

BEAUTIFULCRISIS

The tools I used to survive two years of trauma and adversity in with optimism,
resilience and a renewed sense of hope.

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Disclaimer

Be warned that I am going to talk about some really hard stuff. This is not what I imagined my path would be or the words I would write.

But it's my story. This is the truth. This is real world stuff and not for the faint of heart. This is for people struggling with stuff. Facing what is hard and painful....and how we can get through it.

The words, the photos the vision are hard for me to re-live and to write, but I do so remembering how much the simple notion, "I am not alone" helped me survive these traumas.

I share them now, because I believe that when you face adversity, the tools I used in and after a crisis can support you.

I invite you to walk with me through two very hard years to understand how the tools of well-being can make the difference between despair and flourishing.

It was a choice I made to write my crisis beautiful for the wellbeing of my family.

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“Even in the darkest moments there were blessings. I just had to choose to notice they were there.”

My Story

My anxiety was heightened as I stepped out the door of my house en route to a doctor's appointment. I was 36 weeks pregnant with a baby boy, Henry, who had a birth defect called Posterior Urethral Valve (PUV). His kidneys were beginning to deteriorate because of the blockage in his urinary tract and the pediatric urologist would decide if an early induction should happen the following morning. I already knew Henry needed surgery by three days old to correct this condition, but my weekly sonogram report suggested this surgery might need to happen earlier than anticipated. I was consumed with worry about Henry's well-being when I heard a scream from behind me in the house.

I ran back into my kitchen to find my babysitter running towards me with my two-year-old William in her outstretched arms. He was soaking wet and there was steam rising from his clothes. The potful of water that splashed on him had been boiling. My then four-year-old daughter, Catherine looked on as I ripped off William's shirt to find the skin had melted off not only his face and neck, but chest and both arms down to his fingertips. At this point, my husband Eddie who was home early to accompany me to the pediatric urologist entered the kitchen and immediately took William to the car. Instead of the waiting room of the pediatric urologist, I found myself in the ER with William on my lap perched up against my swollen belly as a team of doctors worked to stabilize him.

By the next morning, we were settled into the ICU Burn Unit. William went into the OR for debridement of his wounds covering 16 percent of his small body and a regenerative skin treatment that the doctors hoped would prevent skin graft surgery. We remained in the burn unit for a week before being sent home to see if William would heal in a more comfortable environment and escape another surgery. Due to William's situation it was decided Henry should stay put in my womb provided his kidney damage didn't progress. My pregnancy was closely monitored and I was grateful for every moment I was able to remain with William because I was his sole source of comfort during a very painful time.

Two weeks following William's injury it was clear his burns were not going to heal, so we headed back to the hospital for skin graft surgery. By this point, I was contracting frequently from the stress of the situation. Still, Henry stayed snug inside my womb through William's five-hour surgery and weeklong stay in the burn unit. He even gave us a three-night respite at home before making his grand entrance to the world.

When Henry was born, he was a strong healthy boy. To my amazement, the ureters I had monitored for so long were no longer enlarged and his kidneys were fully functioning. Surgery could wait and Henry was very much our miracle baby. While it was a difficult experience for my family, in so many ways it could have been worse. Because of medical advances in burn care, William not only survived a very severe burn injury, but regained full mobility and his scars are mostly in areas that can be concealed with clothing.

Still, there was a time of struggle following our immediate crisis. I was juggling a newborn, a two-year-old with a burn injury and a four-year-old who had been a witness to a traumatic event. In the year following William's injury, I learned how arduous recovery from a burn injury can be. Compression garments, scar tissue massage and the deep emotional wounds that also need to heal were a few challenges in burn recovery I did not expect. I frequently wondered and worried about Henry's condition. At birth, his naturally dehydrated urinary tract appeared normal, but with time symptoms of PUV reappeared. It was with hope and fear that I laid him down onto the operating table for anesthesia before his surgery at six months old. Only after this surgery was behind us was I able to fully see how my daughter, Catherine had suffered. How does a parent ever make up for the lost love and support a sibling of a sick or injured child suffers? For so long, Catherine was swept aside because the needs of her brothers trumped hers.

As we made our way through the first anniversary of William's accident and then celebrated Henry's first birthday, I was hopeful our struggles would finally begin to fade into the past. Henry's first steps and thriving health, then William's resilient spirit along with my quiet knowledge of the new baby growing in my womb seemed to validate this thought. While the pregnancy was unexpected, Eddie and I always dreamed of having a family with four children. We couldn't have been more excited about this surprise.

But at twelve weeks there was a large sub chorionic hematoma (this is a fancy word for blood clot in the womb) that threatened to terminate the pregnancy. We held our breath for two weeks but the blood clot passed completely and the baby was unharmed. After Henry's situation, I took ominous sonogram warnings with a grain of salt. The sight of a healthy baby dancing around on the screen couldn't have been a more joy-filled moment.

