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10-2013

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Pieter Damsteegt
Andrews University

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Recommended Citation

Damsteegt, Pieter, "A Journey to Embrace-God Doesn't Want to Let Go of Us" (2013). *Lake Union Herald*. 217.

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A Journey to Embrace

G O D D O E S N ' T W A N T T O L E T G O O F U S

BY PIETER DAMSTEEGT

I feel like I have always had an active lifestyle. Though my mobility was limited by my Ankylosing Spondylitis (a type of rheumatoid arthritis), I still walked, biked some and even, occasionally, attempted jogging. I took it all for granted. I felt invincible like a lot of other people my age. I suppose I even got lazy at times.

When my health started to decline, I just figured this was another normal flare-up that was weather-related and my body would soon return to normal. Instead of clearing up completely, I seemed slowly to be getting worse.

It was one of the hardest transitions of my life — like a transition that I didn't like but had to go through. You see, it's not cool hobbling around on crutches, especially if you didn't have a crazy story like, "Oh, I was snowboarding..." or "Well, I was in a car accident." When my comeback was, "It's a type of arthritis," people's response usually was, "Is it going to get better?"

And I just had to say, "Uh, good question; I don't know."

Days turned into weeks and then into months, and I wasn't improving. I tried everything, but got tired of suggestions and recommendations by well-meaning people. Everyone really can be nice, but in some circumstances they can be too nice; you don't notice it until you have something go wrong with your health.

When I was ten years old and first diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis, I had been through the ropes. Then again with Crohn's, and then I was trying stuff all over again. This round, nothing was working. No matter what I did, I continued to get worse.

I dreamed of being able to jump out of bed in the morning, of walking down back roads, going to the beach, and



Pieter Damsteegt

even biking again, but alas, they would have to remain happy memories. For the time being, I was handicapped, and I slowly began to accept it. At first, I blamed it on school and stress. But when Christmas break came around and I only continued the downward spiral, I knew something wasn't quite right. I had one semester left to accomplish before graduation, and I refused to stop. I was so close.

I think everyone has a refining process. Sometimes, I don't think we see it as such or learn to embrace it. Whether it has to do with health, jobs or relationships, hardship is bound to come. We were never promised

smooth sailing in this life. We were, however, promised strength to get through whatever we are faced with.

The Christian walk is not something easy. If things are going well, you may need to re-evaluate where you are. Just think of Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28. In spite of pain, sleepless nights and the added challenge physically, I had nowhere near the obstacles and challenges Paul faced. How many times had I been beaten up for the Gospel? How many times did I survive a plane crash to share Jesus?

It was just a new phase of life I had to deal with. Yes, I wanted to be back to "normal." But instead, God provided the way, *And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:9 KJV). I came to a new "normal" in life; life was just going to be different.



Back in high school, I remember one of the seniors explained something she did to keep positive in life. She kept a journal that had 5–10 new things she was thankful for each day, and they couldn't repeat or overlap. In my observations, I thought it was just a good way to stay extra positive all the time. I've thought about keeping a journal like that but never really gotten to that point myself, but it was a good thing to remember when aiming to stay upbeat.

After some visits to specialists, I discovered the problem was that my condition had progressed, and I had some bad joints. Once that discovery was made, I had some bigger choices and decisions. Thankfully, God had everything worked out before I even thought of it. After some research by my mom and some good recommendations from friends, we found a solid doctor to do the surgeries needed.

I don't like to call the whole situation I went through a trial. I guess it really was, but I'd rather refer to it as just another step in my life adventure. If I looked at things from a negative perspective, I don't think I would have as much fun in life. There are countless blessings and miracles that happened during the whole adventure that I went through. Here are just a few:

There are people out there to whom I could witness that I never would have been able to reach had I not had some big health issues.

It was the perfect timing for this situation to happen. By the time I was in a wheelchair, it was around the time of graduation. The surgeries I had were during the summer. Therefore, everything was happening between college and work.

I was taking photography and documentary film at Andrews University. Before I ever went to crutches, I planned on doing my senior thesis film about my condition. The original outline I had was okay, but my film was shaped in a completely different direction through the challenges and

hardships of my adventure. From a filmmaker's perspective, what I went through was excellent documentary material; I'm thankful that worked out really well.

My last semester was a pretty easy one academically. It was a real blessing!

One of the biggest blessings is I learned to appreciate other things, like sight, sound, touch and smell. Once walking was not a possible for me, I was able to admire other things and learn to be thankful with what I still had.

I guess I never really understood the whole concept of Malachi 3:3: *He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD (NIV).* I think a lot of people have heard songs like "Refiner's Fire," but they never really consider what that means. By going through this challenge in life, it has made me catch a glimpse of what the refining process is all about.

God wants us to shine. He doesn't want to let go of us. When I asked God for something to help me draw closer to Him, I never considered that I would end up in a wheelchair. Yet, God had a journey for me to embrace.

Though I don't always know my next step in life, I trust He has everything in line for me. Every day that is given me is a gift, and the fact that I am still alive shows me that God still has something for me to do.

Sometimes, I don't understand why or where God is leading, and maybe I won't know while I am here on this planet, but someday I will know. It's that trust that lets me go to sleep at night with peace, knowing that as long as God has something for me to do, there will be another day of new adventures.

Pieter Damsteegt is a graduate of Andrews University with a degree in documentary filmmaking. He currently assists the Lake Union Department of Communication with some ministry and mission film projects.