

A TRIUMPHANT STORY OF FAITH & PERSEVERANCE

NO SUCH THING -as- *Can't*



Lisa Sexton & Tyler Sexton, M.D.

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

A TRIUMPHANT STORY OF FAITH & PERSEVERANCE

NO SUCH THING *-as-* *Can't*

Lisa Sexton & Tyler Sexton, MD



Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

No Such Thing as Can't: A Triumphant Story of Faith and Perseverance

© 2020 Tyler Sexton, MD, and Lisa Sexton. All rights reserved.

A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise marked, are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by CrosswayBibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Editor: Julie B. Holmquist

Cover design: Sally Dunn

All stories in this book are true and are used by permission.

The use of material from or references to various websites does not imply endorsement of those sites in their entirety. Availability of websites and pages is subject to change without notice.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-800-323-9400.

ISBN 978-1-58997-973-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at www.loc.gov.

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

- 1: Dreams *Can* Come True 1
- 2: An Unexpected Kind of Motherhood 19
- 3: Challenges of the Early Years 33
- 4: God Made Me to Be Me 49
- 5: Family Joys and Bumps in the Road 71
- 6: Facing My Real Life 87
- 7: Beyond Desperation 105
- 8: My Right-Hand Dog 125
- 9: Confirming My Calling 145
- 10: Saying Yes to Love 165
- 11: The Great Physician 181
- 12: Yes, You *Can* 199

Acknowledgments 213

Notes 217

About the Authors 219

DREAMS CAN COME TRUE

I'm only six years old, but I already know the drill. It usually starts at the family dinner table.

"Eat up, Tyler," my mom tells me. "You can't have any snacks tonight or any breakfast tomorrow. We're going to see the doctor in the morning."

I'm sitting in front of a dish heaped with some of my favorite foods, and Mom is smiling at me. Even though I know I won't be able to have breakfast, I'm too anxious to eat much.

"Hey, Tyler," Dad says. "Are you ready to play Contra after dinner?"

I love that video game, but Dad's offer doesn't make me happy.

"Dad, I don't feel like playing right now," I say, trying to smile.

"I know you must be nervous, Tyler, but playing a game might take your mind off of tomorrow."

"I just *can't*, Dad."

You guys are so faking it, I say to myself, knowing they are doing their best to take my mind off what's happening tomorrow. We have gone through the same motions so many times before. Another surgery. Another night of feeling so scared before another day of fear. And then, after that, a lot of painful physical therapy.

I can't eat or focus on a game. My parents try and try to make me feel better, but it isn't working. I'm just a little kid, and I wish I didn't have cerebral palsy and need operations. At the same time, I know my mom and dad love me and hope that another surgery will help me walk without braces strapped on both my legs.

That night my parents tuck me in bed and say those flowery words parents say when they want their kid to not be afraid.

"Tyler," Mom says as she sits next to me on my bed, "you're so brave, and we know that you'll be doing great by this time tomorrow."

Great? I think to myself. *Sure! Lots of pain and lots of pain and lots of pain.* I don't say any of that as I look at my mom trying so hard to make me feel better.

"Remember, Jesus is with you," she keeps trying. "He'll protect you, and Dad and I and all our friends at church will be praying for you."

“I know,” I mumble as my dad walks up next to my mom. Dad now starts to help make me feel better too.

I wish the words did make me feel better. I can tell that they don’t really feel good about another surgery either.

Mom and Dad both put a hand on me, and Mom starts praying, “Father, we bring Tyler to You now and place him before Your throne of grace. Please remove his fear and let him fall asleep quickly and sleep peacefully until tomorrow morning. Put your angels around this bed and touch him with Your love and peace. We love him so much and know You love him even more. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

I’m glad they prayed I would sleep because that’s so hard for me to do the night before surgery. There’s a little light from the streetlight outside my window, so I squeeze my eyes tightly shut. I make myself keep my eyes shut and try not to think about the knot in my stomach. I’m sad that I face another surgery. I’m afraid of more pain. I’m even angry that my parents think I need to go through this agony—again.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next time I open my eyes my mom is waking me up. It’s still dark outside, and there will be no breakfast for my knotted, and now empty, stomach.

I'm Trapped

I'm buckled in the back seat of the car, soon to be strapped to a torture table. My mom would be terribly upset if she knew I felt so afraid. I try not to show it, but as soon as the

hospital doors open before us, I start pulling on my mom's arm, trying to keep her back from them.

