

A Conversation with Katherine and Jay Wolf Speakers, Authors, and Founders of Non-Profit, Hope Heals

Q: Katherine, when you had a stroke at the young age of 26, endured surgeries and rehabilitation for years, your life was saved, but forever changed. How did this experience change the course of both your lives?

A: The beauty of young suffering is that it informs the rest of your life. You live differently because of what you've experienced. When you are near death, you appreciate being alive. You can celebrate every day and engage. There are studies about post-traumatic growth. One emerging psychology study shows that people who have had near death experiences don't have the deathbed regrets of those who haven't. Young suffering becomes a strange gift. Before the stroke, life was easy and carefree. I married my prince charming, was doing some commercial print modeling and we lived in Malibu. Life was awesome, easy and fabulous and then I had this massive stroke out of nowhere, nearly died and became severely disabled. I went from a typical existence, able to walk, drive, eat, and care for my baby - all of that was taken down to zero. Ten years later, some of that is slightly better, but largely much of it is very similar to what it was. I still can't drive a car or walk unassisted. My face is still paralyzed on one side; I have no hearing in one ear, and double vision. Absolutely everything was turned upside down.

Q: You have found purpose in your suffering. How might others find purpose in suffering to overcome brokenness?

A: Some have external wheelchairs; some have inner wheelchairs. It's not about overcoming, it's more about embracing those things and deciding this is part of my story and for some reason, this is what God is doing in me and through me and I'm going to lean into it. Maybe it's not about a cure. We've missed a mark in America by wanting to cure everything rather than engaging it and learning the dark lessons for us in our suffering. It's not easy engaging the hard stuff, but incredible when you do. Live well within the constraints of your life. That looks different for everyone. I don't have to walk normally every day to have a great life. A wheelchair is part of my life, for example, and I don't think that's bad.

Q: How have you both redefined hope?

A: In general, we're all defined by a lot of things when we are born into this world. Suffering gives us a chance to redefine those things. Suffering, fears, and hopes make us who we are. Suffering is a catalyst, giving us a chance to redefine what we thought we were. When you insert hope and God into that equation, you redefine your life. Hope is not just wishful thinking, or a reality we manifest with positivity, it's a future promise that we are living out in the present. It's not denial. It's not up to us fully, other than leaning into the reality of it. When we talk about hope we're not talking about an idea, or pulling yourselves up by your bootstraps. But we're talking about Jesus making a way through us, through our brokenness to a new life. What that looks like is this future reality that we get to actively live in the present. Despite the storms that surround us, we know the end of the story. It's about a process. It's about an outcome. It's about a future reality of God. It's about a healing of all broken things. It's about a process of walking through that, not yet with God. When your life turns out totally different that you thought, you

know God has shown up with you in the past, and he will always, which is the reason to get out of bed in the morning. Living a life of hope isn't about living a life that's opposite of your hurt. But rather hope is in the middle of the spectrum, with hurt, despair and unending struggle on one side and on the opposite is hype. Hope lies somewhere in the middle. Authentically living in a story that's full of struggle is acknowledging the bittersweet part of hope. Suffering isn't the end of the story; it's a beginning of a new story with a hopeful perspective of a future in the midst of the unknown and pain.

Q: Katherine, you speak on redefining how you see beauty. What does that mean to you?

A. When I began speaking to groups after a massive brain-stem stroke almost killed me about 11 years ago, the bio organizations used to promote my talk usually led with a nod to my modeling career—and how it was cut short. At first, that emphasis on such a small part of my life confused me. I'd experienced success as a print model, but the jobs never defined who I was in my own mind. So why did it feel like once I sat in a wheelchair with half of my face paralyzed, the world said everyone should care more about what I had to say because I'd once been paid for being pretty?

Beauty has meaning—but it's not what we're being sold. Despite the relentless messages of a multi-billion-dollar industry, beauty is both internal and eternal, and experiencing it has nothing to do with good lighting or nighttime serum. Beauty is connected to our relationship with shame. We all have negative feelings about who we are and what we've done or didn't do. Where do you feel shame about your body? About how you look? About how you sound and present yourself to the world? Pinpoint those tender hurts, and then walk away from them. Shame, which is used so often to sell, has no place in real beauty.

Years after my stroke, I got another modeling job. I became a spokesperson for the American Stroke Association, and my face was on billboards and the sides of buses all over the country. People came up to me to say, "I realized I was having a stroke because I remembered your face and what I saw on that billboard. Your face helped save my life." Instead of being shame-inducing, this modeling job was life-giving—not just for the individuals watching, but for me, too. And that is truly beautiful.

