

The Best Worst Thing That Ever Happened to Me

When she was six weeks old, my firstborn, Anna, had a series of strokes. A mistake was made at the hospital, and then the docs told us she was going to die.

But something unexpected happened: she refused to die. Anna spent the next six weeks in a coma and the next six months in the Infant ICU at the Children's Hospital in Seattle. Like getting old: It wasn't a great six months, but it was better than the alternative.

Anna's tribulation was, naturally, *our* tribulation; but Anna's mother and I had a far different understanding of what "tribulation" means. Anna's mother thought – and thinks – that tribulation means "distress or suffering resulting from oppression or persecution"; and she is absolutely not wrong. That's the dictionary definition.

But look deeper at the word: In Latin, a *tribulum* is a drag used in threshing. It has a purpose: To enable nourishment to emerge by whacking stalks of wheat. It's the source of our word tribulation.

There is nothing I can do to unmake what has been done. Anna's injuries *were*, and *are*, and *will be*; and, therefore, my suffering for Anna *was*, and *is*, and *will be*.

But the suffering I experienced offered me a chance.

You see, West Point doesn't exist to produce *nice* people; it exists to produce *effective* ones. As a young cavalry officer, I used to tell my scouts: "We are in the business of trading lives for victory—*your* lives for *America's* victory." It wasn't that I wanted to spend them. That's bad for morale; and, ultimately, undermines the mission. It was that we were in a business where I might *need to*, and I didn't see any point in pretending.

Ask anyone who has ever had to spend one of their boys, and you will see the gates instantly slam down—because there are no words to describe what it costs.

No one has ever accused me of being normal. I was a creature that would spend a million of your sons (and now, daughters) if that was what was necessary to accomplish the mission you gave me, just as I expected my commanders to spend me if that's what it took to get the job done.

In this therapeutic age, we have rejected the idea that suffering can have meaning. But, in the case of Anna, suffering offered me the opportunity to become less inhuman.

But not before I had broken things that couldn't be put back together. By the time I realized I had pushed her beyond her limits, Anna's mother was gone. She withdrew into a protective shell from which she never emerged. I felt bad and then wondered if that's what they mean by "survivor's guilt." I'd never felt bad like that before.

Like all of us, I had a choice: Keep feeding that part of me that became hungrier the more I fed it or walk away from my military career and devote myself to being mother and father both.

Unknowingly, blindly, tentatively, I struggled to accept what had to be. Something – maybe something that was imbued in me by my family and our faith tradition, maybe dumb luck, maybe a stubborn refusal to surrender inspired by Anna's unbreakable will to survive – slowly began to use my suffering to change me.

In all fairness, I am cartoonishly unsuited to provide a mother's love to my children, let alone a father's. I am a natural predator and struggled to make sense of the Jonas Brothers and "social media" and the countless hurts that the world unthinkingly visits on young girls—even young girls who are severely disabled. Especially young girls who are severely disabled.

But I did my best and tried to muddle through, never suspecting that that's the only thing you *can* do.

And it changed me.

I wish I could tell you that it made me into a saint, but that would be a lie. It just allowed me to set the most ruthless parts of me aside for a bit to let Anna paint my toenails, and for us to cry together when we needed to. When I needed to.

And to my surprise, I slowly began to see light where I had once seen only darkness. I saw within Anna a light that I never imagined could exist. I was fascinated by how the darkness – *my* darkness – receded from such a feeble light. I followed it, and it began – dimly, tentatively – to infiltrate me.

And as I was changed, I discovered that I began to see others in a different light. Don't get me wrong: Every young buck sniffing around Anna is still a potential threat to be neutralized. But, surprisingly, I began to lose the will to *want them* to attack.

It was not that the world became a better place. Rather, it was that my eyes were opened to the truth: The world was not a machine which exists so that I can wrest from it everything that mattered—honor, glory, reputation, victory.

In tiny, insignificant steps, I began to lose the power to impede my own light.

My suffering for my child's suffering took away the illusion that "winning" offered me answers. Because winning means someone else *has to* lose.

You see, a lot of men can be a general; but only one man on Earth can be Anna's dad. I walked away from the Army, and only came back because some amazing leaders arranged a way for me to be both dad and soldier...in that order.

Like a car accident that reveals an undetected cancer, Anna's injuries were the best thing that ever happened to me.

They saved me.

She saved me.