

Chapter 1: Introduction

IN THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, I have been intrigued by the concept of chains. Throughout history, chains have been used for a variety of purposes, including as metaphors for the connections between events and entities. What do you think of when you hear about chains? Perhaps the use that comes to mind most frequently is that of keeping a prisoner in bondage. Others could say that it's a valuable tool used to support heavy objects. Both definitions are accurate; it's just how people choose to view them. As I reflect on chains, I can't help but draw parallels with the challenges and circumstances we face in our everyday lives. So often we feel bound, even paralyzed, by the challenges we face that we lose sight of our dreams. Could there be a healthier, more freeing way to view our challenges? Is it possible to take what once bound us and turn it into a tool that will help us reach our full potential? Not only do I believe it is possible, but I've lived it, and I know that you can too!

My name is Blake Shelley. I'm twenty-seven years old, and I am no stranger to the power of challenge and circumstance. I was born with Cerebral Palsy, which is a disability that affects my muscle movements and my fine motor skills. Since birth, I've had to persevere and overcome obstacles to accomplish things that come naturally to others. There have been many times where I have felt like a prisoner in my body and could

have very easily given up. But living life as a prisoner—what fun would that be? What would I be contributing to my community if I sat in my room, isolated, not bettering myself, drooling, day after day? That would be such a waste of the precious gift of life! Even though I face challenges and pain on a daily basis, I choose to live life to the fullest extent. I set realistic goals, and I dream big! You can and should do the same!

Through my experience, I have subconsciously used a method that has helped me overcome and use my challenges to propel me toward my dreams. In today's culture of instant gratification, many people have lost sight of their goals and dreams. Unfortunately, we can't overcome challenges and reach our dreams as fast as we can order a movie or post a picture to Facebook. This process takes time and deep self-reflection. I'm writing this book to help you get from where you are to where you want to be.

Learn to Tell Your Story

Stories are the oldest form of communication and learning across all cultures. It is one thing we all have in common. However, everyone has a unique story. One of the most rewarding benefits of self-reflection is learning how to tell your story and identify the times in your life that shaped you into the person you are today. By learning to tell your story, both events of the past and what is happening in the present, you can find valuable lessons that will help you and others reach full potential.

Faith

Before we dive into how we turn our bondage into tools of freedom, I need to point out that this method requires a little faith. This can be faith in a deity, in yourself, in humanity, or a combination. In my case, my faith is rooted in my relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship has

given me the strength to rise above my circumstances and the belief that there are good-hearted people in this world.

Turning Bondage into Tools of Freedom

As I reflect on all of the challenges that I have conquered over my short life, I notice a common theme. This theme is one of self-reflection followed by setting a course of action. Striving to live life to the fullest, I have learned to run my challenges and circumstances through a process of reflection, which I refer to as the Six Links of Turning Bondage into Tools of Freedom. Through this process, I have been able to overcome my challenges just enough to use them as a tool and embrace the rest.

Let me paint a picture. Imagine that you are at the base of a mountain, longing to reach the summit. However, someone has put you in modern-day shackles, binding your hands and feet. You then realize that one of the links by your right hand is fragile and can be easily removed. Now you have a free hand (with the cuff around it) and a few inches of strong chain to help pull you up the mountain.

This picture can be used to describe our quest to achieve our dreams. The following self-reflection exercise is to identify where you are, where you want to be, which links are easily removed, and which links you can use to pull yourself up.

The Six Links of Turning Bondage into Tools of Freedom

The Six Links of Turning Bondage into Tools of Freedom consists of What, Why, Where, When, How, and Who. Each of these links has several questions about your circumstance and your dreams. Don't worry if you can't answer them all at once. Remember, this is a process! However, by making a decision to enter into this process, you have taken a step toward freedom and success.



1. What

- What is the challenge or circumstance holding me back? What are my chains?

- What could this be teaching me?

2. Why

- Why am I facing this challenge or circumstance?

- Why do I feel that this situation is holding me back? Is it a physical, emotional, economical, or cultural challenge?

3. Where (In certain circumstances, it can be beneficial to identify where you want to be prior to defining your challenges.)

- Where do I want to be? This is my dream.

4. When

- When do I want to achieve this? Set goals and deadlines.

5. How

- How am I going to reach this dream? Set small, practical goals.

- How are these chains keeping me from taking steps toward this?

- How can I remove some of these chains?

- How can I take my current chains and use them to move forward?

- How can I use previous experience(s) to help me move forward?

6. Who

- With whom can I share the load? Who's in my corner?

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- Who is the ball on the end of this chain?

- With whom can I link up? Find a mentor.

- Whom can I help remove their chains of bondage?

Find a Support System

The sixth link has perhaps been the most influential in my life. Having a support system filled with people who genuinely care about our well-being and success is vital for us to rise up and reach the summit. We all need encouragement, someone in whom we can confide, someone to come alongside us, and someone to follow. Please don't go through life alone!

Come on a Journey

In the following chapters, I will recount how these links have radically changed my life and helped me reach my dreams. I invite you on this journey with me in hopes that you will also find the strength to turn your bondage into tools of freedom!