"Mom, can't we do this another time?" I beg, as terror fills my little-boy thoughts.

I know where we're headed—to the "holding room" where I'll get ready for surgery. I'm really mad now. This place is so phony . . . all cheerful and fun. A jungle scene is painted really big on the walls, all kinds of video games are on a shelf in one corner, and huge television screens are running kids' shows. I know it's a sham. It's supposed to make little kids feel all happy and forget that they are about to be cut into.

I'm not one of those dumb kids who is tricked into believing this is the way the day will continue. No, I've been here before. I know that sometime soon my "prep" for surgery will begin. And here she comes, the nurse with the dreaded gown in her hand.

"Come on, Tyler," Mom says. "Let's get you changed." But the too-small hospital gown barely covers me. The ties in the back never close all the way, so about a one-inch gap opens all the way down from my neck to my knees. My bare bottom is hanging out for the whole world to see. I'm put in a bed. Playtime is over.

Pretty soon Mom will leave to go change into a sterile gown and cap. I know from experience that she will be back, but the panic starts to bubble up and out of my mouth.

"Mom! Don't go!" I scream.

I don't want her to leave, even for a few minutes. I'm so frustrated at how I feel. I have no power to make anything

change. My body won't let me jump up like other kids and try to run out of the room. I'm twisting and turning, feeling helpless while I cry, but I can't get away. *Mom will come back*, I tell myself . . . and she does, but I'm still crying as I'm put on a gurney and wheeled down the hall.

As soon as we enter the surgery theater, that bleach-drenched, super-clean smell hits me in the face. I hate it! I shiver as the cold air wiggles like a snake under the loose end of the sheet lying over me. I wish they'd let me keep my underpants on.

I'm held down and bound to the operating table with sturdy fabric straps. The straps are soft, but I can't move at all.

My arms are stretched out and tied down to bed rods, along with my legs. I squirm and try to twist out of the straps. I think of pictures of Jesus with His arms and legs just like mine, and I don't feel good about this image. I can't protect myself from the beady eyes behind the masks of the doctors and nurses who surround me.

"Let me go! Let me go!" I scream. No one listens.

I'm trapped!

I lie flat on my back on the cold table, terrified. All I can see are two huge lights right above me that blind me. My tears roll down the sides of my face and puddle in my ears so I can't hear well either.

Then I see it! The thing I fear the most! A nurse holds the "sleepy" mask in her hand as she lowers it over my nose and mouth. The sickeningly sweet smell of the gas fills my nostrils and burns my nose. I feel like I can't breathe at all.

NO SUCH THING AS CAN'T

"Sweets? Where's Sweets?" I yell through the mask.

I can hear a voice near me say, "Is he actually yelling for candy?"

I'm angry that the doctors and nurses don't know that "Sweets" is what I call my mom.

"Where is my mom?" I scream. "I want my *mom!*"

Just then, one of the bright lights disappears as my mom's face comes into view.

"I'm right here, Tyler. Everything will be okay," she says softly as she takes my hand.

I am, at once, glad but still angry. I'm even angry with myself for being afraid my mom wasn't there. She has promised me over and over again that she will not let them operate on me until she is beside me. I hadn't seen her standing nearby but should have known she was in the room. I'm still angry because she said that everything would be okay. She can't *know* that! I've been with her when doctor after doctor has warned her that any surgery could fail.

In a short while, my thoughts and feelings get fuzzy, and my mom's face starts to blur and fade away from me. I feel her tears falling on my face, mixing with mine.

I know the happy drugs are working cause my body feels so heavy.

Everything slows to a crawl, and then Mom's voice begins to sound like Darth Vader's:

"I-I-I

W-I-I-L-L

B-E-E

H-E-E-E-R-E

W-I-I-I-I-T-H

Y-O-U-U-U-U-U-U

T-T-Y-Y-L-L-L-E-E-R-R-R-R-R-R-R . . .”

For just a minute, I don’t feel afraid.

What seems like seconds later, I feel her tears again. I’m waking up, and her face is close to mine.

“Oh, Tyler, you did so well!” she tells me.

Trusting God and My Parents

That surgery was only one of many, with the same fear tormenting me again and again: more pain, more panic when being strapped down, more uncertainty about the results.

I knew Mom loved me, so I believed her every time she told me: “You have to see the doctor so you can walk better, Tyler.”

She was right, but that didn’t stop me from protesting or bargaining.

“Oh, Sweet Potato, please, not another one?”

