

20-Year-Old Paralyzed in Diving Accident Now Glorifies God With Comics

In 2004 and at the age of 20, I broke my neck diving into a shallow swimming pool in Costa Rica. Our surf trip ended early that year. Mom had begged me not to go (a mother's intuition). She had dreamed that it rained heavily, and all the trees in the jungle snapped. I still remember the bottom of that pool and my body as a pile of brittle bone.

In the emergency room, the doctor told me I'd never walk again. I remember his sterile eyes. His voice was like a morgue, and his words like cold dead bodies. *I'd be better off at the bottom of the pool*, I thought. But I wouldn't get emotional in the emergency room.

I graduated from high school in 2002. I was an arrogant kid back then—an honors student headed to Point Loma Nazarene University on a soccer scholarship. Even though I had found Jesus during my sophomore year of high school, I had traded him by my senior year for cool friends, a girlfriend and a dream of becoming a wealthy businessman. I thought I had it all figured out.

During the ambulance ride, I'd concluded my life was over. I'd never be able to make it in this world as a cripple. The ambulance rattled, and I felt suffocated. I prayed for God to take me, and then I experienced something I've only experienced once since: a powerful, new voice filled me and said, "Everything will be all right, my son." Then there was darkness.

I spent over three months in the hospital. I was blessed to have family and friends who lined up to visit me, but it was also hard to see them and the sadness in their eyes. I was 20

years old with no idea as to what I was going to do with my life now. They might have been asking themselves the same question. A war raged inside me. I wondered, *Would I ever have a life again? I can't do this. What is the purpose of all this suffering?*

A green NLT study Bible sat in my hospital room for weeks. Collecting dust, it stared up at me. Finally, I opened it up to Matthew, and the Sermon on the Mount cried out: "Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?" (Matt. 6:27).

Reading books quickly became my obsession. The Bible fed me, and I read science fiction, fantasy, nonfiction and self-help books too. I even started consuming comic books. It was easier to escape into a story than deal with my new reality. I spent most days during those first couple of post-accident years in my room at my parent's house, where I was lost in story. God was with me, and I understand that now.

Eventually, I stumbled upon a book titled *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who endured unspeakable atrocities in the concentration camps during World War II. While imprisoned, he studied the mental conditions of the prisoners around him and noticed a shared characteristic among those who endured: hope. According to Frankl's observations, those who held onto a fragment of hope or were able to find meaning and purpose in their suffering were more likely to survive. Frankl became my mentor and taught me the power of the human spirit. Of course, there was purpose in my suffering. Of course, God would move and work through my life despite my brokenness. Over and over, I replayed the words I heard in the ambulance: "Everything will be all right, my son."

My obsession with storytelling became a calling. I read more and more books and started writing my own little stories to pass the time and make mom laugh. It was fun and fulfilling and something I knew I could get better at with practice. I

saw visions of myself using storytelling to reach others—a way to be used by God. That was the beginning.

It became clear to me that I must make comic books. Better yet, I must make comic books that glorify God and reflect His love for me and all of His creation. So, in 2013, I earned my bachelor's degree in literature and writing from California State University San Marcos. Then, in 2015, I received my master's in literature and writing from the same institution. All glory to God. The titles are not as important as the experience, the mentors and the friendships forged. College taught me about storytelling and forced me to think deeply about how stories change the way we see the world. It is exhilarating to finally pursue a purpose that's worthy of the calling you have received from God.

For a long time, I could not imagine a way for God to use my broken body to glorify Him. And to be honest, I still have moments of doubt. I am not here to tell you that I have it all figured out.

But amid the suffering, God is with us, helping us along and teaching us ways to glorify Him. I still suffer. I still sometimes mourn my “old” life before these metal wheels carried me. But I have faith that God will continue to move in my life in unimaginable ways. I am convinced that through the grace and glory of Christ Jesus, everything will be all right.

Mario DeMatteo *is the creator of the Graphic Story Bible () and author of Paul the Apostle: Graphic Story Bible.*