



# IN WAKE OF TRAGEDY, WOMAN MAKES HER LIFE WHOLE USING GRIT AND INSPIRATION

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*Chris Timmins was paralyzed in a vehicle accident in 1978. Fred Dickey*  
Think of your worst nightmares. It's a fair guess that one of them is full-body paralysis. However, when you wake up, you likely would say, "What an awful dream!"

When Chris Timmins wakes up, she's still paralyzed. Morning, noon and night, the nightmare lives on. But this 63-year-old woman has found a way to make a life out of tragedy, and she would like it to be instructive to everyone who thinks, for whatever reason, that living is not worth it. She has picked up all the pieces of her life, except those of her own body.

Standing at her bedside and looking at her friendly face, I think to myself: I can't smile that wide, and I can walk!



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Life dawned fair and calm on the Sunday morning of Memorial Day weekend, 1978. It was a good day to take the sun on San Diego's Mission Bay. Chris took a break from packing for a move that she and her husband were making to Oregon. They would soon be off to start a family and a new life.

Mid-afternoon, she left the hot beach and started the drive back to Tierrasanta. As she made the turn off Sea World Drive onto Friars Road, she became faint and dizzy. She lost control of her car and slammed into the concrete abutment at the train tracks.

She was rushed to the emergency room. She came to, aware that they were cutting off her clothes and asking questions to see if she had brain damage. They put her in traction and screwed a metal halo into her scalp to stabilize her head and neck.

At some point, a doctor told her that she had suffered a broken neck and would be completely paralyzed except for her eyelids. She was still in shock so it didn't sink in to any depth. But, it would ...

The doctors surmised that she had succumbed to a combination of overheating and dehydration and that had caused her to lose control of the car.

There she lay in the broken body of what had been a 28-year-old schoolteacher with a happy marriage and a future that was unfolding like a flower.

All gone. Or so it seemed on that grim holiday.

Nevertheless, she brushed aside her own tears when visitors arrived. “When I was in the halo, people would come to visit me and turn the corner and see me and break into tears, and I would end up comforting them.”

She spent six months in a rehab unit. She regained a faltering use of her right arm, but not the fingers. A small victory, but one that became huge with time.

“I don’t know how long it took me to absorb what it really means to be paralyzed. I kept thinking that I’d get better; I didn’t know how much, but that I’d get better. I cried a lot. I wondered which of the two things I most valued I’d be able to hang on to — teacher and wife.”

She was only able to hold on to one permanently.

Her husband was a rock those first few adaptive years, and she immediately set her sights on returning to the classroom. With the help of a college-student assistant, and using equipment specially designed for the paralyzed, Chris returned to teach at San Diego’s Hoover High School in a wheelchair for three more years. She then transferred to Serra High School, where she taught business education for 30 years before retiring last year.

She had done it. She had returned and completed her career, and left it as an honored teacher.

But in the first few years, Chris’ adjustment to her new body was in fits and starts. After four years, the struggle was not yet won. She was haunted by a bizarre “Star Trek” sci-fi character that was a head on a box. That’s what she was beginning to see herself as — a head on a box. So, she started going to a therapist to improve her self-image.

En route to one therapy session, her husband hit her with it: He wanted a divorce. “It was out of the blue,” she said. “I had no idea it was coming.” Then, he dropped her off at the therapist.

“The pain of being divorced was worse than breaking my neck, because it’s such a personal rejection.”

“Apparently, your husband wanted a normal life” was a question-statement to Chris. Her response was soft and slow in coming: “Yeah.” Chris said depression has not been a problem, except for the five years after the divorce.

(Take a long, long pause before passing judgment. “In sickness and in health” is easier in the saying than the doing.)

But cruel vicissitudes were not yet finished with Chris. In 1990, breast cancer invaded her lymph nodes. She underwent a mastectomy, then chemotherapy and radiation, and has been cancer-free since. “I’m a lucky woman,” she says, ignoring her own irony.

Though she was born to a Jewish mother, what sustained Chris during her descent into a vale of tears was her faith in Christ. She remembers reading the Old Testament with her Jewish grandmother and thinking, “This is the same Bible.”

She is an Episcopalian and also considers herself an evangelical. “I have a really strong faith, a really strong faith.” When she is bedridden, St. David’s Church in Clairemont sends a minister each Sunday to give her in-home communion.

Over the years, Chris never stopped working to find the highest level of freedom for her stricken body. She bought and modified her own attractive home in Tierrasanta. She has a live-in attendant and has to be lifted out of bed and into her power chair. She has gotten maximum benefit out of her semi-usable arm.

With that one arm she can control the chair. She can be placed in a sitting position. She can feed herself, write and use a keyboard with her knuckle because she doesn’t have any finger movement (still, she can type about 20 words per minute). She can even drive her specially equipped van. In explaining all her technology aids, she says, “I feel very fortunate.”

Since her paralysis, Chris has undergone eight surgeries for pressure-point sores. Traditionally called “bed sores,” they are deep wounds in her flesh due to lost circulation. She had her latest surgery on Aug. 3 and is now bedridden, and will be for several more months.

Next to her bed, alternately dozing and looking up at her with affection, is her laid-back service dog, Ben, an English Labrador retriever. To Ben, life comes down to serving, eating, sleeping. In that order.

Chris has self-published a book titled “The Up Side of Down” and has made it available on her website, [braidedstreams.com](http://braidedstreams.com). Her goal is to recover and go to groups and speak of the triumph of the spirit. She remains the teacher. Meantime, in bed she lies, and prays, and reflects, and smiles.

As positive as Chris strives to be, she is not immune from the occasional funks and depression that afflict us all. In those times, she is apt to mourn that a huge part of life has passed her by. As much as anyone would — and with greater reason — she has bouts of what-might-have-been. When her friends come around and incidentally talk about family life and traveling, inevitable pangs result.

“So many things did not happen in my life ... but I can’t do anything about it except return to the life I have.

“I have learned a lot about joy, which is, I think, different from happiness. I find joy in vicarious ways, watching people plant flowers in my garden and seeing birds in my fountain. I used to think joy just came to us, and now I know we have to open our eyes and discover it. Happiness, on the other hand, is more of a contentedness. I’m not pleased that I’m paralyzed, but I’m content.”

When Chris was reading the Old Testament with her grandmother, she may have read the book of Job, the story of the rich man who was put to the test by God. Job passed his test, and his health was restored and his life made whole.

Job got a better deal than Chris Timmins. She passed her test, too, but her health was not restored. However, she has made her life whole in a way that must be altogether pleasing to God.

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