

Season 3 | Episode 10

Pain is a Gift

Tera Bradham DeNeui

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating, and this is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts or find us at joniandfriends.org/podcast.

Joining us on the podcast today is Christian speaker and author, Tera Bradham DeNeui, whose swimming trajectory dramatically shifted after suffering an undiagnosed injury that led her through seven years of chronic pain and spiritual darkness. Through it all, Tera experienced such victory in Christ amidst her pain that it has become her life's mission to help others experience that same freedom. Welcome to the podcast, Tera.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Thank you so much, Crystal. I'm excited to be here.

Crystal Keating:

Well, we're excited to have you, and I want to begin our conversation by hearing about your story. I understand you were one of the fastest 12-year-old swimmers in the country. You had your sights set for the Olympics, but that all changed after you injured your shoulder and started experiencing excruciating pain, even at that young age, my goodness. Take us back to that time in your life when you were training and planning for the future.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yeah, so swimming I fell into because a lifeguard at the neighborhood pool, a high schooler, told my parents that he thought she had some breaststrokes with my brother and me. And so we got into the sport of swimming, like how one conversation can totally change the trajectory of your life. And I got really good really fast, and I really hated losing. I didn't just like to win, I hated to lose. And so that propelled me forward and I had this very aggressive personality and I just believed I was invincible. And so that led to, by the time I was 10 years old, I was the fastest swimmer in the country my age group, so 10 and under at the time in multiple events. And that lasted to the point from 10 until I was 12 years old. So by the time I was eight, I was training at least nine swim practices a week plus weights.

Crystal Keating:

Oh my goodness. So that's morning and afternoon? Probably after school.



Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes. Driving 30, 45 minutes one way, twice a day. I mean, it really was a life, yeah.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So you must have been really good. Well, talk about training for the Olympics.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yeah. So I was in a group with Randy Reese who was an Olympic coach at the time. And so I had lots of people at that level saying, "If you keep going on this trajectory, we think you're going to have a shot at the Olympics at age 15 and then 19 and 23." And so that was the trajectory. It was not guaranteed, but that's what it was looking like. And so that was my dream.

I asked my mom probably when I was about 8 years old, we were on one of those long car rides to practice. And I said, "Mom, if I make it to the Olympics, will you buy me a horse?" And she was like, "Sure." And I'm like, "No, no, no, like really?" She's like, "No, really I'll buy you a horse." I'm like, "I don't even have to win?" She's like, "You don't have to win. If you make it to the Olympics, we'll buy you a horse." And I said, "I'm going to name her Freedom." And so that's where the title of my book comes from was Swimming for Freedom, meant this horse, it symbolized the Olympics. But the thing is, is that became an idol. And as you go through in my story, God completely upends that and I find a very different kind of freedom than the one I was expecting.

Crystal Keating:

Well, let's talk about that, because I think God has a way of giving us a taste of what we think we want, and having those things almost taken away to give us something so much greater, so much more satisfying in him. So even at that young age, talk about pursuing swimming and then what happened? I mean, you obviously sustained a life altering injury that changed the course of where you were going.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

When I was almost 13 years old, I was competing in the state championship for age group swimming in Texas. And I had won six of the seven races, which a full slate of events is seven events. And I really didn't want to lose the last one. I wanted the perfect sweep. And so it was the 50 freestyle, the shortest race in the sport. So you're going incredibly fast, sprinting, only a couple breaths maybe. Once you get older you don't breathe at all.

Crystal Keating:

Wow.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

And so I took my breath coming back and I saw the girls right with me and I dug in and I threw myself into the wall to finish to win. And at that point I knew if I heard the crowd go nuts, it meant I had broken a record or I lost, because they wanted one of those two things. And I knew I was nowhere near a record. And I heard the crowd go nuts and my heart sank, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I lost." And I looked up and we had tied to the 100th. So we both won.



