

# JONI & KEN

AN UNTOLD LOVE STORY



KEN & JONI EARECKSON TADA

*with* LARRY LIBBY

Some people talk about faith. Some write and read about faith. And some people model faith. Jon and Ken model it. This book is a treasured glimpse into the faithful lives of two faith-filled people. They are my heroes. I recommend this book with no hesitation.

MAX LUCADO, pastor and bestselling author

Selfishness may well be the deadliest disease we bring into marriage. While Ken and Joni are quick to admit their imperfections, I can't think of a more selfless couple to learn from. I pray that many will read this book and benefit from their example as much as I have.

FRANCIS CHAN, author and speaker

From the time I first read *Joni* back in the 1970s I've marveled at the amazing journey of faith that Joni has traveled. Hers has not been a story of gliding down an easy path, but down a tough and seemingly impossible road. Her resilience has given hope to millions. The story of Joni and Ken falling in love and their marriage is a beautiful love story, but it's a story that is anything but saccharine-like sentimentality. It's the kind of sacrificial and unconditional love that only God can supply. They are cherished friends and beautiful examples of the kind of faith that weathers storms and endures the harshest realities. When you read their story, you'll have a new perspective about yours.

MIKE HUCKABEE

I first met Joni a few years after the accident that dramatically altered her life. But until I read this book, I had little appreciation for the challenges she and Ken have faced together: the normal stresses of marriage complicated by quadriplegia, a life lived in the spotlight, and her recent life-threatening illness. My goodness — and the rest of us think we have problems! Their hard-won fidelity stands as an inspiring and redemptive example. Thank you, Joni and Ken, for baring your lives in this most vulnerable way.

PHILIP YANCEY

*Joni & Ken* will grip couples and singles as they contemplate what commitment really means. What I love about this story is that it includes the greatest story ever told — that Jesus set the example of endurance in the face of deep trials. Joni and Ken are remarkable witnesses to the strength that comes when we surrender to the One who cares for our every need.

FRANKLIN GRAHAM, president & CEO of Samaritan's Purse  
and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

Ken and Joni are a couple who model real love and real commitment, in a real marriage between two *very* real people. Their “love story” will motivate you to excel still more in your marriage, *and* it is one of those books you are going to give to your friends. Buy a case of their books and encourage your family and friends. This is a *great* story that needs to be made into a movie!

DR. DENNIS RAINEY, CEO of FamilyLife

The words “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” don’t begin to capture the challenges that Ken and Joni have encountered in their marriage. But they have overcome those challenges through steadfast commitment to one another and continual surrender to Jesus Christ. Theirs is a love story for the ages.

JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

Joni and Ken have allowed us an up-close-and-personal glimpse into their marriage — a thirty-year journey characterized by challenges few of us can imagine. As we witness the pruning, purifying, transforming effects of trials in their lives, we dare to believe our own sufferings and flawed human relationships can press us closer to Christ, mold us into His likeness, make us more fruitful, and fit us for eternity.

NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS, author and radio host  
of *Revive Our Hearts*

All those years ago, we had the privilege of sharing some music at Joni and Ken’s wedding. We even had a trio with the bride, Joni — singing Pelle’s song, “Unfailing Love.” And what an unfailing love their journey has been! Unfailing love for the Lord and His work, and unfailing love for each other. We thank God for their amazing example and testimony, and we say, “Thanks, Joni and Ken! We see Jesus in your love and in your lives!”

EVIE AND PELLE KARLSSON, Christian musicians

Joni and Ken are loved throughout the globe for their groundbreaking ministry to the paralyzed and broken, yet their lives together have not been without immense challenges. Here is an honest story of commitment, surrender, and selfless love that will inspire and give hope to all who long to know if their day-to-day struggles and victories matter to God. These two lives beautifully lived will speak right to your heart from theirs.

RAVI ZACHARIAS, author and speaker

This profoundly beautiful love story shreds the deceptive “happily ever after” myth and portrays something far more powerful, fierce, and eternal. Joni and Ken’s story will leave an indelible mark on you, heart and soul. It has on me, and I am deeply grateful to my friends, Joni and Ken, warriors both.

**SHEILA WALSH**, Women of Faith speaker and author  
of *God Loves Broken People*

In this book, a remarkable couple tells a remarkable story that radiates their devotion to Christ and therefore to each other. It makes you laugh, cry, and praise God as it so well reflects the highs and lows of Christian marriage.

**R.C. SPROUL**

We’ve always known that Ken and Joni face the unique challenges of quadriplegia, fame, and ministry demands. Now, through the pages of this book, we get to peek inside their marriage to see its struggles and triumphs. Best of all, this book shows that what has made their marriage work can also make *our* marriages work — tenderness, patience, unselfishness, and, most importantly, the power of the Holy Spirit to generate these things in us when our resources have run out.

**NANCY GUTHRIE**, Bible teacher and author of  *Holding On to Hope*

For every couple who faces adversities and challenges, *Joni & Ken* is a must-read story of hope and encouragement that reflects God’s heart for marriage.

**STEPHEN ARTERBURN**, founder and chairman of New Life Ministries and bestselling author

Poignant and profound! Joni and Ken’s love story will transform your understanding of “for better, for worse” and “in sickness and in health.” Through almost unimaginable adversity, their tender commitment to Christ and each other is elevating. This book is sure to change many lives.

**JUNE HUNT**, founder, CEO, and CSO (Chief Servant Officer)  
of Hope for the Heart

The integrity of making a vow has lost much of its impact in our world today. When you read this book by Joni and Ken, you will have a picture of what God intended when He instituted the covenant relationship of marriage.

