Life without hope has no faith. If you find a way to contribute, you will find your meaning, and hope and faith will naturally follow and accompany you into your future.

My visit to the Knott Avenue church was intended to inspire and encourage others. Though seeing a boy so much like me floating over the crowd initially threw me off, he was a powerful confirmation of the difference I could make in the lives of many people, especially those facing major challenges, such as Daniel and his parents.

This encounter was so compelling that I had to share what I was seeing and feeling with the congregation, so I invited Daniel's parents to bring him up to the podium.

"There are no coincidences in life," I said. "Every breath, every

step is ordained by God. It was no coincidence that another boy with no arms and no legs is in this room."

As I said that, Daniel flashed a radiant smile, captivating everyone in the church. The congregation fell silent as his father held him upright and alongside me. The sight of us together, a young man and an infant with shared challenges, beaming at each other, set off weeping and sniffling in the pews around us.

I don't cry easily, but as everyone around me unleashed a flood of tears, I couldn't help but get swept up too. At home that night, I remember saying not a single word. I kept thinking of this child and how he must be feeling just what I'd felt at his age. I thought also of how he would feel as his awareness grew, as he encountered the cruelties and rejection I'd experienced. I was sad for him and the suffering he likely would endure, but then I was heartened because I knew my parents and I could ease his burden and even light hope in his heart. I couldn't wait to tell my parents because I knew they would be eager to meet this boy and to give him and his parents hope. My mum and dad had been through so much and they'd had no one to guide them. I knew they would be grateful for the opportunity to help this family.

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