And then I had incredible pain shooting through my shoulder. And I remember, I used the backstroke bars on the block to get out and pain just ripped through my arm. I tried to warm down and I couldn't even begin to take a stroke. And I was like, "Oh, it's fine." And we drove back home and got up for practice the next morning and I couldn't move my arm, just maybe a couple inches up from my side, excruciating pain. And so that's what started this journey of "I lost the trajectory I was on." And not only did I lose that, but I lost my health, which is an even more basic fundamental thing that we think we have and take for granted.

Crystal Keating:

What do you mean by you lost your health?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yeah, so this shoulder injury was not a quick fix. So people will think you can just go to the doctor and they solve it. And sometimes that's true, and that was not the case for me. So it a perfect storm of, I had an incredibly high pain tolerance matched with doctors thinking that it was psychological because I had been so good so young. And so they said I was making this up to account for the fact that I was no longer improving. And so we went through that for about five years.

I started pulling muscles because I was so imbalanced. All my strokes changed to avoid this pain. We even had a cortisone shot in and they nicked an artery which caused all the air, I swam a whole practice on it, thinking I was dying and still swimming, pushed all that air out into my throat. Sounded like I was on a helium. And so thankfully the ENT sent us to the ER, and they were like, "If you would have gone to another practice, I mean, your lungs completely would have collapsed. You would have died." So there were all kinds of things in there. That lung collapse was the third day of eighth grade, or near lung collapse, it didn't actually collapse.

Crystal Keating:

Oh my goodness. That is a lot for a young girl to take in. So fast forward a couple years, you're going through misdiagnosis, you're experiencing pain. I mean, at that point, are you still swimming? I mean, what are you thinking about yourself, about your situation, about your future?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yeah. So my senior year of high school, I am still swimming. God broke the fact that swimming was an idol in my life about my sophomore year of high school. And so I believe that I was doing this and he said, "I'm going to give you a platform through this sport that you could never have without it." And so I had resigned myself to, "Maybe I'm here for my teammates to know Christ. Maybe I don't, I'm not going to go to the Olympics, but this is where I'm supposed to be." So I was swimming. I was still in incredible pain. They finally decided to go in for a first surgery. And that's where they found my labrum, the cartilage, and shoulder was ripped off the bone. So I had been swimming with that for five years at that point, but I thought, "Oh my gosh, five years, God humbled me, now they found it. And we're going back. Like he's going to take me to the Olympics. This is my destiny. Thank you, God."

Crystal Keating:

Now I learned my lesson and now I'm good.



Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes, yes. And that is not what happened.

Crystal Keating:

Well, what kind of adjustments were you making as you embraced living with this new normal, what were you thinking? How was it affecting your spiritual life?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

So, when I had the lung collapse, my relationship with God became my own in the sense of, I really was like, "What would have happened if I would have died right then? What am I living my life for?" And so in that I got more involved in church and my senior year of high school. And there, God gave me what I call my life promise. And it's a passage in Jeremiah, he's talking about Jerusalem, but I really felt like the Holy Spirit was like, "This is my promise for you." And so he said, "I will bring health and healing to you. I will rebuild you as you were before. And you will enjoy abundant peace and security. I will forgive all your sins against me, and then you'll bring me renown, glory, praise, and honor, before all the nations on earth that hear of what I do for you. And they will tremble and fear and be in awe of the abundant peace and prosperity that I provide for you."

Crystal Keating:

Wow, amen.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

I was like, "God's going to heal me. He's going to bring me back clearly, because he says every nation, that means the Olympics." Right? In the way I was thinking. And so that's what was going on in my heart is like, "Okay, I'm doing this for the right reasons. I know it's mixed. How can you not mix things when you're spending 30, 40 hours devoted to it a week? But in general, I feel like my heart's in a better place. So of course, if my heart's in a better place, God's going to multiply that and his favor will be on me." And all of that was more what was going on in my head.

Crystal Keating:

So you were really putting your hope in that? "Okay, I know what God's going to do." So when you actually looked at your life then, you can look back with such clarity. What did you see after high school?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Right. Yeah. So it's hindsight's 20/20, right? Well, I kept going in my swimming and the pain got worse. And so after that I was like, "Okay, well I know God told me this, he's going to honor this." And then we had a second surgery and they saw all these symptoms, but they couldn't really get a root cause. And there's no arguing anymore at that point because they had been inside my shoulder twice. It wasn't a false MRI. It wasn't anything misdiagnosed. I mean, how do you argue with that? And my life completely fell apart. And so from there my symptoms got worse and I got to where I had pain 24/7 from my shoulder to my hands. I mean, my hand would go numb. I had numb patches on my arm. I sometimes couldn't turn off a light switch or brush my hair.



