

## Joni Eareckson Tada on Ableism

Eareckson Tada, J., 2001. *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

**Chapter 1:** Joni Eareckson Tada is on a beach in Chesapeake Bay; she dives into the cool, clean water and feels her head strike something hard and unyielding. She lies motionless in the water, unable to move, and fears she will drown; eventually, she is spotted and rescued by her sister, who carries her off the beach and into an ambulance. She wakes up in an intensive care unit (ICU) attached to a Stryker frame (which allows nurses to rotate her body). She gradually realises that she has a broken neck, and that her life is incredibly fragile.

**Chapter 2:** during her time in the ICU, Joni Eareckson Tada thinks about her life; in particular, her father, mother and sisters, who all led a charmed life with her; the accident broke her father, but her mother and sisters remained strong. In the ICU, she also thinks about the Young Life camp at which she became a Christian, the temptation she faced whilst dating her boyfriend of the time, and her despondency after graduating from high school. She felt lost before her accident, and prayed to God to give her a sign and intervene in her life.

**Chapter 3:** a month passes and Joni Eareckson Tada is still in the ICU. The doctors successfully perform fusion surgery on her, but explain that it will not cure her paralysis; the best case scenario is that she will regain the use of her hands. This news shatters her parents, and for the first time since her accident she prays for her own death. She is shocked by some visitors who react badly to seeing her, so asks her best friend to bring her a mirror; she is horrified by her appearance, and asks for help committing suicide. Eventually she starts physical therapy.

**Chapter 4:** after a total of three and a half months at City Hospital, Joni Eareckson Tada is discharged to Greenoaks, a physical therapy and rehabilitation centre. She finds the routine monotonous, because the centre is short-staffed; she has to wait a month to have her hair washed. Her best friend and boyfriend from before her accident, Dick Filbert, stop visiting, but Diana White, a Christian from Young Life, drops by more frequently. Eventually, her physical therapy begins in earnest; she regains very limited movement in her arms and feels some tingling sensations.

**Chapter 5:** at Christmas, Joni Eareckson Tada is allowed home for the day; it brings up a variety of difficult emotions, and she bursts into tears when she returns to Greenoaks. Dick Filbert resumes his visits, but does so as a friend rather than a boyfriend. Joni Eareckson Tada is abused and threatened by a nurse at Greenoaks and begins to believe that God has forsaken her. She befriends a paralysed young man, Jim Pollard, who does not believe in God; he encourages her to read existentialist authors and accept both atheism and the meaninglessness of life.

**Chapter 6:** Diana White decides to become a volunteer at Greenoaks. Joni Eareckson Tada begins to renew her belief in God, rejects existentialism, and returns to regularly reading the Bible. She decides to work out what God's plan for her is. She begins occupational therapy, and learns how to use her mouth to write, paint, and mould clay. At Christmas, she is allowed home and learns that she has a place at a progressive rehabilitation centre in Los Angeles, Rancho Los Amigos, where she hopes to get the use of her hands back: God has answered her prayers.

**Chapter 7:** Joni Eareckson Tada arrives at Rancho Los Amigos; it is much better than Greenoaks, well funded and well staffed. She immediately starts therapy and is quickly able to feed herself. She is presented with a target home date that is only three months away and taught how to use a wheelchair. Before long, she begins making trips to the local Taco Bell; these are both liberating and humiliating, because she has to endure unkind comments from members of the public. She is hopeful that the use of her hands will return and she can resume a romantic relationship; however, her doctor dashes these hopes, and she encourages Dick Filbert to move on.

**Chapter 8:** after Joni Eareckson Tada returns home from Rancho Los Amigos, she becomes increasingly cynical and depressed. Diana White moves into the Eareckson home to provide physical and emotional support. She asks her father if she is being punished by God, but he insists that she is not, and that God knows best; however, this does not appear to be a satisfactory answer. She begins daydreaming about her past and entertaining sexual fantasies in her mind. Diana White works out what she is doing and encourages her to snap out of it; however, she finds these trance-like states incredibly comforting. Once again, she asks God to reveal her purpose to her.