**VONETTE BRIGHT**, cofounder of Campus Crusade  
for Christ International

Jesus never said, “I am the power cord; you are the iPhone.” He said, “I am the vine; you are the branches.” Only Joni can so gently remind us of the kind of faulty thinking that positions God as our charger instead of as the very source and sustenance of our lives. This self-sufficiency heresy in my heart has been dealt a lethal blow by Joni and Ken’s courageous telling of their story. Thank you, friends.

NICOLE JOHNSON, author and dramatist

*Joni & Ken* is an engaging, eye-opening, and heart-touching love story that cried out to be told. Nanci and I love Joni and Ken. While I love all of Joni’s books, this one is unique, containing much that is new to me. *Joni & Ken* is honest, penetrating, at times riveting, and ultimately transcendent.

RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven* and *We Shall See God*

I’m so thankful to Ken (and Joni) for his openness, honesty, and transparency in letting us see beyond the brave and godly persona of Joni to what God has brought about through their marriage, Joni’s cancer, and the unending day-by-day difficulties — simply because of a paralysis that leaves one entirely dependent on others. Jack and I were there at the beginning of this romance — a romance that serves as an example of our Savior’s love for His bride, the church. You two are *our* heroes of the faith.

KAY ARTHUR, cofounder of Precept Ministries International

Joni and Ken’s words seem wet with tears . . . I think they’re mine. Their journey is tender, honest, and soul-searching, and it quickly winds itself around your heart. It’s a stunning love story laced with hurts, hardships, and a great deal of hope. Come and see what the Lord hath wrought.

PATSY CLAIRMONT, author of *Stained Glass Hearts*

I love this book. Ken and Joni open up their life — the good and the bad — in a way that is gripping, challenging, and hope-giving. Reading their story made me want to trust Jesus more. It made me want to love my wife more sacrificially. It reminded me that God can use the worst trials in life for our good. Whether you are single, engaged, or married, I highly recommend this book.

JOSHUA HARRIS, pastor and author

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KEN & JONI EARECKSON TADA  
*with* LARRY LIBBY

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*If any couple draws inspiration from this book,  
may it be credited to the staff and volunteers  
of Joni and Friends who run our Family Retreats.*

*These amazing men and women have a heart  
to mend marriages, safeguard families affected by disability,  
and show the weakest couple  
that Jesus Christ really is the Answer.*





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# A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE STORY



The world has probably been singing love songs since Jubal, sixth from Adam, began experimenting with his newly invented musical instruments, tootling on his hand-carved flute or plucking his prototype harp while his long-suffering and more practical brother Jabal was out in the fields looking after the family livestock.

Have you missed the story of Jubal and Jabal? It's right there, what there is of it, at the beginning of your Bible in Genesis 4:19–21.

There weren't all that many women in the world in those days, but it's an even bet that Jubal attracted some positive feminine attention with this intriguing new activity. What had he called it? *Music*? Sitting by a murmuring stream under a spreading willow, running swift fingers across plant-fiber harp strings, he probably sang tuneful ballads about the big empty world newly wounded by the fall and not far removed from the memory of paradise, needing love, sweet love.

There have always been love songs, and the lion's share of them through the long ages have been wistful, sad, and melancholy. Someone falls in love with someone else, glorying in a brief, improbable burst of happiness, only to have something go wrong. A misunderstanding. A rejection. A betrayal. A slow dwindling of the flame that blazed so brightly. And then the music comes, the song from the bruised heart, telling the old, sad story of what

had so briefly flowered, what almost was, what never was, what might have been, and what was lost forever.

The songs have a million titles, and after the fiasco at the Tower of Babel, the world found itself with songs in a bewildering multiplicity of languages and dialects.

In years to come, disappointed lovers would be singing in Etruscan, Indo-European, Sanskrit, and Proto-Germanic about cheating hearts, last dances, moonlit walks, heartbreak hotels, try-to-remember Septembers, and silhouettes on the shade.

It's the same today. If you have any knowledge of songs from thirty, fifty, or even seventy-five years ago, just hearing a fragment of melody can weave a web of nostalgia or call up a particular shade of melancholy from some forgotten archive of memory.

*The shadow of your smile, when you have gone ...  
Are you lonesome tonight, do you miss me tonight? ...  
Eleanor Rigby, picks up the rice in the church where  
a wedding has been ...  
I really am indeed, alone again (naturally) ...  
I remember the night, and the Tennessee waltz ...  
One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do ...  
My heart will go on ...  
I fall to pieces ...  
I need your love. Godspeed your love to me ...*

Back in the 1940s, a popular song tapped into a theme that has been repeated over and over through the centuries:

*Missed the Saturday dance  
Heard they crowded the floor  
Couldn't bear it without you  
Don't get around much anymore.<sup>1</sup>*

A February 2009 article in the *Los Angeles Times* was titled, "For the lonely: 150 songs for sobbing on Valentine's Day." In the introduction, the author promised "150 of the saddest songs in

the world, subjectively selected and specially arranged for maximum depressive potential.”<sup>2</sup>

Why are so many love songs and love stories sad?

They’re sad because we pin our fondest hopes and dreams on a romantic relationship, but life hardly ever falls together the way we had hoped or imagined. We might “wish upon a star,” along with Jiminy Cricket, but wishes are generally wispy, tenuous things that don’t hold up to the rough-and-tumble of real life.