Q: When you were a child, what did you imagine your life looking like?

A. I truly feel like my whole life was leading up to a stroke. As a child, I'd line my dolls up in my closet, then stand before them to deliver impassioned speeches about justice and equality. Today, I still make impassioned pleas for civil rights—but the dolls have become thousands of human beings, deeply invested not just in my words, but in the change they can help realize.

It's funny how a dream can simultaneously be exactly who you've always been and entirely different from where you'd always imagined you'd be. Too often, we cling to the dreams of our childhood so tightly that we cannot see the surpassingly beautiful and unexpected way they're playing out and beckoning, right in front of us. So many people are hustling, reaching, working so hard for something that's so far away. There is a time for that. There is also a time to look around, right where you are. You may realize your dream is right here, just waiting for you to lean in.

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Q: Your marriage looks much different than you imagined it would when you two were newlyweds heading out to live out your dreams. How has your journey and enduring loss, pain and challenges affected your marriage?

A: On our wedding day, I promised to stay with Katherine, not knowing about the malformation she had under her wedding veil. I was unaware of the future of disability, struggle, near death and loss I was effectively promising to sign up for. Today's cultural thinking would have me believe that if you didn't know, you didn't sign up for it and therefore have the right to go find the life you are entitled to. Making a promise to someone to an unknown future is saying the promise is good no matter the outcome, no matter what the person experiences that changes them, or the struggles you might face. The Christian perspective of this is a covenant versus contract. For us, it's a picture of what marriage is about. Katherine has to stay with me as time and challenges have changed me too. Commitment is difficult. Hardship at a young age challenges you big time. Every marriage goes through iterations in lifespans. Kids are born, kids leave, medical issues, retirement; these things create a new marriage. Big changes like major losses create more opportunities for the marriage to start over. For me, it's the idea of learning to love a new person as we evolve in our marriage. We are not in charge of the outcomes or who our spouse becomes, but we are responsible for showing up and learn to love them in their process of change. Our role is cheerleader not change agent. In the bigger picture of commitment and contentment, you must be open to dreaming new dreams and considering that maybe there's a new dream to lean into that lets you not only survive, but also thrive and flourish.

The expectation that marriage is going to be an upward trajectory based on the dreams you had as a childhood is not only flawed and naive, it's missing out on the richness you get from staying during changes and challenges. The vine creates a sweeter fruit when it's struggled. People miss out on the depth of life they could experience. The marriage vows focus on for better, richer, healthier, forever. The converse of those are worse, poorer, and sickness and death. These are truly the most powerful things you can say to another person. Marriage is not built on a transaction, but this promise that you are going to keep showing up.

Every situation is unique and we encourage others to have a community of people who know them and walk beside them. We were never meant to work through our challenges in isolation. When people pull back because of struggle and shame, it's harder to move through. Studies show that couples that stay in a marriage through seasons of unhappiness are happier. There are fruits that come from the commitment of staying. Commitment and suffering are profound and that is powerfully realized in marriage.

Q: You have mentioned that responses to trials and life-altering traumas determine who we really are. Explain that idea.

A: We cannot control what happens, but we have total control over how we respond to what happens to us. There's power in how we remember what happens. That doesn't mean you revise history, but you see the arc of the story and see God in what's happened so you can look back with gratitude. Re-narrating means not listening to other voices in the world about your response. In a Christian world view, that means listening to God's voice to dictate how you respond. There's response but also remembrance. Re-narration is the idea that how you think about what happened to you is more important than what actually happened to you. Each story has dozens of ways you can look at it. Sometimes different family members view the same story differently. You have to ask yourself, who is telling the story. Are you telling your own story? We get to choose the story we are going to remember. That will impact how we continue to live in the future. What you pay attention to creates a memory in your brain, and that's what your brain uses to anticipate the future. What you pay attention to helps you remember your future. Other

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people often tell us the story we should pay attention to and can narrate that for us if we are distracted or hurt, and receiving whatever is coming through our emotions. We need to stop and pay attention to whether there's a truer story we need to give our attention.

Q: Katherine, you are a wife, mother, speaker, and author who happens to also have physical challenges. The disabled community fights the stigmatism that because of physical challenges they can't live out their dreams or purpose, yet they also face the challenges of physical limitations. What encouragement might you offer to others who are learning to manage limitations, and what advice might you offer those around them?

