

On Fire: The 7 Choices to Ignite a Radically Inspired Life

By John O'Leary

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In the bestselling tradition of Brene Brown's *Daring Greatly* and Nick Vujicic's *Life Without Limits* comes a rousing 7-step plan for living a life on fire, filled with hope and possibility—from an inspirational speaker who survived a near-fatal fire at the age of nine and now runs a successful business inspiring people all around the world.

When John O'Leary was nine years old, he was almost killed in a devastating house fire. With burns on one hundred percent of his body, O'Leary mustered an almost unimaginable amount of inner strength just to survive the ordeal. The insights he gained through this experience and the heroes who stepped into his life to help him through the journey—his family, the medical staff, and total strangers—changed his life. Now he is committed to living life to the fullest and inspiring others to do the same.

An incredible and emotionally honest account of triumph over tragedy, *On Fire* contains O'Leary's reflections on being that little boy, the life-giving choices made then, and the resulting lessons he learned. O'Leary very clearly shares that without the right people providing the right guidance, at the right time, he never would have made it through those five months in the hospital, let alone the years that followed as he struggled to regain mobility, embrace his story, and ignite clarity of his life's purpose.

On Fire encourages us to seize the power to choose our path and transform our lives from mundane to extraordinary. Once we stop thinking solely on the big moments in our lives, we can begin to focus on those smaller opportunities that tend to pass us by. These are the events—the inflection points in our lives—that can determine how we feel about life now, where we are headed in the future, and how many lives we can impact along the way. We can't always choose the path we walk, but we can choose how we walk it. Empowering, inspiring, remarkably honest, and heartfelt, O'Leary's strength and incredible spirit shine through on every page.

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Editorial Review

Review
My company gets the chance to hear from some of the country's best speakers, and my friend John O'Leary is one of the best we've ever had. His incredible story of persistence, passion, and intense focus left a mark on my team that we we're still talking about more than a year later. Don't miss John's message—he will change your life! (Dave Ramsey, New York Times best-selling author and nationally syndicated radio show host)

On Fire, by John O'Leary, celebrates the beauty of LIFE! Through courageously sharing his own pain and devastating loss, O'Leary reveals how crucial it is for us to keep moving forward after a setback or trial—still hope, still dream, still see the possibilities before us. Eventually we must all make the choice to truly live or just exist. A magnificent and inspiring read! (Sean Covey, author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens and The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make)

I can count on one hand the number of books I've read that created an urgency to push away my fears and past mistakes to step fully into life. Drawn in by John's incredible story and conversational writing style, On Fire helped me see life's trials as steppingstones to an enhanced version of me. John's powerful truths enabled me to stop seeing what I can't do and see the opportunities still available. On Fire offers a redemptive invitation to all, leading us to believe that no matter how many times we've fall down, no matter how dismal the current situation, the best is yet to come. (Rachel Macy Stafford, New York Times bestselling author of Hands Free Life)

John O'Leary is truly one of the most amazing humans on theplanet. His story will not only inspire you but give you practical ideas forhow to enjoy your life more, appreciate all that you have, and push you toachieve all that you are capable of doing. (Rory Vaden, Cofounder of Southwestern Consulting and New York Times bestselling author of Take the Stairs)

There a rare handful of people in the world whose life story will change you forever. John O'Leary is one of these people. The powerful life lessons in this book will forever inspire you to live, lead and love differently. (Tommy Spaudling, New York Times bestselling author of The Heart-Led Leader and It's Not Just Who You Know)

John is the embodiment of someone who made a powerful choice to not be defined by his challenges. This book is a reminder to us all that no matter what happens in life, we deserve and are capable of discovering our passion, pursuing our dreams and making a meaningful impact on the world. (Christine Hassler, author of Expectation Hangover)

Fast-paced, emotional and surprisingly funny, *On Fire* is an amazing reminder that we might not be able to choose the path we walk in life, but we can always choose the manner in which we walk it. (Joe Buck, Fox Sports)