Our relief and joy was short-lived because our baby passed suddenly and painlessly that night at home. I held my baby boy who was born too soon in the palm of my hand before making the choice to move forward for the sake of my family. I was desperate to recover from this new trauma, but my health was compromised by the bits of placenta embedded too deeply in my uterus. It took two surgeries and eventually chemotherapy over a three-month period to rid the remains of the pregnancy. This experience following William's accident led me to rethink my understanding of hope. As a result, I have a more realistic view that doesn't depend on tomorrow being better than today.

Now, my greatest hope is that I always find the strength to endure whatever it is tomorrow will bring. Having survived a crisis or two, I certainly am a changed woman. I would give anything to erase my most painful moments, but they are a part of who I am now. Instead, I must learn to accept them and in doing so I choose to see the ways in which I am better because of what I have endured. I might not have much control over what happens in my life, but I certainly can choose how I view it and therefore how it will define me.

I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I have learned that suffering one crisis does not protect you from other suffering. But I have learned a great deal about inner strength, love, resilience and self-compassion. They helped me survive in the past, they shore me up in the present, and they will be with me when I face what the future brings.

The choice to notice how much OTHER PEOPLE MATTER.

"If I could sum of positive psychology in one sentence it is this," Professor Peterson says before he clicks the remote for the projector. A new slide illuminates the screen with three simple words,

"Other People Matter."

Chris Peterson opened his lecture in a course called Character Strengths and Virtues which was one of my first during the immersion weekend of classes in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) with a simple yet captivating statement about the scientific study of what makes life worth living.¹ Peterson went on to explain that building relationships with people makes us happy. Through relationships we are connected to something larger than ourselves, which leads to meaning and purpose.

"If you do the small things over and over again you will build connections with other people and in that you will find a life that is worth living." By the small things, he meant small acts of kindness and moments when we make an effort to connect. It was obvious that Peterson believed in what he was telling us because he was always engaging with someone, especially to his students. Peterson was among the 100 most cited psychologists in the world, but connecting with his students it appeared, was paramount.²

I understood what Peterson was saying. I valued the relationships in my life both big and small. I have always been a "people person" who loves to listen to a new life story, and I thrive on connections. Still, it wasn't until I had children of my own that I learned how powerful a force another person could be. On even my worst days, I get out of bed and keep going because of my children.

I used to think my children provided the most powerful examples of the ways that other people matter in our lives, but I was wrong. For me to fully realize what Peterson meant, it took the support of caring nurses and the acts of friends and family who stopped at nothing to help me during a difficult time. When I found myself in the ICU burn unit with my two-year-old in the final month of my pregnancy, the unconditional support of both strangers and friends lifted me up when I couldn't find the motivation to move forward by myself.

I saw how crucial other people are in the application of positive psychology because there were so many moments when I was stuck. When I say stuck, I mean I was sad, depressed, frustrated, and genuinely uncertain about how I was going to face what was before me. These were moments it might have been helpful to pull out a trick or two from my positive psychology toolbox - perhaps a walk, a cup of tea, focusing on my blessings, or maybe a mindfulness meditation. Yet in many moments of frustration and sadness, I lacked the motivation to try. In fact, I would further my painful rumination by chastising myself for "knowing better" because after all, I had earned a master's degree in happiness.

During the hard times it was other people who mattered, period. Maybe it was a nurse recognizing I needed a break who found a way for me to sneak a shower. Maybe it was another nurse who sparked up a conversation about something that had nothing to do with the hospital setting. Maybe it was opening my email inbox and reading a note of love and encouragement from an old friend. Maybe it was a caring and compassionate insurance representative on the other end of the phone line. Other people helped me move forward when I didn't think I could. Love, compassion, and kindness from those closest to me, and often, complete strangers pulled me through.

In the aftermath of the crisis, I openly and vulnerably share my story. I do so because there are so many others who shared their most vulnerable moments with me, and those stories and small connections have continually given me the strength to move forward. Now I need to pay it forward because of the mother who told me about losing her child to cancer at 19 years old, the mother with a severely autistic child, the mother of the precious girl who is battling Leukemia, the mother who gave

birth to a stillborn, and the mother of a burn survivor who knows the unspoken pain about dressing changes and the unpredictable nature of burns. These are just a few of the women who have deeply touched me by being open and sharing their stories. Those small connections have influenced me greatly. I am humbled and comforted knowing that we all struggle in life. I am not alone, and neither are you. We just need to make the choice to allow these connections to happen to us.

