

The YouTube Sensation

JACK RUSHTON

IT'S GOOD TO BE
ALIVE



OBSERVATIONS FROM A WHEELCHAIR

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JACK RUSHTON

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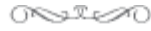
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Introduction

CALIFORNIA BEACHES ARE beautiful. Tuesday, August 1, 1989, was an especially bright, sunny day at Laguna Beach. The water was warm and the waves were not at all threatening. I was vacationing with my wife, Jo Anne, and three of our six children. Loaded down with baskets and blankets, we found a good spot in the sand without too many people around.

As my sixteen-year-old son, John, and his friend, Matt Mecuro, played in the ocean, JoAnne rubbed me down with sunscreen. The water was so tempting. I was really looking forward to body surfing with the boys. After thanking Jo Anne, I glanced over at my two youngest daughters, Rachel (age nine) and Jackie (age three), playing in the sand. Then I ran into the surf.

Just the Saturday night before, we'd held John's Eagle Court of Honor ceremony. Jo Anne had taken a picture of John and me standing next to each other in our scout uniforms. In fact, about a year later, John wrote a school paper about what happened on the beach that fateful day. He titled it "The Last Photograph" because, as he explains in his paper, "It was the last picture taken of my father before he became a quadriplegic." Little did I realize that night, posing for a picture with my youngest son, that he would be instrumental in saving my life a few days later.



The last picture taken of Jack before his accident.

Although we were having a great time riding the waves that day, the boys wanted to get out and have some lunch. We decided we would take one more ride into shore. I stood next to John, waiting for the wave to come. When it did, we both caught it perfectly. John pulled out before it became too shallow, but I was having such a good ride that I decided to take it all the way into the shore. Suddenly, my head hit a submerged rock. I immediately knew something was wrong because I couldn't move my arms or legs. Then swirling green sea water devoured me as I blacked out.

Thankfully, John saw me floating on top of the water, face down and not moving. With great effort, he and Matt were able to pull me onto the beach, where several teams of lifeguards did CPR until the paramedics arrived. Miraculously they were able to keep me alive. Two hours later I woke up in the hospital, surrounded by doctors and nurses.

I would later learn that the impact of the wave thrusting my head into the rock had broken my neck and severed my spinal column between the second and third cervical vertebrae. The nature of my injury is similar to that suffered by Christopher Reeve. I am paralyzed from the neck down and ventilator dependent.

My accident was initially devastating to me physically, spiritually, and emotionally. I was fifty years old at the time, had six children and two grandchildren, and was in my twenty-fifth year of working for my

church's education system. It just didn't seem that life could get much better, and then, in one split second, the bottom dropped out. In the beginning, I did not see how I could go forward with my life, and making a quick exit didn't seem like such a bad idea.

In retrospect, it took almost five years to make the adjustments necessary to have the wonderful quality of life I enjoy now. With the passage of time, as my body stabilized and with the help of the Lord, I eventually made the adjustment from a “walking, normal person” to a quadriplegic operating a huge power wheelchair and living on life support.

One of my greatest fears after being paralyzed was the impact it would have on my family, especially my roles as husband, father, and grandfather. One early morning, many years ago, I was pondering the dilemma of how I might be more effective in these capacities. As I was lying in bed, waiting for Jo Anne to wake up and begin our day, an idea was born. A very strong impression came to me that perhaps I could have some influence for good upon my posterity through my writing. I could share with them my observations about life and I could do it all through email!

Up to that time, voice recognition software had been very rudimentary but was just beginning to take off, as was the quality of personal computers. This truly was something I could do! My first observations were family oriented, but my children, finding them humorous and even sometimes interesting and insightful, began sharing them with friends. Before long, more and more people expressed a desire to receive them, and the list has now grown to include many wonderful people from around the world. I sign off on each observation as “Dad/Grandpa/Jack.”

Since that time, I have written more than two hundred observations and plan to do more. I have no ax to grind. I just try to respond to current events in my life and also delve into history—personal, family, religious, and secular—all from the perspective of a quadriplegic on life support.