Love songs reawaken that soul-deep desire within us for a shining, transcendent experience of romantic love. Through that experience, we hope to escape the disappointments of a broken and mostly cynical world. But then the dream ends, the hope slips away — and we have to return to a shades-of-gray world that seems ordinary, lonely, and just a little bleak.

Why did more than 750 million people around the world sit in front of their TVs thirty years ago to watch the wedding of Britain’s Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer? Was it just the fairy-tale spectacle of it all, with the carriages, the glittering uniforms, and the ivory silk wedding gown with its twenty-five-foot train?

Yes, it was certainly a spectacle.

But it was more than that, wasn’t it?

I think many people wanted to set aside their cynicism and really believe — if only for a moment — in a man and woman living happily ever after together in a palace somewhere. Why? Because maybe if *that* marriage worked, perhaps some of the magic, some of the romance, some of the happiness, might spill over into so many other love stories — stories that began so well, showed such promise, raised such hopes, and faded so quickly.

That’s what makes the love story in *this* book worth thinking about.

It isn’t some sweet, shallow love song, but it has music with deeper roots and a more celestial melody than most of us could imagine. There are no artificial ingredients in this account, with a union movie orchestra playing strings in the background. It

is authentic life, complete with disappointments, pain, disillusionment, struggle, tenacious faith . . . and what you might call a surprise ending.

Yes, it begins in the traditional way, with a handsome young man and a lovely young woman falling in love with each other. There is a courtship, a wedding, a honeymoon, world travels, and the promise of a bright future.

Other than that, the story is anything but normal. Joni, who has become known all over the world for her writing, speaking, singing, and painting accomplished with a brush held in her teeth, was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident in 1967 when she was just seventeen years old. At age thirty-two, she had pretty much given up the idea that any man would or could look beyond her wheelchair and her disability to see her as a prospective lover and wife.

But she hadn't reckoned on Ken Tada.

A high school history teacher and football coach, Ken saw in Joni a beautiful woman with an even more beautiful personality and spirit. Most important of all, he saw a woman with a great passion for the One they both called Lord and Savior — Jesus Christ.

This was the girl of his dreams.

But life is more than a dream, and Ken, with proverbial stars in his eyes, had no concept of the difficult path that lay ahead of them. Joni had a much clearer picture of it all. Women usually do.

So they married.

And the account on the following pages dips into their story here and there, skipping back and forth through the years, showing some of the scenes from their life together.

It's a marriage that began strong, ran into hard times, faded a little, hit much harder times, and . . . well, I don't want to give away the ending. We need stories like Ken and Joni's. We need to hear about dreams that don't end, even when trouble comes in the night to scramble the story.

This book is essentially about two people who had every rea-

son on earth not to fall in love and marry each other in the first place ... whose marriage faced obstacles beyond what most of us could imagine and innumerable justifications for giving up ... who stayed together when their impossible obstacles unexpectedly became impossibly more difficult ... and who found a way, through it all, to attain to a new level of love rather than simply surviving or grimly hanging on.

Remember the song Susan Boyle sang to win *Britain's Got Talent* and launch her stellar YouTube fame? *I had a dream my life would be so different from this hell I'm living ...*

We all dream dreams and know very well that they don't always work out. Life is particularly hard on high expectations. Things hardly ever fall together the way we would have scripted them. The fact is, if we put our hope in a certain set of circumstances working out in a certain way at certain times, we're bound to be disappointed because nothing in this life is certain.

So what's the solution? To give up on dreams?

No, it is to realize that if we belong to God, there are even bigger dreams for our lives than our own. But in order to walk in those bigger dreams, we may face greater obstacles than we ever imagined and find ourselves compelled to rely on a much more powerful and magnificent God than we ever knew before.

That's what happened with Ken and Joni Tada.

Some people might call it a fairy tale, but it's really a miracle. And a miracle is better than a fairy tale.

LARRY LIBBY  
Richland, Washington

CHAPTER FOUR

# IT'S NOT ABOUT US



*God is not unjust; he will not forget your work  
and the love you have shown him as you have  
helped his people and continue to help them.  
We want each of you to show this same diligence  
to the very end, so that what you hope  
for may be fully realized.*

HEBREWS 6:10 – 11

**FEBRUARY 8, 1982**

Questions, questions, questions.

Over the last fifteen months, there had been any number of uncertainties swirling around Ken and Joni's courtship. And now, just as many questions surrounding their engagement.

Would it work? Did a marriage make sense? Even Ken and Joni's parents had misgivings. *How* would it work? Everyone said that marriage was a substantial life adjustment to begin with. Wouldn't it be exponentially more difficult when you added in the reality of a profound disability? Would the responsibilities of caring for a quadriplegic spouse ("*Remember, Ken, this is for the rest of your life ...*") eventually be too much for Ken, wearing him down? Would the pressures and never-ending day-to-day routines put too much strain on a new marriage? What about Ken's teaching career? What about sex? Was that the elephant in the room nobody was talking about? Would they be able to have

children? How would Ken handle living every day with someone famous? Would Joni find adequate time to invest in her marriage with a myriad of other things going on in her ministry?

And what did God think about it all?

It really came back to that last question; Ken and Joni were devoted Christ followers, and His will trumped every other concern. He had known both of them before they were born. Ken Tada and Joni Eareckson had been on His mind when He spoke the galaxies into being, spun the nebulae, and strolled with Adam and Eve through Eden in the cool of the day.

Ten years after Ken and Joni's marriage, Pastor Rick Warren would write a bestselling Christian book that began with a stark four-word sentence.