Psychologists Walton and Cohen have shown us that simply knowing you are not alone and having a sense of belonging have the power to initiate healing.³

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson shows us that positive emotion resonates when two people share it. It is important to remember that love resides within connections so focusing on connections can help you greatly.⁴

Applying the concept of other people matter during a difficult time is as simple as noticing those orbiting around you, but here are a few ideas about how to build on it:

1. Say thank you. Outwardly expressing gratitude is proven to increase positive emotion, but it also breeds good will and kindness.
2. Take note of those you are grateful for in your life. You can even go so far as to write down the good things other people have done for you in a journal at the end of each day. Share your story. When you are open, others are open to sharing as well. You never know when a deep and powerful connection will arise out of your willingness to be open and vulnerable.

The choice to be OPTIMISTIC.

"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another." ~William James

When William was injured, my husband, Eddie took William to the car immediately. We both knew we didn't have time to wait for an ambulance. For just a moment, I stayed behind intending to find his pacifier and blanket. Before I could take a single step to find the items, which would soothe William, I collapsed. The babysitter, who had been with him when it happened, swept in and lifted me up. Then she looked me in the eyes and demanded that I be strong for both of my boys, the one in my womb and the one suffering in the car.

By the time I rushed out to the car, I was calm, collected, and strong. There had been a moment in the kitchen when I was tempted to disengage as I looked down a very dark tunnel of despair. But the babysitter ignited something in me. I became determined to act as if the situation would have a good outcome.

In the ER, the scene was abuzz with commotion as William sat on my lap screaming, "Take my ouches away," while the doctors stabilized him. Before I could blink they had layered gauze on William's burns, put an IV in his foot, hooked up blood pressure and heart monitors, inserted the Foley catheter, and started morphine. Because of the location and severity of the burns a doctor warned me, "There is a great risk of shock due to the size of the burn. This can lead to cardiac arrest. Also, the location on his chest and neck can cause him to stop breathing at any moment if it begins to swell. You need to be prepared for that." I nodded as though his words didn't mean that William's burn was so bad I could lose him.

Given my late stage of pregnancy, labor could begin at any moment. I wanted more than anything to stay with my injured son because I was his sole source of comfort. I knew that intense emotion could send me into labor. I was exhausted and scared. I wanted to go home, curl up in bed and pretend this horrible accident hadn't happened, but as a mother I had to put on a brave face. I understood this doctor's warning perfectly, but in that moment I felt that I had to believe otherwise. William was not going to die. He was a strong boy. He would pull through.

After parking the car, Eddie came into the ER with a look of desperation on his face. Seeing his fear, I was relieved he had missed the news I just heard. Perhaps to convince us both the situation wasn't as bad as it really was I looked at him and said, "William is going to be ok. Everything seems so very scary right now, and what lies ahead won't be easy, but we will get through it." The skeptical glance by the doctor showed he thought I was in denial, but with every cell of my being, I was determined to pull my family through this crisis. Denial or not, when I told my husband we would get through whatever the injury brought, I meant it. Optimism was the only fighting chance I had.

The ER doctor had given me his projection, a possible but not definite outcome. I had a range of possible interpretations I could choose to believe. William dying was one interpretation. William surviving was another. Both were possibilities in that moment. The ER doctor could argue that my perspective was dangerously unrealistic because I would not be prepared if the worst-case scenario occurred. But if William died, I could have dealt with that reality when it occurred. There was nothing to be gained by focusing on the fear of my child dying in that moment when a team of doctors were working to stabilize him as he sat on my lap. Despite believing that the doctor's warning was well intended, William dying was not reality, only a possible future reality. Because I chose not to believe it yet, I remained calm.

Dr. Sandra Schneider's research points out that realism and optimism are not necessarily in conflict.¹ In a given situation, there are often several interpretations that can be made of the known facts. In this case, they were "William will die," and "William will live." Where facts allow, we can choose the interpretation that puts us in the best position in that moment, but still be aware that we may have to change our thinking as new facts emerge. I was aware of the gravity of William's situation, but unless his vitals were crashing, it wasn't helpful to believe he was going to die. That made me a realistic optimist.

My realistic optimism kept me from panicking. It probably kept my labor from starting that night, so Henry had longer to mature in my womb. It also helped me be emotionally present for William who needed my comfort. I like to think that the initial choice of realistic optimism started a ripple effect of other choices that helped me to cope with William in and out of the ICU during the final month of my high-risk pregnancy.

So how do we apply realistic optimism when facing adversity?

