

## #4 A Broken Body

Cross-country skier Janine Shepherd hoped for an Olympic medal — until she was hit by a truck during a training bike ride. She shares a powerful story about the human potential for recovery. Her message: you are not your body, and giving up old dreams can allow new ones to soar.

Accent of the speaker: Australian

Life is about opportunities, creating them and embracing them, and for me, that was the Olympic dream. That's what defined me. That was my bliss.

00:22 As a cross-country skier and member of the Australian ski team, headed towards the Winter Olympics, I was on a training bike ride with my fellow teammates. As we made our way up towards the spectacular Blue Mountains west of Sydney, it was the perfect autumn day: sunshine, the smell of eucalypt and a dream. Life was good. We'd been on our bikes for around five and half hours when we got to the part of the ride that I loved, and that was the hills, because I loved the hills. And I got up off the seat of my bike, and I started pumping my legs, and as I sucked in the cold mountain air, I could feel it burning my lungs, and I looked up to see the sun shining in my face.

Comentario [A1]: Ex. 1 a / ii

01:06 And then everything went black. Where was I? What was happening? My body was consumed by pain. I'd been hit by a speeding utility truck with only 10 minutes to go on the bike ride. I was airlifted from the scene of the accident by a rescue helicopter to a large spinal unit in Sydney. I had extensive and life-threatening injuries. I'd broken my neck and my back in six places. I broke five ribs on my left side. I broke my right arm. I broke my collarbone. I broke some bones in my feet. My whole right side was ripped open, filled with gravel. My head was cut open across the front, lifted back, exposing the skull underneath. I had head injuries. I had internal injuries. I had massive blood loss. In fact, I lost about five liters of blood, which is all someone my size would actually hold. By the time the helicopter arrived at Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney, my blood pressure was 40 over nothing. I was having a really bad day. (Laughter)

Comentario [A2]: Ex. 1 b / iv

02:13 For over 10 days, I drifted between two dimensions. I had an awareness of being in my body, but also being out of my body, somewhere else, watching from above as if it was happening to someone else. Why would I want to go back to a body that was so broken?

02:29 But this voice kept calling me: "Come on, stay with me."

02:35 "No. It's too hard."

02:38 "Come on. This is our opportunity."

02:41 "No. That body is broken. It can no longer serve me."

02:45 "Come on. Stay with me. We can do it. We can do it together."

02:50 I was at a crossroads. I knew if I didn't return to my body, I'd have to leave this world forever. It was the fight of my life. After 10 days, I made the decision to return to my body, and the internal bleeding stopped.

Comentario [A3]: Ex. 1 c/iii

03:10 The next concern was whether I would walk again, because I was paralyzed from the waist down. They said to my parents, the neck break was a stable fracture, but the back was completely crushed. The vertebra at L1 was like you'd dropped a peanut, stepped on it, smashed it into thousands of pieces. They'd have to operate. They went in. They put me on a beanbag. They cut me, literally cut me in half, I have a scar that wraps around my entire body. They picked as much broken bone as they could that had lodged in my spinal cord. They took out two of my broken ribs, and they rebuilt my back, L1, they rebuilt it, they took out another broken rib, they fused T12, L1 and L2 together. Then they stitched me up. They took an entire hour to stitch me up. I woke up in intensive care, and the doctors were really excited that the operation had been a success because at that stage I had a little bit of movement in one of my big toes, and I thought, "Great, because I'm going to the Olympics!" (Laughter) I had no idea. That's the sort of thing that happens to someone else, not me, surely.

Comentario [A4]: Ex 1 d/v

04:15 But then the doctor came over to me, and she said, "Janine, the operation was a success, and we've picked as much bone out of your spinal cord as we could, but the damage is permanent. The central nervous system nerves, there is no cure. You're what we call a partial paraplegic, and you'll have all of the injuries that go along with that. You have no feeling from the waist down, and at most, you might get 10- or 20-percent return. You'll have internal injuries for the rest of your life. You'll have to use a catheter for the rest of your life. And if you walk again, it will be with calipers and a walking frame." And then she said, "Janine, you'll have to rethink everything you do in your life, because you're never going to be able to do the things you did before."

05:00 I tried to grasp what she was saying. I was an athlete. That's all I knew. That's all I'd done. If I couldn't do that, then what could I do? And the question I asked myself is, if I couldn't do that, then who was I?