*"It's not about you."*

He would go on to write, "The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose."<sup>8</sup>

In the spring of 1982, mere weeks away from Ken and Joni's marriage, God began to speak to them as a couple about something much, much larger than themselves. Joni had invited her fiancé on a ministry trip to multiple nations in Europe. And in the course of that journey, all the questions surrounding their marriage began to slip, like pieces of a puzzle, into a larger context. If God had brought them together for a reason, what purpose did He have in mind for them *as a team*? What might they accomplish as husband and wife that they could never accomplish on their own as singles? It wasn't about them. It was about how God might be pleased to use them, together, for His purposes. If God was giving them a greater sphere of influence as Ken and Joni Tada, they needed to rise to that calling.

Ken Tada had grown up as a Burbank, California, boy who liked to stay close to home. As a high school senior, he had turned



down a football scholarship to the University of Hawaii because he couldn't imagine himself so far away from Southern California. For a man who hadn't traveled much out of the country, the trip with Joni seemed like an absolute whirlwind. Accompanied by Judy and Jay, Joni's sister, they swept through London, Paris, and Amsterdam.

Big Ben solemnly tolling the hours under an overcast sky? The lights of Paris at night from a hotel balcony? Canals and windmills in Holland? It had all seemed so exotic and romantic.

And then came Romania.

**APRIL 2, 1982**

"We just crossed the Iron Curtain."

Joni had been peering out the window of the aging Aeroflot jet en route to Bucharest, and she spoke her thought out loud. Her comment brought a quick, hostile glare from the flight attendant.

"Shhh," Judy whispered, "I don't think we're supposed to say *those* words."

Flying over Germany and Austria, they had marveled at the glorious green landscape, tidy villages, and neat hedgerows. Halfway through their flight, however, the world below them morphed into a different reality. Even from an altitude of 15,000 feet, they could tell that the towns were poor and unkempt, connected by dirt roads rather than asphalt highways.

In a sullen red sunset they landed in Bucharest and taxied to the gate. This was the Bucharest of 1982, still clamped in the steel vise of the brutal Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, seven years before his overthrow and execution. The ostensible purpose for the visit was to meet with government officials on behalf of Joni and Friends, but the true focus was to connect with and encourage brothers and sisters in Christ and look into the plight of that nation's disabled population.

As they prepared to exit the plane, Ken looked out in amazement at a ring of armored vehicles and grim-faced soldiers carrying AK-47s. "Unreal," he said, pulling out his camera.

“*Sir!*” the flight attendant suddenly barked. “You must put away your camera. No photos are allowed.”

Startled, Ken quickly complied. Yes . . . truly this was a different world. London, Paris, and Amsterdam seemed like a planet away. And America? Southern California? It might as well have been in a different galaxy.

Romania in 1982 was a ravaged and denuded police state, with fear and dread hanging over the towns and countryside like a freezing fog. In J. R. R. Tolkien’s universe, this was the land of Mordor, under the all-penetrating eye of an evil, highly paranoid, possibly demonic government. The once grand old boulevard leading into the city was potholed. And where were the cars? Very few and far between. Ken marveled to see horse-drawn carts clopping through the city, their drivers slump shouldered and sad, and even the horses seemed dispirited. Old-fashioned streetlights lined the boulevard, hinting vaguely of a grander bygone era, but now, not a single one was lit in the gathering gloom. The only lights in the city, it seemed, were the stoplights at intersections, but even many of those were darkened. Once-stately baroque buildings along the route appeared to be crumbling in on themselves and encrusted with grime. In some ways, it seemed more like Calcutta, minus the teeming crowds, than a European capital. A literal cloud, thick and dismal, hung over the once-magnificent city, heavy with the smell of leaded fuel and coal dust. The few people on the streets appeared like ghostly shadows clad in gray.

It brought to mind novelist Ray Bradbury’s description of a land he called the October country: “. . . that country where it is always turning late in the year. That country where the hills are fog and the rivers are mist; where noons go quickly, dusks and twilights linger, and midnights stay. That country composed in the main of cellars, sub-cellars, coal-bins, closets, attics, and pantries faced away from the sun. That country whose people . . . passing at night on the empty walks sound like rain.”<sup>9</sup>

They had been directed to stay at the Intercontinental Hotel

in rooms predetermined by the Securitate. The hotel itself, however, didn't live up to the promise of its conventional, Western-sounding name. It turned out to be yet another drab, dirty building, probably erected in the 1950s. They were given rooms on the second floor near the end of the hallway. Prewarned by a Romanian friend, they assumed the suite was bugged. Before saying anything of consequence, they had been instructed to open up both water faucets in the bathroom so the noise of the filling tub would prevent the listening devices from picking up their words.

As Judy removed Joni's coat, Ken whispered, low and urgent, "Look!" They watched as he tried to move the mirror on the wall above the dresser. It didn't budge. He tried to peek behind it with no success. Stepping aside out of its view, he silently mouthed, "It's part of the wall."

They looked at one another stunned, remembering the strange door to the room next to theirs, a door with no room number. What a ghastly feeling to think of some gray-faced Communist apparatchik sitting in a dim little room staring at them through a two-way mirror. Or was it just a camera? Whatever it was, it gave one an eerie feeling.

But this side trip into Communist Romania was never intended as a pleasure cruise. They had ventured into the heart of totalitarian darkness for the sake of God's sons and daughters who lived out their lives in that oppressive place, and for the disabled men and women who had to be there too, though no one had heard of them or from them for years.

