

I'm going to tell you a story. A somewhat long story. It has some sad parts in it. But hang in there with me. It's a good one. You're going to remember it for a long time.

Once upon a time, actually in 1990, there was a guy named BJ Miller who was a student at Princeton. He was a sophomore majoring in foreign relations, and dreaming of one day working in China. When he wasn't studying, he sometimes did the things college students are rather notorious for in our country, like going out drinking on a weeknight.

It was a Monday night when he and his friends went out and something happened that could never be undone. It would change the course of his life, and eventually, the courses of other people's lives, too.

Miller and his friends had been drinking for hours when around 4am, they got the munchies and left the bar to hit an all night convenience store for some sandwiches. While they were out, they noticed a commuter train parked nearby, and decided to climb it. Just for kicks.

Miller went first. He doesn't remember what happened next, but his friends saw it. It happened just as soon as he got to the top of the train: a current of electricity, arcing from the train's rooftop equipment... over... to the watch on his left wrist. And through his body. Down his legs. And out his feet.

When his friends reached him—and I shudder to think of them scrambling up near that same piece of electrically charged equipment—when his friends reached him, his feet were smoking.

He woke up several days later, totally out of it, at the St. Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, New Jersey. Thinking he was dreaming, Miller climbed out of bed and tried to walk across the room on those badly destroyed feet. His catheter got yanked out. And that's when the pain hit him.

In the following days, doctors amputated both his legs below the knee.

The day they scheduled the amputation of his arm... that was the worst.

His doctors still weren't sure he was even going to survive, but he didn't know that. He was concerned with what kind of life he'd have. About whether he'd still be himself, or... who he would be.

Miller explains, "Hands do stuff. Your foot is just a stinky, clunky little platform."

He hadn't been able to have visitors because the burn unit was a sterile environment. But the day of his arm's amputation, a group of friends and family—about a dozen of them—lined the hallway as he was wheeled through to surgery, just to catch a glimpse of him, to let him know they were there, that they cared.

Their presence made an impression on him. He feared that he was unlovable just then. He had made what must have seemed to all the world like a really stupid mistake. It was costing him so much. It was costing them, too. He wasn't going to be able to fix it. *But here they are*, he remembers thinking, ... *proving I am lovable even when I can't see it.*

On his way out of surgery, he opened his eyes and saw his mother. She had caught polio as a child, and had been in a wheelchair ever since.

"Mom," he told her as he passed by. "Now you and me have more in common."

If this sounds like a really positive reaction to his situation, Miller is quick to say that he was definitely not in a good mental space.

Not only that, his hospital room was windowless. One day he heard there was a blizzard outside. Knowing he couldn't see it deepened his sense of isolation. But he was at least *open* to finding whatever he could grasp onto for hope.

When a nurse sneaked a snowball into that antiseptic unit, he held it as it melted. He allowed himself to experience a sense of awe that he was part of a universe with snowballs in it. In a TED talk he would deliver years later, he described it as a moment of rapture. Rapture: joy, enthusiasm, a feeling of being transported.

He experienced rapture, along with everything else he was feeling.

It was something.

When he was released from the hospital, it took about a year before he was able to return to school. With two prosthetic legs and a prosthetic arm, he got around campus in a golf cart, a poorly behaved service dog by his side.

Miller switched his major from foreign relations to art history- a major notorious for inspiring dread in parents of college students- what kind of job can you get with a degree in art history?

But it helped.

In dark lecture halls, Miller and his classmates looked at slides of ancient sculptures. I'll bet you can picture one in your mind, even if you've never taken an art history class.... Got an image of an ancient sculpture in mind?

Famous among humanity, the sculptures were monumental, beautiful, moving. And most of them were missing noses, arms, legs, ears. They were all very chipped and worn. The damage time had inflicted on the statues, these wounds they had

acquired in the course of their lives, were considered part of their profound beauty now. I'll bet when you pictured one, some damage was part of the image you saw in your mind.

The statues are revered as perfect art, yet no one living today has ever seen them whole.

Miller saw himself in the statues' changed forms. They were fellow amputees.

He observed that western medicine does not see bodies the way art does. From the perspective of western medicine, Miller says, "There was an aberrant moment in your life and, with some help, you could get back to what you were, or approximate it." Medicine uses words like disability and rehabilitation to describe a fallen or lesser state and its treatment.

In reality, we are all on a continuum of ability. We are *born* with different levels of ability. As we age, we naturally move toward the less abled end. Some of us lose ability along the way due to injury or illness. We can even lose ability due to changing social conditions, like the invention of the printing press. Dyslexia was not a disability before people began to rely on written text. We acquire scars and stretch marks and wrinkles. Some of us have bionic parts. New knees. New hips.

