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FIRST PERSON

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Realizing What You're Made Of

by Glenn E. Mangurian

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Those who have survived a traumatic, life-altering event often convey a curious sentiment: They wouldn't have it any other way. Some people emerge from adversity—whether a career crisis or a devastating breakup or a frightening diagnosis—not just changed but stronger and more content. They seem to have found new peace and even an optimism that they didn't have before. It's tempting to dismiss this sort of response as making the best of a bad situation. Not long ago, I would have done so, too.

On May 26, 2001, I suffered an unprovoked disc rupture that pressed against my spinal cord, leaving the lower half of my body permanently paralyzed. I had two lengthy operations and spent two months of my life in a Boston rehabilitation hospital and four years in physical therapy. It was the kind of experience that nobody can anticipate. I was healthy and secure in my career as a management consultant, and in an instant, my life was utterly transformed and filled with uncertainty. At first, I was mostly frightened and in serious pain. Then, I felt anger and sadness at losing the use of my legs. Compounding those emotions was the recognition that it wasn't just my own life that would be severely altered: I had a wife and two children, whose lives would change forever and who would have to give up some of their own dreams.

Becoming paralyzed is without question the worst thing that has ever happened to me. I've had some very dark days, and life is a constant struggle. But at the same time, the experience has allowed me to take stock of all that I have, rediscover some of the neglected parts of my life, and cut through the clutter to focus on what really matters. Over the course of my hospital stay, I found the will to accept that my old life was gone and decided that I would create a new and equally meaningful one, drawing on all my experiences and a caring community of family and friends. Today, I've not just returned to consulting; I've also engaged in endeavors that wouldn't have occurred to me before, such as advocating for stem cell research.

It's a cliché to say that what doesn't kill you

makes you stronger, and most people can accept that it's generally true. But more content? That's harder to explain. In my case, in spite of the frustrations of being in a wheelchair, I can honestly say that my life is good and that I am more at peace than I was before. How can that be? I know I was lucky that my injury didn't kill me and that I had resources to draw on, but I also believe that we are born with a renewable capacity for resilience—a built-in power to heal, regenerate, and grow beyond our known limits.

Resilience is one of the key qualities desired in business leaders today, but many people confuse it with toughness. Toughness is an aspect of resilience, certainly, as it enables people to separate emotion from the negative consequences of difficult choices. It can be an advantage in business, but only to a point. That's because it can create an armor that deflects emotion, and it can cut you off from many of the resources needed to bounce back—notably, the people around you. Resilience, by contrast, is not about deflecting challenges but about absorbing them and rebounding stronger than before. Life-changing experiences are not something you can plan for, which is often difficult for businesspeople to accept; executives love to anticipate various scenarios and prepare their responses in advance. Instead, they tend to come out of the blue, when it's too late to prepare. However, you can live your life in a way that allows you to accept setbacks as they occur, move on, and create new possibilities.

Since my injury, I've had the opportunity to explore resilience from my own standpoint as well as through numerous conversations with leaders and others who have been through life-altering events. My hope is that by sharing my story I can show people that they can create a new future after a crisis hits. As for those who are taking on the challenges of everyday life, perhaps they can look to some of the lessons I've learned for insights into how they might prepare for the worst.

Choose to Go Forward

Accepting adversity and moving on isn't easy and can take time. You don't have to like or somehow justify what's happened. You just have to decide that you can live with it. Pretty early on, I decided that I could live without the use of my legs, which was just as well, because I couldn't change the past. Better to focus on things over which I did have some control—for example, how would I move on and live a full life?