As Judy and Jay got Joni ready for bed in the next room, Ken looked out the grimy hotel window at the scene below. The darkened windows of the building across the deserted street gaped back at him like empty eye sockets. *What am I doing here?* He felt a wave of homesickness for his sunny, bustling Southern California, so brimming with life.

At that moment, however, a fragment of Scripture intruded into his thoughts. Something from the latter chapters of Matthew's

gospel, speaking of a time beyond time when all nations would be gathered before the King for judgment: “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, . . . when did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:37, 39–40).

He wasn’t in Romania for Joni’s sake alone. He wasn’t there just because they were getting married and he needed to learn the ropes about all this travel stuff.

He was there because Jesus wanted him there.

The thought sobered him. He, Ken Tada, history teacher and football coach, had a job to do. And whatever their team was able to do to encourage the oppressed believers in that place, to look into the plight of orphans and the disabled, “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,” would be a direct service to Jesus Himself. And He would take note of it.

According to the government, however, there were no disabled people.

In Ceaușescu’s workers’ paradise, everyone was able-bodied and whole . . . or so their government guides informed them.

Their official tour of the country’s few “rehabilitation centers” seemed to bear out the government line; they were practically empty. Told that they would be taken to a “school for the rehabilitation of children,” they were escorted into a roomful of unsmiling teenagers dressed in blue uniforms and sitting erect and silent at their desks. On cue, one boy dutifully showed them his leg brace, another her amputated arm. *These were the disabled? Seriously?*

At another so-called facility for people with disabilities, they toured dim hallways lit by a few hanging lightbulbs. In one of the many white-tiled rooms, the official showed them a few prosthetic legs and braces. But where were the people? Where were the wheelchairs?

Toward the end of the visit, a few disabled people were ushered into the hallway to meet the “Western visitors.” One man

was in a vintage wheelchair, and several others hobbled along on crutches. Joni tried to strike up a cheerful conversation with them, but they replied in tight monosyllables, their faces as blank as the white-tiled walls. *They're afraid*, Joni thought. *Scared to death. And they can't wait for us to get out of here.*

As they drove in silence back to the hotel, Joni remembered studying about the Soviet Empire in her Modern and Contemporary History class in high school. She recalled being afraid of the “people behind the Iron Curtain,” as if they were of a different race — stalwart and strong like those imposing Leninist sculptures of farmers holding sickles and workers wielding hammers. She had felt sure that, given the chance, they were ready to storm across the borders and overpower the West.

But none of the citizens she had seen so far looked anything like the statues or the propaganda photos. They didn't look stalwart and strong; they just looked afraid.



Pastor Sarac prayed the blessing over their dinner but seemed in a hurry from the first bite.

Two elderly women dressed in long skirts and wearing babushkas bustled in and out of the kitchen with steaming platters of garlic chicken, sausage, and onions. Joni later learned that these women and several others from the church had taken turns standing in long food lines to make sure they got two chickens and some onions for their American guests.

Wind-driven rain spattered against the windows as they ate.

After what seemed no longer than ten minutes, the pastor pushed back from the table, wiping his hand on a napkin. “We must hurry to get into the church,” he said.

Surprised, Joni glanced at a clock. “But the service doesn't begin until nine o'clock,” she said. “It's early yet.”

Pastor Sarac flashed a quick, nervous smile. “Oh ... I do not think so, dear sister.”

Leaving the pastor's apartment and stepping out into the

night, they were stunned at the sight before them. Rain was pelting down on a sea of people lined up in the darkness. Clogging the path to the church entrance were elderly men huddled beside their wives, young mothers holding babies, fathers clasping the hands of their children — and all of them seemingly oblivious to the soaking rain, smiling and staring wide-eyed at Joni in her wheelchair.

Jay and Judy shook hands vigorously with everyone and kept insisting, “Thank you, yes; please, let’s go *inside* the church.”

The crowds cleared a path for Joni’s wheelchair, but no one else could enter because the church was already packed. Ken and Joni looked around the auditorium in wonder. Elderly people crowded each pew, while younger ones stood in the aisles, shoulder to shoulder, three abreast, in row after row up the middle aisle. Up the stairs to the balcony, the kids were jammed like sardines, and the upper section appeared to sag from the weight of many more. The air was hot and steamy and smelled of wet garments — and flowers. When Joni glanced to see if the windows could be opened a little, she found herself looking into the smiling faces of young children and teenagers sitting on each and every sill. Behind them, even more people stood outside in the rain, jostling to get a view.

Ken had never imagined such a scene, and it was still difficult to comprehend that he was a part of it all. These people — even if they spoke a different language, followed unfamiliar customs, and lived in circumstances wildly different from his own — were his brothers and sisters in Jesus. He couldn’t shake the thought that he had more in common, much closer ties, to these Christian strangers than he had with his non-Christian next-door neighbors in his Burbank condo.

Pastor Sarac said a few words of introduction in Romanian, one of the most beautiful languages Joni had ever heard. Someone had described it to her as “a blend of strong, confident Slavic tempered with the passionate, rhythmic flow of a Romance language, complete with the rolling *r*’s!” When the pastor led the

assembly in a hymn, the music was simply stunning. Sweet and strong, robust and wrung from the deep places of the soul. It had all the passion and suppressed Slavonic longing of a Dvořák melody, but ran deeper still.

Tears filled Joni's eyes. *This was the song of the persecuted church.*

Seven years later, a peaceful protest around a pastor's home in Timișoara would help launch the Romanian revolution.

