

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. On the way to City Hospital, Joni Eareckson Tada prays repeatedly; she is scared, but nobody tells her anything, even when she is admitted. She is operated on shortly after her initial medical examination, which provokes a series of recurring nightmares in which she is beheaded by one of the apostles of Jesus. Eventually, Joni Eareckson Tada wakes up in an intensive care unit (ICU) attached to a Stryker frame (which allows nurses to rotate her body). She befriends a paralysed young man and sees another admitted to the ICU; both die suddenly during the course of her stay. She gradually realises that she has a broken neck, and that her life is incredibly fragile.

Chapter 2

In the ICU, some patients become better and leave whilst others become worse and die; however, Joni Eareckson Tada's condition stays the same. During her time in the ICU, she thinks about her life; in particular, her father, who volunteered at the Bishop Cummings Reformed Episcopal Church where he met her mother, wrestled for the United States at the 1932 Summer Olympic Games, and built a successful flooring business. Joni Eareckson Tada, her sisters, and their mother led a charmed life; the accident broke her father, but her mother and sisters remained strong. In the ICU, Joni Eareckson Tada also thinks about the Young Life camp at which she became a Christian, the temptation she faced whilst dating her boyfriend of the time, Jason Leverton, and her despondency after graduating from high school. She was offered a place at Western Maryland College, but still felt lost; shortly before her accident, she 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 at City Hospital. She is frequently visited by her father and mother, her best friend, her ex-boyfriend, Jason Leverton, and the boyfriend she started dating just before her accident, Dick Filbert. 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. Over the following weeks, Joni Eareckson Tada's condition deteriorates: she loses her appetite and experiences medication-induced hallucinations. 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. Dick Filbert visits and suggests the accident was part of God's plan; he hitchhikes back from university to see her, even though it damages his grades and he loses his scholarship. Joni Eareckson Tada becomes needy, which pushes Dick Filbert away. 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. When she is admitted, she meets her parents, but they quickly leave upset and in distress. Joni Eareckson Tada joins a room of five girls, including Betty Jackson, who also has a broken neck. Betty Jackson comments that Greenoaks is an ivory tower: all the patients have mobility problems, so it is psychologically easier to remain there; it is much harder in the outside world. Joni Eareckson Tada finds the routine at Greenoaks monotonous, because the centre is short-staffed; she has to wait a month to have her hair washed. Her best friend and Dick Filbert stop visiting, but Diana White, a Christian from Young Life, drops by more frequently. Eventually, Joni Eareckson Tada's physical therapy begins in earnest; she regains very limited movement in her arms and feels some tingling sensations. The Bishop Cummings Reformed Episcopal Church holds a prayer service for her and she begins to believe that God will heal her; when this does not happen, she has to hide her disappointment.

Chapter 5

At Christmas, Joni Eareckson Tada is allowed home for the day; however, driving home is difficult, because she is unable to support her own bodyweight. Christmas brings up a variety of difficult emotions, and she bursts into tears when she returns to Greenoaks. Dick Filbert resumes his visits, but this takes a toll on both of them and Joni Eareckson Tada finds herself praying for her own death again. Eventually, due to persistent bed sores, she is transferred to City Hospital to have some boney protrusions ground down so they stop rubbing against her skin; however, this operation is not successful. Dick Filbert continues to visit, but he does so as a friend rather than a boyfriend, although this change is not discussed. 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 (e.g. Jean-Paul Sartre) and accept both atheism and the meaninglessness of life. She is not convinced by the arguments of existentialism, but wants God to do something to prove his existence.

Chapter 6

Diana White begins to visit Greenoaks more frequently, and eventually decides to suspend her university studies for a semester and become a volunteer. 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. Eventually, she is transferred to Kernans Hospital for a further operation on boney protrusions in her back; this time it is successful. Joni Eareckson Tada continues to read the Bible, but wonders whether it will ever be possible for her to be happy. At Christmas, she is allowed home, but for much longer than before; this visit is a success, and she manages to go to the cinema with Dick Filbert. On the way home, the car stops abruptly and she hits her head on the dashboard; although unharmed, the incident is awkward and embarrassing, and she begins thinking about whether she will ever be normal again. After Christmas, Joni Eareckson Tada 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 is surprised by Dick Filbert and her friends, who drive from Maryland to California to help her settle in. She immediately starts therapy, which revolves around increasing her independence; very quickly, she is able to feed herself, which is a major milestone. Unlike Greenoaks, the therapy regime is proactive; Joni Eareckson Tada is presented with a target home date that is only three months away, and is quickly taught how to use both a wheelchair and an electric 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 and still has difficulty with accomplishing some simple tasks herself (e.g. paying). Joni Eareckson Tada makes friends at Rancho Los Amigos, including one who gets her into trouble by encouraging her to race her electric wheelchair. When Dick Filbert and her friends leave, 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 has a difficult conversation with Dick Filbert, in which she definitively closes down any hope of a future romantic relationship and insists that he moves on. Joni Eareckson Tada 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, and she becomes increasingly depressed. She begins fantasising about her past, sleeping in and daydreaming about experiences she can no longer enjoy, 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. Eventually, Joni Eareckson Tada realises that sin is an attitude as well as an act, and that she will never make herself happy by rebelling against God (i.e. shutting him out and fantasising about the past). Once again, she asks God to reveal her purpose to her.