This is a book about coming alive -- about practicing courage and fully showing up at home, work, and with the people we love. John is a storyteller, change-maker, and cage-rattler. Reading this book is like having a good friend look you square in the eye and say, 'The time to be brave is now.' (Brené Brown, Ph.D., LMSW, author of the #1 New York Times bestsellers Daring Greatly and Rising Strong)

If you haven’t heard John O’Leary speak from the platform of a sold out arena, you’re missing out on an incredible message. But you’re in luck! John has put his inspirational and life-changing message into this brilliant book. His story and words of wisdom will not only encourage you, they will ignite a passion to live your life to the fullest. (Les Parrott, Ph.D. #1 New York Times best-selling author of You're Stronger Than You Think)

About the Author
John O’Leary shares his expertise on overcoming adversity and how to live inspired with more than 50,000 people at more than 120 live events each year around the world. In 2006, he was inducted into the Energizer “Keep Going” Hall of Fame. He was selected as Saint Louis University young alumni of the year in 2008, was voted “Speaker of the Year” for Vistage International, and was recently chosen as one of the Top Ten “Most Interesting People” in Saint Louis, Missouri. He is also a lifestyle contributor for ParadeMagazine.com. He considers his greatest success to be his marriage to Beth, their four young children, and his relationships with friends and family.

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On Fire

1

DO YOU WANT TO DIE?

Life is not about avoiding death; it’s about choosing to really live.

The nurses seem frantic.

They keep telling me everything is okay. That I’m going to be fine. They say they’ll stay with me and there is nothing to worry about.

So why are they racing around me?

Why do they seem panicked?

Why do they continue to poke me and stick me and whisper about me?

I watch them buzzing around me.

Then I look down at my body; it doesn’t look like me.

I look at my hands, but they don’t look like my hands. I look at the remnants of my green sweat suit and tennis shoes; they’ve become one with my arms and legs.

The pain is intense.

The fire this morning changed everything.

Everything.

A nurse says again that it’s going to be okay. I know she’s wrong.

I really messed up today. Today, I blew up my parents’ garage.

I didn’t mean to.

It wasn’t even my fault, really.

It’s just that earlier this week, I watched some older kids in my neighborhood playing with fire. They dripped a little gasoline on the sidewalk, stood back, and then one of the big kids from seventh grade threw a match on top.

The puddle sparked to life.

It was amazing!

I figured if they could do it and get away with it, so could I.

So this morning, with Mom and Dad out of the house, I went into the garage. I lit a small piece of cardboard on fire, walked over to the five-gallon barrel of gasoline, and tilted it to pour a little gasoline on the piece of cardboard.

Just like the older boys, I wanted to make the flame dance.

But the big red barrel was too heavy to lift.

So I set the burning piece of cardboard on the concrete garage floor.

I knelt down, bear-hugged the can, and carefully tilted it toward the flame.

I waited for the liquid to come out.

It never did.

What I remember next was a big boom. The explosion launched me against the wall on the far side of the garage.

My ears rang.

My body hurt.

My clothes were drenched in gasoline.

I was on fire.

I was on fire!

I felt dizzy. Everything around me was ablaze. The only way I could get out of the garage was to go back through the flames.

Yes, I remembered being taught to stop-drop-and-roll.

But I was so scared.

I was in so much pain.

I needed someone to save me.

So I just ran.

I ran through the flames.

I ran up two steps and opened the door to the house. I ran struggling and screaming into the house. Running around downstairs, not sure what else to do. Yelling for someone, anyone, to help me.

I stood in the front hall, screaming.

I was still on fire.

Two of my sisters came down the stairs. They looked at me, covered their faces, and screamed in horror.

Then I saw my older brother, Jim. He raced toward me. He picked up our front doormat and started hitting me with it. He just kept swinging that mat into me. Then he tackled me to the ground, wrapped me in the rug, and carried me outside.

The fire was out.

But the damage was done.

A few minutes later the ambulance came hurtling down the street.