“Why do I need to see *that* doctor again?”

“Sweet Potato, can’t we wait just a little while? I’ll go later, I promise,” I’d plead, even though the passing of time would not relieve the anxiety that preceded every surgery.

When words failed me, my fears, frustrations, and feelings of powerlessness spilled out in sobs and screams. But none of my protests ever succeeded, and before long, Mom and Dad would drive me to another big building where people would do what they could to heal my broken body.

I knew that not only did my parents love me, but God loved me too. I prayed to Jesus and asked Him to heal me like He did for others in the Bible. He did not answer that prayer with instantaneous, miraculous healing.

I still relied on God and Jesus to guide my parents in ways that would follow His plan for my life. I didn't think I would die. I just didn't understand why I had to suffer so much to be able to stand up and walk. I wondered what it would be like to live just one day as a "normal" boy, to hop out of bed in the morning and run downstairs to breakfast before running outside to play with the neighborhood kids on bikes and skateboards. I could not imagine how that freedom of movement would feel. I saw it all around me, but I didn't live it. It was beyond my reach.

I kept praying and believing as God kept leading my parents to put me through more and more surgeries.

Some procedures were short. Some dragged on for hours. And some were downright horrifying. I remember the day one specialist said to my parents, with me still in the room, "Tyler needs this surgery to help him walk, but I have to warn you that if complications develop, he may never walk again."

I freaked out! I squelched a scream because I didn't want to be taken out of the room. I wanted to hear what else the doctor said, but my mind drifted to what "he may never walk again" might mean.

I had progressed enough to walk awkwardly with braces on both legs and help from a walker, but the thought of

being forever bound in a wheelchair struck me as a fate much worse than the limited movement I'd finally achieved. I'd been through numerous surgeries and thousands of hours of therapy to get to this point. I didn't want to risk losing what I had accomplished so far.

"I don't know if I can still be me and be happy if I can't walk anymore," I complained, picturing myself falling further and further behind all the "normal" kids at school. "I don't want to disappear and have everyone forget all about me!"

The roller-coaster ride of peering down just before plunging into an abyss and then slowly climbing back up into the arms of Jesus took its toll on me. The knowledge of undergoing another surgery, riding through the emotions until it was over, followed by the recovery—it just exhausted me, as well as my parents.

Even so, that particularly frightening surgery went on as scheduled, as did additional ones. I did finally walk, and I'm still walking today.

My Unusual Normal

Surviving a surgery was always a reason to celebrate. Nurses showered me with toys and all the ice cream I could eat. Family members added to my growing collection of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles toys. And I probably played more video games than any other kid my age.

Those perks for suffering through surgery were all terrific,

but the joy of them was soon diluted by the everyday life of a child with my limitations.

Any hopes of becoming a “normal” kid like the ones who hang out with friends and lead active, fun-loving lives were soon replaced with hopes that the next surgery or procedure would simply bring me closer to walking better.

I faced new challenges soon after the last dish of ice cream was finished and the last hospital gift was delivered. A painful period of recovery began with countless hours of physical therapy. The therapists pulled and pushed and twisted my body and legs to help me learn to walk independently. I'd sweat and huff and puff and long for each session to be over. It seemed that as soon as I got the hang of new therapies, another surgery was needed. Then, former progress was often stripped away, and I had to start over again.

My parents' attitudes bolstered me through those continuous battles. They never gave up on me, and they never allowed me to give up on myself. Day after day, they provided something more transforming than any procedure: hope.

Whenever nurses, doctors, kids at school, or the world made me focus on all the things I couldn't do, Mom and Dad taught me to dream about everything I would be able to do when my body was better.

“God doesn't make junk, Tyler,” they reminded me. “You are a beautiful creation.”

The gentle reminder that God doesn't make mistakes, that we are all created in His image, made all the difference to me.

My Physician Friend

While most kids went to school and made friends their own age, I went to medical offices where adults became my friends. My favorite was my pediatrician, Dr. Greg.

He wasn't like the other doctors. He didn't quietly walk from room to room seeing patients. He ran, jumped, and exuded all this wild and crazy energy. He seemed more like a kid himself than like a highly educated professional.

He was also quite the style icon. Colorful shirts adorned with flowers, fish, dogs, and other curious embellishments replaced the plain scrubs most doctors wore. Mismatched socks peeked out from the bottom of his pants. Even his stethoscope was different. When other doctors listened to my heart, their instruments were cold and metallic. But Doctor Greg wrapped his stethoscope in an awesome dinosaur cover.