Having lived in two dimensions—“normal and walking” and then as part of a “disabled minority group”—I believe my observations are unique. Few people have been privileged to sit in my chair. I use the

word *privileged* because I have been able to learn and experience things that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.



As I write this introduction, I am in the twenty-first year of my injury. I have lived to see sixteen more grandchildren join our family, making a total of eighteen. All but one of our children live within an hour's drive of our home in Tustin, California. Our oldest is a judge, while the others have careers as a schoolteacher, business owner, ER doctor, registered nurse, and music teacher. I am so grateful my life didn't end on the beach that day. I would have missed out on so much.

It's good to be alive—to be with JoAnne and all my family and good friends. I'm grateful I'm able to give service in my own unique way through writing, speaking, and teaching. I'm grateful that as the years have passed, I have not become bitter or cynical. I am convinced that the challenging circumstances of life that come to all of us need not limit or control our behavior, preventing us from enjoying life. In fact, it is these very challenges that stretch us and help us grow in ways we never dreamed possible.



Jack and grandson Trevor Rushton

Jack L. Rushton

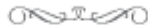


SECTION ONE

Life in a

WHEELCHAIR

OBSERVATION ONE



I Wish It Was YESTERDAY

WESTSIDE STORY HAS been one of my favorite Broadway musicals and films since 1962. In a rumble between rival gangs—the Jets and the Sharks—the leader of the Sharks was inadvertently stabbed to death by the leader of the Jets. The police came, the gang members all scattered, and later that night two of the Jets met up with one another. They were visibly shaken by what had happened, and in the ensuing conversation, one of the boys said, “I wish it was yesterday!” That haunting phrase, “I wish it was yesterday,” always captures my attention. When I was lying in the hospital bed after my accident, I was not thinking of *West Side Story* and the phrase “I wish it was yesterday!” However, those words described my state of mind at that time perfectly.

Around midnight the head neurosurgeon sent all of my friends and family home so he could perform additional tests to determine the extent of my injury. I have never felt more alone than I did when my loved ones departed that night. Yesterday had been beautiful as my family and I acted the part of tourists at the beach. Life couldn't have been better. There was not a cloud in the horizon of our lives, and it seemed like we would live happily ever after.



The Rushton family in 1988, a year before Jack's accident.

As I lay alone in the intensive care unit of the regional trauma center that night, I could not believe what had happened to my family and me. How would we ever get through this tragedy? How would we survive financially? If I were permanently paralyzed, how on earth could I ever endure living this way? Those kinds of questions ran through my mind the entire night, and from the depths of my tortured soul, my heart cried out, "I wish it was yesterday!" I am sorry to report that I cried, "I wish it was yesterday" much longer than I would like to admit.

But the day finally came when I understood I could not be at peace or have a productive, meaningful life, unless I eliminated the phrase "I wish it was yesterday" from my vocabulary. That kind of thinking leads us nowhere.

Most of us have done something we have regretted or experienced a trial that has made us wish it was yesterday. How we would like to go back to the good old days before the tragic event took place. It is human nature to have that knee-jerk reaction to the challenges life can bring our way.

It has been so since the beginning of time. I wonder if Eve, as she gave birth to her first child, ever thought, “I wish it was yesterday” back in that beautiful garden.

Lot's wife was challenged as she looked back at Sodom with longing eyes and was turned into a pillar of salt—an inanimate object that could not act but could only be acted upon. She was unable to move forward; her progress came to an abrupt halt, which happens to all of us who live in the past.

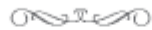


The Rushton family in 2004.

Regardless of what may happen to us, we simply must press forward, never looking back. I no longer think, “I wish it was yesterday,” for today is filled with joy and satisfaction.

Dad/Grandpa/Jack

OBSERVATION TWO



My Name Is Jack— I BROKE MY BACK

I BELIEVE ONE of the most frustrating and terrifying experiences a person can have is not being able to communicate, and as a result, not getting the help or reassurance needed to be comforted. The Lord gives babies the ability to cry, which is the only way they can communicate their needs. Though oftentimes annoying to adults, a baby's cry eventually gets adults' attention and is a vital tool of communication. Immediately following my accident, I couldn't speak at all and wasn't even able to cry out for help.