I tried to run to it, but my legs would barely move. So I hobbled. Naked. My skin and clothes had been burned off.

I was so hoping no one would see me.

I was embarrassed. I was scared. I was cold.

I just wanted to get inside.

I climbed in the ambulance and Jim was right behind me, ready to hop in. “Sorry, you can’t come,” the paramedic said as he shut one of the doors.

Jim tried to argue with him, he explained we were brothers, but the man just said, “I am sorry.” And pulled the other door shut.

The ambulance pulled away. Through the back window I watched my brother and two sisters standing in the front yard, smoke rising behind them.

We drove away.

That all happened this morning.

Now I'm here in some emergency room.

Everything has changed.

I feel desperately alone.

And then, I hear a voice in the hallway.

Mom!

Finally!

She always makes everything better. I know she can fix this.

I hear her footsteps.

I see the curtain surrounding me pulled back.

She comes right over to my side, takes my burned hand in hers, gently pats my bald, raw head.

"Hi, baby," she says, a smile on her face.

I look at my mom. Tears that I didn't even realize I was holding back begin falling down my cheeks. "Mommy," I say, my voice shaking in fear. "Am I going to die?"

I know it's bad. And I so much want her warm encouragement. I want her to brush my fears away. I want to be cuddled and comforted with hope and reassurance. I want her to kiss it all away as only Mom can.

I wait for the promise that she'll take care of everything. She always does.

She always does.

Mom clasps my hand gently in hers.

She looks into my eyes.

Gathers her thoughts.

And asks, "John, do you want to die? It's your choice, not mine."

Three summers before the fire I was at a neighborhood swimming pool.

It was the kind of Midwest, July afternoon perfect for swimming. High humidity. Brutal heat. Blazing sun. Absolutely perfect!

The water was packed with kids and the deck jammed with parents. I was a couple of weeks from turning seven, was just learning how to swim, and loved my newfound independence. That's right, no more floaties for me!

But overconfidence can be deadly.

It caused me to get too close to the deep-end edge. My head was bobbing just above water as I bounced along the bottom of the pool, and then all of a sudden, I slid as if I were on ice. The gentle-sloping floor dropped off rapidly into the deep end of the pool. Nothing was underneath my feet. I lost my footing. I was sinking.

I slid all the way to the bottom. I didn't even try to move my arms or kick my legs. I'm not sure if I knew it was hopeless to try or if I knew someone would come for me. But I just sat there on the bottom of the pool.

Looking up.

Waiting.

Hoping.

Expecting.

Knowing.

Then the water broke open above me and a person quickly grabbed me, brought me to the surface, pulled me to the side of the pool, and I was out of the water. I looked up to see my savior, squinting my eyes in the sun.

It was my mom.

She'd jumped in fully clothed and pulled me out of the water.

She saved my life that day.

She just dried me off, wrapped herself with the towel, got me a Popsicle, took off her waterlogged watch, and moved on. She showed me that day and on innumerable other occasions she would be there for me. She would save me. I just had to reach out my hand to her.

So on the day I was burned, as she held my hand, and I asked if I was going to be okay, I already knew what she would do and the words she would speak.

"Baby, you are fine. We'll get you home today. If you are brave I'll get you a milk shake on the way home. All you need to think about right now is if you want chocolate or vanilla."

I wanted the milk shake promise!

Instead, I got this: "John, do you want to die? It's your choice, not mine."

Hold up. WHAT?

What kind of question is that to ask a scared little boy in an emergency room!?

SINK OR SWIM

You may be thinking that my mom was the coldest, most callous parent of all time.

I'm not going to argue with you on that point.

I mean, who doesn't offer his or her little boy, dying in a hospital bed, some love and encouragement? What kind of woman could be so absolutely indifferent and standoffish? Didn't she know that this poor little fella just wanted a little hope?

But what was it that I needed?

Because in retrospect, that was exactly what she delivered.

I remember looking up at her and responding, "I do not want to die. I want to live."

