

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

Recall a time your body surprised you.

I Say You Can Walk

Do the math. Two legs, four times broken. This sounds like a story problem. “If Rick has two legs and breaks them four times, how many . . .” The answer to this math problem is not two. It’s three.

Right leg, three breaks.

Skis, car wreck, stupidity.

In the case of the car wreck, the second and third break, it was both legs above the knee. The clinical term I acquired was “bilateral femur fractures.” Those breaks meant either body cast or wheelchair. I went—or rather my parents along with the attending physician went—with the latter.

It was fall 1971. I experienced life on wheels. A wheelchair gave me mobility, as long as I was in the house. There were a few tricky details. Does the chair fit through doorways? How do I get in and out of the chair? How do I get in and out of bed? Bed, chair. Chair, bed. For four months those were my options.

The body’s work continued. Intake, output, perspiration. My family and I learned workarounds. After a month I felt better. I felt like myself again. I ate with gusto and gained weight. My head injury cleared. I put stuff in it. At the time there was no cable tv, no VCR, no Internet. There were, however, books to read. I read like mad. On television or in the movies, you follow the character who goes to prison and discovers self improvement, living a monastic existence in his cell. That was me. My brother was away at college. Daytime my parents went to work. There were long hours of solitary confinement. My body worked. I was doing head-work.

What I wasn’t prepared for was standing up. After four months I was ready emotionally, but there was a surprising and radical shift in perception. “I say you can walk,” the doctor said. (I’ll always remember those words.) He said I would need crutches for a few weeks. I stood up and immediately sat back down. I stood up again and felt my surroundings take a little spin. Everything around me was so low. At my new altitude, I was dizzy.

There’s a reason you take months and years to grow 6-12 inches. If it happened over night, you would fall down trying to walk.

It took just a few days for the dizziness to pass.

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Then came stupidity. No one likes to talk about how stupid they are.