

Blessed, broken and given



Clare Sultmann

believing



Greetings, my name is Clare.

It is a privilege to be with you and an honour to share a reflection at this special time of the Church's year.

Our stories are never fixed. They can change in a heartbeat through no fault of our own. What becomes important when we are faced with the unexpected, and perhaps the traumatic, is our attitude, our resilience.

Right up to the year 2000 my life-story was, I thought, going to plan – educated in Catholic Schools, state and national representative honours in sport; university degrees in business and law. I had a work placement in a multi-national firm in Sydney while living at the iconic Bondi Beach. I was 23. I had planned everything and my life was going according to the plan. How things can change and how they did change. In the words of the former Archbishop of Brisbane, the Most Reverend John Bathersby: *If you want to make God laugh, plan your life.*

On the 18 August 2000 my life changed. The day started out no differently to any other. I got up, got dressed and proceeded to go for my usual 10km morning jog. I ran the same route everyday. About 100 metres from my unit I crossed onto a pedestrian crossing as I had done for the previous eight months. I looked both ways and proceeded to cross. At the same time a garbage truck rounded the corner and, by the driver's own admission, 'failed to see me', so kept going. The truck stopped, but on top of me. I was trapped in its wheels and underbelly for 37 minutes. I was conscious the whole time.

It is hard to describe the pain. A deep burning sensation would perhaps describe it best, yet does no justice to the immense trauma I was experiencing. I was given an abundance of morphine – to quote one ambo: 'enough to kill a horse'. After the police rescue squad freed me from the truck I was taken to St Vincent's Hospital. I was triage code one. The worst there is; typically reserved for life threatening situations. My chief surgeon described my situation: 'She looks like someone we would normally see in an anatomical dissecting room in a morgue'. Three specialist surgeons, vascular, reconstructive and orthopaedic worked on saving my life and limbs for over 13 hours.

My first question after 2 days in an induced coma: 'Do I have my legs?' 'Yes BUT' – and the BUT was huge.

For the initial months of my hospital stay I was confined to lying flat in bed and, eventually was able to venture short distances from my hospital room in a wheelchair. This was soon to transition into the beginnings of learning to stand with assistance, moving short distances and ultimately to reach the door and take a few aided steps into the corridor. Learning to walk again (ever so gradually) involved my open wounds seeping through bandages and the blood falling onto the corridor floor. In most instances mum would walk behind me and up mop up the remains.

After months at St Vincent's Hospital I was taken to a rehabilitation hospital, St Luke's, where I continued on my pathway to walk again and become independent. During my stint in rehab I began to adjust to living more normally. The things we all take for granted I learnt to do again. Little things like: Toileting out of bed for the first time in months; having lunch at a table; sitting in a chair for the first time in months. I was eventually discharged from St Luke's hospital – some six months after I had first been admitted to St Vincent's.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Blessed
+
Broken

What was critical in my story was the support I received from my family and friends. To quote John Churton Collins: *In prosperity our friends know us, in adversity we know our friends.* I had unflinching support from my mother, my father and my extended family and I had unwavering loyalty and solidarity from my friends, many of whom I had gone to school and university with. It was without doubt this support and love that got me through. As well, support often came from the most unlikely quarters and again I was reminded to look beyond the physical and seemingly obvious.

After St Luke's, I continued to live in Sydney. It was in so many ways, swings and roundabouts. The repeated pattern was surgeries (37), hospitalisation and rehab. Besides this hazy fog of trauma recovery I had to, for my own sanity, have another focus. This included being admitted as solicitor, completing a Masters Degree in law, working part-time in barristers chambers and continuing to write my story.

In December 2005, I returned to Brisbane and in April 2006 began working in a voluntary capacity with the Brisbane based charity Youngcare which unbeknown to me, changed my life once again. Youngcare was founded in 2005 by David Conry, Nick Bonifant, Matthew Lawson and Simon Lockyer. David's wife Shevaune had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1998 aged 26. At age 33 she needed a place that could provide for her 24/7 care needs. This remarkable organisation has done tremendous work providing individuals, such as Shevaune, appropriate care that upholds their dignity and self-worth. In August 2012, at age 40, Shevaune died, but her ongoing legacy is this wonderful organisation that supports young people with a disability by providing greater choice in housing and care options. The time at Youngcare was for me a blessing. To quote Gandhi: *The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.*

What has helped me to move forward came from my mother. 'It's not the accident that will define you but what you do with it and where you go from here.' This gave me a belief that although I couldn't control what had happened to me I could control what I did afterwards and how I went about getting on with my life. Another piece of advice came from one of my best friends who said: 'You are so much more than your injuries'. A huge lesson for me – I shouldn't, and don't now, define myself by my legs. They are two incredibly scarred, barely functioning and disabled legs, yet they are mine and they don't define me as a person. Me is so much more. I have come to learn that we should never define ourselves on what we believe are our greatest shortcomings. Our spirit, our strength of character and our inner self are more important than outward appearance.

Over the past nearly 17 years I have questioned God on a number of occasions, yet I never stopped believing. Very early on after the accident I asked the question so many times: 'Why me?' In many ways, although my questions have stopped, I still don't understand why I had my accident. I will never know. Yet what I do know is that my life now is full of love and blessings.

I said working with Youngcare changed my life. It did and in a good way. I met my husband at the opening of the first ever Youngcare Apartments in December 2007. We were married in June 2010 and we have three children. William aged 6, Joseph 5 and Amelia 18 months. We live in Noosa and although I am not practicing as a lawyer I continue to work in a different capacity. My autobiographical account of the accident, *Standing On My Own Two Feet*, was published in May 2013 and I am about to launch a website called *Dear Molly* pertaining to women supporting women.

I live with the repercussions of my accident every day. In fact twice this year I have contracted cellulitis because of damaged lymphatic system, bad circulation, lost arteries and veins. I live with a permanent limp, I cannot run, I will never be an active parent. I will never be able to take a bike ride with my children because my right knee doesn't bend. There are so many things I cannot do now because of the accident – legs horribly scarred and disfigured, I can hardly walk without shoes on, I wear pressure stockings all the time – built up shoes. The list goes on.

If I were to focus on what I can't do, what I've lost, I'd be a mess. Instead I focus on what I can do and I think of how lucky I am. I am here; standing before you on my own two feet when so many said I'd never do that. I have a wonderful husband, three beautiful children, incredibly supportive parents and loyal and longstanding friends. I feel so incredibly blessed.

I hope my story allows you to know more clearly that light follows dark; life goes on; you can do it and you are never alone. Hold fast to the Spirit within, among, and beyond us all, and be courageous and responsible for the gift that you are.

Thank you for your time. The privilege of this experience has been your attention and I am very grateful.

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