

From There To Here

*Forty-five personal
journeys from
trauma to meaning.*



From **There**

Stories of Adjustment To Spinal Cord Injury

To **Here**



*Edited by
Gary Karp and
Stanley D. Klein, Ph.D.*

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Take the Pain



Mark Mathew Braunstein

L2-3

Age at SCI: 39

Date of SCI: August 6, 1990

Quaker Hill, Connecticut

On my thirty-ninth birthday, sober but celebratory, I dived off a footbridge into a river and emerged awaiting a wheelchair. I shattered my T12 vertebra and injured that fragile bundle of nerves called the spinal cord. Diagnosis: paralysis. Not everywhere, just below the waist. Prognosis: paralysis. Not forever, just the rest of my life.

Though I seldom leave things unfinished or undone, it was my good fortune that my spinal cord injury was incomplete, that my cord was not severed, and that during rehab, my functional level progressed to L2 and L3 (and later to L4 and L5). During rehab, I began to take a stand against SCI. And one year post-injury, I began to ambulate with crutches and leg braces. I still wheel at home and at my workplace, and do nearly everything I used to do, just lower. But I continue to crutch everywhere else in between, and go nearly everywhere I used to go, just slower.

My mind dwells inside my body, but my life dwells more inside my mind. My body matters, but my mind matters more.

Although my body is broken, my mind is not broken, and so my life is not broken.

When tragedy strikes, the stricken can choose to live with it, or to die from it, or to cry over it, or to laugh at it. I choose to laugh. Sure, early on, I suffered some sorrow and much pain. And sure, on some days, I contemplated suicide over my loss of a whole body that abruptly had been halved. But on other days, I did the math and added up that half a body is more than none. Indecisive, I made a secret pact with myself, the one person I could trust to keep a secret. I placed myself on a two-year waitlist. If then not fully recovered, I would reconsider suicide. Two years later, I only half recovered my lower body, yet fully resumed my life. I half-forgot my past, and fully forgot my pact.

Now, more than thirteen years post-injury, my every step contributes to a journey from there to here, from can't to can, from injury to rehab, from disability to recovery. My journey includes some hyperbolic detours and humiliating downturns, especially because paraplegia is not just about "walk." It impacts four other four-letter words, namely "feel" plus the three sacral functions. Initially, all four took a hike.

Pardon my bedpan humor, but I still "pray for piss." I don't feel my penis, yet I do feel my fingers and do feel my tongue. So, I prefer to make love to a woman the way a woman makes love to a woman. "Come" never did come back, but ejaculation and orgasm are anti-climatic compared to being tireless in bed. Some call it tantric yoga. I call it paraplegia.

Now about "number two." Until my body hotwired its toilet training, accidents often reduced me to a whimpering fool. Other adults have accidents too, but they don't have to sit in them. During my third year post-injury, I slowly got my shit

together — literally. I regained bowel function by sheer luck of the draw, but also by perseverance, having remained steadfast in my renunciation of suppositories, they being pharmaceutical drugs. Had I used and thereby become dependent upon them, my bowel function might have verged on the edge of recovery, but I never would have known it.

Prior to my injury, I had abstained from pharmaceutical drugs for seventeen years. After SCI, I avoid them still. Even the painkillers. Especially the painkillers. I abstained from them even during the calamitous first week while immobilized in a Stryker frame, that human rotisserie in which its occupant is flipped every two hours. Each flip inflicted excruciating pain, but I endured the pain.

But why endure the pain? Because most analgesics kill all sensations, both painful and pleasurable. Because drugs that inhibit feelings of sensation, inhibit feelings of emotion too. One way to hasten healing is to feel love — your own love of self, and others' love of you. Others who? Others tending to and taking care of you — doctors and nurses. And others in attendance who care about you — family and friends.

I always heal ahead of schedule due in part to my abstinence from pharmaceutical painkillers. I can't cite scientific studies to bolster my assertion, because such studies don't exist. We do know that all drugs pose risks, and all drugs produce unintended side effects. So if you can take the pain, don't take the painkiller.

Such a credo, "Take the Pain," has fostered my acceptance of paraplegia generally. After thirteen years of it, I indeed should accept my paraplegia. But I was just as okay with it after thirteen days. Friends describe my attitude as stoic acceptance or Buddhist detachment. I describe it as just me.

Thousands every year sustain SCIs. Someone seemed destined to occupy my bed in the rehab ward. It might as well have been me because I could take the pain. Next door to me, every night, and all night, a middle-aged woman wailed and wailed. “Why me?” was the gist of her wailing. While crossing the street, as though struck by lightning, she was nailed by a hit-and-run motorist. My attitude of “Why not me?” differed from hers because I had no one to blame but myself. No one pushed me off that footbridge. I dove of my own free will. Perhaps I’ve been in free fall ever since. The ride has been a wild and wide detour to my life that, if given the choice, I certainly would not have taken.