She answered, "Then, John, you need to fight like you've never fought before. You need to take the hand of God, and you need to walk this journey with Him. Race forward with everything you have. Daddy and I will be with you every step of the way. But, John, you listen to me: you need to fight for it."

You need to fight for it.

Before that day, I was a typical nine-year-old kid. I shirked responsibility and seldom owned my actions, and even less frequently the resulting effects. I cleaned my room because I had to. I did homework because they made me. I went to church because they told me to.

My parents were in charge.

I followed.

They gave me everything I needed and I happily accepted all of it. I was a bit . . . entitled.

I was the fourth born to parents who loved one another. They also adored all six of their kids.

I lived in a beautiful house.

I had a father who worked, a mother who stayed home.

I lived in a safe neighborhood.

Went to a great school.

We had church on Sundays, blueberry pancakes afterward, and fried chicken at Grandma's in the evening.

We even owned a golden retriever.

We had it all.

Life was perfect.

And then life changed.

It always does.

When life changes in this way, we can beg and plead to go back to the way things were. Feeling entitled to that reality. Waiting for someone to wave the magic wand and put things back to normal; back to the way life was.

Or we can step up, recognize that it is time to move forward from here, and embrace total accountability and ownership over our lives.

Own your life, John.

Fight for it.

It's your choice.

Not mine.

Mom's response demanded ownership. No more entitlement, no more shirking responsibility. She gave me truth.

Reflecting on it today, I see Mom's question was an inflection point—a moment in time that changes everything that follows.

That day, when it mattered most, I was teetering on the brink of death. Mom courageously walked to the edge of the cliff and looked over it with me. It wouldn't take much for me to give up, let go, and fall down into the abyss.

But there was an alternative path, a way forward. She pointed away from the cliff. In the other direction was a huge mountain. It looked impossible to climb. But she said that I could do it. That I could choose to turn away from the edge and take small, shuffling steps, up the hill, back to life.

We all have that choice. We choose to vibrantly go about life, soak it up, embrace it, and celebrate it, or we choose not to. No one else can make this decision for us.

We get one life.

We either choose to live.

Or we choose to die.

DO YOU WANT TO DIE?

By all accounts, I should not have survived the fire.

After enduring several minutes engulfed in flames, I was burned on essentially 100 percent of my body.

Eighty-seven percent of my burns were third-degree.

The worst kind.

These burns were deep. They seared through the three layers of skin, through the muscle, and even all the way to the bone in places.

Burned skin will never grow back without donor skin. And, ironically, donor skin must come from the recipient's body. Since all of my skin was burned, the only donor site that could be harvested was from the least badly burned part of my body, my scalp. It was a near impossible task.

In addition, my lungs were damaged by smoke inhalation. Controlling the core temperature of my body was difficult with no skin. Infections were likely.

Things were extraordinarily dire.

Today the mortality rate for burn patients is calculated by taking the percentage of the body burned and adding the age of the patient. So for me, almost three decades before many advances in burn treatment, the math worked like this: 100 percent of the body burned plus nine years of age equals absolutely no chance of survival.

The fire was a death sentence.

My mom didn't know all of this when she walked into the hospital room that morning. She didn't know much about how the fire started, what burn treatment consisted of, or what was to come next.

She didn't know at that moment the coming agony of going to bed nightly wondering if her little boy would be alive when the next day arrived. She never imagined pacing the hospital floors at night, crying in lonely, darkened corners of the halls, or enduring the hours of agonized waiting through dozens of surgeries with her son's life hanging in the balance.

All she knew—all we knew—was the fight was on.

Now, I feel obligated to tell you a secret and share some good news before we go on.

Spoiler alert: Don't read the next sentence if you want to be surprised by the end of the book.

The boy lives.

Yep, while those moments I described in the hospital are heartbreaking, every parent's worst nightmare, this book has a happy ending. Obviously, or you wouldn't be reading these words!

But it wasn't by accident.

