

EPILOGUE

ABUNDANT LIFE



Amy and Sam in Reno, Nevada, in 2024.

It's a strange thing to try to write an epilogue for a life I'm still living.

As I write these words, I'm in the midst of a US Senate campaign. Most people who read this book will have the benefit of knowing information I don't currently have: was the campaign successful or unsuccessful? Did I win or lose?

But if there's one thing I've learned over the last sixteen-plus years since my *Alive Day*, it's that those sorts of questions are not the ones which truly matter.

Is there hope?

Will some purpose emerge out of this current trial?

Can I root my identity in something other than my current circumstances, or position, or profession, or physical form?

These are the questions that matter. These are the thoughts with eternal ramifications.

If you've been willing to read up to this point, I hope you'll allow my best attempt at answering those questions.

Yes, there is hope. If you get anything out of my story, let it be that goodness and beauty can come out of suffering. That doesn't mean hope is easy, and it may not mean you get what you want. There were times in my healing journey when I experienced crushing disappointment, like when I learned I could never return to Afghanistan to lead my platoon. Hope can't anchor itself in any person, place, or thing, because all of that is temporary and fallible.

But there's a different kind of hope that can sustain you. It's what sustained me. In my own darkest times—the horribly long minute of burning alive; the hellscape of the ketamine nightmare; the agony of a painful healing process; the shattering realization that my life's plans were no longer possible; the certainty that marriage and family were out of my reach—I struggled. It was only the hope in something *bigger* than myself that I was able to endure.

I call that hope Faith.

For me, faith served as a bridge that enabled me to climb out of despair. It stretched between the pain of where I was, to the purpose

of where I was going. I remember lying on the stretcher at the HLZ in the Kandahar desert, waiting to be MEDEVACed out, my eyes blinded by gauze and my body in torment. But in that moment, I felt certain that my life had been spared for a purpose. Only by having faith that a greater purpose *existed* was I able to endure the days, weeks, and years that followed. Even though I had no idea what might be on the other side of the bridge and what the destination was, the path forward was there. I had faith in a good God. I had faith that I would find something meaningful on the other side of the journey. In that hope, I wasn't disappointed.

Which brings us to question number two: will some purpose emerge out of this trial?

Yes—but I believe it will only come if you're open to it. We've all heard that phrase, "Everything happens for a reason." It's a cliché, but on my own journey, I knew I needed to *choose* to believe it. I couldn't imagine what potential gifts might come out of the trauma. But I knew none of those gifts could ever come unless I chose to expect that there *could* be something more.

I wanted those gifts to come fast. If someone had told me that it would be three years before I was done going in and out of the hospital, I'm not sure I would have had the motivation to keep going. I had only ever planned a life that involved military leadership and valor, under fire if necessary. My life plan required a healthy body and a successful string of medals that represented leadership triumphs and missions accomplished. I had no life plan for medical retirement or a disfigured and broken frame. How could any silver lining make up for the loss of everything I'd wanted? "Everything happens for a reason"—so, what was the reason?

I had no idea. But I had hope that my pain *wouldn't be wasted*. I lived with anticipation that a good story would unfold with time, and I kept looking to the Divine Author for His direction.

Now, I see gifts all around me—and their existence is rooted in the ashes of that fiery day. Because of the faith I found in the midst of dying, I experienced freedom. Because of that freedom, I experienced

joy in the midst of my painful disfigurement, which caused Amy to fall in love with me and experience freedom of her own through Christ. Because of my scars and my story, I've been able to encourage countless people who carry their own internal and external scars.

That doesn't negate the pain and suffering that defined so much of my journey. But it means the pain of trauma is no longer the defining aspect of my story.

What *does* define me? That's the essence of question number three: is there an identity to be found in something other than circumstances, or position, or profession, or physical form?

Yes! It's an identity that can never be taken away. My Alive Day put to death everything I used to value about myself. On the other side of those flames, I was no longer a leader of men; I no longer fought for the US Army; I was no longer fit, strong, or healthy. I was humbled to the point of death.

But with those temporary identities burned away, I was left with a true awakening of who I am: I only exist by God's grace and for His purpose. The "control" I wield in this human form falls infinitely short of His reign over my life.

I think that's why I feel so thankful for my scars. They remind me daily of the fragile state of my physical life—of *all* of our physical lives. And because of that reminder, I don't feel scared or limited anymore by what is temporary. I've had people tell me they feel amazed that I so freely engage with the world around me, despite my obvious disfigurement. They assume it would be a natural response to avoid the public eye, when my physical identity has been so distorted.

But I've gotten to a place where that doesn't bother me at all. My physical strength and appearance doesn't define my identity anymore. My identity is in Jesus Christ, and it's something no one can see, touch, or harm, because it's inside of me. I find the truth of who I am in my relationship to God. When I ground myself in that, it becomes possible to take risks without fear, regardless of what other people think of me, and even regardless of the outcome.

I don't ever want to find myself in a position like I was before my

Alive Day, where I believed I could do all things through my own strength, and that I could define my own purpose and mission. That was an empty existence. When it was incinerated on the battlefield, my old self died.

That death was when I began to live. It started when I cried out to God: “Jesus save me!”

“The life I live is not my own.” In this frail form, I live to serve others through serving the Lord. It’s my hope that, in being faithful to God, I will be a faithful servant to the people around me. And by sharing my story, I hope you recognize that purpose may emerge out of your own struggles. I hope *you* see that bridge of faith: rising out of despair, guiding you toward hope.

Even as my brother, Daniel, approached his final days in this life, he looked forward with hope and expectancy to the eternal life that follows. If you’re in search of the peace Daniel and I both found through our faith and relationship with God but you don’t know where to start, his final journal entry is the answer that will lead you to hope: “Said prayer to Jesus Christ to manifest to me and asked for forgiveness of my sins.”

The pain in our lives is the preface of an eternal story. That’s the gift I’ve found in faith: living life is like reading a good book, where I can expectantly turn the page and look forward to getting to the next chapter, because I trust that my Divine Author has written a happy ending—eternal peace.

There is *peace* that comes through surrendering to God.

In my story—in your story—we can have hope.

This is only the beginning.