



Every Sunday, Ruth has enjoyed the privilege of caring for Joni. The friends have had countless personal and spiritual conversations—from everyday chaos of life to the big God questions. This is a collection of those stories. Readers encounter God's amazing grace in ordinary moments and discover biblical guidance.

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CHAPTER 1

The Woman in a Wheelchair

I first met Joni Eareckson Tada in 1986. Joni was thirty-six; I was seventeen. It was the summer I had graduated high school. And in all fairness, when I say met her, it was not exactly that. Far from it. It was me and 20,000 other people in a crowded stadium who all came to see her and hear her speak. I like to think that she noticed me—this tall seventeen-year-old girl in the front row, but she probably didn't.

Joni was once seventeen too. A confident, athletic, tall girl, who, like me, had just graduated high school. She was enrolled in college for the fall and was enjoying her summer break at home. When I look at her pictures from those days, she sparkled. Living life to the fullest. Horses, sports, music, friends—all of that. One sunny day, she and her sister decided to go for a swim in the Chesapeake Bay, not far from their home. Both Joni and Jackie were good swimmers and had been there hundreds of times. The warm day was perfect for a dip in the crisp, cool waters of the bay. Jackie was already in the water, swimming

away, while Joni was getting ready to jump in. The girls and their world seemed careless and light.

Until it wasn't.

Joni misjudged the depth of the water when she dove off a raft, thinking it was deep enough, but it was actually shallow. A tragic miscalculation and the next thing she knew was that she couldn't move her body. Joni lay in the water, still, with her face down. In a split second, after her dive, she'd broken her neck and her world was never the same. The minutes that followed must have felt like ages, when Joni could not turn herself around and when she felt as if she was slowly drowning.

Meanwhile, Jackie had swum a good distance away from Joni and had no idea what happened. By a blessing in disguise, she was pinched by a crawfish and turned around to warn Joni. While scanning the horizon, she knew something was wrong when she saw Joni floating on her stomach.

Bless that snappy, little crawfish!

Jackie quickly swam back to Joni and turned her over.

I can only imagine the big gulp of fresh air Joni took—the first breath of a whole new life. Joni eventually wrote down her story in a book, which I'd read three times by the time I was seventeen. (The book later became a movie.) Joni had traveled from California to the Netherlands to “meet” me (and the other 20,000 fans) at a Christian festival, called the *EO Jongerendag*—a huge gathering of young people who wanted to learn more about God and see the woman from California, who could sing, paint, and speak of Jesus as you'd never heard before.

The morning of the festival featured music, speakers, announcements, and all the things that make a good event, but it seemed that everyone in the stadium was there for one thing—to hear Joni speak. The anticipation was tangible. Finally, it was time. Around two in the

afternoon, Jan van den Bosh—a longtime friend of Joni and the emcee of the event—said the words we’d eagerly awaited . . .

“Ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome. Here she is! Joni Eareckson Tada, all the way from California!”

The crowd applauded in unison when Joni, ever so smoothly, rolled and twirled her chair onto the big stage, followed by Ken, her husband.

Joni was stunning. Just beautiful! With a bright smile and clear voice, she greeted us. Ken, standing next to Joni, looked handsome and strong, letting her talk and shine.



I was awestruck. She was all I had hoped for: confident, and fun, and oh-so-Californian—something coveted by the Dutch because California was far away and synonymous with beachy, glamorous, and sun-kissed film stars. Coolness, strength, and happiness obviously came with it, we figured.

California was the dream, and Joni and Ken were pretty much our Barbie and Ken! I still remember what they wore: knitted sweaters with cables and colors and patterns; the sweaters you hope to find in trendy thrift stores today, if you are lucky.

All 20,000 of us hung on every word they said, mesmerized. And in the evening, we would watch it again on national television, when Joni’s performance was aired. I can’t even remember what she said, or which songs she sang, but I remember how she made me feel.

So good.

There was something different about her. Not her wheelchair, her beauty, her flawless presentation, or her fame. No, not even the

matching sweaters. It was her happiness that beamed forth. It was authentic.