After the introductions, Ken wheeled Joni's chair to the front, and she turned to face the crowd for the first time. Immediately, women and children surged forward with bouquets of flowers, placing them in her lap and all around her wheelchair. And there to her left and to her right, on the floor between the pews and the platform, were people with disabilities. Some lay on thin mattresses and mats or sat in homemade wheelchairs constructed of bicycle parts . . . the blind and the deaf, the lame and the mentally challenged, men and women with twisted legs and spines. She recognized those with polio, spina bifida, and cerebral palsy, all straining to see their American counterpart. And how many more, huddled in sodden coats, hats, and blankets outside in the rain, were hoping to hear something, see something, that might bring a little hope into their dreary lives?

Yes, Romania had its disabled population, all right. They had simply been shunned and hidden away in back rooms, attics, and basements; frowned at and despised in public; forbidden to ever enter a hotel, restaurant, or market — their very existence denied by a megalomaniac dictator.

That night in the hotel, Judy and Jay unloaded pockets and purses stuffed with tightly folded pieces of paper, piling them on the bed. Ken and Joni had been given notes too, which they added to the growing heap. They sat up that night reading many of them, desperate stories of people, all pleading in halting English for hope or help. A few asked for knowledge of medical cures for "our mongoloid child" or spinal cord injury or stroke or psychotic

problems. One said, “Can you help my son who is a spastic?” Another note read: “My daughter needs a wheelchair, please?”

After a while, and without words, the four of them looked at each other, the same thought occurring to all of them. *Maybe we can do some good here — return with wheelchairs and crutches ... perhaps bring Bibles or my books in the Romanian language ... could this be why God brought us here?*

At that time, few people in the West knew anything about the hidden population of disabled men, women, and children in Ceaușescu’s Romania. But now ... they all felt as if a mantle had been laid on their shoulders, a burden of responsibility they could not, and would not, ignore.

God had not forgotten His most vulnerable children in this beleaguered land. When Jesus addressed His letter to Pergamum in the book of Revelation, He might as well have been speaking of the Christians in Romania: “I know where you live — where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name” (Revelation 2:13).

Now He had brought them there, Ken and Joni, Jay and Judy, and they had looked into the eyes of Romania’s suffering believers. They wouldn’t forget.

And somehow, they would be back.



Next stop, Poland. It might have been a tightly controlled Communist state with its own cadre of secret police, but compared to the dark, nearly demonic oppression of Romania, it felt almost light and airy.

Joni spoke before churches in towns with names like Katowice and Wrocław, and together they presented the gospel of Jesus Christ to disabled people at rehabilitation centers.

At one church, noisy and packed to capacity, Ken and Joni prayed together behind a flimsy wooden screen before rolling out in front of the crowded pews. He gripped her lifeless fingers, praying that the Holy Spirit would speak through them to the



curious, excited, and eager men, women, and children who filled the auditorium to capacity.

She had been in similar places on similar nights in different parts of the world, but tonight was different. Tonight, Ken was there. Her husband-to-be. It wasn't just Joni; it was Ken and Joni. And as they prayed together, she felt a new strength and confidence. For Ken, it was yet another glimpse into the future. *So this is what it will be like . . .*

Joni peeked out from behind the screen into the faces of the people of Poland. Farmers with their families. Steelworkers and miners. Little boys who tugged at each other and bumped one another's shoulders. Young women with brightly colored kerchiefs, spots of blue and red and yellow dotted throughout a crowd dressed mostly in heavy dark coats and sweaters.

Two older women squeezed together on the front pew, their heads thinly framed in tight black scarves. For an instant, she saw them as she might have painted them, with faces lined and weary, yet full rosy cheeks and sparkling blue eyes. They were looking expectantly at their pastor, as did everyone else, whether jammed into the pews or standing in the middle and side aisles, listening to his introductory remarks.

It seemed so loud that night, even though no one but the pastor was talking. It occurred to Joni that the din was from hundreds of coats, scarves, shoes, canes, and crutches crowding and rustling against one another. The cold plaster walls of the church echoed the sound off the high wooden ceiling. It was a chilly night outside, yet in the church the air was tight, hot, and humid. And charged with excitement.

A young man, probably afflicted with some form of multiple sclerosis, sat humped over in his pea jacket, his hands twisting a handkerchief. His wheelchair was very, very, old, the drab green leather worn and torn. The wheels were different sizes, as though he had pieced together mismatching parts, perhaps cannibalizing foot pedals and armrests from other, even older chairs.

The bright, scrubbed face of a young girl looked on, her lips

full, naturally pink, and parted in a mild and gentle smile. Joni pointed her out to Ken. "Look at her eyes!" she said. Ken nodded. Her eyes were absolutely glowing. "She knows Jesus," Joni said. "I'm sure of it." She was sitting in a molded orange plastic chair someone had placed at the end of the first pew and leaned on a black cane. Her spindly thin calves were encased in old leg braces — probably a polio survivor.

Joni couldn't help but glance down at her own wheelchair, each aluminum spoke gleaming and clean, her seat outfitted with an expensive black cushion. She had already met many people with disabilities in Poland who sat on old couch cushions in their wheelchairs, or perhaps doubled-up feather pillows. She felt like she was about to drive a shiny new Mercedes into a street filled with ancient Pontiacs and battered Studebakers. She was suddenly very glad she had worn a plain woolen sweater that night, and that her hair had been simply styled. The last thing she wanted to look like in front of these people was glamorous. Without even thinking about it, she began to rub the blush off her cheeks with her sweater sleeve.