First, we need to choose **optimism**:

The science of positive psychology is predicated on the fact that maintaining an optimistic perspective is a factor of well-being. Some of us are born with a higher threshold of optimism than others, which explains why optimism might be easier for some and harder for others. But Dr. Martin Seligman who began his twenty years of research on optimism when he discovered that an optimistic explanatory style worked against helplessness, points out that regardless of where we are on the scale of optimism, we can learn to have more.² As his book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, explains, optimism is what often differentiates people who persevere from people give up in the face of adversity.³

Second, we cannot forget to remain grounded in **reality**:

There are many critics of optimism who will argue that being overly optimistic will evolve into self-deception. Indeed, completely ignoring negative facts is not a healthy choice. Yet as Schneider suggests, we can be realistic optimists who assess the current situation with a keen eye. A realistic optimist will recognize both positive and negative aspects of any given situation, yet choose to focus on the positive. We need to keep comparing what we choose to believe against the facts available. If there are multiple interpretations possible, we can deliberately choose the one most helpful to us. If the facts change, then we update what we choose to believe to match. In a situation where the facts are unclear, choose the interpretation of the situation, which will be most helpful.

The choice to focus on what you are GRATEFUL for.

“Searching for and being thankful for what is positive in every situation digs the tunnel and breaks the stranglehold of despair.” ~Robert Emmons

Not only do I have Emmons’s book, *Thanks: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* on my bookshelf, he was a guest speaker in my master’s program.¹ I sat in a classroom taking notes while the world’s leading expert on gratitude insisted that not only will a grateful attitude help, it is essential when you going through a hard time.

I heard Emmons loud and clear, but I was arrogant when it came to gratitude. Because it is one of my signature character strengths, gratitude surfaced organically in ordinary life. When I met roadblocks, I didn’t sit down and use an intervention of gratitude to increase my positive affect. I assumed it was always there and working and that leaning on it wouldn’t make a difference.

After William was injured, we spent several weeks in and out of the ICU burn unit where he underwent two surgeries. During this stressful time, if I wasn’t overwhelmed by grief and fear, I was ruminating about what happened and what I could have done differently. At some point I realized this state of despair was not helpful, so I had nothing to lose by trying some of the interventions I had tucked away from my studies of positive psychology. In the throes of crisis, gratitude was the easiest intervention for me to reach for. It was always effective in helping me to shift out of a negative perspective.

Let me illustrate this with my experience applying a gratitude intervention when William was recovering from skin graft surgery. “Three Good Things” is an exercise of listing what we are grateful for in a journal.² This simple technique has been shown to have a positive effect on reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, while simultaneously increasing a sense of joy and well-being.

When I remembered gratitude could shift my perspective, William was raw from a procedure that harvested skin from his buttocks (donor site) that was sewn onto his chest and right arm. The surgeon insisted that the donor site be exposed to air, but the delicate grafts did not allow William to lie face down. Further complicating this order was William’s right arm, bandaged in an immobile 90-degree angle. We balanced him in a peculiar position on his side, but before long, he began to swell. Then he could barely speak, let alone eat or drink. William required nutrition to heal, or his body would reject the graft. This led to my state of despair.

I had no intention of formally writing down the blessings I was searching for as the exercise suggests. Further, I was skeptical it was appropriate given the situation. But feeling frustrated was distracting me from focusing on William, and ruminating was not going to alleviate his pain. I had nothing to lose by consciously seeking gratitude.

I was desperately looking for something to appreciate when my favorite night nurse, Rhonda, began her shift. Determined and creative, Rhonda found a position that brought William comfort. Her attentive care was blessing number one. I had a well-needed laugh at the absurdity of holding William in my arms, outstretched beyond my pregnant belly so his bottom could “air dry” and his swelling drain. Next I shifted my attention to my husband, Eddie, who was scrambling to bring me water and replay a scene in the movie *Shrek* at William’s command. I was fortunate our daughter was in the care of family members so that Eddie could be a source of physical and emotional support. With that came blessing number two. Immediately, I realized that while it was extremely difficult to see my little boy in even more pain, he was now out of surgery and in my arms. This meant we were on the road to recovery. Blessing number three was the gift of time. With this major surgery behind us, I had seen William through the worst of the situation before needing to focus on Henry’s birth and health complications.

For the remainder of our hospital stay, I relied on gratitude, on seeking my blessings in the hard

moments because recovery from skin graft surgery is arduous. As I applied gratitude along William's journey to recovery I found it was easy, it was abundant, and the larger picture became one of a family relying on strengths to endure. The more I expressed gratitude, the better I felt. My expression of gratitude was a theme in my blog, which was a powerful tool for me. When I put my reflections of gratitude in writing, I set an intention for a grateful perspective I was determined to keep.

Even though I consider myself good at gratitude, during this hard time, I had to work at it. Sometimes my act of gratitude was as simple as saying, "Thank you" and really meaning it. Maybe it was acknowledging an email of care and concern or genuinely thanking a nurse for helping me. But when I tapped into gratitude, I found hope. This, I assure you, is much like sadness leading to anger. During a hard time I found an uplifting spiral of positive emotion could be just as natural as a downward spiral of rumination. Gratitude is always how I initiated the more productive upward spiral towards hope.