I was transported to the Mission Viejo Trauma Center by ambulance just hours after breaking my neck. It was nearly dark when the ambulance came to a stop outside the emergency area. The doors to the back of the ambulance swung open, and I was carefully lifted out on the gurney. As someone pushed, others walked beside me, carrying the apparatus that was pumping air into my lungs. I felt helpless and vulnerable laying flat on my back, unable to move or speak, and only seeing ceilings and faces.

The ICU seemed cold and sterile with all the hospital beds lined in a row, divided by curtains. My ears were sensitive to all the strange noises made by various machines that seemed to echo in the dimly lit room. Of course, the machine next to my bed, keeping rhythm with my breathing, seemed to be the loudest. I wondered how long I would have to be attached to it. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day the tube in my mouth running down my throat to my lungs would be removed and I would be able to talk. Then the thought

came flooding into my mind: *Will I ever breathe on my own again? If not, surely I will die. How does one live without being able to breathe? How does one live and not speak? Will I want to live if I can't talk or teach?*

Later the next afternoon, I learned the awful truth. I was going to surgery to have a tracheotomy so I could breathe from a machine for the rest of my life. I remember thinking, *That surgery is a little different from having your appendix or gall bladder removed.* The expression “pull the plug” took on new meaning for me.

Although the implantation of the cuffed tracheotomy tube made breathing much more comfortable, the system had its drawbacks. Neither on inspiration or expiration did it allow the airflow to pass through the vocal cords—thus preventing any vocalization. As needs arose, I tried to mouth words and was grateful when family and friends could understand what I was saying. Before long, my children came up with different eye signals for me to use. Then Ron Wilson, a commercial artist and good friend of ours, devised a series of charts, and using my eye signals I was able to communicate even more.

Because of Ron's chart, I was able to let Jo Anne know that I did not want to be left alone during the night. There were always people during the day, but at night I would become very anxious. A group of men from our church worked out a schedule so that someone would always be with me at night. These wonderful men would sit by my side through the long hours of the night and read to me when I was unable to sleep. One man, sensing my uneasiness in the early morning hours, had a beautiful voice and would softly sing familiar hymns that I loved so much.

As the days passed, I was not given any hope that I would ever speak again. I wondered if I would be able to deal with this on a long-term basis. How could I possibly live under these circumstances? Although I could not vocally pray as I usually did, my silent prayers were heard. Even though I did not know if I would ever walk or breathe again and lead a normal life, I knew that somehow, ultimately, everything would be okay. I had resigned myself to the fact that the vent and I were like Siamese twins, joined at the hip—or at the throat, I should say. I would never go anywhere without it for the rest of my life.

After two weeks, I was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital. As my health improved, about six weeks after my arrival, they traded out my cuffed trach for a cuffless trach, which allowed the air to pass by my vocal cords. I was finally able to talk and announced, "My name is Jack. I broke my back." As grateful as I was to use my voice again, it wasn't a normal speech pattern. There would always be a long pause mid-sentence. It made for bad joke telling because I always had to wait for the next breath to come before I could finish what I was saying. Teaching and public speaking seemed to be a thing of the past.

As I grew accustomed to speaking on a vent, the speech therapist introduced me to the Passy-Muir Speaking Valve. To me it was a miracle. It had been invented only five years before I got hurt by David Muir, a creative young man with muscular dystrophy who was frustrated at not being able to speak normally. This little valve (placed just inside the flex tube attached to my neck) forced the air on its way out past the vocal cords and up through the mouth and nasal cavities. In a sense, my head became a wind tunnel. However, I could now speak on the inhale and exhale. "Jack is back," I said with great hope. Little did I comprehend at the time that the way was being paved for me to lead a functional and productive life while living on a ventilator.