Guessing what she was thinking, Ken reached around her neck, tilted her head back, and kissed her. It was reassurance like no one else could have given her in that moment. How glad she was to have him there with her!

In the next moment, he wheeled her onto the platform and parked her chair next to the woman who would translate their message. The noise in the church increased as people slid forward in their seats or jostled in the aisles to get a better view.

Ken was still in awe of Joni's fame. Here they were in Communist Poland, and many of these people had seen her movie or read her books in Polish. And now . . . here he was at her side, and part of that picture. In his younger years, he would have never imagined such a thing. You just never knew what life would bring when you surrendered it to serving the Lord.

Joni and Ken traded shy, nervous smiles with the audience, and then he walked off the platform. She began to speak, finding

her cadence with the translator. Love, concern, and joy seemed to radiate from her in waves. What an amazing gift she had with an audience! He could see her enthusiasm reflected in the faces looking on intently. They were warmed by her, encouraged just to be near her. A wizened old woman in a front pew nodded and smiled, drinking in every word. The young disabled girl in the orange chair leaned forward on her cane, smiling with confidence and hope.

After Joni's message, Ken rejoined her on the platform and began speaking about their upcoming marriage, with its challenges and joys. *Having a translator isn't a bad experience*, he told himself. It gave him time to collect his thoughts a little.

Ken quoted 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, relating how Joni's disability had become a weakness about which to boast, allowing God's power to rest on their lives. He had used those words before, but on that night in Poland, they seemed almost electric with meaning, and he watched, or sensed, people nodding their heads in acknowledgment.

As he spoke, Joni thought to herself, *But they mustn't think of us as extraordinary or heroic. They mustn't think of me that way — a celebrity from the West with wings on her wheelchair who smiles and paints and writes and sings. I must find a way to tell them more clearly how we struggle with so many things and fall short so often, just as they do.*

For that night, however, it was enough that they had brought words of blessing and hope from a distant America — and a Savior who wasn't distant at all.



Since both Ken and Joni were history buffs and interested in events surrounding World War II, they took advantage of the opportunity to visit the site of a Nazi concentration camp — Auschwitz-Birkenau — in Poland.

It ended up being a more jarring experience than either of

them had anticipated. What stuck in Joni's mind in years to come, however, were the wildflowers.

In Auschwitz, at the site and around the museum, and in Birkenau, where the evidence of the camp had fallen away, the grounds were carpeted with tiny white daisies. There seemed to be untold thousands of them, poking up through the new spring grass, nodding delicate heads in the breezes.

"Do you suppose the government plants them?" Joni whispered to Ken, out of earshot from their Polish hosts, who were guiding them.

Ken shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe God planted them. Anything bright helps in this place."

In spite of the wildflowers and the intervening years, Auschwitz was a chilling, depressing place.

Joni noticed a row of lovely rose bushes planted just yards away from the gas chambers. Obviously, *those* had been planted. Their guide nodded yes, observing that there had certainly been no flowers when Auschwitz was in operation. Every wildflower, every blade of grass, was plucked clean, right down to the naked clay, by starving prisoners. They ate everything that grew, trying to stay alive.

To Joni, the carpet of daisies seemed like a covering of God's grace over a scene of inconceivable horror ... or perhaps a memorial.

Inside the museum, one of the first displays was housed in a large room behind glass, filled with piles and piles of prosthetic legs, walkers, crutches, canes, and everything else that any person with a disability might have had when he or she had come to that place.

The disabled were always the first to die.

Years later, Joni would learn that when Nazi "medical" teams across the Third Reich began doing their gruesome experiments on "low value" people, they began by pulling people with mental and physical problems out of various institutions and carting them off in the night to their laboratories. But not just anyone.

At least initially they only chose people who had no visitors, no family or friends coming to see them. The Nazis reasoned that people without advocates were easy marks because no one would notice or care if they went missing. Disabled people like Joni had been labeled as “useless bread gobblers.”

*How incredibly sad*, she had thought. And she felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for her family, and especially for Ken, her husband-to-be. *I have an advocate*, she thought. *Someone who will be there for me and stand up for me, no matter what.* For the rest of her life, as long as Ken lived, she had an advocate, a champion . . . and a friend.

Auschwitz contained every horror she had ever read about. Bare bricks and barbed wire . . . storehouses of eyeglasses and gold teeth, canes and crutches, shoes, hearing aids . . . stacks of yellowed and dusty record books bearing neatly inscribed names . . . gallows and guard towers . . . even the ominous chimneys and the ovens.

But she hadn't expected the flowers. The tiny little wisps of white innocence, carpeting the grounds.

They journeyed the short distance from Auschwitz to Birkenau. Here, trainloads of Jews and dissidents had been emptied out into the freezing night to face the machine guns of pitiless and soul-dead men. Children were gun-butted one way; their mothers herded the other. Men were separated into groups of the old and young. But virtually all of them, millions of them, ended up in one place — the incinerator, now crumbled and overgrown — at the end of the camp.

Nothing was left standing at Birkenau. Their hosts explained that what appeared to be orderly rows of heaps of brick were once the smokestacks of wooden barracks. Nothing remained of the guard towers. Even the train tracks and railroad ties were gone, uprooted or simply moldered away.

Joni shivered, but not from the cold. The camps were stark reminders that wherever Satan ruled in the world, people weren't valued as those who bear the stamp of God's image. Only “useful,”

able-bodied lives had any value. The message of the Nazis — and Ceaușescu’s Romania — was that “you are better off dead than disabled. We don’t need people like you.”