Comentario [A5]: Ex. 1 e/i

05:18 They moved me from intensive care to acute spinal. I was lying on a thin, hard spinal bed. I had no movement in my legs. I had tight stockings on to protect from blood clots. I had one arm in plaster, one arm tied down by drips. I had a neck brace and sandbags on either side of my head and I saw my world through a mirror that was suspended above my head. I shared the ward with five other people, and the amazing thing is that because we were all lying paralyzed in a spinal ward, we didn't know what each other looked like. How amazing is that? How often in life do you get to make friendships, judgment-free, purely based on spirit? And there were no superficial conversations as we shared our innermost thoughts, our fears, and our hopes for life after the spinal ward.

Comentario [A6]: Question 1

06:11 I remember one night, one of the nurses came in, Jonathan, with a whole lot of plastic straws. He put a pile on top of each of us, and he said, "Start threading them together." Well, there wasn't much else to do in the spinal ward, so we did. And when we'd finished, he went around silently and he joined all of the straws up till it looped around the whole ward, and then he said, "Okay, everybody, hold on to your straws." And we did. And he said, "Right. Now we're all connected." And as we held on, and we breathed as one, we knew we weren't on this journey alone. And even lying paralyzed in the spinal ward, there were moments of incredible depth and richness, of authenticity and connection that I had never experienced before. And each of us knew that when we left the spinal ward we would never be the same.

Comentario [A7]: Question 2

07:22 After six months, it was time to go home. I remember Dad pushing me outside in my wheelchair, wrapped in a plaster body cast, and feeling the sun on my face for the first time. I soaked it up and I thought, how could I ever have taken this for granted? I felt so incredibly grateful for my life. But before I left the hospital, the head nurse had said to me, "Janine, I want you to be ready, because when you get home, something's going to happen." And I said, "What?" And she said, "You're going to get depressed." And I said, "Not me, not Janine the Machine," which was my nickname. She said, "You are, because, see, it happens to everyone. In the spinal ward, that's normal. You're in a wheelchair. That's normal. But you're going to get home and realize how different life is."

Comentario [A8]: Question 3

08:13 And I got home and something happened. I realized Sister Sam was right. I did get depressed. I was in my wheelchair. I had no feeling from the waist down, attached to a catheter bottle. I couldn't walk. I'd lost so much weight in the hospital I now weighed about 80 pounds. And I wanted to give up. All I wanted to do was put my running shoes on and run out the door. I wanted my old life back. I wanted my body back.

08:47 And I can remember Mom sitting on the end of my bed, and saying, "I wonder if life will ever be good again."

08:54 And I thought, "How could it? Because I've lost everything that I valued, everything that I'd worked towards. Gone." And the question I asked was, "Why me? Why me?"

09:10 And then I remembered my friends that were still in the spinal ward, particularly Maria. Maria was in a car accident, and she woke up on her 16th birthday to the news that she was a complete quadriplegic, had no movement from the neck down, had damage to her vocal chords, and she couldn't talk. They told me, "We're going to move you next to her because we think it will be good for her." I was worried. I didn't know how I'd react to being next to her. I knew it would be challenging, but it was actually a blessing, because Maria always smiled. She was always happy, and even when she began to talk again, albeit difficult to understand, she never complained, not once. And I wondered how had she ever found that level of acceptance.

Comentario [A9]: Question 4

10:06 And I realized that this wasn't just my life. It was life itself. I realized that this wasn't just my pain. It was everybody's pain. And then I knew, just like before, that I had a choice. I could keep fighting this or I could let go and accept not only my body but the circumstances of my life. And then I stopped asking, "Why me?" And I started to ask, "Why not me?" And then I thought to myself, maybe being at rock bottom is actually the perfect place to start.

Comentario [A10]: Question 4

10:51 I had never before thought of myself as a creative person. I was an athlete. My body was a machine. But now I was about to embark on the most creative project that any of us could ever do: that of rebuilding a life. And even though I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do, in that uncertainty came a sense of freedom. I was no longer tied to a set path. I was free to explore life's infinite possibilities. And that realization was about to change my life.