I call my experience a beautiful crisis because of all the beauty I saw in a difficult time. The beauty was always in the blessings I recognized. Through the lens of gratitude, I was surrounded by love and support. I walk away from it all knowing that in the darkest moment there were blessings. I just had to choose to notice they were there.

Here is a formal explanation of how to apply Three Good Things (also known as Three Blessings) as I learned it from Christopher Peterson's Primer on Positive Psychology:³

Several scientific studies suggest counting your blessings on a regular basis will make you happier and more content with life. Specifically, research suggests the act of writing down three good things that went well at the end of the day will have the most powerful effect in initiating a shift to a more grateful perspective.

Method

At the end of each day, after dinner and before going to sleep, write down three things that went well during the day. Do this every night for a week. The three things you list can be relatively small in importance ("My husband picked up my favorite ice cream for dessert on the way home from work today") or relatively large in importance ("My sister just gave birth to a healthy baby boy"). After each positive event on your list, answer it in your own words with the question "Why did this good thing happen?" For example, you might speculate that your husband picked up ice cream "because he can be really thoughtful" or "because I remembered to call him from work and remind him to stop by the grocery store." When asked why your sister gave birth to a healthy baby boy, you might explain, "God was looking out for her" or "She did everything right during her pregnancy."

Summary

Each night before you go to sleep:

- 1 Think of three good things that happened today.
- 2 Write them down.
- 3 Reflect on why they happened

To further expand on the Three Good Things exercise and make it a family activity, you can find inspiration from the following article published on the Positive Psychology News website: "Three Good Things": A 7 Year Old's View on Three Blessings.⁴

The choice to be MINDFUL.

"There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious." ~ Carl G. Jung

I learned mindfulness in a yoga studio and in workshops on meditation. Give me a tidy neat mat in a room closed off from the outside world for an hour, and I can give my full, undivided, nonjudgmental attention to my thoughts.

But out in the world, mindfulness becomes a challenge. In a crowded supermarket with my children throwing tantrums or in the kitchen cooking dinner and overseeing home chaos, then it is hard to remember. Being mindful is one thing, but remembering to be mindful when you most need to be is a whole different concept.

In our society, there are so many distractions, so many ways to numb our feelings. Prescription drugs, a glass of wine, exercise (to the extreme) all can either numb pain or release endorphins that distance us from discomfort.

When I was in the ICU with William, I wanted to vent my fears and frustration by running a mile as fast as I could, and then by downing a glass...or two... of wine. But given my vulnerable pregnant state, neither were options. Had I been at home with William, I could have kept myself busy doing laundry and preparing dinner. But there were only so many times I could re-organize a tiny hospital room. Besides, being out of physical contact with William upset him. I was his comfort. I was his pain management.

So I sat there beside him, with the fleeting thoughts of the distraction of adult TV, but his need for Shrek on repeat to keep him calm outweighed my desire for some mindless reality TV. Periodically, I sent emails to friends, and when I was really bored and fidgety, I played CandyCrush on my phone, but that is only distracting for so long.

So I entered a time of stillness. It was a painful time. Without any distractions or ways to be numb, I was forced to be present.

I cannot say it was easy, but I faced all that discomfort head on with no armor to protect me. Looking back, I realize there is so much beauty in my memories. Because I was forced to experience the pain, I was able to catch the full range of emotions present in any moment. In a time when pain was prevalent, there were also joy and humor and kindness. I just had to look harder to notice them.

Moments, like thoughts and emotions, are fleeting. We don't live in them forever. That means that when a moment is hard we know it won't always be hard (this too shall pass) and when it is good, sadly the happiness won't remain (the importance of savoring).

When William was screaming and hard to soothe, I focused on being fully present with him so that I could do whatever I needed to get him comfortable. So when a nurse came in to help me, our mutually focused effort led to a connection with a shared laugh (humor). Moments of humor are prevalent in my memories. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn suggests mindfulness is, "Paying attention to the present moment with intention, while letting go of judgment, as if your life depends on it."¹ Certainly, I was present in those difficult moments as though my son's life depended on it.

Yes, it was a hard time, but in the hard and tough there was good. That is what I choose to see and remember. The experience has taught me to look for the good in anything I need to face. It is always

there, if I can be focused and mindful enough to be present in the moment.

Through practice, mindfulness helps dissolve worries of the future and thoughts of the past that keep you awake at night and drain your energy. Even so, many people are unaware of the potential of mindfulness as a way of catalyzing healing and transformation, especially if practiced regularly, preferably on a daily basis, both formally, using guided meditations, and informally, in awareness of what's going on in everyday life.