Chapter 9

In 1969, two years after the accident, Joni Eareckson Tada emerges from another deep bout of depression. She realises that she will eventually relapse into an endless cycle of depression and recovery without mature spiritual guidance. Diana White suggests that she meets with a young Christian, Steve Estes; even though he is only a teenager, he immediately puts Joni Eareckson Tada at ease. Steve Estes is very spiritual, confident and assured; he agrees to study the Bible with her, helps her to stop fantasising, and teaches her that she has a God-given purpose. Joni Eareckson Tada decides to rid herself of possessions from the past (e.g. her horse, which she sells), and engages in role reversal sessions with Diana White (inspired by psychological experiments); this improves her confidence, which is frequently undermined by how people in wider society treat her. Bible study gives Joni Eareckson Tada hope that she will not be paralysed in her resurrection body, and 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 talk to others about relating to the disabled, accepting disability, and being a Christian.

Chapter 10

Joni Eareckson Tada's five year-old niece dies of terminal brain cancer after a year of terrible suffering. The entire Eareckson family finds it difficult to cope, especially her divorced sister (who had to raise her two sons and care for her dying daughter alone). At different times, they all find themselves questioning God. Steve Estes tells Joni Eareckson Tada that suffering can be to the benefit of Christianity and God's message; he uses the Bible to show that Paul thought his imprisonment would ultimately be to God's benefit, and suggests that her disability may be too. Joni Eareckson Tada begins to practice thankfulness, by regularly thinking of things to be thankful for rather than dwelling on her disability; eventually she becomes more thankful. Steve Estes suggests that her disability may be a blessing, which she is initially unsure about. 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 purpose, rather than trying to mould herself. For the first time in her life, Joni Eareckson Tada feels like she can glimpse her purpose; it is like an iceberg, only ten percent is visible but there is huge potential beneath the surface.

Chapter 11

In 1970, Joni Eareckson Tada's self-confidence continues to improve, and she starts to work on her appearance. She is content with her paralysis for the first time. Steve Estes encourages her to attend the Gothard seminar; here, she learns about God's use of irritations to file Christians from rough stones into gems. She learns to respond to irritations in a positive, Christian way, which is immediately put to the test when her catheter bag begins leaking during a talk. She realises she needs to make a greater effort with her relationships, particularly at home where she takes a great deal for granted. Joni Eareckson Tada decides to stop being selfish and strengthen her bonds with others, through this process she perceives God at work developing her character. Although art does not have a special place in her life yet, she continues drawing and painting, and she starts a band. The band performs at Christian camps, and she eventually works as a leader at one of them. The girls she supervises are not sure how to treat her, because of her disability, but eventually accept her. She 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; many get married and become occupied with starting families. The prospect of remaining single for the rest of her life begins to worry her, and she prays for a husband. At this time, Joni Eareckson Tada meets a friend of Dick Filbert's, Donald Bertolli, at a Young Life meeting. Donald Bertolli is 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, particularly when he manages to adjudicate a dispute between her and Diana White. On one occasion, Joni Eareckson Tada is taken to Ocean City by Donald Bertolli; after waiting for a while on the boardwalk staring at the sea, she becomes upset contemplating her inability to swim. He wheels her off the boardwalk, down onto the sand, and into the waves, before picking her up and carrying her deeper into the water. Some members of the public are alarmed, but her laughter reassures them that nothing is wrong. He confesses that he is interested in a romantic relationship with her, but her sisters caution her to be careful.

Chapter 13

In 1971, Diana White gets married and moves out. Joni Eareckson Tada moves to the family ranch in Sykesville, to be near her sisters and Diana White (who lives nearby). Donald Bertolli suggests they should get married; he is adamant he can manage her disability, and suggests that a sexual relationship is unimportant to him. She believes that marriage is now part of God's plan for her, and Donald Bertolli increasingly becomes the centre of her world. At Christmas, they have their first argument; he accuses her of becoming jealous and possessive, and suggests that they take a break from one another; he goes to Europe for three weeks with the Filbert brothers, and returns with his love for her renewed. They begin to believe that God's plan for the future involves healing her; they begin praying for a healing and attending healing services, but it soon becomes clear that nothing is happening. Diana White and Steve Estes help explain that she may never be healed, especially if it does not serve God's purpose for her. Donald Bertolli abruptly breaks off their relationship and leaves her life; she is left devastated, with her hopes for the future shattered.