But given no choice, I endure paraplegia’s detours and downturns. Children’s stares and, what’s worse, adults’ averted glances. Flat tires and, worse, dog doo on fully inflated tires. Inaccessible public restrooms and, worse, no clean place to cath once inside the stall. The social stigma of being looked down upon for being crippled and, worse, the social isolation from being overlooked when you’re seated at four feet tall. Not to mention the various health risks and complications, which I won’t mention. Yet no matter how severe the humiliation nor deep the sorrow nor crippling the pain, I rest assured that after a good night’s sleep; I’ll get over it the next morning. “Take two aspirations and call me in the morning.”

(Some object to the word “cripple.” If I’m not “crippled,” who the heck is? An “invalid” person and an “invalid” thing are the same word assigned different pronunciations and ascribed with different definitions. A person described as invalid thus can be associated as being a deficient object. It’s politically correct to call an injured animal a cripple, so I side with the injured animal, in the same way I side with the scapegoat, the underdog, and the sitting duck.)

Occasionally I have achieved some lofty goals attainable only through paraplegia. Being very visibly crippled has some perks, and I've enlisted them to advance social causes.

Soon after my injury in 1990, I learned of an herbal remedy that both relaxes SCI spasms more effectively than tranquilizers and relieves SCI pains more safely than narcotics (not that I care about the pain). In 1996, in Europe, I procured a prescription for that herbal remedy from a Dutch physician. In January 1997, emboldened with my prescription and encouraged by recent referendums in California and Arizona, I wrote an editorial about my use of medicinal marijuana.

Connecticut's major newspaper, *The Hartford Courant*, displayed my public confession prominently and illustrated it very memorably. That single editorial garnered more reader response and more media attention than all my other books and articles combined. Since then, I've remained Connecticut's preeminent poster child for medicinal marijuana, which makes me half poster child and keeps me half flower child.

I accept full responsibility for my SCI. Society owes me nothing. I am able to stand on my own two feet. During all these years, I've lived independently, alone in a house in the woods. Those woods are part of a nature preserve where hunting is banned, but along whose shores duck hunting in the river was legal.

Before my injury, I participated in the outdoor sport of scaring away ducks from flying within range of shotguns. After rehab, I returned home in time to hear the shotgun blasts heralding duck hunting season. Seated in my wheelchair, I swore that next year I'd get out there to compete against the duck hunters again. And I did, but with crutches and with one surprise. I

was arrested for hunter harassment. The newspaper stories about my heinous crime could have been headlined, “Lone Cripple with Crutches Arrested for Harassing Four Hunters with Guns,” but their titles were more diplomatic. The newspaper reports generated public support. Long dismayed about duck hunting on the shoreline of the nature preserve, advocates wrote letters, made phone calls, signed petitions, and attended hearings. Our state legislator was enlisted, and state wildlife staffers made a field trip to the crime scene. By next season, the waterways along the nature preserve in which I live were banned to duck hunting.

A born-again pedestrian, I’ve resumed all my other previous vocations and avocations, including nature photography. The world I now photograph, however, has narrowed in focus. I photograph mostly my backyard. And sometimes, my front yard. One recurring theme is “Seasons in Sequence” in which I return to the same site during different times of day and on different days. Every year, I scout out and set up a new shoot spot. This enables me to view nature more clearly, or at least more comfortably. I clear a path so I can navigate in my wheelchair, or so I won’t stumble with my crutches. I set up shop, and then just sit. I wait for birds to sing, or clouds to lift, or wind to settle, or thoughts to crystallize. Some evenings, I shoot the breeze. Many mornings, I shoot the sunrise.

“Deer Family Photos” is a recent theme. In 2001, I plotted to lure deer with food, and then to photograph them. Yet, if I simply appeared at my window from one hundred and fifty feet away, they’d spook and head for the hills. Slowly, slowly, I earned their trust. In early May, one very pregnant and very hungry doe lingered long enough for me to shoot the first of her family photos. By August, I could shoot her and her fawns from a hundred feet away. By October, fifty feet away. By spring 2002, I could shoot the yearlings from fifteen feet

away. The peaceful evenings I share seated among the deer are more spiritually enriching than any other experience of my life. The endeavor needed much planning and patience. It also required approximately fifty bushels of cracked corn and exactly one wheelchair. The wheelchair is pivotal. Deer recognize me from a mile away. Seated, I'm their height, and so less intimidating. Indeed, I could not have entered into this communion afoot. I could attain it only in a wheelchair.

A wheelchair, however, hampers me elsewhere, for instance from access to the site of my injury. Yet I've managed to bridge that gap three times. People ask me, why would I wish to return to a place of such bad memories? I instruct them that precisely by my being able to return, I transform my memory of that place into a good one. I crutched and, where necessary, crawled the steep one mile trail down to (and back up from!) that fateful footbridge. Because it was there. Because I wasn't. And because I may be crippled, but I ain't dead.

What's next? What's more challenging than being paraplegic for the rest of one's life? I suppose being paraplegic for the rest of one's life, and living to be a hundred. When I reach one hundred and one, then what? Dunno. I'll dive off that bridge when I come to it.

Mark Mathew Braunstein lives in Quaker Hill, Connecticut. He is an art librarian at Connecticut College, a widely published nature photographer, and author of two books and many articles about art, literature, philosophy, vegetarianism, and wildlife.