A. What's key is to universalize my physical limitations as similar to every type of limitation. Being a disabled mother has great limitations. I'm not going to be the volunteer mom walking kids into the classroom every morning, but I'm able to tune out the voices that tell me that's what I need to do to be a good mother, and tune in to the voice that says I have a unique role to play in the lives of my children. My kids have a leg up because they have some really legit teaching moments they're seeing in their own home every day.

Q: Jay, you write about rewriting the narrative of hard circumstances and changing the way you see the feature. Can you speak more on this?

A. Our family changed forever when my wife Katherine suffered a massive stroke at 26-years-old. It wasn't just dreams and plans that were derailed. Suddenly, we no longer recognized our everyday existence. We aren't alone. In this life, we will all experience pain. There will be trauma, too—of varying degrees and forms. We don't get to pick our poison or when it hits. But we do get to choose how we remember it all.

Our friend Dr. Curt Thompson has condensed complex neuroscience into a transformational truth that we can all understand: What we pay attention to, the stories we tell ourselves, and what we choose to take away become our memories. For those of you wary of New Age ideas about the power of perception, please realize that I am not talking about manifesting some new reality or creating a more palatable past. But there are rhythms of intentionality that we can weave into our lives every day to help us as we step into an unknown future.

Did you weather a hard season? As we look to the New Year, instead of focusing on the hurt, consider this: You're here. You made it to the other side. You are resilient and strong, and no matter what happens next, you can and will be resilient and strong again because you know how to be. The framework is there, ready and waiting inside of you.

Q: The world is not made for individuals who are challenged physically in any way. How has this affected both your lives and what changes do you hope society will make in the future for this community of our population?

A. We all have wheelchairs; some are just invisible. We acknowledge it's hard for some of us to be in the world. There's a need to open the door to get access and to have a seat at the table. So often we feel isolated by our pain and struggles by things that feel so personal, but often the things that feel personal are a universal part of our existence as humans. A person is not wheelchair bound, but the wheelchair gives you freedom. Without it many of us would not be able to get out into the world. It's a powerful picture to think that which looks like an avenue to our loss, can actually be the avenue to a new world and living out our story. I didn't know the challenges of traveling around the world in a chair until my wife was in one. People with disabilities have the highest rates of divorce, suicide, and homelessness. No one wants to

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acknowledge this group because it reminds them of their mortality. Persons of disability are the largest underserved community in the world. They are also the most un-churched group. We can go across the world to evangelize folks in the name of Jesus, but there are those down the street who can't get into the church. There's an amazing opportunity to start seeing each other. With circumstances like ours, you don't normally have the opportunity to make it your life's work. With our camp, we wanted to give communal support, respite, and resources that are shown to improve the quality of life of those with disabilities. It's been profound to see how this impacts those who are campers with disabilities and those who don't have disabilities. Campers leave with dignity and calling for their lives. Continuing to build a community centered by compassion has been the place we've found extraordinary healing in the midst of a story we could have never imagined or embraced. Our experience has opened our eyes to hurting people in general. Struggles can make you bitter or break your heart in a way that opens and expands your heart to see hurting people all around you.

We didn't want the redemptive path of experiencing the struggle of disability as part of our journey, but in going back to help others who are struggling we've found more hope and healing. In leaning into that part of our story, we found a new community, people with disabilities. These are our people, which spurred us on to start a camp for families with disabilities like us. The Hope Heals camp is three years old with 800 participants in the U.S. and UK. It became this incredible healing experience that wouldn't have happened if we had said we couldn't handle any more struggle or our reality of disability.

When you have a disability, it's a real struggle for you as an individual, but it is also a struggle for those who are part of your system of family and friends. Katherine bears the weight of so many challenges, but it's our whole family's story. We share that as a family and need healing as a family too. Camp gets you out of your normal day-to-day rhythm and allows you to see life and God differently.

About Katherine and Jay Wolf

Katherine and Jay Wolf's story is one of love, survival and hope. After meeting in college, the 22-year-old couple married and moved to Los Angeles where Jay was pursuing a law degree and Katherine began modeling. Six months after their son James was born in 2007, at the age of 26, Katherine suffered a massive and catastrophic brain stem stroke that nearly ended her life. Against all the odds, she survived and Katherine's life was saved but forever changed, as was their marriage. Seven years after the stroke, the couple welcomed their second miracle son, John into their lives. Katherine is a charismatic and dynamic force that brings humor and joy to all she meets. The two are speakers, authors and founders of the non-profit ministry, Hope Heals. They also co-authored "HOPE HEALS", the account of her near death and their new life, told from both of their perspectives. Their second book, "SUFFER STRONG: How to survive anything by redefining everything" releases February 2020. The family resides in Atlanta, Georgia.

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