Here are a few tips to apply mindfulness and be present even in the difficult times:

1. Learn to practice mindfulness by starting with a guided meditation.² Mindfulness meditation can be a catalyst for healing and transformation in one's life, especially if practiced regularly.
2. Set an alarm on your phone for three different times. Each time the alarm goes off, pause and pay close attention to exactly what is happening in that moment. Once you are checked into the moment, notice what is good, and acknowledge what might be negative. Once you have a realistic assessment of the moment you are being present for, decide what it is you can take away from that particular moment that will help you grow. By repeating this "check in" regularly, you develop the habit of pausing to be mindful in a very busy world.
3. Learn about the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Dr. John Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.³ In a number of studies, a majority of participants had lower pain-related drug use and higher activity levels and feelings of self-esteem.

The choice to exercise RESILIENCE.

"Resilience is not all or nothing. It comes in amounts. You can be a little resilient, a lot resilient; resilient in some situations but not others. And, no matter how resilient you are today, you can become more resilient tomorrow.

~Karen Reivich

For most of my life, I was a dancer. I started each day at the barre, gently waking up my muscles and reminding them of the potential they had to flex and stretch. Starting with breath and posture the movements were small and gradually increased as my body warmed for the demands of the day, which could be a performance, an audition or simply a rehearsal. I spent countless hours of my life sculpting and stretching, turning and leaping as I prepared for what was to come.

I had a keen awareness of my body from dancing. When I began my positive psychology studies, I noticed the ways that maintaining my mental health paralleled what I had practiced my whole life as a dancer. Positive psychology suggests that happiness is a product of our pursuits. Thus, we have to work at wellbeing. As a dancer I sought comfort in work and routine because I knew the result would be increased physical strength and ability. As a psychology student, I reveled in the knowledge that I could strengthen and hone my positive affect like a muscle.

I had the opportunity to study under Karen Reivich, one of the lead researchers on resilience.¹ Using a blend of cognitive behavior therapy and positive psychology, Reivich spearheaded a program to build resilience in adolescents and later the U. S. Army under the Penn Resiliency Project.² In her training sessions, I learned about the skills we can develop to prevent depression and anxiety. During my crises, I knew how to recognize catastrophic thinking. These were times when I was "hopeless" "anxious" "angry" or "sad" and my perception of reality was very negative. Then I could work to reclaim a more balanced perspective. Learning to balance emotion is hard work, something I work at every day. But I am getting better at it, which means I am increasing my emotional resiliency.

I didn't just walk into Radio City Music Hall and get hired as a Rockette, I worked at it for years. Similarly, there is no short cut in happiness. But just as my muscles grew stronger with effort, so can my emotional resiliency. As a dancer I could recognize if I was off balance. I knew enough about my body to make adjustments and strive for strong and fluid movement. Similarly, I recognize when my emotions start spiraling downward, and I know the tools and techniques I can use to bring my emotions back into balance.

A rehearsal or performance goes on regardless of my physical wellbeing, so I had to find a way not only to work through the kinks, but to prevent illness or injury. Proper food fueled my muscles, vitamin supplements strengthened my immune system, and stretches and exercises prevented injury. Now that I have studied the techniques that protect my mental wellbeing, I blend my physical and emotional health habits into daily practice. Much of my healthy lifestyle feels natural, but it comes from years of the habitual practices I developed as a dancer.

Since the terrifying moment of William's accident and my choice to be optimistic, I have eagerly applied tools from positive psychology to the never-ending performance that is my life. As a mother, the show must always go on. I have three little lives to nurture and a husband to cherish. In the year following William's accident and Henry's birth, applying a blend of techniques targeting my physical and emotional wellbeing was crucial to foster my resiliency. I can say I am on the road to recovery and yes, in many ways I am thriving after this crisis, but my wellbeing didn't just happen. Happiness didn't just reappear as my family healed. Every day I hope and pull and fight my way to "better."

Here is how we can deal with moments of panic, self-blame, or anger and strengthen our resilience:

1. Deep breathing or meditation. Yes it sounds simple, but deep calming breaths will have a physically calming effect on your body so you will be better able to calm your mental state.
2. Once you are calm, think of something that increases your positive emotion. My go-to for this is to infuse gratitude in some way, but it can be looking at a picture of someone you love or using humor by telling a joke.
3. After experiencing a positive emotion, try to shift your thinking about the challenge that started the response. Think about the worst case scenario and then the best case scenario. Once you know the extremes, you can choose to allow your focus to lie somewhere in the balanced middle.
4. Remember times when you've faced difficult experiences successfully in the past. We cannot completely avoid adversity. Every time we face a situation, resilience gives us a greater reserve to draw upon the next time we face something difficult.
5. To understand more about resilience, I recommend reading [The Resilience Factor](#).

The choice to find a pathway to HOPE.

Hope

/hōp/

noun

1. a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.
2. a feeling of trust.

verb

1. want something to happen or be the case.

As I started writing about hope, I paused to wonder, What is hope anyway?