Everyone I know who's been through a major crisis can remember the exact moment that he or she chose to accept what had happened and to go forward. People remember where they were, what they were wearing, whom they were with, what the weather was like—every detail. For me, the defining moment came after those first few terribly bleak weeks in the hospital. I was lying in my bed, looking out the window, and I told myself that I still had a lot to offer. Although I was physically limited, my brain still worked. Because I had played various leadership roles before my injury, maybe my future could entail leading by example—that is, demonstrating the ability to bounce back after adversity. I even thought about writing an article about my experience for *Harvard Business Review*. That this particular detail came to pass is not what is important; what matters is that it was a positive and concrete image representing what could be part of my new future, even if I hadn't yet imagined how I would get there.

The primary reason I was able to let go of the past without regrets was that an outpouring of support from family and friends showed me that my old life had already proved to be of value and made a difference. All of us have been there for a family member, a friend, a colleague, or even an acquaintance in a time of need. We touch people's lives, but we don't necessarily realize how much. It's easy to underestimate the impact we have. But people notice and remember. In my first couple of months in the hospital, I received a few hundred cards, more than half of which came from people I had gotten to know through my 20 years of consulting work at CSC Index. The letters were humbling and rewarding. None of them simply expressed regret and support. Everyone wrote paragraphs, recounting our times together and instances of my helping them in some way—simple acts of kindness that became lasting memories for them. I had long forgotten most of these incidents. The letters recalled deeply personal conversations, some of which dated back a decade or more. One person wrote about the time he and I had been stranded together in Minnesota on business while he'd been going through a divorce; he said I had been a source of comfort to him. An-

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other wrote that he would never forget my flying to Chicago to meet him for dinner after he was fired from his job of 20 years.

Reading those letters felt something like being present for my own eulogy. Few people get to "listen in" the way I did. I was moved, of course—but more important, it was liberating knowing that I had made a difference in others' lives and that I no longer had that to prove. And happily, I had the opportunity to bring all those experiences and relationships with me into a new life.

There is no way I could have overcome the trauma and found hope without a caring community. To survive, you need at least one true believer, someone who will have faith in your ability to recover even when you lose it yourself. I was lucky enough to have my children and my wife, whose heroics I won't detail here, because that would be a book in itself. Not everybody has strong family ties, though, and crisis does put a strain on them, particularly if they are tenuous from the start. The letters I received served as a reminder that you can create a caring community in any context, even at work. People will care about you if you authentically care about them.

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Seek Perspective

When you undergo a sudden loss, your routine is interrupted, and your mind becomes preoccupied with trying to make sense of what happened. In the early days, I had a lot of time to think, and I pondered the inequities of life, which I had just experienced firsthand. Why did this happen? Why me? What could I have done to prevent this? Whom can I blame?

I was also consumed by questions about the future. Are we going to be able to continue living in our house? Will we be able to send the kids to college? What about my responsibilities at home? Will I be able to work? How much will I be able to earn? At times, my emotions distorted my sense of reality. I briefly imagined myself becoming homeless, forced to sell pencils from a tin cup on the corner.

In the end, I came to realize it's fruitless to wish you could change the past, and it's overwhelming to obsess about the future. I also came to understand that "Why me?" is a natural question but one that can't be answered. Such things can happen to anybody. So I decided to put my energy into the present: getting better. That's where I think my work experience helped me gain perspective, because I had guided executives through some pretty dramatic organizational changes. At times I saw experienced, capable people lose their jobs in the process. I saw what they went through, and I saw them rebound.

During my hospital stay, I was vividly reminded that there are always people who are worse off. I was in a rehabilitation ward with 14 other patients. Four were teenagers. When their parents came to visit, you could see the grief on their faces. One patient was a 17-year-old girl who had lost the use of her arms and legs after a diving accident. I reflected: I'm 52 years old. I've had a great career. I've been married for 20 years to a loving wife, and we have two wonderful children. Why should I feel sorry for myself?

Re-Create Your Identity

A crisis challenges your sense of identity. If you're fired, you question your professional abilities. If a loved one dies, you lose a defining relationship. A physical crisis like mine robs you of some of the basic elements of independence. One of my first tasks in building my new life was reclaiming my dignity and identity.