Chapter 2: Surviving

WHEN FACING OUR CHALLENGES FOR the first time, sometimes surviving is enough. Most of the challenges we face are triggered by a certain event or a chain of events over which we have little or no control. I like to think of this as the moment our shackles are slipped on and we're left at the base of the mountain in the cold. Although we often don't have control over events that create our adversities, we do have a say in how we respond. Every life-changing event presents us with a decision. Are we going to be paralyzed by our current situation or are we going to fight to survive?

My family and I were faced with this decision very early in my life. In fact, we encountered the event that altered our lives the morning I was born. Early one February morning my parents entered the hospital to bring life into the world. Little did they know what would transpire in the following hours and weeks to come.

The process of pregnancy is always a sensitive and miraculous time in one's life; my mom had carried twins a week past full term without any complications. A week prior to giving birth, my mom had an ultrasound to check if my sister and I were in the correct positions. At that time we were, but the doctor said that if anything changed they would have to perform a C-section.

However, as the birthing process began it was apparent that something was wrong. My sister had been born without complications and was being attended to by the nurses. Now it was my turn! Sometime between the last ultrasound and the beginning of labor, I had flipped, causing me to enter the canal "breech." Breech presentation is a term describing an infant who is either born legs first, or, in my case, leading with the buttocks. That's right, I started my life by mooning the doctor! Due to my position, it took over twenty minutes for me to enter the world, during many of which I was deprived of oxygen. As a result of this, I was presented blue and lifeless. As the doctors began CPR, my parents sat there in shock, praying that I would cry.

Once I was stable, I was transported to another hospital that had a neonatal ICU. Although I had survived the traumatic experience at birth, my future was still very unclear. Due to my brain injury, I proceeded to have multiple seizures throughout the first twenty-four hours. As the doctors updated my parents on the condition of their baby boy, they outlined several outcomes, including severe physical and mental disabilities or death. Because of this news and the trauma that she'd experienced, my mom was hesitant about seeing me for the first time. After talking with the nurses, she decided to come see me, and from then on I was rarely left alone! Over the course of my three-week hospital stay, I had a constant stream of visitors between my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They even taped a picture of my twin sister to my incubator, which seemed to soothe me.

My family was finally able to welcome me home on a snowy March day, and my parents were thrilled to have both of their babies at home for the first time. Over the next several months, my parents learned the joys and challenges associated with caring for two newborns. Right from the start, my parents built a community around my sister and me, enlisting the help of friends and family. My mom and grandma Shelley would marvel at the rate that I seemed to be developing compared to my sister. I was the first to roll over, and when they stood me on their knees, I could push myself up. However, they would soon find out that my ability to push with my legs was a sign not of strength but of spasticity.

Because of the time I'd spent in the hospital, the doctors wanted to monitor my development and ordered testing once I reached five months. These tests led to a diagnosis of Extrapyrimal Cerebral Palsy and chronic drooling. This would set my family on the course of multiple doctors' appointments and several therapy sessions per week at the Shriners Hospital for Children in Portland.

As they struggled with the weight of having a disabled child and of being unsure about my future, my parents had to decide how they were going to raise my sister and me. Although they realized that I would require more assistance and attention as I grew, and that they were still unsure of what my abilities would be, they chose to raise me according to the same standards by which they raised my sister. Instead of giving up and enabling me, they were determined to help me reach my full potential, regardless of how difficult it was to see me struggle or how much time they had to spend transporting me to different appointments. Due to my parents' determination, I learned to never give up. In our house, the words "no" and "I can't" were not acceptable answers to the unique challenges I faced. At an early age I learned that as long as I tried and gave it my best effort, there would always be help available.

Throughout my life, I have revisited my first couple of years through self-reflection. Using the six links of turning bondage into tools of freedom, I've reflected on what lessons I learned in those early years and who the people were who saw me through them. Who helped me carry my chains? The most powerful lesson I learned during this time was that everybody has different types of challenges, so just because your challenges look much different, don't let it stop you. Don't take no for an answer!

I also learned that I can't be entirely independent. In all actuality, none of us are completely independent! We all need others to encourage us and lend a hand after we give it our best shot. Throughout my childhood, my family served as the starting point for what would become a powerful support system.

Reflection

At the end of each remaining chapter, I want to give you an opportunity to reflect on the lessons I have outlined in the chapter. I highly encourage you to keep a journal! Before writing this book, I wasn't keen on the idea of keeping a journal, due to the sheer fact of how long it takes me to type. However, I have recently found journaling to be freeing and insightful. If writing isn't your strong suit, try talking to a digital recorder. Get it out of your head! Meditate on your discoveries and revelations.

- Sometimes you need to fight to survive! What were the events in my life that spawned the challenges that I've faced or am currently facing?

- Has this event paralyzed me? Did I choose to fight? Am I still stuck? How so?

- Change can only occur when someone decides to take action! What lessons did I learn from enduring this event or challenge? How can I apply this to my life TODAY?

- Who is encouraging me? If I need help, whom can I call?