I believe in the power of prayer. And I know thousands of prayers were offered up for me that night, and every day for the next five months I spent in the hospital. But I also believe that prayer is not so much intended to change God, but to inform and inspire the next steps of the individuals offering the prayer.

I survived because of the actions and encouragement of remarkable people by my side every step of the way,

pushing me to fight, imploring me to believe, and empowering me to take ownership of my life.

And the little boy expected to die is now abundantly alive.

Today, I've been happily married for twelve years. My wife, Beth, and I have a strong marriage and four healthy, beautiful, and frequently rambunctious kids. Three boys and a girl. We live in an idyllic community, belong to an active church, and enjoy amazing lives.

This incredible life is the outgrowth of a daring question:

Do you want to die?

A bold question that reminds us that we hold the power to choose our path forward. We may not control everything that happens to us, but we always control how we respond.

Obviously my rash decision to play with fire was a huge inflection point.

I made a simple choice as a child. And in a moment my life, and the life of my family, would never be the same. There was no going back.

But that wasn't the only inflection point we faced. Countless others came in its wake. Moments in time that changed everything afterward. The choices we made would lead either to a life of hope and possibility or a life of fear and regret.

We all make these choices throughout our lives.

I hope to open your eyes, to help you truly see which path you are choosing to go down. And to point you toward the one filled with possibility.

The first choice you must make to ignite a radically inspired life is to own your life. It is to leave entitlement behind and realize that it is up to you to make the changes in your life.

Stop making excuses.

This is your life.

Do you want to die?

No?

Good.

Then act like it.

NO MORE ACCIDENTS

One of my favorite movies is Good Will Hunting.

There's a powerful scene where a seemingly brash, arrogant, know-it-all young man is in the midst of a deep

conversation with his psychologist about his past. Eventually, the psychologist tells the troubled young man:

It’s not your fault.

It’s not your fault.

It’s not your fault!

This compelling scene is a pivotal moment in the movie. Embracing the freeing truth in those words would greatly benefit many of us in our lives.

Yet, my encouragement to you is quite different.

When my family and I recall the fire that changed our lives, we describe it as “John’s accident” or simply “the accident.” The term accident appears more than a dozen times in a book my mom and dad wrote about it called Overwhelming Odds.

Accident.

Let me ask you a question: What do you think happens when someone holds a flame to a can of gasoline?

Yup.

That’s not an accident: it’s a law of nature. It’s the result of holding a burning object to highly combustible fumes.

Yes, I was a child.

Yes, I had no idea what would happen.

And, yes, I certainly didn’t expect the massive explosion that took place, but to call it an accident cheapens my role in the event.

When my mom encouraged me that it was my choice whether I lived, she was doing something vitally important. She was challenging me to take full responsibility not only for what happened, but more important, for what would happen next. This was a defining inflection point for me. I had two choices . . . take responsibility for my healing and fight forward, or believe someone else would save me and passively endure.

My mom knew that this was life and death, that I was on the edge of a cliff. That if I didn’t take the reins, I would fall into it and slip away. She knew that she could not make me do it. She understood that I needed to be accountable.

Accountability gets a bad rap these days. What do you think of when you think about accountability? Maybe you think of responsibilities, burdens, a weight you have to carry. Maybe you think of corporations that avoided accountability, that destroyed people’s lives and shrugged their shoulders afterward.

Unfortunately at times it feels like we live in a society that loves to shirk responsibility and expects others to swoop in and save the day.

Ah, but accountability not only keeps you from accidentally slipping backwards in life, it frees you to intentionally navigate the path forward. It gives you the power to take ownership of your life.

STOP SHRUGGING

Personal accountability is a prerequisite for any worthy achievement.

Several years ago I was fortunate to be asked to give an inspirational speech about how to rise above challenges in the real estate market to the Staubach Company, a real estate company started by former naval officer and great Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach. Over the following three decades it became hugely successful before Roger sold it for more than $600 million in 2008.

