

How I Found Opportunity in Adversity

The last thing I remember from April 23, 2011 was closing the garage door. After that, it felt like a thick blanket of fog had settled over me. I couldn't wake up or make any sense of what had just happened to me.

Two days later, there I was, in ICU being told what happened and why I had tubes hook up all over my body and couldn't move. I was in shock disbelief.

April 23rd was a sunny Saturday and the day we chose to take our first ride of the season. My wife and I loved summer and cruising on our Honda Shadow 750 motorcycle. That morning, we put on our leathers and headed off down the highway.

Then, out of nowhere, a car ran a stop sign and pulled out right in front of us. All I could do was lay the bike down and run right into the car. That is what I was told probably happened.

I landed head first under the car while my wife ended up on the shoulder. I broke my leg in two places, broke my arm, and sustained life-threatening internal injuries.

That Saturday afternoon, we were airlifted to the trauma hospital, where a team of doctors and nurses did what they do best, and kept me alive with screws, staples, and several units of blood.

Before the bike went down, life was good. I was running marathons. Working internationally. Making a difference. Expanding in my impact. On the move!

My purpose was strong. I was enjoying my life.

When the storm hit and I woke up, I didn't know what to think. What I did have was the ability to breathe, and a desire to get through this – somehow.

The problem was, I was extremely messed up. My femur had been exposed to the air out there on the country highway, and I had picked up a rare but rugged bacteria found on farms.

After one week, the infection came to the surface and I was wheeled back into Operating room for two more surgeries.

As I began my recovery journey, I had a strong belief I would conquer this challenge and overcome this adversity. I believed I would healed up in no time. After all, I was strong and was in peak physical condition. I had good medical care and they knew what they were doing.

I believed I would be back to work by September. Back running by October. Back to normal by November. But reality would prove otherwise.

Four months in to my recovery, the infection resurfaced and I needed more surgery. It was then when I hit the bottom emotionally -- after that 4th surgery.

I couldn't go back to work, I wasn't going to walk any time soon, and I had more surgeries in my future.

More than once I wanted this journey of suffering to end. "Would the treatment work? Would I end up losing my leg?" Not even the doctor could say for sure.

So there, sitting on my black recliner, I hit the darkest time of my recovery. Hope for a speedy recovery had faded and I wasn't seeing any opportunity in my adversity. I was in pain, depressed and felt very alone.

The oxy eased my physical pain but didn't touch the emotional and psychological pain. I was desperate. I said out loud, "What on earth am I suppose to do now? I'm stuck here... for what?"

I struggled for several hours – waiting and wondering. Then, ever so slowly, a shift started to happen in my mind and heart. Somewhere deep inside I saw a glimmer of hope – the door of opportunity started to open just a crack.

I started to believe that I could find meaning in this mess. I started to see what I could do from a recliner. I started to imagine and believe things would get better.

I realized that I didn't need to let my circumstances limit my success.

I chose to focus on the things I had control over and define my purpose in a way that I could use. I decided to believe things would get better.

With this purpose and a plan to live that out, hope emerged and changed everything. The door of opportunity opened and not only did I begin to change, it led to me having greater impact on others.

This transformation wasn't automatic or easy but when I learned to step into this season of suffering with purpose, it gave me the traction I needed. **You'd be surprised how much you can get done from a recliner!**

I sharpened my writing skills, took online courses, learned to self-publish and became an author. I started to see others – the home care workers, nurses, neighbors, people I would meet at the cast clinic, as **people I could inspire and help.**

I learned another powerful lesson. Having a renewed purpose and positive attitude wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed a way to cope with the grind of this day-in-day-out; week-in-week-out recovery journey. I believed I'd get through but how – when it kept going on for what seemed like forever!

One of the ways I took each day as it came was to get myself out of bed, painstakingly make and eat my breakfast, then hobble over to my recliner in my walker and write out, on a 3X5 card, the 6 things I was going to do that day.

Then I'd get at it. It helped me tune out the pain and focus on what I could control.

I had a purpose and a plan to make each day count – regardless of the circumstances. I'd take my pain medication, get in my recliner and get to work. I would focus on the things I could control & leave the uncontrollable for someone else to worry about.

Hours would go by and I'd be lost in meaningful activity. I napped often but my spirit was strong as I lived one baby step at a time. I allowed this major setback to be a catalyst for change and transformation.

Viktor Frankl was right, “Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.” Having a purpose and a daily plan infused with optimism opened the door to opportunity, transformation, and the ability to change things for the better.

But there was something else I needed to throw open the door of opportunity even wider – I needed the strength of a community.

I get it. People who suffer sometimes just want to be left alone. But had I not been open to those who were there to help, I would have lost hope and become overwhelmed, carrying this load by myself.

It started the moment I woke up in the hospital. My family and friends were there. But I quickly learned that I needed to let them in. Let them get close. When I did let the right people in, with that came healing and help.

I also knew I needed to guard against isolation – especially while at home for days at a time. I needed to take the initiative and create community. I needed people. I’d hobble down the stairs, get on my red scooter and head out into the neighborhood.

I instantly started to feel better as I pushed the lever on my scooter and rode down the sidewalk in search of someone to talk to combined with a flower to smell or some scenery to enjoy. One person stands out. He also was on a scooter and struggle with serious health challenges – and rode a much nicer scooter than mine.

We shared surgery stories and felt each others’ struggle. I’d say goodbye and return home, energized, and ready for some more recliner time. That ride and that friendship helped me take my eyes off myself and off the pity party I was tempted to have all alone.

This replenishing community was transformative.

10 surgeries later, I was transformed, not because of what happened but because of what happened in me while on that journey. The renewed purpose, realistic optimism, and replenishing community that kept me going.

The theme of this conference is revolution and how to create change in our community. Lasting change starts in us and involves being able to take the setbacks we experience and not waste them.

Learning to lean into setbacks, storms, losses and mine the gold we find there is so important.

We are transformed when we find a purpose that is big enough to give us a reason to get up in the morning, even when the wind is blowing and we’re experiencing challenging weather.

We are transformed when we can adjust our sails to that wind and believe we’ll get through some how but develop a day-to-day plan to deal with the incredible hard work we have to put in to actually get through.

We are also transformed when we surround ourselves with people who can walk with us. There’s wisdom in the words, “If you want to run fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.” To go the distance, we need others to travel with us.

We can't control what happens to us but we can control our response. The challenge is to see opportunity in your adversity and experience internal transformation and have it spill over onto others.

To be honest, I didn't want this traumatic to happen, didn't enjoy it, or always know what to do with it.

But I did learn to see my adversity, not as an unwelcomed interruption to life but as something that could be used to change me for the better. Leaning into adversity and growing through it transforms your character and gives you an even greater opportunity to help people.

Adversity is a doorway into the amazing room of opportunity. **Join me in walking through that door and just watch what happens.**