

Doin' Time; a Metaphor

by Gordon W. Brown

For most readers of this paper, doing time refers to a prison sentence. For families of the incarcerated, it is the long journey of patience waiting for their loved one to come home. And for both it can be a vast uncertainty, a wish for freedom and reunion that may never come. But for me doing time is something different.

I understand confinement. In my context confinement is illustrated beginning in 1988 when we were rear-ended by a limousine on the West Side Highway. My motorcycle was turned sideways and pushed into the stopped car in front. My girlfriend, now my wife, was thrown onto the trunk of that car, with her shoe left behind on the bike because her foot and ankle were damaged beyond repair. She has her own brand of struggle as a result of needing an amputation; she has learned a new lifestyle as a BK (below the knee) amputee. Her surgery was almost immediate and her recovery began. Within a few weeks she was learning to walk again on a prosthetic limb.

My sentence? A comminuted (crush) fracture of the left tibia and fibula and fractures of bones in my left ankle plus significant muscle death due to burns and interrupted circulation and pain that defies description. My confinement began with my first stay in the hospital, 19 days.

Those days began in limbo, in and out of consciousness, then into surgery for 9 hours to try to save my leg. The initial surgeries were successful. The brilliant Dr. Chiu took muscle from my back and skin from my thigh to replace murdered muscle and skin and to cover the broken bones in my leg, then he restored the circulation. The Orthopedic Residents removed the bone fragments, screwed my ankle together, and stabilized my leg with an external fixator: long

screws placed into the bones and fixated by a structure outside of my leg. This was my confinement, not to mention being bedridden, drugged with high doses of Demerol or Percocet, and more often than not, neglected by the nursing staff at Bellevue. The device was my “ankle bracelet”; though not electronically monitored it severely restricted my freedom.

Thanksgiving came and having met my future in-laws in the ER 3 ½ weeks earlier, I was invited to their home. Again I was in bed most of the time, but near my girl and assisted by her ex-nurse mother. Their acceptance of me in spite of the crash is another story, one of surprising grace. 1 week after Thanksgiving and a doctor's visit, I was back in the hospital with an infection.

Now I am housed in a better joint, NYU Hospital. 21 days this time, almost 17 hours in surgery, and another graft. The wound left by having had my ankle pinned against the hot motor was treated by removing all the burned and dying tissue and replacing it with muscle and skin taken from my groin. But the results were dubious. Dr. Chiu prescribed sterile leeches to try to get the blood flowing into the graft, my girl and I named them Snap, Crackle, and Pop. These three friends did their best to expedite my release, but to no avail. The graft was almost completely lost. The Resident decided I should hobble to the patient's shower room and hose down the wound 3 times a day, then pack it in with Silvadene, a miracle salve Dr. Chiu helped invent for promoting healing of difficult wounds. When I started this process, the graft was so compromised that I could see through a silver dollar sized hole on the inside of my ankle right to the bone. Fortunately, this all worked to close the wound and stabilize it. At last, all the soft tissues could heal.

Then there were months of confinement in hospital or bed. Friends and family visited my “visiting room”, many cared, but I really had the company of my TV and my pot. Admittedly, things were improving. I would crutch out to the corner for a coffee each day and smoke one in the Broadway median if it was safe. Then back to my “cell” for a Percocet, a joint, and the unconscious jailing of sleep.

At last the day came to fix the bones. Another 13 days in the hospital. My “cell mate” was a 65-year-old man who was having his 125th surgery after being accidentally forced off a cliff in a motorcycle race in BajaCalifornia. He was living in New Jersey now. He was going home in a few days, on his motorcycle. I will never ride again. That exhilaration and freedom has been taken from me, an understandable yet lamentable consequence. His replacement was an old guy, also from New Jersey, who was virtually blind. I don’t remember why he was there. I do remember him telling me that he had made his living being a bagman for the mob and a bookie. Why he confessed this to me I’ll never know. He died within a few months of our meeting. There is always someone or some story that puts our own whining into perspective. So Dr. Lamont starts cutting and scraping on me. He mines some good living bone from my hip and pastes the separated leg bones together, joining the broken ends with a bone graft. He removes the external frame and replaces it with plates and screws in the bones, under the old muscles and the new tissues Dr. Chiu had placed there.

After weeks, nothing. No healing. More worry. No parole.

Back to NYU. 14 days. This time Dr. Lamont scrapes out all the bone graft, excavates a new supply, shortens the exposed ends of the tibia and fibula, and tries again. My movements are so limited still. For the last 7 weeks I’ve worn a “removable” cast, having to remove it to bathe

my fragile leg or air it out carefully, not put any weight on it, none, cradle it like a newborn when not in the cast. Follow the rules or the confinement looms longer! 7 weeks more of the same and at last I can start to walk a little, with lots of support.

For over 9 months, back and forth, in and out of bed, going to the toilet or taking a bath are acrobatics I have finally mastered, then a Percocet or a doobie or both, an occasional cab or sedan ride, greasy pizza or burgers or grilled cheese and bacon on rye with fries and extra ketchup are delivered, cranky bitches my insurance company hires to clean for me 3 mornings a week, and not a lot of fun. I have gotten so comfortable and skilled with the crutches, all of them, but I don't want them.

In a few weeks I am paroled to a cane. A lot of physical therapy, my "reentry program", but most of it is bullshit. I am the one that has to learn to walk again! And I do, but it ain't the same.

2 ½ years and back to surgery, so much ankle pain. Another 10 days at NYU. Dr. Lamont takes the old hardware out of my ankle, he reconstructs it, straightens it, he fuses it with grafts made of ankle bone and more screws. My leg has already been shortened, my ankle is now rigid, and arthritis begins to creep through my foot. But, I will eventually be able walk easier and get shoes properly built to help compensate for my losses. After another year I return to NYU for the last time and he removes screws and plates from the last fix.

It all started over 20 years ago. I did my "hard time", the really scary part, and am now accepting of my limitations. Sometimes I am able to overcome them. Because the limousine driver was driving illegally and the crash was his fault and his company was big and we had a really good lawyer, I could retire. This is not the way that I recommend to make a living. But,

because of this outcome I am able to make my own plans, do my own thing, recover completely from all the surgeries, the traumas, the haze and the weed, and settle into a life of family, art, and service.

I still have some sort of discomfort or pain or restriction every day from the incident of 10/28/88. That won't change.

Maybe I should say I am Doin' Life.