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Trauma is My Life --- My Trauma Narrative

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Cover Page Footnote

My thanks to Dr. Rex Veeder, professor and inspiration, and to the unique and invaluable Survive and Thrive organization he leads.

Jon DeMent
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My Trauma Narrative

I first set foot in a Trauma room in 1973, as a Respiratory Therapy student, at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis. We stood with our backs to the wall, in shock, as the staff saved the life of a young man who had blown his own face off with a shotgun because his girlfriend cheated on him. Somehow, he got all face and almost no brain, and he survived. His life would certainly never be the same, but neither would mine; for while one of my classmates fainted and another threw up, I was entranced, addicted. For the next twenty-five years, nearly my entire professional life was spent in the busiest and best trauma rooms in the world. I have seen people die in pretty much every way a person can die, one and two and five a night, every night, somewhere around ten thousand of them through the course of my career. Yes, ten thousand or so persons that I watched take their last living breath, usually squeezed into their lungs by my hands on an ambu bag. We saved a lot too, of course. I've seen what can only be called miracles of survival and surgical and medical brilliance, but for all the satisfaction and pride and sometimes joy you take in that, it's the deaths you remember.

Unfortunately, I have also seen the Trauma Room from the other end of the tubes and wires. On September 8, 1982, I crashed my motorcycle at ridiculously high speed, shattering my body and drawing a line across the timeline of my life, dividing it into two separate and unequal halves. Both my legs were shattered, my liver was lacerated as was the portal artery supplying it with blood, both lungs were collapsed, my pancreas was totally dislodged, my spleen was ruptured, and my esophagus was jerked off the top of my stomach. Odd as it sounds to say it, I was extremely lucky. I was in exceptional physical condition, preparing for my third marathon of the year, with about five percent body fat. Somehow my aorta was intact, which is almost impossible given the torque that severed my esophagus. I stayed relatively calm. And, of course, I had remarkable care. I survived. I woke to the disorienting sight of my parents stunned faces, arrived from Chicago while I was in the operating room After fourteen hours of

surgery, ten days on a ventilator, two weeks in Intensive Care, two months in the hospital, I survived, and began what would be two years of rehab and physical therapy.

Two things disappointed me during my hospitalization. First, despite the fact that both legs were shattered, my right leg was twisted into a pretzel with my ankle in my lap and the ankle bone split down the middle like a hockey puck cut in half, and for a week I faced a daily decision as to whether my foot or leg would be amputated, no one ever told me I'd probably never walk again. In the movies, every guy on reality shows, any time someone has a bad accident, they get told, you'll never walk again, and hey have a triumphant recovery based on proving the doctors wrong, and they always seem to be wrong. So I never had that satisfaction. Second, despite having no blood pressure for about twelve minutes, no heartbeat at all for about two minutes, and no palpable pulse for the better part of an hour, I never saw any light at the end the tunnel, I never saw God, any God, or any devil for that matter. By many standards, I was dead for awhile, but I had no visions or revelations of any kind.

About six months after the crash — and it wasn't an accident, it was reckless by intent and while it certainly wasn't intentional it was absolutely inevitable given my behavior — I strapped on my leg braces and resumed work in the same Trauma Room I had so nearly died in.

Trauma, though, doesn't end at the hospital doors, or even rehab or physical therapy. Every moment of every day since that crash I have been in some degree of pain. Even today, thirty-one years later, there is an instant when I first awaken when I don't remember, and I shift my legs, and the pain reminds me of that moment of stupidity so long ago. It is impossible to forget or even really put it in the past, because with every step, every slight shift of position, I am forced to remember. For some, the reminders aren't so physical or so incessant, but they are there nonetheless. Facing mortality so intimately, truly realizing that you could be gone in a heartbeat, is not a platitude or an intellectual exercise, it is integral to a trauma survivor's soul. In that limited way, it's like having been to war.

Change is difficult for we humans, and it was overwhelming for me. Before, I ran forty miles a week, rode motorcycles and drank and partied too much and worked five adrenaline and caffeine fueled shifts a week. I had no family, work and play was my life, hard work, hard play. Overnight, I could barely walk much less run, and work was haunted for me, at least at Hennepin County; it was all business now. I didn't know about depression then, hadn't learned how to fight it. I began a pattern that would last for ten years. Move to another trauma center, rent a cabin in the woods, spend every moment I wasn't working either alone in my cabin or riding my bike at ridiculous reckless speeds on the track or the street, and after eight or nine months, in utter agony physically and utter despair emotionally I'd use my accrued vacation and sick time and just walk away. Vegetate and heal for another month or so, send out a resume, and repeat. Year after year, twisted legs wired and screwed together and mind struggling for survival as hard as my body ever did; inevitably it ended with two semi-voluntary weeks in the loony bin at Scripps Clinic, in utter defeat overlooking a golf course and one of the most beautiful shorelines on earth. Depression, the most common sequelae to extreme trauma.

I learned. Medication helped some, a shrink helped, but mostly, I learned about the beast that held me, and I found the key, at least for me, to my surviving, and yes, eventually, thriving, at least by my definition of that state: I began to write. My first story was an unconscious allegory of a boy left alone by his father's death in the Alaskan wilderness. Eventually I wrote fiction and non-fiction of my wreck, and of trauma rooms. I spoke to those who worked in those rooms, shared my view from the wrong end of the tubes, and I wrote. I faced my demons, shared them, counseled my colleagues, and I wrote. I worked part time, I found peace, without medications, without regrets or recriminations, and I wrote. I rejoined the life of my son and eventually my grandchildren, I found myself a dog, I learned to settle for racing my car instead of motorcycles, and I wrote. I have no money, few possessions, I often have to use a cane to walk, I have a huge hernia through my ventral incision that I can't afford to have fixed, one of the wires in my left knee pokes through the skin sometimes, my ankle aches every minute of every day, and I couldn't be happier. In my own way, by my own

standards, I am indeed thriving. I write. I will always write. And I will, always, I know, thrive, whatever traumas life may throw at me.