

A Born-Again Pedestrian - Spirit of Change Magazine

That fateful day of my diving accident occurred on my sober but celebratory birthday. I've renamed my plunge into paraplegia as my Rebirthday.

 By Mark Mathew Braunstein

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Photo courtesy Mark Braunstein

A single moment in 1990 changed my life, but not forever; just for the rest of my life.

While hiking with friends on a woodland trail, we came upon a footbridge where three men were repeatedly diving in unison into the river below. As a mile swimmer, I seized upon the spectacle as an opportunity to go for a swim, so I joined in the fun.

In my daredevil dive, the devil outdid my dare. I took a deep dive into the world of paraplegia. I shattered a vertebra that injured the fragile bundle of nerves called the spinal cord. Paralyzed. Not everywhere, just below the waist.

My spinal cord injury (SCI) was well documented. Four decades before everyone carried palm-size video cameras in their pockets, very few people lugged around heavy, bulky, and unsightly VHS camcorders. As a skilled photographer, my girlfriend also dabbled in videography. With her boxlike videotape recorder, she aimed her lens at the three swimmers. Driven by my macho male ego, I wanted to impress my girlfriend. I also attempted the dive precisely to capture it on videotape. I probably was thinking, "Hey, guys, watch this!" Famous last words.

For the next two years, she documented my many steps of recovery as I began to take a stand against spinal cord injury. From my creeping, to crawling, to jostling between parallel bars, to ambulating with a walker and leg braces, to crutching on sidewalks, to crutching in the woods,

she recorded much of it on tape. Her video compilation of my injury and rehab was broadcast for nine minutes on Sunday evening primetime [network TV](#). If we all merit 15 minutes of fame, I've got six more coming.

A Walk On The Wild Side

Still crutching as a paraplegic 35 years later, I remain a born-again pedestrian. Paraplegia, however, is not just about Walk. Its four other unwired four-letter words are Shit, Come, Piss, and Feel. Below the waist, I can barely Feel. While I got my Shit together, Come never did come back. And pardon my bedpan humor, but I still pray for Piss. Call me, The Catheter in the Wry.

Lamenting the loss of my body that abruptly had been halved, I experienced a half-life crisis, but only half-heartedly. Challenged by the same calamity, some people sink into self-pity, self-destruction, or suicide. I never sought such solace or escape. Instead, I have remained self-sufficient and self-supporting. Until my retirement at age 62, I remained employed full-time post-injury for 23 years. I've also achieved some successes attainable only because of paraplegia. Being visibly crippled has some perks that I've enlisted for social causes that I otherwise might not have been able to advance.

That fateful day of my diving accident occurred on my sober but celebratory birthday. I've renamed my plunge into paraplegia as my Rebirthday. Perhaps I've been in freefall ever since.

A Big Tiff Over A Little Puff

Soon after my injury, I learned of an herbal remedy that both relaxes SCI spasms more effectively than do tranquilizers and that relieves SCI pains more safely than do narcotics. The Netherlands was the only nation where this forbidden herb was legal, so in 1996 I traveled to Rotterdam to procure a prescription for that herbal remedy from a Dutch physician. Back home in 1997, emboldened with my prescription I wrote an essay confessing to my use of medical marijuana.

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New England's third-largest newspaper, [*The Hartford Courant*](#), prominently displayed my public confession on the front page of its Sunday editorial section. That single editorial garnered more reader response and more media coverage than any of my subsequent six books and countless articles combined. You might not recall or be aware of the frigid arctic political climate that swirled around cannabis a generation ago. My friends feared that police would arrest me, that my

workplace would fire me, and that my landlord would evict me. I gambled otherwise, with my wheelchair and crutches as my sword and shield.

For the next 15 years, serving as the state's preeminent poster child for medicinal marijuana, I appeared in many [newspapers](#), including [The New York Times](#), and on several [Connecticut](#) and New York City network [TV news shows](#). I also testified in person at all seven legislative [public hearings](#) each year that the failed bill was introduced. At long last, in 2012, Connecticut [legalized](#) medicinal marijuana. Half flower child and half poster child, I celebrated as a member of the winning team in that victory against the War on Drugs.

A Real Sab Story

Before my injury, I participated in the outdoor sport of diverting ducks from flying within range of shotguns along the shore of the nature preserve where I lived. After rehab, I continued my hunt sabotage, sometimes while alone. The hunters would have kicked the shit out of me if without my crutches, but my crutches were my shield. Then one fine day during a hunt sab in 1992, I was arrested for hunter harassment.

