

The Power of the Moment

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I wanted this opportunity to stand up and speak because as many of you know, I had an rather transforming experience in 2008 that solidified some things for me, so I thought maybe, just maybe, I might have something to share. I've never really done this kind of talk before, so bear with me, also this is still a bit raw, so I'll ask your indulgence there too. As we face this economy, the world we live in, the challenges we all face together, I hope these ideas are as helpful to you as they have been to me. This is about learning to let go of the outcome, learning to focus on the question "What can I do right now?" and the way that gives us our own power. Strength to move and act because of how, ultimately, the outcome of our efforts is so often affected by so much outside our control, and frankly, what we can do right now, is well, what we can do, right?

You know how, sometimes, when we try to say something deep, it just comes out sounding trite?

Lets talk about what made this real to me, maybe that will help sound a bit more meaningful. You know, its funny, sometime near the end of January 2008 I can remember telling people that I wanted, needed, a "shakabuku" - a swift spiritual kick to the head that alters your reality forever. I did not realize that I would not only get what I wanted, literally, but that that it would show me, powerfully, what the question "What can I do right now?" can achieve for me, and how it gives me power and the ability to act, even in the face of really desperate events.

On February 22, 2008 around 5:30pm in the afternoon, I passed out in the hallway of my home, while home alone, and fell on my face. It doesn't sound like a big deal, except, at the time, I was practically

running up the hall for the bathroom, so when I went down, I skidded up the hall about 6 feet on my face, slipping a disk in my neck and pinching my spinal column.

Here's a thought – when you feel nauseous, don't jump up and run somewhere. Apparently there's a physiological response that dilates blood vessels when we get nauseous and we can pass out from blood shifting. Who knew?

When I woke up, I couldn't move. At least, not from about my elbows down. I could move each index finger, and I could move my forearms and shoulders, but that's it. I could not feel my legs, hips or body from about my ribs down.

Laying there on the floor, alone, when I knew my wife wasn't coming home for 36 hours, and nobody would find me, I started to panic. I started to really panic. The kind of gripping panic that starts with complete mental silence, and then fills up your mind like a deafening roar, until its all you can hear...How bad was I hurt? What would happen to me? What if I died here? 36 hours is a long time! The thoughts raced through my head as I started to lose control of my breathing. Then, and I'm still surprised at this, one thought went through my mind louder than everything else...and the result was like someone switched off a raging waterfall. It was a question, a question about right now.

“What can I do right now?” That question made me realize that the panic, right then, was not helping me.

You know, its interesting, since my injury, I watched an interview with a guy whose face and skull was crushed by a bear, an injury most people do not survive, and while he was lying there, slowly dying in the Alaskan wilderness, he said that he started to worry, to panic, and then, out of the blue, he asked himself that same question.

“What can I do right now?”

He said he let go of the outcome, and decided, to try not to die today, not yet, instead to try and conserve energy, not to lose too much blood, and just breathe...until help came. He survived. It took a few years to put him back together, he never got his sight back, and he looks pretty frightening. But he counts himself lucky. He's still here...

Wow. Listening to him, I realized that I made a similar choice, a different outcome, not quite so extreme an injury, not such imminent death and pain, but the same question;

“What can I do right now?”

I realized, I could move, my arms, maybe I could drag myself. Heck, maybe my injury would pass. I realized I just didn't know, so I started to test out what I could do with my body.

I will not go through the details of the next moment for you. Maybe 5 and 1/2 hours involving dragging myself around to the soundtrack from Blade II, which was playing on the TV. I was in an odd mental spot - I made some strange choices along the way – like cleaning up what I considered some embarrassing stuff in the living room, and stopping to switch from a vacuum cleaner infomercial back to action movie, because, the infomercial was just not motivating. It was when I tried to get up on the couch, when I couldn't lift myself, that it sunk in that I wasn't getting any better, so I changed strategy, got over to the front door, unlocked the interior door, with just my index finger, because it had some nice stained glass that I didn't want the EMT's to break, left the storm door locked (I tried though) laid on my back and called 911 from my cell phone. Fortunately, I had also stopped by my jacket to grab my hands free, or I might have gotten tired holding my arm up to hold the phone to my ear.

I didn't say that I was centered, balanced, and rational – but I had found a way to focus on what I could do in the moment and my power came back through my fear about what was going to happen to me. I guess, some of that strange stuff was comforting to me at the time. When the EMTs got there, they

asked me to open the door. I laughed the whole time that they broke through it. It seemed ironic.

Then hours of tests, MRIs, CAT scans, X-rays. The whole time I was on a backboard really uncomfortable. If anyone here has a bit of claustrophobia, which I do...you might understand the feeling of being strapped in one place, unable to move, and I started to panic again after several hours, and again, there came that one question.

“What can I do right now?”

Well, I couldn't do much. I could breathe. I could say “Hi” to people and be friendly, get 'em talking to me. So I focused on that, I focused my mind on those things. I started to enjoy the ER. There are some interesting people who work the graveyard in an ER. Funny. Then came the phone calls – to my wife, my parents – at almost 2 am Saturday morning. I was so afraid for them – AND – I was in a space where I really understood that I couldn't help much, except to be calm, so out came this amazing calm.

