

## **Strength Through the Struggle**

### **Chapter 12**

"Dad, I feel sad..."

This wasn't the first time I heard Josh say this. I don't know when the last time will be. I've tried so very hard to help him make sense of his life since the "accident."

What do you say when your child is in pain?

It was about 8pm on a Sunday night. The end of a rough week, for several reasons. That statement above from Josh put the exclamation point on it.

Josh struggles with many things. He struggles with all things intellectual including memory, learning, maturity for his age (he's fifteen) and social cues.

He also is fighting a battle with his body. Trying to get his body to do what he wants in practical terms i.e., walking, standing with balance or throwing a ball is one thing. Trying to fulfill the desires of his heart physically - think James Bond meets Aaron Rogers meets Captain America - is altogether another thing.

Those two things, the intellectual and physical challenges, really take a toll on the third part of his existence--his emotions. The older he has gotten, the

bigger the struggle with his self-esteem. The more clearly he perceives the contrast between himself and others since the hit-and-run that changed our lives.

I'll let our conversation say the rest. It actually lasted over an hour but you get the short version.

"Josh, is there something bothering you?"

"No."

"Are you sure? It looks like there is something on your mind."

"Dad, I feel sad."

He's now trying to hold back the tears.

"What's wrong son?"

"I don't know. I'm just sad."

"What are you sad about?"

"I'm not sure."

I wait a moment, trying to gather my thoughts. We've been down this road a few times but it is never the same.

"Josh, I know how smart you are. I also know how strong you are. I believe you can find the words. I believe you can find the words and tell me what's at the root of you feeling sad."

A minute passes before the words finally start to come out. With the words are tears he is desperately trying to choke back.

"Dad, my life is hard. Ever since that accident my life has been so hard!"

I don't know what Josh remembers from before the accident. He's been to over two thousand appointments since. In spite of the Traumatic Brain Injury he was left with, he understands "hard."

A mix of emotions hit me. My personality splits. Part 'A' says, "Stay focused. He really, really needs you right now." Part 'B' wants to punch something. And punch it hard enough that I can create enough pain in my body to forget about the grief in my heart.

"Hey buddy! I know your life is hard. If I had your life I would think and feel the same way..."

I don't really know what to say or how to soothe him. His pain is real. It's palpable. It's heartbreaking. I wait a few seconds hoping his emotions will come down a bit. Eventually I reach over and put my palm on his chest and tell him... "It's OK Josh."

He's still sobbing. He is also trying to calm himself. Eventually he blurts out, "But it's NOT OK dad! It's not!"

I realize what I said and what he heard are not the same things. How do I tell him I didn't mean "things are OK the way they are? How do I tell him I didn't mean it was OK for his life to be this way? I just wanted him to know it's

OK that he is feeling the way he is. It's OK to cry. It's OK to be sad for the moment.

"Things are hard for me since that accident. I have to wear these boots and this helmet. It's hard for me in school. Learning is hard. It's hard for me to remember things. My heart feels like it's been torn into too many pieces."

He's fourteen years old and my fifty-five year old mind is blank.

The tears are full on now. He can't hold them back nor can he catch his breath. I'm speechless again. My own breathing is shallow and my stomach muscles are tightening. I don't know what to say to help him feel better. I don't know how to say anything that will make sense of what happened that day.

I pray for an insight. I pray for the right words.

"Josh, do you feel like you are different from others?"

"I am different dad! And I don't like it!"

"Yes son, you are different. You are different in ways that are good as well as the ones that are difficult. Your heart is different. You care about others. You understand things that others can never understand. You see things others can't see. And believe it or not, you will do things

others could never do. All of that because you've had to go through this."

He's heard it all before...

"Josh, I have to believe there is a purpose to all this. I don't believe it is a mistake or an "accident" that you survived. I can't believe this is all for nothing. I have to believe that this is really..."

"A gift dad?"

Like I said, he's heard it all before.

"Yea Josh. It's a gift."

"Dad, It doesn't feel like a gift."

At times, with answers like that, it doesn't seem like the brain injury is even there. But it is.

"I know it doesn't feel like a gift to you. But not everything we feel helps us. And if we focus too much on those sad feelings, like this is a burden and we shouldn't have to be going through it, we just feel worse."

Now I'm preaching to the choir. I need to hear and remember those words as much or more than Josh.

"Dad, will you always have my back?"

"Of course son. I am always here for you."

"Dad, is your number in my cell phone."

It's always been in his cell phone but he doesn't even remember that.

"It sure is buddy."

"If I'm feeling sad, and I'm not home should I just call you?"

"Absolutely! That's part of what I'm here for. You can tell me anything you want. If you want to talk, I'll listen. If you want to figure something out, I'll help."

It's quiet for a minute. I decide to break the silence and to let him know how I feel even though I'm not sure if I'm being selfish or not.

