

A Life-Changing Drive By Adam Suderman

Where fear could prevail, joy now reigns.

Standing months removed from a life-altering, single-car accident, no one could blame DeVona Roble for focusing on the former.

Yet as she recalls what occurred on the afternoon of Jan. 27, 2020, the creek bottom by 110th and Meadowlark in Butler County, Kan., is now the catalyst to one of her greatest experiences of overcoming.

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Roble, who is in her 38th year as an occupational therapist, proceeded southbound as she anticipated her next stop at Wheat State in Whitewater. She had just finished working at Peabody Health & Rehab nursing home.

Scenic drives are a routine in Roble's career, seeing patients across Kansas. As she continued south, nearing where Remington High School intersects with Highway 196, she lost consciousness.

"My next time of waking up was when I crossed the center line and my car started going down into the ditch," she said. "... My eyes opened to see what the situation was, and I knew I was going toward some trouble."

Roble's 2012 Chevy Equinox was soon airborne, colliding with the concrete base of the bridge that ran over the creek.

She regained visual after the front of the car plummeted into the creek bottom of 2 to 4 feet of water. She was soon submerged in waist-deep water inside her car.

She reached for her door but was unable to open it. She didn't know the full extent of her injuries but felt her right arm "dangling" at the elbow as she further assessed her situation. The airbags had been deployed, and she was trapped between her steering wheel and seat.

"I was conscious long enough to see my situation and recognize my inability and to say, 'Lord, please help me,'" she said. "I said it in a way that was a desperate plea."

Out yet again.

When Roble's eyes opened next, she was standing against the exterior of her car. Hoping to make sense of the situation, another blackout occurred until she found herself sitting roadside, looking down at her muddy and water-logged feet.

But how did she make the 10- to 12-foot climb out of the creek bottom?

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“I was aware that someone had come by and stopped to help me (roadside),” she said of the moments after regaining consciousness on the road. “I felt their comfort. I knew they had called the ambulance.”

Three individuals, all believed to be high school students according to emergency personnel, were the group that helped comfort Roble. One of those students was trained in emergency response, allowing them to properly aid her while awaiting additional help.

Was there any evidence of struggle to climb to the roadside or a clear indication of how she got out of the water? Not according to a direct member of emergency response.

EMTs asked Roble where she wanted to go to be treated, and she responded with, “Wesley Medical Center in Wichita, Kan.” As she was treated by doctors in the trauma bay, the fuzziness of what she endured began to grow clearer.

She nearly shattered her right elbow, remembering that doctors told her it would be a puzzle to put back together. It was a compound fracture at the elbow leaving an open wound. She also had a fracture in the upper right arm at the shoulder. Seven ribs had broken (some on each side) with each breaking in multiple places. A fracture of the T5 vertebrae was later discovered.

The impact of the rib injuries led to a flail chest, which occurs when a portion of bone detaches from the chest wall. The medically-serious condition can sometimes lead to lung damage and mechanical ventilation to keep the chest stable.

Astonishingly, no damage was done to Roble’s lungs.

She had also endured a bleed in her parietal lobe, which is the part of the brain that allows you to make calculations and assess a situation. A follow up CT scan showed the bleed resolved by the next day.

Surprisingly, Roble’s ulnar nerve, which runs from your neck and into your hand, wasn’t compromised. She never lost sensation in her fingers and only had temporary swelling.

The question remained: What allowed her to escape near hypothermic conditions after enduring this trauma?

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Trying to make sense of what had happened in the hours prior to her arrival at Wesley Medical Center, Roble found growing peace amidst the pain.

As someone who had dealt with varying levels of claustrophobia and anxiety, she was still able to find relief through one of the most difficult chapters of her life. Beyond being trapped inside of a vehicle more than 10 feet down from the road, Roble was nearly invisible to oncoming traffic.

The moment came with a sense of peace, understanding that her life could have just as easily come to an end instead of allowing her to share her story.

“I think God healed me of (those fears) before the impact of the car in the ditch with the water,” Roble said. “I felt peace when I looked at the most difficult situation I could ever imagine myself in... trapped in a car, water to my waist, bleeding wound, hypothermic conditions. I was in place where no one would have seen my car from the road. I would have been hidden from view. There is no other way to see it.”

As Roble pondered her story, she recalled the Bible passage surrounding Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Acts 8 details Phillip’s encounter with the eunuch, preaching the message of salvation. God provides water for the eunuch to be baptized. After that moment, the Lord takes and physically moves Phillip away to the city of Azotus.