No one is entitled and no one can expect to stay in an optimally able, unscarred state.

Miller decided to take a different approach to his injuries.

In a January article in New York Times magazine, which is where I and no doubt some of you first heard this story, the journalist Jon Mooallem explains Miller's thinking at the time.<sup>i</sup>

Miller refused, for example, to let himself believe that his life was extra difficult now, only uniquely difficult, as all lives are. He resolved to think of his suffering as simply a "variation on a theme we all deal with — to be human is really hard," [Miller] says. ... As a disabled person, he was getting all kinds of signals that he was different and separated from everyone else. But he worked hard to see himself as merely sitting somewhere on a continuum between the man on his deathbed and the woman who misplaced her car keys, to let his accident heighten his connectedness to others, instead of isolating him. This was the only way, he thought, to keep from hating his injuries and, by extension, himself.

It wouldn't be easy. Just like the day he told his mom they now had more in common, Miller still struggled with frustration, fear, and self-consciousness. The scars at the ends of his amputated limbs made the flesh look brutalized. At first he didn't want anyone to see it.

But he gradually went from the usual sock-like covering doctors offer amputees, to actual socks. Plain socks at first, then happier socks with bright patterns. Until one day he gave up the socks altogether.

Next, the ugly foam coverings came off his prosthetic limbs. The prosthetics had a kind of architecture. Maybe it shouldn't hide.

Kind of like our sanctuary. When you look at our sanctuary building and the social hall next to it from Carlisle, you see steel beams on the exterior. This new building echoes and compliments the style of the old one, in which the building's strength is not covered up with softer exterior materials, but is exposed, put on display, to be admired in its own right.

Miller took a page from this kind of architecture. He decided to let the strength and design of his prosthetic limbs be seen.

Eventually, Miller was accepted into medical school. What a different perspective he must have brought to his classes! He found his way into palliative care, a specialty in which providers focus on improving the quality of life for people with serious illness.

Miller went on to become the executive director of Zen Hospice in San Francisco. Zen Hospice started out as a pretty improvised response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980's; a group of Buddhists taking in young gay men who had nowhere else to go, and trying to help them die more comfortably. Today, Zen Hospice is a thought leader in end of life care, encouraging Western medicine—and all of us—to see death as a part of life, part of being human, and not just a medical event—or worse—a medical failure.

At Zen hospice, patients are people. They can come and go, eat cookies, drink Bud Light or smoke cigarettes if that's their thing. I love the fact that Miller survived, thrived, and went on to help people who are dying experience an abundance of life in their last days.

(I guess *that's* what kind of job you can get with an art history degree.)

Around that time, Miller also decided to take up motorcycle riding. He had already been mountain biking, but was drawn to the exhilarating speed of motorcycles. I'd guess that being a triple amputee probably slows you down when you're walking from place to place, going up stairs, carrying things, and all that. Imagine the freedom of hopping on a motorcycle and propelling yourself down the road at 70, 80, or 90 miles per hour.

This is where the mother in me goes, "Oh, LORD, no." But Miller had already stood at the brink of death and looked over the edge. Now he was ready to live, really live, on his terms and to the greatest extent possible.

The problem was no one wanted to try to build a motorcycle for a triple amputee. For years Miller asked around, and everyone was put off, not only by the challenge

of it—how do you run all the controls to just one side of the handlebars??—, but by the potential liability. What if Miller hurt himself? What if he hurt someone else?

Finally a young guy named Randy Sloan agreed to do it. Still in his 20's, Sloan was the youngest person at the motorcycle shop where he worked, and was known for being the most sensitive one there too. He instantly perceived what a special person Miller was.

Sloan finished the job in the spring of 2014.

Mooallem says that on the day Miller took possession of the bike:

A crowd gathered at... to watch ... Sloan had [Miller] climb on, then clambered around and under the bike, making final adjustments. Then he stepped back and started, quietly, to cry.

Miller was tearing up under his helmet, too. But he didn't drag things out. He started the engine, said thank you, then streaked down the alleyway at the back of the shop. Everyone ... applauded as they watched him disappear down Valencia Street — very fast, but with a pronounced, unsettling wobble.

It turns out Miller had never ridden a motorcycle before; a fact he'd failed to mention to the bike shop.

Let us pause here and consider the story. Why have I told you, in a sermon called "Abundance," a story about a man who loses three of his four limbs and works in a hospice center? It sounds like a story about loss.

We think of abundance as having as much of something as we could possibly want, or even more.

If you google "abundance," you'll find religious stories about people who accept Jesus and then, the very next day, receive a promotion. Hallelujah!