My wife still has the voice mail something like:

“Um, hey honey, Hi. I hope you're having fun at the conference, so um, I kind had this little thing happen, I kinda fell on my face, and kinda hurt my neck, and well, I can't move, I'm in the hospital, I don't really know how bad it is, but um, there's not really much you could do, so don't come home early, just finish out that art conference and head home tomorrow, that's ok with me, I'll, I'll be right here. I love you. Give me a call, ok?”

I did not realize that would turn out so ridiculous, bemusing and touching afterwards.

I'll gloss over the next moments – the call with my father, the relief when he said they would come up to Salt Lake (of course), asking Sutton on the phone to calm down, that I was still here, that nothing

was going to take me away, that I just couldn't walk so well at the moment, and trying to convince her that she could wait 5 hours during the drive home to confirm that herself.

Right on up to Sunday morning, when the surgeon came back from his vacation early and told me that my only non-surgical option was to stay paralyzed, so we talked about moving my vocal chords (eek! What if that affecting my singing? “What can I do right now?”) and the titanium plate that would replace my disc, fuse my neck, and hopefully take the pressure off my spine so I could move again.

Well, there's that question during a crisis. It worked pretty well there – so how about sustained efforts? As I realized what had gotten me through my injury and into rehab, I thought about the days to come, and again, I started to worry about my outcome. Would I ever walk again? What was my life going to be like? They had me up and standing out of bed the first day after the surgery, and it was sobering – I could not stand unassisted, I could not feel my legs, in particular, my right ankle was so weak, that it moved out from under any weight. I could not use the bathroom myself, I had little to no control over my body.

I moved from St. Marks to the U of U hospital for rehabilitation. Rehab is where I learned about hope and expectations, and the difference between them. I had my first conversation with the rehab doctors; and I learned that they didn't get to know how I would turn out. They couldn't tell me. One of the interesting and more “Special” things about a spinal column injury is that they cannot see through the spine well enough to assess any real damage to the nerves. They have to guess...

After I learned that, I didn't want to hear, from anyone, what they thought I could, or would, be able to recover and do, and maybe more importantly, what they thought I would not be able to do. My mom and I had some choice moments during my recovery as she tried to help at times when I was much more interested in seeing how far I could get on my own, right here, right now. It was pretty rough on

both of us. I guess, for her, like having to let go of her kid all over again.

But ultimately, nobody knew what I would get back or be able to do. None of us got to know what I would get back, how functional I would become. The one thing that we did know, is that the harder I tried, the more I worked, the more likely I was to recover more.

Well, DUH! It sounds so simple. So simple in theory, so challenging in practice. You know, I think about the song Resound sang this morning, "Kiss the Girl" - how many of us have been to caught up in the outcome to seize a moment like that?

That question "What can I do right now?" It was a real gift to me, and I saw people who did not have the same idea driving them, who could not bring themselves to work, to try, who were so depressed and upset about their outcome, that they had trouble finding the strength to work in the here and now.

Some of them had trouble even getting out of bed for rehab in the morning. The contrast was stark.

That question gave me power. Every morning, I was up, dressed, ready, sometimes getting out of bed, into my wheelchair and getting downstairs to meet my therapist before my appointment, before they had trained me on how to do wheelchair transfers or even to put on my socks without tools. I was so eager to work. The team said I was amazing. I didn't feel amazing. I felt like I was clear on what I could and could not do, here and now, and my attention was focused there.

Now there were two guys who had the same kind of approach. The staff kept saying to the 3 of us, "Now be careful" - and we short of being completely stupid. We'd laugh.

A friend I shared these thoughts with said that she had read something in Oprah's magazine of all places that said, "the moment that you start to focus on the outcome, that is the moment that you start to take energy away from what you are trying to do."

Well, I guess you CAN find wisdom anywhere.

I remember one woman in particular. She was having a lot of trouble. The doctors couldn't get her to try to walk, they couldn't get her to try and quit smoking (her smoking was exacerbating her neural degeneration), she just kept saying "What's going to happen to me?" I tried to talk to her during a moment we had alone together in the therapy room...I asked her what if she asked a different question, what if she asked "What can I do right now?" I don't know if it helped. I guess it was all I could do right then. It felt good to try and reach out. I hope it helped her...

There's that word again. Hope. I guess central to letting go of an outcome and really focusing on what we can do right now is that hope word. For me, this is part of the difference between some of the personal power stuff that's out there, focused on results, and a deeper, more spiritual approach to the here and now.

After I got out of rehab, Resound went to sing for Bill Dobbs while he was in rehab. Bill and I felt a particularly strong kind of connection. I got out as he went in. After we sang, we stopped by another patient's room who overheard us and said he liked it. We sang a few songs. I told him that I was a C5-6 partial and said that I was sorry for his injury. He was shocked. He said:

"How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get up and walk again?"