This is something I struggled with from day one in the hospital. I was so accustomed to my independence that it was hard for me to adjust to needing help from others—I wanted to be able to do things on my own schedule rather than at others' convenience. I certainly didn't want to become an obligation or burden to my family. I had a fleeting and degrading image of myself as the new family pet. ("Who's going to walk the dog? I did it last night; it's your turn.") It was an absurd image, but it was a visceral, emotional reaction to my diminished physical capacity.

Adding to my frustration was overhearing people in white coats conferring about me in low tones as though I were a case study. Truth be told, after an entire career spent analyzing and talking about other people and organizations, I realized I *was* a case study. So I began to assert myself by joining the conversations and putting in my two cents, even contributing ideas about how the hospital could be run better. It was my way of saying, "I'm not just a body. I have a point of view, something to bring to the table."

Despite my optimism and determination, my first experiences in public were difficult.

Most people have limited contact with the physically disabled. To some, I stand out—I feel as though a wheelchair puts a spotlight on me. But I can be easily overlooked as well. For one thing, I'm not at eye level with my peers unless they're sitting down. For another, many people have preconceived notions about those of us in wheelchairs that go beyond our physical limitations. I've learned to counterbalance my physical disadvantages by being more outgoing and assertive than I was before. I now initiate conversations all the time. I want to demonstrate that I still have something of value to offer. To this day, my energy sometimes takes others by surprise; it's hard for them to reconcile what they expect with what they see and hear.

The transition was uncomfortable at first. I had come to terms with the fact that I wouldn't be returning to my old life, but I didn't yet know who I was becoming. Still, being in between the two places was freeing. I refused to put limits on myself, even in ways I might have in the past.

The new me is driven and fearless—sometimes I feel invincible. When I see an opportunity to participate, I don't ask for permission; I just jump right in. I say to myself, "What's the worst that could happen? I've already discovered a deep bottom, and I'm OK."

Raise the Bar

I've always had an inclination to aim high. I was one of the first in my family to attend college, which opened doors previously unknown to me. Then, at CSC Index, our consulting practice constantly pushed clients to achieve ever more aggressive goals, and I witnessed some pretty astonishing results. So during my rehabilitation, I decided that I wouldn't compromise my ambitions. Instead, I would raise the bar: If I can survive this injury, what else can I do? My first victory was to survive; now I would find a new way to lead.

When I got out of the hospital, I moved as quickly as I could to reestablish myself as a professional. With 30 years of consulting experience under my belt, I knew I could still contribute something of use. It would have to be on new terms, though; I would have to take into account my physical limitations. About 18 months earlier, I had left my old company and, with a partner, launched a new firm. I'd been largely responsible for marketing, a role that requires a lot of hustle, especially at a start-up. After the injury, I didn't have the stamina to jump right back in, so my partner and I decided to put my involvement in that company on the back burner. What to do instead?

Once again, the network I had developed in my previous life proved invaluable. I made my first significant post-injury public appearance

Wisdom from Adversity

A traumatic event forces you to rethink your life and your beliefs. Since my injury, I've spoken with numerous people who have gone through crises, and certain themes have repeatedly come up. Some are truisms that we've known since childhood, but they don't really take root until you face a serious challenge to your identity. Below, I've summarized a few of the lessons I've learned.

You can't know what will happen tomorrow—and it's better that way. If we knew all the good and bad things in store for us, we would probably focus on preventing the bad. It's far more rewarding to engage with the present.

You can't control what happens, just how you respond. Successful people are accustomed to being in control, but adversity strikes unannounced. The only way to influence the outcome is by focusing on the things you have the power to control: the choices you make in response to life's events.

Adversity distorts reality but crystallizes the truth. It reinforces your fears but also puts an emphasis on what matters right now. Adversity also sheds light on your beliefs: It shows you what is important to you, who your friends are, what you are capable of, and what your true goals and ambitions are.