Chapter 14

Joni Eareckson Tada is devastated by Donald Bertolli's departure. Dick Filbert confesses that he confided in him about his feelings, and that he was not able to cope with the reality of marrying a paralysed woman. Donald Bertolli writes letters to some of the mutual friends he shares with Joni Eareckson Tada, and this provokes feelings of jealousy. 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, Joni Eareckson Tada 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 for the best if she puts her faith in God. Steve Estes writes from Bible college to console and guide her. Eventually, Joni Eareckson Tada learns that Donald Bertolli is engaged; she ends up sitting next to his fiancée at a Bible study group and finds herself genuinely and unexpectedly happy for them. She tells his fiancée that she prays for them and wishes them happiness. 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, if she is not destined to get married or continue her studies. She reflects on the fact that her sufferings have helped her mature spiritually, and is confident that God will reveal her purpose. She starts to take her artwork more seriously, focuses on improving her technique, and significantly increases her output. She does not want people to appreciate her artwork because of her disability, she wants it to be judged on its own merits. A chance meeting between her father and a local businessman, Neill Miller, leads to a massive exhibition of her artwork in central Baltimore. It raises hundreds of dollars, and leads to television and radio interviews, a trip to the White House, and a financial interest in a local Christian bookstore. Joni Eareckson Tada secures financial independence and a measure of freedom. Additionally, at her exhibition, she helps console a young fireman who is introduced to her by Neill Miller; he lost both his hands during a fire, but she shows him that he can still find purpose in his life through committing himself to Christianity. This begins an interest in helping other disabled people.

Chapter 16

In late 1974, Joni Eareckson Tada is asked to appear on The Today Show, to talk about her experiences. Her sister drives her to New York, where she prepares for the interview with the help of a producer. Eventually, the time for the interview arrives, and 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. On The Today Show, Joni Eareckson Tada meets Eleanor McGovern (the wife of a Democratic former presidential candidate), and discovers the broadcast has been watched by the president of PaperMate, Al Nagle. She uses these opportunities to spread God's message and increase her evangelical activity through art exhibitions and further radio and television interviews. When Joni Eareckson Tada returns home she discovers a huge amount of fan mail, including invitations to contribute to magazine and newspaper articles. 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. Joni Eareckson Tada 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 starts to understand why Paul rejoiced in his sufferings, and begins to rejoice in her own. Joni Eareckson Tada writes the epilogue to *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* backstage before talking to almost two thousand children at a Youth for Christ rally. It is 1975, and she realises how much she has grown in grace, and how much her family and friends have supported this process. She has learned to rely on God's sovereignty and trust that he knows best. Joni Eareckson Tada is about to step onto the stage for her talk, and she knows that the next half hour could transform the lives of several children. She reflects that even if only one soul is saved by contemplating her life story, then her disability will have been worth it.

George Thinks

Joni: An Unforgettable Story is Joni Eareckson Tada's first published book. She has gone on to publish over a hundred others, mostly covering her disability and her faith. At first glance, it isn't immediately obvious that this work actually addresses issues of ableism, because much of it is focused on her development as a Christian, but a close reading reveals that it does. Throughout, Joni Eareckson Tada is concerned with the way that disabled people are perceived, treated, and valued; she relates numerous instances in which she is physically or emotionally abused, or treated as though she is mentally disabled. She articulately explains how the standards of modern society erode the self-esteem of disabled people, often leading to depression and the contemplation of suicide. As readers of *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, we can see the bedrock of the belief system that led Joni Eareckson Tada to establish Joni and Friends, an evangelical Christian organisation that supports people with disabilities in the United States and abroad by enhancing their dignity and independence.

Of course, this isn't the only thing going on in *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, because it's also a searingly personal autobiographical work; most of the narrative involves Joni Eareckson Tada wrestling with the realities of her disability, coming to terms with profound changes in the power dynamics in her relationships with family members and friends, and trying to understand how God could allow her to endure such suffering. I suppose this is where her views on disability are always going to divide opinion, because she ultimately suggests that it's easier to live with disability as a Christian. In many ways, her inspiringly positive outlook is predicated on her belief that her body will be restored and transformed in the afterlife. Joni Eareckson Tada writes at length about using the opportunity of her disability to evangelise and spread God's message, something that repeatedly plays on her mind before her interview on *The Today Show*. In short, Christianity is unashamedly central to the amazingly positive and purposeful life of this inspiring woman, but it isn't for every disabled person.

