

Broken

The man was brought into the hospital in grave condition. His leg was severely damaged from the car accident, and he lost and continued losing blood rapidly. Several surgeons surrounded him; nurses were cutting his clothes from his body, others were applying tourniquets, others were giving him blood transfusions, while others were checking his vital signs or administering pain medicine. The scene was one of organized chaos. A casual viewer would undoubtedly see it as chaotic, while a person in this profession would recognize how professional and experienced each emergency room personnel was. Each person knew precisely what their job was, yet they also learned to work with the others in the room.

The surgeons had learned that the man had no immediate family or friends for them to talk to, to ask what they wanted the surgeons to do about saving or amputating his severely damaged leg. So, they talked, occasionally asking a nurse for more information on a bone break or an artery torn and bleeding, and then the team voted. The unanimous vote was to try to save the man's leg rather than amputation. The choice between saving or amputation was difficult because either way, the leg would never work correctly again, and the man could be severely disabled for the rest of his life.

Eleven hours later, the man was transferred from the operating room to the Intensive Care Unit, and once there, more highly trained doctors and nurses attended to caring for him. Slowly the man recovered, slowly his life came into focus again, and then there were further operations. Pins and rods were removed, skin grafts were performed, and he was a willing participant each time. His surgeons were not the emergency room surgeons any longer, his rehabilitation was done with different doctors and nurses, he was moved from the ICU to long-term care, and his

life, which he was told would never return to what had been normal, was slowly returning to a life that was happy and functional for him. Of course, the man needed to come to terms with his disability, and that was not as easy for him as it sounded. He also needed to enter a drug treatment center as he had become addicted to the narcotics he was taking to fight the tremendous pain he would have otherwise felt.

By now, eighteen months had passed since his accident. These were the most pain-filled months of his life, not only from the accident and the many operations he required but also from the daily physical pain he endured as he began to rehabilitate his leg. Many times, he wished they had amputated his leg. He never got to talk to the emergency room doctors about their decision to save his leg rather than amputate it. He had discussed their decision with his other doctors, and the consensus was that saving anyone's leg was better than amputation. The reasons were many and varied, but the number one reason was that he still had his leg. He was informed there were ghost pains that many amputees feel, like pains in a foot that had been amputated or a foot that itched constantly, yet there was no foot to scratch because it was amputated. Of course, ghost pains or ghost feelings were difficult for the man to imagine or understand. While Psychological and Mental Health Services helped him immensely, he alone needed to finalize and accept this new condition he found himself in. He learned that he needed to come to terms with his disability and that no one else could do it for him. His physical and mental health therapists, whom he met with weekly, helped him with their wisdom and experience, and slowly he recovered in both body and mind.

As the months passed, he could finally leave his cane at home and walk unassisted. Gradually he could bend his stiff leg a tiny bit at the knee. Then, slowly, he would bend his knee further and

further while also strengthening the tendons and ligaments, which had been reattached after the accident.

After another year of grueling rehabilitation, he again walked long distances and could hike in the beautiful mountains where he lived. His knees, bones and muscles, tendons and ligaments, had all grown stronger and more robust, and he could finally let his entire body weight down onto his repaired leg. After that, he wore a backpack, and after filling it more and more to sometimes weighing as much as sixty pounds, he could and would hike for hours until finally, he could go for hikes spanning several days. He was never without pain, but it was always bearable pain. Many times, the pain from his leg was so bad he could not talk, yet the joy he felt from hiking the mountains made everything worth it. Most of the worst pain was caused by the steepest ascents and the steep, rocky descents. Sometimes his foot would land on a round rock, and his foot would roll forward, causing excruciating pain. Many times he fell, and his day of hiking ended with nasty scrapes and bruises, yet still, he remained happy and optimistic.

He learned that having his leg instead of a prosthetic was good. Having a leg that had been repaired more times than he had counted was still better than not having a leg at all. He was indeed thankful and humbled by all that had happened to him.

As he sat in his therapist's office, listening to her recount his progress since his last visit, the man apologized for bringing up some personal issues during their previous visit.

His therapist replied, "Never apologize for being real, " which surprised the man, and he smiled at how authentic that reply sounded.

The two of them chit-chatted about how his week had been, and then his therapist brought up that his little dog, who had passed away some fifteen months earlier, was waiting for him to

decide what he wanted to do next. The two of them had had this conversation several times since he had begun seeing this therapist. His dog, his best buddy for thirteen years, had indeed died, and his therapist thought he should consider getting a new dog. So, after taking a deep breath, the man replied, “My dog, my spirit buddy, sits on my chest most days. Most of the time to be honest. We’ve talked about how long he would hang around. I asked him how long was too long, and he told me that ten minutes in his spirit world equals ten years of my life. We figured I’d probably live twenty more years, and he’s good with hanging out for twenty minutes. But I’ll never love again as I loved him, and I don’t need to because I haven’t stopped loving him. That makes it difficult for some humans I’ve met to hear that I won’t and don’t want to love that deeply again, but that’s how I feel.”

The man’s therapist replied, “I think one of the things that make dogs so lovable is their sensitivity to our cadence of life. So remarkably well-tuned to when they need to be patient and accepting and when to be a motivator to get on with life.”