**Chapter 9:** in 1969, Joni Eareckson Tada emerges from another deep bout of depression. She realises that she will eventually relapse into an endless cycle without mature spiritual guidance. Diana White suggests that she meets with a young Christian, Steve Estes; he agrees to study the Bible with her, helps her to stop fantasising, and teaches her that she has a God-given purpose. Steve Estes convinces her to share her experiences with a church group. She enrolls at the University of Maryland to study public speaking, so she can communicate better with others.

**Chapter 10:** Joni Eareckson Tada's five year-old niece dies of terminal brain cancer after a year of terrible suffering. Steve Estes tells her that suffering can be to the benefit of Christianity and God's message, and points out that her disability may be too; he suggests that it may even be a blessing. He tells her that she needs to work on her self-image, and judge herself by God's standard rather than society's. He encourages her to allow God to mould her according to his will. For the first time in her life, she feels like she can glimpse her purpose.

**Chapter 11:** in 1970, Joni Eareckson Tada's self-confidence continues to improve, and she becomes content with her paralysis for the first time. Steve Estes encourages her to attend the Gothard seminar; here, she realises she needs to make a greater effort with her relationships, particularly at home where she takes a great deal for granted. Through this process she perceives God at work developing her character. She volunteers as a leader at a Christian camp and uses her experiences to guide others through their own hardships (e.g. shyness).

**Chapter 12:** in the autumn of 1970, Joni Eareckson Tada's friends begin to drift away. The prospect of remaining single for the rest of her life begins to worry her, and she prays for a husband. She meets Donald Bertolli, who is a little older than her, handsome, strong, and spiritually aware. He relishes spending time with her, and they increasingly enjoy one another's company. He is knowledgeable about the Bible and this impresses her. He confesses that he is interested in a romantic relationship with her, but her sisters caution her to be careful.

**Chapter 13:** in 1971, Joni Eareckson Tada moves to the family ranch in Sykesville, to be near her sisters and Diana White. Donald Bertolli suggests they should get married; he is adamant he can manage her disability. She believes that marriage is now part of God's plan for her. They begin to believe that God will heal her in the future; they start praying for a healing and attending healing services, but it soon becomes clear that nothing is happening. Donald Bertolli abruptly breaks off their relationship and leaves her life; she is left devastated.

**Chapter 14:** Joni Eareckson Tada is deeply hurt by Donald Bertolli's departure. She begins reading the Bible more frequently, and realises that her feelings are rooted in lust rather than love; she decides to focus her attention on God rather than self-pity. Through this process, she manages to sever her emotional dependence on other people and throw herself upon the grace of God. She is hurt by how her relationship ended, but more hopeful than ever that things will work out. She realises her changed attitude is from depending upon God for her emotional well-being.

**Chapter 15:** in 1972, Joni Eareckson Tada begins asking God serious questions about her future. She starts to take her artwork more seriously, focuses on improving her technique, and significantly increases her output. A chance meeting between her father and a local businessman, Neill Miller, leads to a massive exhibition of her artwork in central Baltimore. It leads to television and radio interviews, a trip to the White House, and hundreds of dollars in sales. She secures financial independence and becomes interested in helping other disabled people.

**Chapter 16:** in late 1974, Joni Eareckson Tada is asked to appear on The Today Show. She finds herself speaking to Barbara Walters and an audience of millions of people for fifteen minutes. Instead of feeling nervous, she feels confident that God's grace will give her the ability to make the most of the opportunity. She uses the exposure to spread God's message and increase her evangelical activity through art exhibitions and further radio and television interviews. She realises that God is helping her use the opportunity created by The Today Show to broaden the scope of her witness and open new doors (including her ministry to disabled people).

**Epilogue:** Joni Eareckson Tada speaks to over a thousand people at a talk about her Christian faith. She claims that it would be miraculous if she was healed, but not as miraculous as her soul being saved. She claims her disability has helped her to serve God, and that without it she would have drifted through life. She tells the crowd that she is happy, and begins to view her disability as an opportunity to teach people about Christianity and convert them. She has learned to rely on God's sovereignty and trust that he knows best. She reflects that even if only one soul is saved by contemplating her life story, then her disability will have been worth it.