In my mind, hope has always been looking forward with the belief that tomorrow will be better than today. During any hard experience and even on ordinary days, I hoped that the days to come would be brighter and more peaceful.

This is how I spent much my life: running from the present moment because I wanted the next to be better. I was striving toward accomplishment because whatever was next was going to be brighter. Whatever cards I was handed, I was bound and determined to make the future better than the present. The character strength, Hope, optimism and future-mindedness was a gift, but at times I pushed it to the extreme.

During our recovery from one medical crisis after another, my view of hope transformed. Hope is an important concept of positive psychology, so I have needed to understand exactly what shift occurred. What does hope mean to me, given my experience of such serious challenges?

I decided I needed a refresher on hope. As I sorted through my notes from a lecture on hope, I was struck by the memory of palliative care physician Chris Feudtner.¹ I remember sitting in stunned silence as he described difficult situation where he asks parents about hope after he has just told them that the death of their child cannot be prevented. I remember thinking, Hope? These parents are losing their child, and you are asking them about hope?

Feudtner told us that he always started by empathizing with their agony. Often, his question, "What are you hoping for?" would elicit the response, "We want a miracle." Then he would allow the family further time. But then they were often able to shift their attention to something they could control, such as hoping that the doctors and nurses would stop poking and prodding their child, or hoping their child will be free of pain at death. Then Feudtner would step in to help them formulate a plan. In unavoidable situations like these, Feudtner describing helping people identify what they wanted, envision a pathway to get there, and gain the belief that they can do something to make the goal occur. Feudtner has helped many grieving parents face reality with greater purpose by helping them locate hope.

Research suggests individuals experience hope when they have an expectation that a desired goal can be achieved.² According to Hope Theory, hope requires 1) goals we wish to attain, 2) awareness about ways to attain those goals ("pathway thoughts") and 3) belief in our ability to successfully follow a chosen pathway ("agency thoughts").

So why did I struggle with hope? Initially, what I was hoping for was impossible. Just like parents wishing for a miracle to keep their child from dying, I was holding onto an unattainable goal that tomorrow would be free from adversity. I hoped that my family would reach a point where everything felt normal again and difficult things no longer happened to us.

This belief that I could carry my family through our crisis to a worry-free time was helpful in the

hospital days, but not in the aftermath. Life continued to happen and brought with it the inevitable blend of good and bad. So many times I thought we were through our time of struggle so that we could have peace. But surviving one crisis doesn't mean we've reached the end of trouble.

Here's an example. Around the year anniversary of William's accident, I celebrated because my unexpected but very welcome pregnancy seemed concrete evidence that my family was entering a happier time. But when I delivered that baby at 15 weeks unexpectedly at home, I wanted to lose hope. What forced me to move forward was the three children who depended on me. My hopefulness was further challenged by three difficult months of medical interventions that were necessary to rid the remains of the pregnancy that ended too soon. During this time, I adopted a more realistic goal:

I hope that I have the strength to handle whatever it is that I need to face tomorrow.

Repeating this mantra has given me a more realistic foundation for hope. It has been crucial in my ability to move forward and heal.

Here is a list of how you can locate hope along with a few examples of how I moved through these steps myself:

1. Look at your goals. Ask yourself, "are they realistic?" The goal of a better and stress-free tomorrow is unrealistic, because of unforeseen events that have created physical and emotional stress.
2. If you find goals that are no longer possible, then what new goals could you adopt in their place? Instead of hoping for tomorrow to be stress-free because I have no control over the physical setbacks I am experiencing, I can only hope that I face tomorrow's challenges with grace and strength.
3. Once you have a realistic goal in mind, think about pathways to that goal. Do you have at least 2 approaches to reach your goal? If tomorrow is even more difficult than today, and I find it hard to be strong, I know I can lean on my husband for support....If I find myself overwhelmed, I will do something nurturing for myself like taking a long walk or going to dinner with a girlfriend.

Remember, roadblocks happen. If you find you are blocked from your goal by circumstances beyond your control, do you have an alternative path that will keep you moving forward?

4. Do you believe you have the strengths within you to move toward your goal? If not, how can you boost your confidence in yourself to meet your goals? How can you better support yourself in achieving this goal? Yes, having survived a crisis...or two...I know that I can handle whatever life brings my way. I just need to always make the choice to seek out what is good in any situation. Maintaining a positive perspective in the most difficult times is always easier when I write. Knowing that writing is my best therapy, I will carve out time to write regularly and if I struggle, I will work out my frustrations through the artistic expression of writing.

The choice to have SELF COMPASSION.