I flew to Dallas to speak to a gathering of their senior-level leaders. When my taxicab pulled up to their headquarters, the young woman who'd organized the event greeted me at the door. I smiled and we chatted as we walked to the room where I would prepare before going onstage.

Although I had researched the background of the company and spoken to several of the event's organizers, I thought I would take this chance to ask this woman what she felt was most critical to the company's long-standing success.

She paused as she poured me a cup of coffee.

She handed it to me.

And then said, "Well, there is this story that has become legend around here."

She explained how Roger Staubach had famously demanded accountability from every employee at the firm. He had learned the importance of accountability as a naval officer, seen its value repeatedly on the football field, and knew it was essential to grow a business and a life.

She explained that he empowered each employee to run his or her own business, support one another, and to responsibly work through any issues that arose, both with clients and within his or her team.

It didn't always go so smoothly.

One day two brokers approached Staubach unable to solve how to split a $16,000 commission. Each agent argued that the entire commission belonged to him. They'd been stuck in this argument for several days and finally went to their boss, threw up their hands, and said, "We can't solve this. Can you fix this for us?"

Staubach asked a few questions.

Thanked the two brokers for sharing.

He asked if they could see any way past their grievances, see the other's perspective and own a mutually beneficial outcome. They could not.

He asked if they would be willing to split the commission, recognizing that they both had done substantial work in securing the deal. They would not.

Staubach stood. He shook both their hands, thanked them for their work, and thanked them for their generosity.

He then legendarily took the entire commission and donated it to charity.

He wanted to let those brokers know that they would either be responsible for succeeding together, or be responsible for failing together. It was their choice.

No one else ever took such a complaint to the boss. Future problems were tackled as they occurred at the individuals' level.

I thanked the woman for sharing that story. It helped me understand the culture of that company and what kind of leadership advice might be relevant. But that story extends well beyond business.

Can you think of a time when you were tempted to be like those brokers?

Have you at times in your life wanted to shrug your shoulders, throw up your hands, and look for someone else to solve your problems? It's understandable to want to look outside yourself, to put the onus on other things or other people.

We frequently blame things outside of our control.

We point to situations: It's not my fault. Traffic was bad. The markets stink. The world's a mess.

We point to others: It's not my fault. She is too difficult. My employees are idiots. My patients are needy. The commission is all mine.

But excuses get you nowhere.

Here's my challenge: erase "It's not my fault" from your vocabulary. Every time you feel it coming to the surface, about to roll off your tongue—stop. Say instead, "It's my life and I'm responsible for it."

This changes everything.

It's my life and I'm responsible for it.

No one's going to save you.

Accountability means you take ownership of your own life. Realize that you hold the keys to changing things, solving your problems, improving your life, and making a difference. And it's not just about action and fixing. Accountability also provides the power to let things go, to surrender things you can't change, to forgive events and people that have burned you in the past. It demands that we stop shrugging our shoulders, throwing up our hands, thinking that we can do nothing.

Your life provides the daily inflection points to stop looking outside yourself, to stop waiting for someone else to change, and to stop passively waiting for someone else to step forward.

This is your moment to choose to live.

To really live.

Own it.

PICK UP YOUR FORK

Have you ever experienced the joy of feeling that you finally made it?

Perhaps it was graduating school, landing your first job, or getting married. You worked, strove, labored, and achieved. You summited a mighty peak—and then discovered that the difficult part of your journey was just beginning?

For me that experience was coming home after being burned. I was nine years old, had just spent almost five months in the hospital, endured a couple of dozen surgeries, and lost my fingers to amputation. The painful experience of being away from family, facing continuous procedures, was finally over. The struggle was over; the celebration was on!

The hospital that had admitted me with no chance of surviving was now releasing me back to my family. I was now burned, scarred, bandaged, and wheelchair bound, but very much alive and grateful.

We pulled out of the parking lot, made the five-minute drive home, and turned onto our street. I was absolutely overwhelmed by the cars, fire trucks, balloons, and friends lining our subdivision.