"Son, your heart isn't the only heart that's broken."

"Who else dad?"

"My heart broke the day you got hurt. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't fix things. But my heart also breaks again every time you feel sad or I see you struggling. It's almost every day. My own heart aches for you and what you have had to go through. What you are going through. It hurts me too."

He sees a tear in my eye.

"Nobody knows our pain dad, do they?"

I smile again on the inside. It's absolutely amazing what comes out of that brain damaged brain.

"Well son, it's difficult to completely understand anybody's pain unless you have lived it yourself. But there are plenty of people who try Josh. Your friends, your

family, your teachers. There are a lot of people on your side. Even if we feel alone at times, it doesn't mean we really are alone."

"Dad. Is it OK if I cuss just this one time?"

"Sure Josh. Let it rip!"

"That truck driver is stupid!"

I smile to myself. A bit pleased that he thinks "stupid" is a bad word!

"Yea buddy. I agree."

"Can we talk downstairs dad?"

"Of course!"

"You know dad, I want to talk downstairs because it's guy talk and that's kind of our man cave down there."

"Yep. You are right. Let's go."

We head downstairs and he grabs the couch. I park my butt in the chair.

"Tell me how you feel about that truck driver, Josh. What do you think of him?"

He gets a peculiar look on his face. He actually looks surprised. I don't know if it's the question or the answer in his mind or maybe something else.

"C'mon Josh. Tell me how you feel about him. It's fine. You can say whatever you want."

He pauses for a moment. Mulling things over. Choosing

his words. I've seen it before. Josh's lips start moving. I can't tell what he is saying because there isn't any sound coming out.

"What did you say buddy?"

He does the same thing. His lips are moving but no sound.

"I can't hear you buddy. Say it out loud."

Out comes a whisper but I can't make it out.

"Try again, Josh. Say it louder."

He does and I'm shocked at the words that came out.

"He's a bitch dad!"

I'm dying on the inside.

"He's a bitch, is he?"

"Yeah."

Not quite sure how he strung that together. Josh has never heard me use the word "bitch." I'm not saying I haven't said, "bitch" in one manner or another. I'm just saying he hasn't heard me say it.

"Go ahead Josh. Say it again. Louder this time."

Josh is so self aware that this isn't normal conversation that he can't ramp up the volume or intensity. I finally tell him to say it as if the truck driver was sitting in front of him. He really looks surprised and tries again. Another mild delivery comes out. I change

tactics.

"Josh, pretend I'm the truck driver. Say it to me and say it like you mean it."

This is going a bit too far for him. It is clear he is unsure about going through with this. I grab a baseball hat and some sunglasses. Once they are on we try again.

"Josh, I'm not your dad right now. I'm the truck driver who caused the accident. You can say anything right now and you will never be in trouble for it. Go for it."

It came out barely above a whisper. "You're a bitch."

"Josh, you don't sound like you mean it. If you really feel the way you do, don't hold back. Try again."

"You're a bitch."

"Louder Josh. Say it like you mean it."

He leans in towards me with an impish grin. "You're a bitch."

I'm certain by his body language that he is still unsure of going all in. Yet, he is getting some pleasure out of this based on the smile on his face. I can see he thinks he is getting away with doing something bad! Or else it's making him feel really good.

"Josh, I don't believe you. You don't sound like you mean it. This is your one chance to tell me, the truck driver, how you feel about what happened that day."

"You're a Bitch."

"Really? Let him have it Josh! Say it like you mean it."

"YOU'RE a Bitch."

"C'mon, Josh. Again! Louder!!"

"YOU'RE A BITCH."

"LET IT FLY JOSH! LET HIM HAVE IT! LOUDER!!"

And at the top of his lungs he lets go.

"YOU'RE A BITCH!!!!!"

"Good job buddy! That was AWESOME!! How do you feel?"

"Good!"

"Do you feel better?"

"I do!"

"That's great! Let's get some sleep."

"Okay, Dad."

While this whole conversation was actually over an hour and it ended well with Josh's spirits lifted, I was angry.

Angry that my son was going through this. Angry that this didn't have to have happened. Angry that at times, life seems so arbitrary, unfair and unreasonable. I was angry that I didn't know how to fix this for Josh. And, I was angry because my own heart was broken.

The pain has been something that at times has been overwhelming. Immobilizing. Soul crushing. Life stealing. The future looked so bleak. It wasn't and isn't. But it looked that way. And the longer I looked at it, the worse it seemed.

I have feared for my son's future because I don't know how to protect him. Not from others and not from life altering decisions made because he didn't understand

There are times when I can push through the pain and there are times, when I just have to sit with it. Let it wash over me and do its thing. Feel it. Be there with it. And then let it dissolve. Today was the latter. Tomorrow will be better.