And eventually I competed a little bit and had a good meet. And then I was reading through *The Circle Maker* by Mark Batterson. And he has this prayer in there that says, "Lord complicate my life with a holy complication." And I prayed that, and things blew up. And so at that point, I'm sitting there like, "Okay, God, we've gone through almost seven years of this at this point. And you told me to swim, and I have lost my life, my quality of life, I mean, forget swimming, forget the Olympics, which is like, great, that's clearly not happening either, but I've lost everything, because I took a leap of faith and I did what you told me to do." And so there was not just this physical, but it was this betrayal of, I mean, if I just quit swimming when you broke it of being an idol, maybe I would have a normal life right now.

And I mean, just repeating maybe 100 times a day once I stopped swimming, it actually got worse. Which doctors had always said, "If you would just quit swimming, you'd be fine." And so that's when things got so, so bad, 100 times a day sometimes I think I would just say, "Your grace is sufficient for me. Not tomorrow, not next hour, right now as I can't open the door as I'm hurting on the steering wheel." And that got me through. And even with that, I still got to the point where I started having suicidal thoughts and I'd say, "God, just let me die. If this is your promise, maybe healing is on the other side. I don't know." So it was a really dark place and a rollercoaster in that season.

Crystal Keating:

Well yeah, when the pain gets so bad that it causes such limitations. I think people start wondering like, "Who am I now? What's my purpose? What is the purpose of this pain? How long is this going to last? How bad is this going to get?" I mean, I know Joni's asked those same questions. She really thinks there's a lot of fear when pain comes, and many people who live with chronic pain wrestle with feeling like, "Hey, this is not the life I chose. I don't want this kind of life." So how did pain at that point affect your relationships with other people and even your outlook on the future? I mean, you talked about it being a dark time. How did you get through that?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

I thankfully had two people, I would say, and my family did not give up on me. One of them said, "Tera, this is not God's end for you. This is not where the story ends." And so thankfully, I mean, it's just that one sentence, someone listening, that meant the world, but even really plugged into a church, everyone else kind of slipped away. It wasn't their fault. It's just, they didn't know what to do when they said, "How are you?"

And I'm not someone who likes small talk. You're like, "Oh, I'm great." And so I'd be like, "Yeah, things still kind of suck." And they didn't know what to do. Yeah, when I said that for months and then years, and everyone really loves the story of like, "Oh, she was the fastest in the country her age, on track for the Olympics. Horrible fall injury, she's coming back." And, I had made it, barely missed Olympic trials after my first surgery in a year. And they all loved that story.

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

But when it gets to the point where you're barely hanging on for life and sanity, not many people know what to do with that. And so I'm really grateful for the few people there, but God gave me



just what I needed. But I will say, I mean, I have the most profound respect for Joni. And I mean, she's my hero and so many other people's, because I did end up experiencing a level of healing on this side. And so, I was so caught up in this promise and what I thought the promise meant. How I was interpreting it. Not necessarily what God meant, what I thought my healing was tied to. "Well, if you're not going to complete this promise, how do I even know the other promises are true? How do I even know you're real? I mean, I've seen all these things, but this is so the opposite of everything I've heard. I clearly don't hear your voice correctly. So what is going on?"

And my parents ended up taking me to a surgeon, last-ditch effort. He's one of the best in the country in Denver. And they went in and they cut my bicep tendon off and they flipped it over and underneath my tendon had started degenerating. And so it was essentially rotting inside and we don't know what would have happened. There were signs that my immune system was shutting down and everything else, and then you had the suicidal thoughts as well. And so with that, I say, God saved my life in that. And you look at that promise. So they cut that out, and I'm missing an inch of that tendon. They rebuilt about 75% of my shoulder. I was in a body brace and all of that.