Not only was he fun loving but also extremely kind. Other doctors came and went, but Dr. Greg was always there for me. He never treated me with condescension or pity. I was just like any other kid to him. I had some medical issues, but otherwise I was a boy with a full life ahead of him. His perpetual smile and positive attitude encouraged me to hang on to whatever dreams of the future I entertained. It didn't matter if my dreams seemed unattainable, Dr. Greg supported me. As much as other doctors told me what I could *not* do, Dr. Greg cheered me on.

I remember one particular day when I entered his office very excited to tell him my latest dream about my future.

"Hey, Tyler, my man," he greeted me. "You look super smiley today. What's up?"

"I know what I want to be when I grow up!" I eagerly said.

"Well, give me the big news." Dr. Greg squatted down and looked at me eye to eye.

"I want to play basketball in the NBA!" I grinned back at him.

"That sounds great, Shaq!" he said with reference to Shaquille O'Neal, the 7'1", 325-pound NBA basketball hero of mine.

"Yeah, I *love* Shaq. He's so good. No one can beat him," I said in a little-boy dreamy voice.

Dr. Greg gave me a high-five and said, "You go for it, Tyler, and I'll help you be just as great as you can possibly be."

He knew that particular dream wouldn't come true, but he saw no reason to destroy my happiness then. He also knew that I would arrive at the same conclusion on my own as I grew up.

And of course as I matured, my dreams did change. I no longer strived to be a professional basketball player. I knew I was destined to be a doctor. My relationship with God deepened to the point that I felt certain He was calling me to help and heal others through professional medicine. The response I often received when sharing this news was that either God or I was mistaken. That's not how Dr. Greg responded. He never once doubted my dream.

When I told him I wanted to attend medical school, he wholeheartedly encouraged me.

Dr. Greg was a healing presence in my life and a barometer of my general well-being. If things were going well, I only saw him once in a while. It's when I *wasn't* doing well that I saw Dr. Greg more often. I enjoyed being with him, but I also knew that it might mean he would need to send me on to one of those *other* doctors. He never sent me to a surgeon unless he knew it was in my best interest. If another surgery was needed, Dr. Greg loved me enough, and was professional enough, to tell me the news I hated to hear.

I knew he was doing the right thing, but I'd become so anxious about the possibility of another surgery that I'd try to avoid him, even if I needed care. I vividly remember friends of mine daring me to ride a skateboard. Now, what would ever possess a handicapped kid with zero balance to get on a skateboard? I'll tell you what would: pride! I was like any young boy who was given a dare—too proud not to at least try it.

I stepped on the skateboard and quickly found myself lying on the ground. So much for pride! I broke a few ribs and dreaded what Dr. Greg would say this time. I tried to think of how I could keep him from finding out about my level of pain. Thankfully, I didn't need to see him for that particular injury, but the incident illustrates how much I wanted to avoid another surgery.

Dr. Greg was not only a healing presence in my life but also a role model for the kind of doctor I dreamed of becoming. I wanted to tell kids that they could go after their dreams despite the naysayers who tried to dampen their aspirations.

With the exception of Dr. Greg, I heard a lot of "No, you can't do that" from a vast number of physicians. But I kept moving forward. I kept looking for ways to become the kind of affirming doctor I wanted to be.

The foundational reason I had hope was my belief and trust in God. I realized that the only way I could become a doctor was by God's grace and intervention in my life. I still don't look like your typical doctor. There were numerous hurdles on the way to becoming a physician that seemed insurmountable, and I didn't soar over them. But I crawled up and over them—and I made it. I'm *Doctor* Tyler now.

I've had a lot of help and support, especially from my parents. They are people of great faith, as you'll see when you read the chapters in this book written by my mom. God used her in so many ways to keep me hanging on to hope when I was dangling from the cliff of despair by my fingernails.

My journey and hers continue in the following chapters, but for now, here's a quick preview.

Reversed Roles

Fast-forward about two decades from the days of my childhood dreams.

I still spend much of my time in the hospital, but there's a big difference. First of all, I'm walking! Second, I'm the doctor taking care of kids who are just as scared as I was all those years ago.

I now walk the long, white hallways where my fear grew with every turn of the gurney wheels as I was taken to surgery for another operation.

I enter rooms where parents try to comfort crying children the way my parents tried to comfort me so many times.

I walk past darkened rooms, respecting the privacy of grieving parents as they absorb bad news.