11:31 Sitting at home in my wheelchair and my plaster body cast, an airplane flew overhead, and I looked up, and I thought to myself, "That's it! If I can't walk, then I might as well fly." I said, "Mom, I'm going to learn how to fly." She said, "That's nice, dear." (Laughter) I said, "Pass me the yellow pages." She passed me the phone book, I rang up the flying school, I made a booking, said I'd like to make a booking to come out for a flight. They said, "You know, when do you want to come out?" I said, "Well, I have to get a friend to drive me out because I can't drive. Sort of can't walk either. Is that a problem?" I made a booking, and weeks later my friend Chris and my mom drove me out to the airport, all 80 pounds of me covered in a plaster body cast in a baggy pair of overalls. (Laughter) I can tell you, I did not look like the ideal candidate to get a pilot's license. (Laughter) I'm holding on to the counter because I can't stand. I said, "Hi, I'm here for a flying lesson." And they took one look and ran out the back to draw short straws. "You get her." "No, no, you take her." Finally this guy comes out. He goes, "Hi, I'm Andrew, and I'm going to take you flying." I go, "Great." And so they drive me down, they get me out on the tarmac, and there was this red, white and blue airplane. It was beautiful. They lifted me into the cockpit. They had to slide me up on the wing, put me in the cockpit. They sat me down. There are buttons and dials everywhere. I'm going, "Wow, how do you ever know what all these buttons and dials do?" Andrew the instructor got in the front, started the airplane up. He said, "Would you like to have a go at taxiing?" That's when you use your feet to control the rudder pedals to control the airplane on the ground. I said, "No, I can't use my legs." He went, "Oh." I said, "But I can use my hands," and he said, "Okay."

Comentario [A11]: Ex 3. a

13:11 So he got over to the runway, and he applied the power. And as we took off down the runway, and the wheels lifted up off the tarmac, and we became airborne, I had the most incredible sense of freedom. And Andrew said to me, as we got over the training area, "You see that mountain over there?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, you take the controls, and you fly towards that mountain." And as I looked up, I realized that he was pointing towards the Blue Mountains where the journey had begun. And I took the controls, and I was flying. And I was a long, long way from that spinal ward, and I knew right then that I was going to be a pilot. Didn't know how on Earth I'd ever pass a medical. But I'd worry about that later, because right now I had a dream. So I went home, I got a training diary out, and I had a plan. And I practiced my walking as much as I could, and I went from the point of two people holding me up to one person holding me up to the point where I could walk around the furniture as long as it wasn't too far apart. And then I made great progression to the point where I could walk around the house, holding onto the walls, like this, and Mom said she was forever following me, wiping off my fingerprints. (Laughter) But at least she always knew where I was.

Comentario [A12]: Ex. 3b

14:41 So while the doctors continued to operate and put my body back together again, I went on with my theory study, and then eventually, and amazingly, I passed my pilot's medical, and that was my green light to fly. And I spent every moment I could out at that flying school, way out of my comfort zone, all these young guys that wanted to be Qantas pilots, you know, and little old hop-along me in first my plaster cast, and then my steel brace, my baggy overalls, my

Comentario [A13]: Ex. 3c

Comentario [A14]: Ex. 3d

bag of medication and catheters and my limp, and they used to look at me and think, "Oh, who is she kidding? She's never going to be able to do this." And sometimes I thought that too. But that didn't matter, because now there was something inside that burned that far outweighed my injuries.

15:27 And little goals kept me going along the way, and eventually I got my private pilot's license, and then I learned to navigate, and I flew my friends around Australia. And then I learned to fly an airplane with two engines and I got my twin engine rating. And then I learned to fly in bad weather as well as fine weather and got my instrument rating. And then I got my commercial pilot's license. And then I got my instructor rating. And then I found myself back at that same school where I'd gone for that very first flight, teaching other people how to fly, just under 18 months after I'd left the spinal ward. (Applause)

16:19 And then I thought, "Why stop there? Why not learn to fly upside down?" And I did, and I learned to fly upside down and became an aerobatics flying instructor. **And Mom and Dad? Never been up.** But then I knew for certain that although my body might be limited, it was my spirit that was unstoppable.

**Comentario [A15]:** Ex. 3e

16:48 The philosopher Lao Tzu once said, "When you let go of what you are, you become what you might be." I now know that it wasn't until I let go of who I thought I was that I was able to create a completely new life. It wasn't until I let go of the life I thought I should have that I was able to embrace the life that was waiting for me. I now know that my real strength never came from my body, and although my physical capabilities have changed dramatically, who I am is unchanged. The pilot light inside of me was still a light, just as it is in each and every one of us.

**Comentario [A16]:** Ex. 4 B is the best choice.

17:40 I know that I'm not my body, and I also know that you're not yours. And then it no longer matters what you look like, where you come from, or what you do for a living. All that matters is that we continue to fan the flame of humanity by living our lives as the ultimate creative expression of who we really are, because we are all connected by millions and millions of straws, and it's time to join those up and to hang on. And if we are to move towards our collective bliss, it's time we shed our focus on the physical and instead embrace the virtues of the heart.

18:32 So raise your straws if you'll join me.

18:36 Thank you. (Applause) Thank you.