Loss amplifies the value of what remains. It pushes you (and may force you) to take stock of what you have, allowing you to liberate yourself from petty or irrelevant matters and celebrate your assets.

It's easier to create new dreams than to cling to broken ones. Adversity alters relationships and may even ruin them. It destroys some dreams and renders others unlikely. Certain things will be irrevocably lost, and pretending otherwise is foolish. But adversity also provides an opportunity to housecleaning—to pack old dreams away and make room for new ones.

Your happiness is more important than righting injustices. Anger is a normal response to a traumatic event, but attempting to assign blame or seek justice is draining and usually futile. It's more fruitful to release the anger and move forward with your life.

that September, at a reunion of CSC Index alumni. The person hosting the event invited me to say something, and I was happy to do so. The group got extremely quiet, and I asked everybody to sit down—which they did, mostly on the floor. I had a chance to tell everyone there how much their support had meant to me, and because they were sitting, I didn't have to look up to see their faces. It was very moving for me.

Nine months after my injury, I held two brainstorming sessions, each including eight or nine people I trusted, with one of them acting as a facilitator. The goal was to help me shape my thinking about what I could do professionally now. We began with the idea that my medical condition could be a platform that would give me access to new people and enhanced credibility in delivering a message about achievement. I didn't want to limit myself to consulting on crisis but hoped to use my experience to help others fulfill their ambitions despite perceived constraints. I also wanted to consider more traditional business opportunities. We came up with a variety of possibilities ranging from advising hospitals on how to help patients reenter the world to coaching executives to raise the level of ambition for themselves and their teams, looking at each idea through the lenses of personal interest and enrichment, feasibility, and income potential.

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About six months later, a former colleague called me to join a consulting project he had taken on, helping a group of senior executives launch a firm aimed at the baby boomer demographic. The work was interesting, but what mattered most to me was reengaging in the world of business. A full workday was physically exhausting at first, and just getting there—driving into downtown Boston, finding a place to park, and rolling to the office—was very stressful. But it was exhilarating to be back at work. I told myself, "I can still do this." Since then, I've discovered many causes to which I can contribute my time and expertise. I developed an interest in the Christopher Reeve Foundation, so I got in touch with its directors. I've now done a few projects with the foundation, most recently acting as the local host of a worldwide summit for its spinal cord researchers. I also testified on behalf of stem cell research at a legislative hearing at the Massachusetts State House—and was surprised to find myself on the news that night and on the front page of the newspaper the next morning. I'm giving back to my community, as well. I sit on the boards of several not-for-profits, and I'm the executive-in-residence at the University of Massachusetts, my alma mater. Not long before my injury, I'd launched an executive breakfast program, a forum for interviewing accomplished alumni. My ties to the university were identified at the early brainstorming sessions as an important asset I should hold on to; I've missed only one breakfast, which was held while I was in the hospital. Today, the breakfast group has grown from 250 members to 1,800 since my injury. The injury has enriched my management consulting practice, too, as I can combine my recent experience with my business background to advise leaders who are facing adversity in their personal lives or at their organizations. In my new life, I am able to use all of my assets, including my paralysis, to be a new kind of leader.

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Many of us underestimate our ability to withstand crisis. I certainly did. If you had asked me before my injury how I would handle being paralyzed, I would have said something to the effect of "You might as well put me in a corner and shoot me." I quickly changed my mind about that. Not that I like being in a wheelchair—I struggle every day with the additional limits and challenges that paralysis has imposed upon me.

But rather than feel sorry for myself, I've chosen to use what I accomplished in my previous life as a foundation for building a second life full of purpose and possibilities, some of which only became visible thanks to my injury. My new life's a work in progress, and I have to re-create parts of myself every day. I know that this life is full of new adventures, though, even if I don't know what all of them are yet. I may experience them sitting down, but in a way I am standing taller than ever.

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