I don't personally identify with every child or parent here, but I identify with many of them.

And now I do my best to provide medical expertise, comfort, and hope to my patients and their families. I'm the doctor wearing the unusual T-shirts, all of them embellished with superheroes. I say, "Yes," to as many dreams of excited children as I can.

With the unwavering support of individuals like Dr. Greg, my dreams have come true. Today, I'm the chair of pediatrics at Singing River Hospital in the small coastal town of Pascagoula, Mississippi.

I also practice at other hospitals, teach classes on hyperbaric wound healing, run a company and a charitable foundation, write articles for medical journals, serve professional medical organizations and ministries like Focus on the Family, and travel around the world to speak.

Dreams Do Come True

While God has blessed my professional life, He really showed up in my personal life. I prayed frequently and fervently for my

future wife. I prayed that God would bless me with someone who would understand what it meant to be married to the handicapped kid. Sure, people thought the little crippled kid with his tiny walker was adorable, but I wondered what they would think when that kid was a full-grown, handicapped man.

In His infinite wisdom and grace, God abundantly answered my prayers for a wonderful family. I met my future wife, Laura, in medical school. We were married in 2012, and together we're raising our beautiful daughter, Harper Grace.

My dreams really have come true.

The story of how that happened is a real testament to God working in my life and in the lives of many other people along the way.

The following chapters will take you along on that journey. You'll read not only my story but my mom's story too: of the ups and downs of raising a child whose limitations could have broken our family apart.

Some of my story may sound a bit familiar to you. The television series *The Good Doctor* based some aspects of the story line on a part of my own life. This television show is about a doctor with autism and savant syndrome who is hired by a prestigious hospital in San Jose, California. I don't have the same disabilities, but the television doctor faces some of the same misunderstandings about his abilities as I have faced with having cerebral palsy.

ABC (American Broadcasting Company) and the television show *20/20* got together to do a segment on *The Good Doctor* by highlighting real-life good doctors. A *20/20* producer read

about me and was touched by my journey. As a result, I was featured in the *20/20* episode titled, “The Good Doctors: Brilliance and Bravery.” It’s a hopeful sign to me that shows like this one may encourage other people struggling with disabilities, or any kind of obstacle in their lives, to fulfill their dreams.

We’ve titled this book *No Such Thing as Can’t* to push back against all the negativity that challenged my dreams and my parents’ aspirations for me. My mom kept researching and reading and taking me to doctor after doctor to help me stand up and walk. My dad always, always held on to his God-affirmed belief that I *would* walk one day. Dr. Greg and other faithful friends kept inspiring us when we really wondered if we could remain hopeful that yet another procedure would help me.

We hope you, too, will be inspired to persevere in the pursuit of your own dreams. I’ve heard that it takes five positive comments to repair the damage from one negative comment. That means we need a lot of positive reinforcement to move through life with all its challenges. We want this book to be a dose of positive reinforcement, and we encourage you to put aside the “you can’t” responses that may have come your way. Replace them with “you can!” thoughts that lead you to discover ways to overcome any obstacles you might face. This isn’t a candy-coated formula to build you up for a letdown. It’s the truth. It takes work and perseverance, but you can achieve far more than you realize when you get out of the “*I can’t do this*” mind-set.

While other people may dampen your dreams, there is someone closer who may also bring you down: you! That is

certainly understandable when coping with overwhelming feelings of disappointment or discouragement. I understand. There were many times when I held negative self-thoughts too close. You'll see how I overcame those times and kept working to accomplish my own dream.

My mom also faced the danger of negative self-thoughts when she couldn't cope any longer with the pressures of our lives. She reached the deepest depths of depression but is still here to encourage others when they are slipping away from hope. She shares that part of her journey in chapter 7.

This book is honest while being hopeful. It's not always uplifting, but it's real. God is present, as is the reality of doubts and down times. You may not have a child with special needs or be a person with special needs, but you live in this world where all kinds of challenges and victories flavor each day of your life. You have your own dreams . . . some fulfilled and some yet to be fulfilled.

Or perhaps those dreams are gone and have left you with lingering pain. My mom and I hope the vulnerability with which we write our story will at least help bring some healing to any aching places in your heart where sorrow may still live.

If victory is already yours, we hope you'll look at your own life as you read about ours and see where God met you. You may be used by the Lord to help others experience victory also.

No matter where you are in your journey—whether you need to hear this message or pass it along—remember that with God, there's *No Such Thing as Can't!*