The news media reports of my solitary action set into motion a course of events that generated public support for my cause. Long dismayed about duck hunting on the shoreline of that nature

preserve, neighbors wrote letters, made phone calls, signed petitions, attended hearings, and enlisted our state legislator. State wildlife staffers made a field trip to the crime scene. By next hunting season, the waterways along that nature preserve were banned to duck hunting.

Deer Family Photos

Another cherished activity that I resumed post-injury was nature and wildlife photography, including of ducks and [deer](#). I lured deer with food, and then shot them with my camera. I shot the first of a pregnant doe's family photos in early spring. Slowly earning their trust, by fall I could sit and shoot her and her two fawns from fifty feet away. By next spring, I could shoot her yearlings from fifteen feet away.

I was able to photograph the yearlings from fifteen feet away. Seated, I was their height, and so, less intimidating. I could not have entered into my communion with deer while afoot. I attained it only in a wheelchair.



Photo courtesy Mark Braunstein

Seated on my wheelchair, those peaceful evenings I shared among the deer were in sum the most spiritually enriching experience of my life. The endeavor needed much patience. It also required around twenty bushels of cracked corn and exactly one wheelchair. Deer recognized me from afar. Seated, I was their height, and so, less intimidating. I could not have entered into my communion with deer while afoot. I attained it only in a wheelchair.

Nocturnal Wildlife On Lovers Lane

For 26 years, I lived in an old farmhouse set back in the woods of the Connecticut College Arboretum. Its long tree-lined driveway was not visible from the house, nor the house from the winding driveway. Amorous couples often briefly parked their cars upon that secluded and potholed

road. After consummating their nocturnal activities, they tossed out of their car windows emptied beer cans and filled condoms. Litter removal from Illicit Lovers' Lane was delegated to me.

I had assumed that the occupants were high school teenagers. I soon discovered otherwise, that they were streetwalkers and their johns. Despite its remote wooded setting, the house was only three miles from downtown New London, a playpen for sailors at the nearby sub base and for gamblers at the nearby casino. After ten years of collecting the sex workers' trash, I began collecting their stories.

Reprieved from their usual carnal commerce, they willingly told their tragic life stories to me and posed for my photos. As a paraplegic whose sacral functions were neutered, I was a eunuch shut out from enjoying the pleasures of the harem. So instead of their customer, I became their confidant. For ten years, I interviewed several hundred and photographed 144 women, of which over fifty photos are posted on [Social Documentary Network](#).

Three of the streetwalkers soon were [murdered](#). A fourth became a serial [bank robber](#) of six banks in six consecutive days. When my photos of the four women were published in [newspapers](#) and

broadcast on [NBC-TV](#), I the interviewer became [interviewee](#).

Walking in the March of Time

Rites of passage often bookmark the chapters of our lives with Before and After. Such rites include our marriages, our children's births, and our loved ones' deaths. Oftentimes we choose as milestones celebratory transformative experiences. Or sometimes calamitous events get dumped upon us. The good news (if any exists) about my plunge into paralysis the day I turned 39 is that now at 74 that milestone has bisected my lifespan into two halves defined by Before (while afoot) and by After (while wheelchaired or crutching).

Until I fill my coffin, I still have appointments to keep, people to meet, books to read, places to go, fortunes to make, and empires to conquer. At my age, though, both my gait and my memory have begun to falter. With advancing age, I may lose still more abilities and faculties. Other members of my generation already have lost much of theirs and have succumbed to the degenerative diseases of old age. Survivors among my senior class in high school have ripened into senior citizens.

At class reunions, you can view the march of time etched upon the faces of your former classmates. At your 50th high school reunion, all your classmates will share the same dire news. During

their recent annual physical exams, their doctors informed them that they may have only twenty years left to live. If I happen to remain on stage for twenty more years of encores, then what? Dunno. I'll cross that footbridge when I come to it.

Reprinted from Four Tulips Publishing's "New Beginner Contest," of which this essay was the award winner. You can read this and the other contestants' entries at www.FourTulips.com

Mark Mathew Braunstein is a paraplegic who practices Nordic walking with crutches. He lacks the imagination gene, so writes only nonfiction, including six books and countless articles, including eight times previously to *Spirit of Change*. You can read many of his articles at www.MarkBraunstein.Org

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