

## A Remarkable Life

Some people have heroic moments- rescuing a stranger from a burning building, chasing a criminal, saving a friend from drowning. We admire their bravery, and fittingly award them medals and accolades. **Still others live heroic lives, not marked by dramatic or newsworthy events, but rather by a lifetime of faithfulness and courage.** The latter are my personal heroes, who fight battles every day that most of us know nothing about.

Many of you are familiar with Joni Eareckson Tada, whom I have admired for years and written about frequently, who fights daily battles with intractable pain and quadriplegia. *Joni and I also share a hero, a woman who isn't rich or famous, hasn't accomplished anything impressive by the world's standards, but as Joni says, is "a monument of inspiration."* I couldn't agree more.

Her name is Rika Theron and she lives in South Africa, in a small coastal town in the Western Cape. She suffers with severe Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) and has for almost 40 years, since she was 16. ME is a debilitating neurological disease that affects the entire body and causes bone crushing fatigue, terrifying brain problems and constant muscle, joint and nerve pain. The pain can sometimes be unbearable with 24/7 shocking impulses and nauseating burning throughout the body — as if every nerve is a damaged power cable, shooting sparks. It involves sensory dysregulation so even processing sounds can be alarming and painful, and sleep is often elusive, and even then, non-restorative. Because of the low blood pressure and breathing problems caused by ME, people usually cannot tolerate pain medication.

With severe ME, Rika spends over 90% of her time in bed, often in a dark room since there is no "safe" level of activity for her. Even minimal effort or sensory stimulation including things like concentrating, reading, writing, trying to remember something, making a phone call, listening to music or having someone visit for a short time, can result in frightening Post Exertional Malaise (PEM) which is a severe worsening of all the symptoms, lasting for hours, days or sometimes weeks. So anything Rika does could trigger a flareup. There has never been a remission, never 'quiet' in her body.

She has been housebound, mostly bedridden, since she was a teenager and has continued to live with her family. Her younger brother has a mild cognitive disability, as well as Chronic Myeloid Leukemia and her parents care for him as well. Rika's father is a retired Dutch Reformed pastor, and both her parents are in their late eighties, so they must all trust God day-to-day to provide for them.

**Few of us know anything of suffering that deep and that relentless. Loneliness, isolation, and inactivity with at best a few functional hours a day. Intractable pain that has continued, unabated, only worsening over time. Utter dependence on others and on God, trusting Him alone for the future.**

*This. This is a life of suffering. And this is a life of breathtaking beauty. A life better spent than mine — I would venture to say better spent than anyone I know.* She pours the contents of her alabaster flask out daily, using the few hours a day she may be functional, to worship God and to serve others. She is steeped in God's word and knows it intimately. God is her comfort

and she clings to God's promises in Scripture. She cares deeply for others, always following up on prayer requests, bringing names of the suffering before the Lord as he gives her strength.

Rika finds inspiring articles, often written hundreds of years ago, lightly edits them, and shares them as she is able with a small group of friends we call Joni's Pain Pals — friends of Joni who deal with severe chronic pain and illness. I do not know how she does that given how difficult thinking is, let alone reading and writing, but somehow she manages it, marshalling all her strength and energy. Not surprisingly, the articles she curates never fail to inspire.

A few excerpts from her articles:

From FB Meyer:

*The soul cannot accumulate a stock of grace. It has no stores. From hour to hour it is always on the edge of bankruptcy, but ALWAYS supplied. So should we live — at every moment giving all we have, never doubting about the supplies of the future.*

*Bear pain for one moment at a time; there is patience enough in Jesus for the next moment. You cannot exhaust God; and your work is to be, not in your might or power, but by his Spirit.*

From Charles Spurgeon:

*The praises of the angels, as they bow in perfect happiness, and say, "God is good," must be very blessed. And the praises of men of God on earth, who have health and strength, and who say, "God is good," are very precious. But you take me to one who is poor and needy, one who is racked with pain and suffering, and deprived of every comfort; yet I see her stretch out her hand, and say, "The Lord is good, blessed be his name" — I think the Lord finds a sweeter note in that praise than He does even the music of the angelic choirs.*

Often Rika writes a short preface to the article like this one:

My precious Pals...as you read this, may you know that EVERY single day of perseverance is a day of victory. Whether it is one of the 'easier' days, or just one of 'those' soul-weary, groaning, tear-filled-eyes days. It still IS a day of victory... A day in which, even as you are fighting for yourselves, you are fighting many a battle for all of us. A day in which your courage helps all of us to take courage and press forward, as Henry Ward Beecher writes. May these words comfort and encourage you today. Praying for you as my day is ending. With so much love from my tiny corner of the world.

*Oftentimes the comfort that comes from seeing others victorious, brings victory to us.*

*We do not know when we are fighting for ourselves, how many battles we are fighting for others, too.*

*Now, let us open a Christian gallery, and take all men that have been martyrs; all men that, for the sake of maintaining truth, have left home and country, and lived in mountains and caves; all men that have exiled themselves, and wasted their lives in dungeons and hospitals; all men that have stood patiently in their lot, and suffered, and died, and gained their victory, and gone to glory. I look upon the portraits of these men, and say, "That grace which has carried every one of them through, can carry me through."*

**In a world that worships fame and productivity, indulgences and self-sufficiency, Rika's life may seem unbearably difficult.** She has not enjoyed the fleeting pleasures afforded to most people and has spent her life in relative seclusion, in pain and dependent on others. ***Yet watching Rika live in joyful dependence on God, touching the seen and unseen world, I realize she's changing the universe as she fights her daily battles – perhaps having a greater impact on the kingdom of God than celebrities with large ministries. In heaven, the people who have suffered alone, in a small corner of the world, will shine more brightly than we can imagine.***

I can't wait to meet Rika in heaven. My guess is that she'll be so very close to Jesus and will have hordes of people around her that I'll probably need to wait in a very long line!

**Watching Rika live with complete trust in God has humbled me, amazed me, and made me want to know Jesus more deeply.**

***For those who feel forgotten and insignificant, I am praying Rika's life will remind them that God sees and cares deeply about them. That it will encourage them that they're not alone in this battle. And that it will give them courage to press on, knowing that the same God and the same grace that carries Rika through can carry us all through as well.***