*But Ken needed her.*

How wonderful to be needed. Wanted. Cherished. Loved for something more than physical “usefulness.”

She dropped her gaze to the daisies Ken had tucked into the straps of her arm splints. And smiled. *Her advocate.*

The children of their Polish hosts had remained in the van during the tours of the death camps, absorbed in playing Mario Bros. games on their Nintendos. It made Ken, the teacher, thoughtful. Was that the attitude of the coming generation? Absorbed in the latest gadget coming out of the West, with no interest in learning about the terrible historical events that occurred only miles from where they lived? How quickly would the terrible lessons of history fade?



In Athens, just before flying home, they had been invited to attend the Greek premiere of the *Joni* movie.

Organizers of the event sent a big black Mercedes to pick them up at the hotel. At the theater, a large group of Joni admirers crowded around the car as the driver and Ken fetched her wheelchair from the trunk. Ken was dazed by the spotlight, flashbulbs, and the excited murmur of the crowd. *I can’t believe this*, he told himself. *I’m marrying a movie star. Where’s the red carpet?* He lifted her out of the car, and Joni emerged, smiling and waving to the friendly crowd, just as if she’d done it a million times before. As they picked her up, however, the clamp on her leg bag broke, releasing its contents on the sidewalk.

*Well, well*, Joni thought to herself, *I must have been letting this international movie premiere thing go to my head a little. Thanks, Father, for helping me keep things in perspective!*

Before they left town, everyone wanted to see the Parthenon, and no one really imagined it would be wheelchair accessible!

Ken's weight training, however, combined with a good dose of a history teacher's excited adrenaline, enabled him to carry Joni all 150 steps to the magnificent ruins at the crown of the Acropolis.

There, late in the afternoon, Ken held his bride-to-be, looking out over Athens and the Aegean Sea and Sea of Crete in the misty distance. What a trip this had been! How could he ever look at life in the same way again?

They looked out as far as they could see in all directions. If you stayed there long enough, lingering from sunset to moonrise, you could watch the columns of the Parthenon turn from beige to golden to rose to stark white.

Maybe so . . . but Ken was ready to find a restaurant and order a plate of sizzling *soutzoukakia*.

Carrying fiancées up hilltops was hungry work.





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*Joni and Ken*

# RESOURCE S FOR YOU



For a complete list of other books written by Joni Eareckson Tada, or for more information about her greeting cards, which she paints by mouth, visit the website of the Joni and Friends International Disability Center at [www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org).

Or you can write Joni and Ken at:

**Joni and Friends International Disability Center**

PO Box 3333

Agoura Hills, CA 91376, USA

818-707-5664

The mission of Joni and Friends is to communicate the gospel and equip Christ-honoring churches worldwide to evangelize and disciple people affected by disability. Premiere programs include Wheels for the World, Family Retreats, the Joni and Friends television series, and a radio outreach aired on more than one thousand outlets across America.

The Christian Institute on Disability is the educational and training arm of Joni and Friends, partnering with Christian universities and seminaries around the world to develop courses of study in disability ministry. Through a network of volunteers and Area Ministry teams, Joni and Friends works on a local level to accelerate Christian ministry into the disability community around the world.

If you have a disability in your family, we urge you to prayerfully consider attending a Joni and Friends Family Retreat near you. The ministry holds over twenty Family Retreats across the

United States every summer, with additional Family Retreats in developing nations.

If you have benefited from Joni and Ken's story, let them know by writing Joni and Friends today. We would love to hear your story and learn how we can pray for you. You'll also be encouraged by reading other books written by Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni and Friends is here to serve you!

# NOTES



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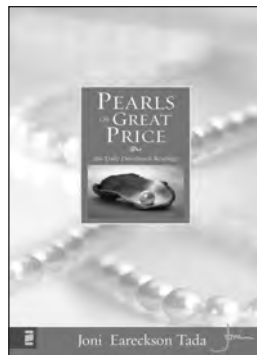


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366 Daily Devotional Readings

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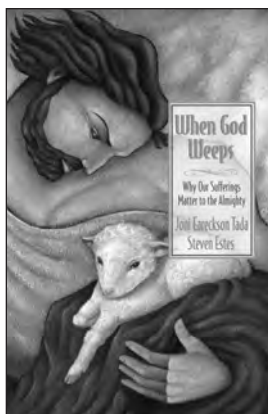
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KEN TADA recently retired after thirty-two years of teaching and is currently the Director of Ministry Development for Joni and Friends. He is also a member of the Board of Directors. In 2001, Ken received the FamilyLife Ministries Robertson McQuilkin Award honoring “the Courageous Love of a Marriage Covenant Keeper.” He is an avid fly fisherman and helps to lead Wild Adventures, a fishing ministry for men.

JONI EARECKSON TADA is the founder and the CEO of Joni and Friends International Disability Center and an international advocate for people with disabilities. She founded Joni and Friends in 1979 to provide Christ-centered programs to special needs families, as well as training to churches. Her lifelong passion is to bring the gospel to the world’s one billion people with disabilities. She is the author of numerous bestselling books, including *Joni*, *When God Weeps*, *Diamonds in the Dust*, *Heaven*, and *A Step Further*, winner of the Gold Medallion Award. Joni and Ken have been married since 1982 and reside in Calabasas, California. You can learn more about Joni’s ministry at [www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org) or can write her at [corresp@joniandfriends.org](mailto:corresp@joniandfriends.org).

LARRY LIBBY is an author and editor who has written a number of books, including *Someday Heaven* and *Who Made God?* He and his wife, Carol, live in Washington.

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