Another piece of technology that we found useful was introduced to us by our good friend, Ken Rogers. He perceived how dangerous it was for Jo Anne to leave me alone in the van while running into a store, even for just a few minutes. Ken, an electrical engineer, thought about the problem for a day or two and then came to our home with some small handheld radios that transmitted an astonishing distance. We used these for some time but have now replaced them with cell phones and Bluetooth technology. Now Jo Anne can leave me in the van with confidence for a few minutes while she takes care of business in her favorite stores. It is comforting to me to say, "Jo Anne, where are you?" More often than not she replies, "I'm at the return desk!" I ask, "How long will you be there?" She responds, "Just a couple of minutes." Translation: probably twenty or thirty minutes. We are even getting the hang of radio talk, which we still use with our cell phones. I usually say "ten

four.” (I have heard radio people use that phrase; I'm not sure what it means, but it sounds very authoritative and knowledgeable). Jo Anne responds with “seven eleven,” which to me makes more sense than “ten four.” When I am finished talking, I always say, “Roger, over and out!” I don't know what that means either, but I like Jo Anne's response better than mine as she counters with “In-N-Out.”



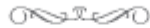
Jack at Rancho Los Amigos Rehabilitation Hospital.

When people who are dependent on a ventilator are unable to speak and are having trouble breathing, they make a clicking noise with their tongue, which is the universal call for help. The hope is that someone will hear and understand and come to the rescue. One afternoon while I was working on the computer in my office, my hose dislodged from my throat and landed on my chest. The machine mistook it as still working, and the alarm did not go off. I began clicking my tongue with all my might. Jo Anne and the girls were cooking in the kitchen and did not hear me. However, our little dog, Poco, who looked like the dog on the Taco Bell commercials, came running into my office. He sensed my danger, ran into the kitchen, and barked until Jo Anne came and saved my life. Ever since that day, Taco Bell has been my favorite eating establishment.

Sometimes in the midst of a heated conversation, Jo Anne has been known to pull my air hose off my neck just as I am about to make an important point. End of conversation... end of life? Breathing and speaking are the best!

Dad/Grandpa/Jack

OBSERVATION THREE



A Breathtaking NECKTIE

I LOVE THE Christmas season for many reasons. One thing I enjoy is going to church and seeing the astonishing array of holiday neckties worn by the men and boys. I have always been intrigued by neckties—who invented them, why we wear them, and their purpose. I used to have quite a collection that I enjoyed wearing, but many years ago I traded them all in for just one “breathtaking necktie” that became a permanent part of my attire following my body surfing accident.

This breathtaking necktie connects me to my mechanical ventilator, which pumps twelve breaths of air into my lungs per minute. I love every one of them. I would not be here without this necktie that connects me to my life support system.

Since my accident, my life support has failed me several times. All but one of those times, Jo Anne has been able to bring me back from a state of unconsciousness without involving the medical world. By squeezing the trusty ambubag (a hand-operated air pump), she pumps life-saving oxygen into my lungs. She does this over and over again until I come back from the dead (so it seems), and then reconnects me to the ventilator.

The one time Jo Anne could not revive me, I was in a coma for eight hours and required the assistance of police, paramedics, and hard-working ER/ICU professionals. All of this was accompanied by much prayer. I have no recollection of what happened before I went into the coma. When I finally awoke in the hospital, the last thing I

could recall doing was eating a hot dog at Costco. Was it the Costco hot dog that almost did me in? Although I don't seem to enjoy them nearly as much as I used to, Costco will be relieved to know it wasn't a tainted hot dog that nearly killed me but a malfunction of my life support system.

It is a humbling experience to absolutely know—not in theory, but in actual fact—that if I am disconnected from my life support, death will quickly follow within a few short minutes. I am not a medical doctor and have not researched the subject, but I would imagine that most people die because they quit breathing.

Let me share with you another episode that I remember vividly. One evening, a few years ago, Jo Anne and I went out to dinner with our friends. The food there is usually pretty good, but that night my taquitos were buried in some kind of red sauce, which made them soggy and mushy. I had a hard time getting them down. It wasn't my favorite meal, but the company was enjoyable and salvaged the evening.



Dinner with friends.

When we got home, Jo Anne set me up with the TV in my bedroom to watch the Dodgers/Arizona Diamondbacks baseball game, which was in about the sixth inning. The score was tied at two runs each, and a warm feeling began to swell within me that perhaps this evening the Dodgers would not snatch defeat from the jaws of victory as they so typically do. I had watched but a short time when the Arizona Diamondbacks began to hit everything the Dodger pitchers were “throwing up” to the plate. Before I knew it, the score was five to two in favor of the Diamondbacks, with two men on base.