Appointed by the apostles to spread the Gospel, Phillip answered his calling. As Roble contemplated her coming days, weeks and months, she sees her movement from the water to the road as a miracle.

“It was a loving Father caring for a child that he loves dearly,” she said tearfully. “I was picked up carefully and placed where he wants me to be. The depth of the love that I felt in that moment, I can’t even express to you (how I felt).”

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Where can she go from this experience? It began in the days following at Wesley Medical Center and at its rehabilitation clinic.

Roble’s daughter Kari brought her the devotional “Jesus Calling” by Sarah Young. The day that she received her glasses allowed her to read through the day’s entry, Feb. 6. It read as follows.

*Come to me and rest.
I’m all around you to bless and restore.
Breathe me in with each breath.
The way just ahead of you is very steep.
Slow down and cling tightly to my hand.
I’m teaching you a difficult lesson learned only by hardship.
Lift up empty hands of faith and receive my precious presence.
Life, light, peace and joy flow freely through this gift.
When your focus turns away from me, you grasp for other things.
You drop the glowing gift of my presence as you reach for lifeless ashes.
Return to me, regain my presence.*

The third line from the bottom tied in perfect with the imagery of Roble’s spiritual revelation. What was she holding onto that kept her focus away from God?

“When light goes into a dark room, it filters everywhere,” she said. “The dark is pushed right out. I had that sense of the greatness of God. He has a mighty and awesome presence that pushes away darkness. I can choose to grasp his presence where there is life, joy and peace, or I can choose to pick up the ashes, phobias, anxieties, depressions or fears.”

One specific concern was washed away due her contract with Aegis Therapies at the Whitewater facility. Because of the agreement, she was covered by worker's compensation in the event of an accident. Roble otherwise was uninsured.

In the months prior to the accident, she mentioned two events that brought clarity amongst the chaos. Her sister Amy passed away on May 4, 2019. As her primary caretaker, she had a firsthand glimpse at her decline in the days leading to her passing. Her son Daniel had previously enlisted in the military and was preparing for his upcoming deployment on the day of her accident.

"It was harder for me to sit as a healthy human being and watch (Amy) transition than it was to be a person with many broken bones and a body that was having a hard time being sustained," she said. "... Did we do the right thing and make the right decisions? Should I have said something different? When they closed the casket on her, I had such a hard time thinking of her. Seeing her buried was really hard for me. That is all gone. I'm not labored by that whatsoever."

Wanting to use her life as a picture that paints the sufficiency of God, she expressed great joy when realizing what God had done for her.

With just over a year of her son's deployment beginning shortly after the accident, she provided a glimpse of God to her son that she feels is powerful.

"He could be grieving the loss of his mother," Roble said. "I have been praying for my children for a long time... With that has come the preparation and the building of the framework for what I can do and say today. I knew Daniel was going and I wanted to do everything I could to help support him in his service. I'm very proud of what he is doing.

"How could I have delivered a stronger message of the (goodness) and the reality of God and who he is? she said. "To have shown him this way... I could not have given him a better example or lesson outside of what happened. Would I ever have not wanted that? No. I'm so grateful."

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"You're one of those people."

Roble's spirit in the facilities was almost contagious, described perfectly by the line above from one of her doctors.

Overflowing with the joy she felt the Lord had given her, nurses, doctors and all other aid workers got a firsthand glimpse of how she had overcome such adversity.

Roble shared of a nurse who had ties to the area near the accident. She had lost a baby that had been diagnosed with Down syndrome, similar to her sister Amy.

"She and I connected so well," she said. "She left, called back and had someone bring a piece of paper with a song (*See a Victory* by Elevation Worship) on it. She thought it would be a good song for recovery."

A second nurse expressed her desire to have the words to say in a moment of sorrow. Roble also connected with her through prayer.

A memorable moment of Roble's medical stay came courtesy of an individual who had a mental disability. Having heard her story of the accident, they had one question.

"I bet it's going to be hard for you to get in the car again isn't it?"

The words struck Roble deeply.

"Just like we were always so astounded by Amy's strength in her weaknesses, I was astounded at the insightfulness of this person," she added.

What it did, however, was provide a springboard to Roble in her recovery.

Having made numerous trips inside a car since Jan. 27 for appointments, fear has been overcome.

"Why would I ever, ever go back to picking up the ashes (of the past) and focusing on them?" she said. "Why would I ever do that? I don't choose them. I know what the way forward has. I'm going to walk in (God's) presence... and if it means something great, something out in the forefront, I'm going to say yes, not because of anything I can do, but because of him. He can do it."