I knew about Jesus and was brought up in a Christian home, but that summer day in 1986 was the first time I truly understood the source of such happiness: a beautiful and true relationship with Jesus.

And I wanted what she had.

The Painting

There is a quote that captures something I have always felt but never found the words for:

*We will meet and talk with friends
and speak of everything and nothing.
We will laugh and reminisce
and no matter how light the conversation may all seem—
we will remember that day fondly.
Forever.¹*

That.

At my dinner table. And I am happy.

These words capture my longing so beautifully, and I wish I could give credit where due, but I don't know the author. It could be among Shakespeare's verses, but instead I read it on a plate in Anthropologie's sale section. Yes, I know, an unromantic \$18.95 was all it took. Needless

1. Author unknown.

to say, I had to buy it, and for many years the plate hung on my kitchen wall.

Until it broke.

By then I knew the quote by heart. It captures what I love and cherish, and not just because I like to eat (which I do very much), but because what I long for is the togetherness the words describe—the gathering.

Some might call this “entertaining,” but it’s more than that. Entertaining sounds burdensome, a tedious task, and that’s the last thing I want when I have people over! I want them to hang out at the kitchen counter while I cook, and lounge on my couch where we drink our tea and sit with me at the table and eat. Nothing formal nor fancy—just warm, welcoming togetherness.

Jan Steen, a seventeenth-century Dutch painter, captured this feeling well. In a time when paintings were a way to flaunt one’s wealth and importance, Steen’s work depicted messy tables and joyful gatherings. Presence over pretense.

I’m not a painter, but I can set a fine table. I will prepare you a place, and then we’ll talk about everything and nothing, laugh and reminisce. With fondness.

So, it was only a natural continuation when I got to know Joni (not with a crowd of 20,000, but in person) to invite her to our house.

To my table.

Because by then, it was the year 2007 and we lived in California. As a filmmaker, my husband, Helmut, had a longtime dream to make a movie and live and work in California. In an adventurous mood, we sold our home and business in the Netherlands and moved with our two young sons, Dyde and Romeo, to Los Angeles in 1999.

Let’s try it, we said, and give it a year.

But one year became three, and three became eight, and eight became twenty-five. Soon enough our two daughters were born, Brontë and Lente, in 2001 and 2002. And in those years, we raised our family. Helmut made movies as an independent filmmaker and found his sweet spot as a freelance director in Los Angeles, while I steered our home. Building the nest, as I like to call it.

One day (hop-hop, we are now in 2007), a producer friend asked Helmut to film a series for Joni & Friends.² Joni was still my hero. I listened to her radio shows and read her books, but I had no idea her home and office were so close to our home in Calabasas. To my surprise and bliss, the woman I admired from afar was practically my neighbor!

Long story short: Helmut filmed Joni, then he met Joni's husband, Ken; and I (oh, happy day) met Joni, face to face this time.

A party seemed the perfect way for the first steps toward this goal. Helmut likes to have people over as much as I do and we decided to have a New Year's Eve party—for food, togetherness, and, of course, for Joni and me to become best friends.

By now, Helmut and I attended the same church as Joni and Ken, and I had the audacious plan to invite the whole church family to the party, along with—wait for it—our kids' friends from school, a few neighbors, and a couple of other friends. It honestly got out of hand and the group grew in number and diversity: young kids, fine diners, believers, nonbelievers, old friends, new friends, and Joni.

Not an easy task for the hostess! I was a bit nervous, wondering how to make everyone happy and Joni impressed . . .

The craft store came to my rescue. *We can paint!* I thought, inspired by Jan Steen's happy gatherings. I picked up small canvases, brushes,

2. The nonprofit Joni founded in 1979 to bring help and gospel hope to people with disabilities around the world.

and paint and turned our dining room into an arts and crafts studio.

And what I hoped for happened. On New Year's Eve, everyone gathered around my table to paint. Young and old, new and longtime friends, all connecting over mini canvases and brushes; laughing, reminiscing, and speaking of everything and nothing—just as I love.