At that moment I heard a very loud screeching noise, like a high-pitched siren, and my ventilator went completely dead.

In the many years I had been on a ventilator, I had never heard that noise before, nor had my ventilator ever quit working without any warning. Of course I panicked when I realized I wasn't breathing, but I tried to be positive and told myself that Jo Anne would rush into the room any second, discover the problem, and get me breathing once again. I waited but she didn't come... and she didn't come... and she didn't come! I finally entered a state of resignation, knowing that she was not coming and that I would soon be dead.

The sad thing about the entire experience is that as I began to enter the twilight zone—half alive and half dead—I was still watching the baseball game. Just as I was slipping into unconsciousness, an Arizona Diamondback hit a three-run home run over the deepest part of centerfield off of Joe Biemel, a journeyman left-handed relief pitcher that nobody but the Dodgers wanted. In the foggy recesses of my mind came the voice of Vince Scully: “And now the score is eight to two in favor of the Diamondbacks.” *What a way to go into the spirit world*, I thought—a bad Mexican dinner in my stomach and the Dodgers being hammered by the hated Diamondbacks.

The next thing I remember, Jo Anne was standing over me, weeping and hollering at me while trying to get me to come back. All I knew was that I needed more air and was saying as loud as I could, “Bag me! Bag me!” Awakening out of my catatonic state, I did not realize she was doing just that with the ambubag while trying to dial 911 at the same time. The more she bagged, the more the life came back to me, and she was soon able to move my wheelchair over to the bedside where she hooked me up to my backup ventilator that I use at night. I have no idea how long I was out, but I easily could have slipped into the spirit world, and it would not have been a painful experience except for the memory of the bad Mexican dinner and the Dodgers/Diamondbacks game.

I know of nothing more humbling than not being able to breathe. When you can't breathe, nothing else matters at all!

Recently I was visiting a good friend of mine who has been in the hospital and on life support for a few months due to an accident. As we were visiting, his respiratory therapist came in the room and saw

me. He was amazed when he learned I had been ventilator dependent for twenty years. He told me that for many years he had worked with a number of young men on life support and that most of them had not lived more than a couple of years. He was astonished at my quality of life. Talking to this respirator therapist and seeing his reaction to me made me realize how fortunate I am to still be here.

I have often referred to my situation as “living on the edge.” Each time I have a brush with death, I consider it another incredible wake-up call. With every encounter, I have reinforced into my mind and heart how precious the gift of life is and how quickly it can be taken from us. I find renewed motivation to live each day as though it were my last. I also notice that Jo Anne treats me a little better—at least for a while.

At times I have been tempted to vegetate and take it easy. After all, who could blame a poor paralyzed man on life support for doing that? Thankfully, I have realized that coasting requires little effort and usually is done downhill. I have come to understand that dying is easy—it is the living that is hard and demanding. Feelings of gratitude have welled up in my heart for the love I have felt from God, my family, and my friends. My loved ones have said things to me that are usually reserved for one's funeral service. I am grateful to have heard them while still alive, because I believe it is better to be seen and spoken to than to be “viewed” and talked about.

My rather unique situation has helped me understand and appreciate the truthfulness of what Jesus taught his apostles just before going into the Garden of Gethsemane: “I am the true vine.... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.... I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: *for without me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:1–5; emphasis added).

John accurately recorded what the Lord said to the apostles on that occasion. Jesus didn't just say he was “the vine,” but that he was “the *true* vine.” That statement implies that we can attach ourselves to other vines—false philosophies, precepts, organizations, and so on. But unless we attach ourselves to the true vine, we will not be able to bring forth “much fruit.” As the Savior

said, “The branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine.” Unless we are attached to our spiritual life support—Christ—*we can do nothing!*”

I am convinced that we are each as dependent on Christ each minute and hour of the day for our spiritual life support as I am dependent on my electrical and mechanical life support system. I know with a sure knowledge that if I attach myself to the “true vine,” I will find peace and indescribable joy.

Dad/Grandpa/Jack

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