Under an awning, a line formed of family, friends, classmates, neighbors, first responders, and community members welcoming us home. Music played and people cried.

The miracle had happened.

The boy lived.

Eventually, though, our friends went home, the cars pulled away, the front door shut, and we were left to decide how we'd move forward as a family.

That night Mom made my favorite meal: au gratin potatoes. (If you hadn't figured it out yet, this likely just cemented it for you: I was a strange kid!) We sat around the kitchen table in our reconstructed house as a family for the first time since the night before the fire.

Dad and Mom sat at opposite ends of the table. Three of my sisters, Laura, Cadey, and Susan, lined one side, with my brother, Jim, my sister Amy, and me on the other. Our family had been through inconceivable trials over the preceding months.

We'd lost our house in the fire.

My siblings had lost their parents to their near-24/7 hospital vigil.

My brother and sisters, ranging in age from eighteen months to seventeen years old, had been split up, staying with friends and relatives until the house was rebuilt.

My parents almost lost their son.

I'd lost my fingers, the ability to walk, and was scarred from my neck to my toes.

And yet here we were.

We made it.

Home.

Together.

One family.

Changed.

Scarred.

Transformed.

And alive.

We were back to eating dinner, cleaning up spilled milk and worrying about elbows on the table. Life would return to normal. But undoubtedly, a miracle had occurred. So tonight we celebrated.

The food looked delicious. I closed my eyes and smelled the cheesy goodness. Then opened them and realized . . . I couldn't eat anything. Because of wrappings, splints, and my inability to hold a fork, I could not partake in my celebration meal. I stared at my plate, not sure what to do.

My sister Amy saw me struggling. So she thoughtfully grabbed my fork, speared a few potatoes, and elevated them toward my mouth.

Then I heard it.

"Put that fork down, Amy. If John is hungry, he'll feed himself."

I turned my head toward my mom.

What did she just say?

Put that fork down?

He'll feed himself?

What the heck, Mom? Haven't I already been through enough? Are you kidding me? I'm hungry and I can't eat!

That night I cried at the table. I got mad at my mom. I told her I could not do it, that it wasn't fair, and I'd been through enough. The night quickly shifted from celebration and laughter to upheaval and contention.

The party was over.

Mom ruined it all.

Yet that night also created another inflection point for a nine-year-old boy. As my siblings cleared their plates and my hunger and anger mounted, I wedged the fork between what remained of my two hands. My fingers had been amputated just above the bottom knuckles. Because the skin had still not entirely healed, my hands were wrapped in thick gauze. I looked like a boxer, fighting to get a fork between two boxing gloves.

It was painstakingly slow.

The fork repeatedly fell out of my grasp.

But eventually, I awkwardly stabbed at the potatoes, brought them to my mouth, and chewed them.

And stared angrily at my mom.

I was mad.

My hands throbbed.

She'd ruined my night.

I hated her.

But I was eating.

Looking back on it, I see what a courageous stand my Mom took. It must have been extremely painful for her to sit with the entire family watching her little guy. How much easier and seemingly more loving it would have been to just feed me those darn potatoes and bring out the ice-cream cake.

How much easier it is in life to not do—or to make others do—the hard stuff.

Easier to take a picture of the family with everybody smiling at the dinner table, a little kid in a wheelchair at the end, post on Facebook, and write, "Back to normal! We're all home and doing great!"

Mom wasn't worried about what others thought.

She wasn't concerned about Photoshopping the moment.

Mom utilized this moment as a reminder that others would be there to encourage, to serve, to love me. But this was still my fight, this was still my life. It might be ripe with challenges, but it was also my opportunity to realize that none of those obstacles would be insurmountable.

This moment was just the beginning of many times when I would have to find a way. She forced me to pick up my fork. And I'm completely convinced I would not be living the life I am today if she hadn't.

The day I was burned, she challenged me to choose not to die.

The night I came home, she freed me to choose to really live.

Users Review

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