I thought for a moment, and I answered him. I don't remember exactly what I said, but it was something like, "I hoped that I would be able to do it, and I found what I could do, at the time, and I did it, the best I could, with everything I had. If I could move a toe, a little bit, I moved it, as hard as I could, trying to do a bit more. When I had more toes, I moved the next muscle. I kept going. A few times, I felt despair, and I let myself feel it, and I kept going. I kept trying. I kept bringing my mind

back to what I could do, instead of what I could not do. I kept doing it, as hard as I could. When my mind wandered to fear about what would happen to me, I gently brought it back to today, right here, right now, and what I could do to support my hope.”

The nurse, who was visiting with the patient, said “Yeah, but you were incomplete and you got lucky.” An incomplete injury is one where's there are signals going through the spine. I don't thgink she really got my point. She sounded angry at me for talking about hope. She did not sound very detached from the young man's outcome and focused on what he could try to do right here right now.

At this point, remember what I said about spinal column injuries? And what the doctors can actually tell? Here was someone already trying to get this patient to think about what he could not do.

So I shared a story someone in rehab told me about her husband. Diagnosed a complete C6. The doctors thought his injury was complete, meaning they could not detect signals going through, he did not respond...but he never stopped trying, working, and eventually, he walked, they had kids. As he got older, his tissue degenerated and he lost some of what he got back, but he got it, and he got it because he never stopped hoping, and he never stopped working.

At that time, the patient said he wanted to try like that, and set his jaw. The nurse looked really ticked off, still, I don't think she a lot more to say to him what he couldn't do. I don't think anyone was going to have a lot more to say to him about what he could not do. He seemed to have made up his own mind.

During my time in rehab, there was a phrase that my mentor gave me, “Pleased but not satisfied.” I like that phrase, it is a celebration of what we have achieved and a willingness to continue our work, our hope. “Pleased but not satisfied.”

Certainly there are cases where people are not allowed by providence, God, Allah, whatever to get

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something back. There are cases where people do not recover, and where the effort does not deliver the desired outcome. That's kind of my point. The outcome is not under our control; just what we contribute to try and get there. Aren't we more happy and fulfilled when we focus on that? What do we hope to gain by focusing on what's outside of our control?

During my outpatient rehab, another therapist said to me, “You can walk because you tried. You could have sat in the chair and given up, then you would still be in the chair.” So yes, I got lucky, I was one of the ones that providence smiled upon. I also gave everything I had to get what providence gave me. So as I left that hospital room – with the encouraged patient and the angry nurse - in that moment I realized what I believed about the role of hope. Hope part of “What can I do right now?” Its in the moment...its something we feel, something that fuels us, that drives us. Hope is healthy. Hope gives us what we need to cope. Its different than expectations, and I realized that I believe expectations seem to be what people fear. Expectations are tough. Expectations relate to outcome, and since that is not under our control, expectations are frequently full of disappointment. Hope relates to desire, and desire is right here, right now. Hope we can savor, enjoy and taste in the moment. We can hope while we work in the here and now, it can even feed our motivation.

So I was out. I was walking. I was working. I was too healthy, too recovered for disability, but not enough to feel really like me. Kung Fu isn't the same. Hiking is doggone hard. Shoveling snow – my goodness, what effort!

And I learned something else – this thing, this question, this focusing on the now. Its HARD in daily life...and this is where I learned what I think is the last piece of this puzzle. This is where I learned about practice, and forgiveness.

There is an old ZEN saying “Its easy to be a holy man on top of a mountain.” I guess my injury was

my mountain because boy, coming down, wow...I realized as amazing as doctors, nurses, therapists told me I was, how remarkable they said my attitude had been, I didn't know much about this whole "What can I do right now?" moment thing and how to apply it to the rest of my life.

I still need that question in relation to my injury – because its been a year and I'm still not back to full, and I still don't get to know whether I'll get there or not. But what can I do, right now? I can work. I can support myself. I can drive. I can even, almost, sometimes, run, which amuses me, because the people at Golds Gym look really scared when I run, legs flopping around, kind of mostly going where I tell them, hanging on to the treadmill.

A big area where I need that question is with the revenue of my business. I'm still working on that one. I worry about it constantly. In many ways, the spinal column injury was easier for me.

So here's something that has just started to help me. The realization that this is a PRACTICE, its not a skill, I haven't figured out the skill part yet. This is something we can practice. We can practice asking that question. And when we practice, we can forgive our missteps – that's part of the practice? Right? Its how we learn.

So, with me, for a moment now, I want to ask you to do something. There is one thing I tried to do to practice "What can I do right now?" Its a Sufi exercise. I spent years and years studying Zen. This exercise gave me something else. I'd like it to be the last thing I share this morning.

Take all that stuff that might be playing in your mind. The thoughts about the rest of the day. Whether or not that person saw you pick your nose earlier. Whatever is in your head. Lets put something else there. Lets take a moment.

Take a deep breath. Pay attention to your breathing. Pay attention to how you are sitting. The air on your skin, the light in the room, pay attention to the sound that's coming into your ears. Try not to

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think. Try not to interpret. That's the trick. Try to pay attention, not react.

Then, think about one thing that you want to have happen in your life. Something that you hope for, and ask “What can I do right now?”