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RELEARNING TO BREATHE: LEARNING TO BE OKAY WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

 SHARA - JUNE 28, 2015

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I read somewhere that your body begins to die when you turn 25. Well, exactly five months after I turned 25, I felt the effects of that very statement.

It was a Sunday. I woke up and went to church. I came home, ate lunch, uploaded a dumb video onto my Instagram account, and hopped in bed to finish a 24-hour rental of *The Fault in Our Stars*. Naturally, I laid in bed weeping at the movie's conclusion (I read the book. I knew how it ended. Doesn't matter. Tears always ensue). Then, I got out of bed, and my life changed forever.

You know how everyone always talks about how your life can change in a second? Mine did. I got into bed a healthy 25-year-old and I got out of bed a sick one. I got into bed well and I got out broken.

Long story, really short: Ever since that moment I crawled out of bed, I have been battling an unknown and debilitating illness that has left me bedridden for a great deal of the past 9 months. I am a "mystery" to the doctors and have lived at the mercy of my crippling symptoms.

I won't pretend to compare myself to those of you who have suffered through or are currently suffering through illnesses that can only be described with four letter words through gritted teeth. But, I do want you to know that, in what way I can, I get it. I get chronic illness. I get *never* feeling well. I get forgetting what it feels like to feel okay. I get people expecting you to be okay, and you're just not. I get trying to do something simple, like take a shower or drive to Starbucks, and it only reminding you how *not okay* you are. I get sitting in your car after said Starbucks run, body seizing in pain, and weeping-weeping because you're not okay and you don't know if you ever will be again. I get the bitterness and jealousy you feel toward other people who live seemingly care-free lives. I get the loneliness. I get feeling like you're nothing-like you mean nothing because you can *do* nothing. I get trying to smile and to act normal when your body is attacking you every moment of every day. I get feeling like a shadow of the person you once were. I get sitting in a clinical counselor's office listening to them tell you unhelpful things. I get the despair. I get being given anti-depressants that make you fantasize about ways to kill yourself. I get begging God to let you die. To let you be free. I get wanting desperately to be free.

I've realized that Christian suffering places you within the Biblical tension of Luke 22:42. Jesus, on the Mount of Olives, prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Christian suffering places you in the tension of that prayer-the tension between "Remove this cup from me" and "not my will, but yours be done." This is the tension I am desperately trying to live in. Trying desperately to breathe in. But it's suffocating sometimes. The "But if not" of Daniel 3. God is more than able to save-to heal. We worship a God we cannot exaggerate. He is able to do immeasurably more than all that we ask or think. I believe with all my heart that God is able to heal my broken body. **But if not**, God's character would not change. He wouldn't become less good, less able, or less powerful. In all things, He has never and will never become less "for me."

I've heard it all during my illness. I have been told to pray harder. I have been told I don't have enough faith. I just need to believe harder. If I believed hard enough, I would be healed. I have been told I just need to see the "right" person who is, I suppose, properly trained in prayer to pray over me. I have been told I needed to go to a healing service or a healing ministry, *then* I would be healed. I have been told I had unconfessed sin that I needed to repent of. Yes, I have even been told that my illness was related to my love for the Harry Potter books (not kidding). You learn a lot about your theology in the midst of suffering. And you learn a lot about others' (I have simultaneously learned how to not be completely miserable at healthy confrontation because of above comments).

But, I just go back to the tension. I believe Jesus lived there. And, somehow, some way, I am praying to learn how to live there too. Praying for help to live in the tension. To live believing with all of my heart that God is good, that He is able to heal that which is broken, and yet, no matter what, that He is perfect in all of His ways. To live praying earnestly for healing-to desire healing and freedom from my physical suffering in this life **yet**, *ultimately* desiring and praying for the Lord's will to be done-whatever that may be.

I'm not sure how to live there but I'm learning.

Learning to live and to breathe in the tension. That God desires to heal, but, sometimes He chooses not to. That He came to give us an abundant life, but we suffer in this fallen world. That I am trapped inside a body that tortures me day and night, and the Lord is sovereign over it all. The tension of *He is more than able, but if not, He is still good. Lord, heal me. Yet, not my will but Yours be done.*

Learning every day to pray for healing, yet praying “Thy will be done”. Learning that if I never get better, God is still good. That somehow in the midst of pain and suffering, God has not abandoned me. That if I am never able to finish my degree, travel the world, get married, have a family, and pursue all of my dreams, God *loves me*. And, that *is* God loving me. Learning that the “good” in Romans 8:28 is found in Romans 8:29— all things work together for believers to be conformed into the image of His Son.

As Elisabeth Elliot writes,

“Our vision is so limited we can hardly imagine a love that does not show itself in protection from suffering. The love of God is of a different nature altogether. It does not hate tragedy. It never denies reality. It stands in the very teeth of suffering. The love of God did not protect His own Son. The cross was the proof of His love – that He gave that Son, that He let Him go to Calvary’s cross, though “legions of angels” might have rescued Him. He will not necessarily protect us – not from anything it takes to make us like His Son. A lot of hammering and chiseling and purifying by fire will have to go into the process.”

I’ve learned (am learning) a lot of lessons in the darkness. Maybe I can sit with you over a cup of coffee one day and we can share about all the lessons learned in the ashes. The Lord hasn’t rescued me from this suffering. And perhaps in His infinite wisdom, He might choose not to. But I don’t believe that will be because I didn’t believe hard enough, have the right person pray over me, or because I find Harry Potter to be the freakin’ best (I literally feel sadness for people who have never read them). If I never get better, I trust that His ways are higher than mine. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.

I pray that you and I will learn to live in the tension. To praise God in the tension. To find joy in the tension. To fall on our faces in worship in the tension. To rest in the tension. To breathe in the tension.

And to eagerly await the day when all the sad things will come untrue.

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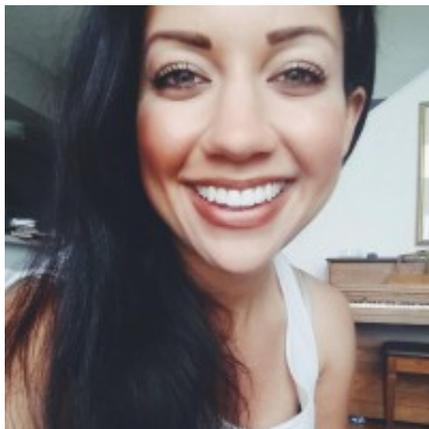
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Shara is a twenty-something seminary student at Columbia International University. She's a strong believer in coffee, lipstick, correct usage of possessives and contractions, Chipotle, and that the book is always better.

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