Joni liked it too, and with a determined mind of an artist, she picked out colors and brushes. We built a makeshift easel to hold her canvas, and Judy³ handed her clean brushes, which Joni would hold in her mouth. With the brush controlled by her lips, teeth, and tongue, she started to paint a gorgeous bright blue sky, followed by a twirling green circle. A canopy, perhaps? Then, after mixing colors into a deep hickory brown (still with her brush held in her mouth) a humongous, well-defined tree appeared on the canvas.

I worked on a Christmas tree on my little canvas, and one might think with the advantage of ten moving fingers it would not be difficult. But it was, and comparing my canvas to hers, I gave up on my attempt at a Christmas tree.

Pointing at her tree, Joni said, “That’s your tree, from your backyard.”

That’s Joni. A keen observer. I hadn’t realized she’d noticed our tree during her brief time in the backyard. But there it was, a California live oak that had stood for hundreds of years, wide and tall—unmovable as a house. Almost inconspicuous in its greatness. Strange how that sometimes happens, when things become so obvious and large that we don’t see them anymore. Yet, Joni noticed.

I didn’t. You see, our front door and its steps were not wheelchair friendly. To bring Joni into our home, we had to navigate the uneven

3. Judy Butler is a close friend of Joni and has been Joni’s right hand and executive assistant from the beginning of Joni’s public ministry: <https://joniandfriends.org/news/judy-butler-retirement>.

terrain of our backyard—full of gopher holes, hidden roots, and slippery slopes.

My goodness, I was nervous about that too, but Joni didn't seem worried. While I only had eyes for dangers and snares, she navigated effortlessly around the gopher holes, roots, and hillside and still noticed our monumental tree.

My favorite place to sit was underneath that tree. There was a fountain where birds would come to splash and drink and a sandbox for the kids to play in. A swing hung from one of the high branches, and in the afternoon, the canopy of leaves shaded the children and me from the Californian sun.

It was as if the tree loved us as much as we loved it, watching over our home and the hill where our goats and chickens roamed.

I often wondered if Jeremiah knew a tree like mine when he thought of a tree planted by the water:

*“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
whose confidence is in him.
They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”
(Jeremiah 17:7–8 NIV)*

Oh, to be like that tree—life-giving, firmly planted, unwavering. Fruitful—with an attitude.

But our tree was not like that, because a few years after that

gathering, it fell during a storm in the middle of the night.

Thump was all the sound it made. One firm thump, and in a split second, it was gone.

As it fell, the tree crushed everything in its path—smaller trees, bushes, and the bright white oleanders beneath it, but it somehow missed the chicken coop. The sound woke me up, and when I looked out the window, I didn't even notice what was missing. Until I saw the monster roots, exposed and standing almost eight feet high, with the tree itself flat on the ground.

I was shocked to see the tree I once trusted for its stability, shade, and strength now lying in ruins. It was gone without any resistance or steadfastness.

THUMP. Followed by stillness and devastation. Every time I look at the empty spot where the tree stood, I think of how its leaves are no longer green, and its branches won't bear fruit.

And then I look at Joni's painting of our tree, which she gave me at the end of the New Year's Eve party. It was when we stood outside on the patio, looking at the tree.

"I noticed your tree right away, Ruth—what a beautiful, strong tree," she said and handed me her painting.

I love that painting so very much. Every time I look at it, I'm reminded of the evening our friendship began. When we talked of everything and nothing and reminisced on Jeremiah's tree planted near the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear, it has no worries, and it never fails to bear fruit.

Over the years our friendship grew. Joni became my mentor, my friend, my prayer partner, and so much more. From her I learned what it means to be like that tree with its leaves always green. And therefore, she is still my hero.

She is like that tree, and not because of lofty circumstances or noble virtues. But getting to know her, I can tell she does not fear when heat comes, whether it is pain, cancer, or any form of suffering. She is planted by the water and sends out her roots by the stream.

Her life is blessed because she trusts in the Lord, and her confidence is in Him.

As you turn the page, I invite you into our conversations in which Joni and I spoke of everything and nothing and where I learned about strong roots.

It is my hope that you and I will be like that tree—planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

Let's go.



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