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.” ~ Brené Brown

I recall a conversation I had with my girlfriend, Kristin, who is a bit younger and is yet to start a family. Since she is not yet a member of the motherhood club, there are times I think, how will Kristin understand? How will she relate? But relating and making connections is a beautiful gift that Kristin has. Wise beyond her years and experience, she has always offered me the most caring and compassionate advice. On a particular afternoon I remember relaying to Kristin how disappointed I was that my story was so heavy. I had a story to tell, but it wasn't the one I wanted. I was inspired to write, but the words that were flowing were not the story I anticipated. The stressful time I encountered beginning with my little boy's suffering was NOT supposed to be the way I would bring the message of positive psychology to the world.

Kristin didn't say much in response to this except there was some researcher whose work she knew would help me sort out my feelings about the situation. She mentioned the name Brené Brown. I know she saw me roll my eyes through the phone. She knew I was going to brush the suggestion off by pretending I was too busy to read a book. After all, she wasn't a mother, she didn't understand. I left the conversation satisfied to have had an opportunity to vent my frustrations and move on. But Kristin wasn't letting me off the hook. After our phone call ended, she sent me a YouTube video of Brown's TED talk on vulnerability.¹

Now that she was forcing the matter, I caved and watched the video. I was half distracted by the kids when it started, so I paused it, decided this was a necessary moment for the television to babysit my children and returned to Brown's talk. I was awed by this woman's research, in which she codes stories of adversity. Brown has discovered there are people who come through a difficult time whole-hearted (resilient and optimistic) while others end up broken-hearted (depressed). Vulnerability is the variable that differentiates between the two outcomes. It seems the broken-hearted tend to numb the pain they face in adversity. The problem with this is that we cannot selectively numb our emotions. Therefore, when we avoid what is negative, we lose out on what is positive.

I understood this because throughout my crisis, I had a heightened sense of fear, pain and sadness but I also experienced gratitude and love like never before. When William was injured, I was eight months pregnant and having contractions. That meant I couldn't go for a long run to release the endorphins that would mask my fear or drink a glass of wine to dull my anxiety. There were no chores to keep me distracted because I was stuck with William in a hospital bed wrapped up in a constant snuggle. In other words, my situation did not allow me to numb the pain (trust me, I wanted to) and I had no choice but to be fully present in a difficult experience.

Having been forced to dwell in vulnerability, I made it through adversity unbroken. Realizing this, immediately purchased *Daring Greatly: How our Courage to Remain Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*.² I devoured this book (even though I had no time to read) along with the rest of her books.³ There is a theme in Brown's writing not only about the importance of vulnerability but of believing we are worthy of love and belonging regardless of imperfection. With Brown's message about self-compassion in my head, I decided to stop being so hard on myself. I had been carrying a lot of guilt about William's accident. I had ruminated about the ways I had failed him. If I had been in the kitchen instead of the babysitter, the accident would not have happened. If I had been more careful about making sure she knew my safety standards, it would not have happened. If I had paid attention to what was happening in the kitchen as I got ready to leave, it would not have happened...By practicing self-compassion, I was able to forgive myself and let those thoughts go.

This is when I realized it was not the events that had transpired in my life, but my own shame, guilt

and fear that was holding me back from healing. By appreciating vulnerability and having self-compassion, I forgave myself for all those moments I wasn't as strong as I should have been, because I am imperfect. My best might have fallen short of many standards, but I tried. And from the mistakes I have made, I have learned.

I have survived a crisis with a whole-heart because I was forced to be vulnerable. Now, I strive to remain vulnerable and by accepting my imperfection, I have found the courage to write about a very difficult and intimate experience. In doing so, I have fulfilled my goal of bringing a message of positive psychology to the world, even though it is not the way I intended to.

Julie Hall and Frank Fincham have found that self-forgiveness is associated with positive self-esteem, and higher life satisfaction.⁴ Hall and Fincham suggest that self-forgiveness can lead to restoring one's self-respect by moving through four phases, which I describe below with an example of how I used them myself:

1. During the **uncovering phase**, learn to recognize your own denial, guilt and shame: I wish I could go back and redo the course of events leading up to William's accident. There are a thousand things I would have done differently to prevent his suffering. I carry a lot of guilt for not protecting my child from suffering.

2. In the **decision phase**, decide to have change of heart and desire more positive feelings: The guilt and shame I have because of William's accident is beginning to negatively impact my life. It is time for me to accept what happened and let it go. But how?

3. During the **work phase**, develop new self-awareness and self-compassion: I know that every day I wake up and parent my children to the best of my ability. I could not love them more. Accidents happen. While we can do everything we can to prevent them, in many cases we must accept that sometimes things occur which are out of our control. William's accident doesn't determine my success as his mother, but my reaction to it all certainly does.

4. Finally in the **outcome phase**, learn to stop activating painful thoughts about the offense and choose a more helpful explanatory style about what you experienced: Through all we have experienced, I see the ways in which my family has become stronger. Eddie and I are more committed as parents and make every attempt to savor the moments we have with our children.

Notes & References

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Self Compassion

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