But when I woke up in that body brace, I said, "I don't know what they found, but they found it. They found it." And you look at that where I was sitting there and everyone said, "You're never going to pick up your kids one day. What are you doing?" And I said, "God told me to swim. I don't know when I'm going to do this, and it didn't make sense. They had been inside my shoulder, but they had never looked underneath that tendon. It would have had a hole. It would have snapped eventually." And who knows what else would have happened? And so I'm saying, "I lost my life because you told me to keep swimming and then you played the story out. And it's actually like you saved my life because I kept swimming. Because if I hadn't, I don't know if they would have done the third surgery. I don't know if they would have gone in and found what they found." And so you look at that and you're like, "Oh my gosh, it wasn't what I thought, but it's so much better than we think."

Crystal Keating:

Right. And I think Joni's message is always that [deeper healing](#). We tend to, I mean, just as natural creatures, we think on the physical level, we think on the human level, and God is so concerned with those things, but he's even more concerned for us trusting him, for believing him, for persevering through times when we can't see what's ahead, when we misunderstand him. That's incredible. Even just the kind of medical care that you had. I think a lot of people with chronic pain can relate to that feeling of going from one doctor to the next, and even with the greatest physicians not knowing the root of the pain or how to fix it. And that can be very discouraging. So what a blessing that you were able to just really get resolved. Well, there seems to be a commonly shared grief of releasing what life used to be in order to embrace what life is like now. So, Tera, as we close this conversation together, how has God used pain to refine and clarify his purposes in your life?

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

He completely changed my life through pain. And just to wrap up my story, I say I'm living a miracle. I still have nerve damage. I still have lots of compensation. So I do have other things, but I say it's a small price for a miracle. And I ended up finding true freedom, which is not being bound by the world circumstances. It's not being controlled by idols. It's not being bound to my



sin. Like that's freedom. And so through that, I've recently been even still relearning about pain. And I read a book called *The Gift of Pain* by Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey.

Crystal Keating:

Yes, I love them.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Yes, he's incredible, so kind. And so I've just been thinking about, so much of my life I have fought pain and I've hated pain and said, "My body isn't working correctly." I think people who have auto-immune diseases or things like that can really say like pain is not a good thing, but oh my gosh, they changed my perspective of like, "Look how our body is made. Look at the fact that pain in my shoulder kept telling me for seven years, 'Hey, they still didn't get it. Something's still wrong.'"

It really is a gift. And I recently wrote a letter to pain because I surprised qualified for nationals in the triathlon, which is so exciting, but I get to do it with a different perspective than I did at swimming. Saying, "I'm going to honor my body, and hey pain, we're going to be friends now, and I'm going to listen to you," which is just so different than anything I've ever thought. But more than that, now God has surprised me yet again, and he I feel has called us to create a ministry for people who live in chronic pain and physical limitations. So we've created a podcast which has turned into a retreat, which went online, which then turned into a fledgling.

We're getting nonprofit status for that. And that is now literally the water I swim in is trying to bring healing to really this gap in the church with a capital C that I see you guys filling, but it's few and far between in this sector and people in this, we need each other and we definitely need God and resources are good. And how can we fight for healing together? So just totally changed everything. You know, God doesn't waste pain, he doesn't, but we have to give it to him. I think there's so much pain that's wasted in this world, but he doesn't waste anything that's given to him, he just redeems that.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. We do have a redeeming God. And I know that instead of running away from the things that are hard to embrace them and to invite God into those difficult seasons of pain, of illness, of disability, of difficult diagnosis, because that's where we really find the depth of who he is and all that he has for us in Christ Jesus. Well, Tera, it's so nice to talk to you. I'd love for you to come back on the podcast again to tell us more about your ministry. That is such a huge need for people who are isolated in chronic pain, but also for the church to have a better understanding of how to embrace and welcome people in those situations where we don't really know what to say all the time. We want to lock arms together. So I can't wait to talk to you again, Tera. Thanks for joining us on the podcast today.

Tera Bradham DeNeui:

Thank you, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

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