Or who give to a televangelist and then win the lottery. You'll find quotes from ancient scriptures that suggest that if you do what God tells you (or at least, what people-say-God-tells-you, you will have abundant crops and possibly numerous wives and many children.

(We had already redefined marriage, friends, long before the Supreme Court got involved).

Of course, what we know is that those theologies of prosperity or abundance don't apply to everyone. Many of the most devout religious people are desperately poor.

And the problem with theologies of prosperity like those is that they don't inspire much help for the poor. They, and their cousin theologies that teach that if you have the right thoughts you'll attract material wealth into your life, don't offer much guidance for dismantling systems of economic oppression, like ours in this country,

in which the top 1% of US households own more than 40% of the nation's wealth, and the bottom 40% of Americans struggle to get by on 0.3% the nation's wealth.

The bottom 40% of Americans have only .3% of the wealth. And we are having public conversations about immigrants stealing jobs from Americans. This is no accident. As long as we are fighting like dogs over that .3%, we won't notice those outrageously wealthy people hogging up the rest of it and lobbying for more.<sup>ii</sup>

If you think that doesn't apply to you, consider the fact that the bottom 80% of the country has only 15% of the wealth. The wealthiest people, the top 20% have the rest of it.

When we talk about economic scarcity in our country,

when we worry that there isn't enough money or there aren't enough jobs for everyone here,

and when some people suggest the answer is that we should send Immigration agents to steal away mothers like the one taking sanctuary right now in the Friends Meeting House in Albuquerque,

we have misread the situation.

We have misread the situation. That's why our Board of Directors issued a statement last week supporting the Friends Meeting House in their decision to become a sanctuary church.

But this isn't a sermon about economics. It's a sermon about abundance.

We tend to conflate financial success with abundance. We think if we have financial success we will have abundance. But they are not the same.

Let me tell you, I have known wealthy people who believed they were broke. Who had that anxiety, despite six figure incomes and nice homes. Wealth does not equal abundance.

And so we have some work to do on economics, but in the meantime, while by the grace of God we're on our way to a fairer and more equitable society, I want to talk about abundance in the spiritual sense. In the way that transcends your bank balance. That transcends your luck in life. That transcends, even, the number of limbs on your body, or the years you are given to live.

Abundance is not about having what you want, but about noticing what you have, and multiplying it through sharing it, multiplying it through your manner of being in this world.

That's what Miller did. He discovered that his injuries caused not just the loss of 3 limbs, but an increase in connection with his mother and with other human beings.

He opened his eyes to a path that would allow him to multiply connection, love, kindness, generosity, and growth. And he said yes to the path.

Have you noticed: people who experience abundance also tend to give abundantly? Whether it is of money, love, joy, time, or any other blessing in life.

There is a myth of scarcity in our culture. We learn it through language and judgment. Either you're whole or you're broken. Either you're a winner or a loser. Either you're white... or you're not. That's what racism really comes down to, isn't it? White or not. In or out.

Either you're happy or unhappy. Either you're living or you're dying. (We are all doing both). Either you're male or you're female. But we know that's not true.

We know that this kind of binary, either/or, scarcity thinking creates sadness within us and division among us.

What are you struggling with right now? Health? A relationship? Politics? Concern for the pain of this world? Could it be possible to experience, also, a sense of rapture? To cultivate a boundless heart? To find deep meaning and joy in the days you are blessed to live?

I invite you to begin by accepting, deeply, that you are enough. That you have what you need already, within you and around you. That your life is rich with abundance in its own right. That you have more than enough meaning, beauty, love, time, and resources. That you are deciding every day whether to notice them and where to "spend" them.

Will you join me in a spirit of prayer one more time this morning?

O source of love and wisdom, source of life, great mystery,

Help us to see the overflowing abundance of our lives, the abundance of all creation in which we live and are interdependent. Help us to see the abundance of love, generosity, and meaning overflowing in our lives.

Help us to transcend our either/or, limited, scarcity thinking about gender, ability, nationality, culture, and race, to see that there are myriad, abundant ways of being, and that they are beautiful in their spectacular array. <sup>iii</sup>

Help us to see that there is enough for ourselves and all people, and to live into that truth.

May our blessings be multiplied through our sharing them.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mooallem, Jon. "One Man's Quest to Change the Way We Die." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 Jan. 2017. Web. 26 Mar. 2017. <https://tinyurl.com/kt4pgf2>

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<sup>ii</sup> Fitz, Nicholas. "Economic Inequality: It's Far Worse Than You Think." *Scientific American*. N.p., 27 Mar. 2015. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.  
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/economic-inequality-it-s-far-worse-than-you-think/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nationalweekendofprayer.org/>