The man chuckled and said, “And you and I have talked before about dogs being able to read human emotions. So yes, I agree. I still haven’t cried for my dog because I know he wouldn’t like it at all.”

A little more forcefully, his therapist replied, “Frankly, I think he’s a bit peeved with you because he doesn’t want you to be alone!”

The man paused and then replied, “I’m not alone. I think that to feel alone, a person’s heart cannot be broken. My heart is broken, so I don’t ever really feel alone. And to be honest, I haven’t felt alone in a long time. The last time I felt alone was sitting in a room full of people. And I don’t want to try anymore. My life is good right now.”

Without waiting for a second to pass, his therapist replied, “Your dog isn’t buying it for a minute! We both know that you are an amazing companion to the fur beings of planet Earth....”

But the man shook his head no and replied, “Nope. It’s not going to happen.”

Again she replied immediately, “Don’t expect to have a definitive moment...your dog has a great deal of influence....”

The man said, “Yes, he is my hero. And I was a good friend to him too. No one-way streets where we lived.”

A silence descended, each thinking their thoughts until finally, his therapist said the session was over. The two people rose, hugged briefly as was their norm, and he departed.

As he walked away, he took a long deep breath and exhaled loudly. Once again, and probably for the millionth time, he thought about his life and his failures in his hundreds of relationships with people.

Time gave him a perspective he hadn’t had before. So now, as he remembered and looked back, he no longer saw things from the inside out. Nor did he relive his memories as a victim any longer. Now his memories about his broken heart were the same as his memories about his broken leg and the same as those of his dog who had died. His memories about everything he had lost were no longer deeply personal memories that had previously caused him pain or regret. His memories had taken on the now rather enjoyable state of neutrality.

His leg was broken and would never be fixed, and that was a fact.

His heart was also broken and would never be fixed, and that was a fact.

He had decided he would not love another person or animal again, and that was a fact.

He didn't want to love that deeply again because the pain at the end was too great, and that was a fact.

He had learned to love a little, just enough, so that the animals and people he loved were happy with him and his love, and yes, that was a fact.

No one but him ever knew that his loving them, just a little, was an act. No one besides the medical people knew the extent of the damage to his leg because he never told anyone.

No one but him knew the extent of the damage to his heart because he never told anyone. Whom would he tell? Who would even care? Oh, he had told his dog, now dead and departed, all about everything, and when his buddy died, he took all the man's secrets with him. The man didn't want to go through a loss like that again. He wanted that part of his life to be finished, and the only way he knew for him to control that part of his life was not to love again.

He laughed out loud and thought to himself, *What has love brought me besides pain and loneliness? I see people who love each other and live and love daily, some even for decades. And yet, for me, none of that ever worked. My heart was broken early and often until it was too broken to fix. I kept trying because I didn't know my heart was broken beyond repair for the longest time.*

My leg is broken beyond repair for me to do many things too. It's damaged too badly for me to be an athlete. My leg is too broken to run on it and too damaged to bend it enough to kneel on it.

So, what's so different about my heart? questioned the man. *Both my leg and heart are too broken to repair. But hundreds of existential emotions are attributed to the relationships of our hearts, and we buy into those unsupported facts that emotions are somehow good for us.*

As the man drove home, he successfully stopped that train of thought. But when he got home, he decided to sit in his comfy chair, with his legs resting on the ottoman, and once again, he let his mind wander, perhaps hoping to unravel some of the knots and tangles thinking about loving deeply again brought up for him. As he sat, he thought these thoughts: *I've noticed many times after a relationship ends that I wonder what I saw in the person that was so attractive I felt like joining them. Because after I left and looked back, nothing attracted me anymore. It was as if I was providing the attraction with my emotions, enthusiasm, and happiness, so I could get what I wanted, or at least I hoped to get what I thought I wanted. Once my enthusiasm, happiness, and emotions were withdrawn, nothing was attractive to me any longer. I would look back and wonder what the attraction was. Was I the only person stoking the relationship with what it took to keep it going? Was I the only one supplying the connection with what it took to keep it exciting and the relationship performing at a high level? After each relationship failed, I would again look for a new one. Once again, my optimism would soar as I overlaid my emotions, enthusiasm, and happiness onto what I hoped the relationship would be. I would once again try my best to succeed, and I would believe I was giving my best effort. But, much to my regret, I could never control everything, nor could I keep my fictional story from faltering once again. My life also needed stoking, and while I was busy stoking the lives of people around me, my fire was dying. So, I would pull away, only for a short while, to tend to my fire, but when I returned often, there was nothing I was attracted to any longer. I didn't realize for a long time that while I was tending to myself, while I was stoking my fire, I had let the other fires go unattended, and since no one else was stoking those fires, they also went out. Attraction, enthusiasm, and happiness are all excellent. Yet, when I overlay my attraction, enthusiasm, and happiness onto a relationship to make it what I want rather than what it is, it is only a matter of time before the*

imaginary relationship I created becomes rejected by reality. My expectation for what I would receive was often far greater than what the person could give in return. But I could pour my attraction, enthusiasm, and happiness into the relationship and provide what I thought everyone needed; until I needed time for myself. Sometimes the other person ended the relationship, but each time a relationship ended, and I looked back, I wondered what the big attraction had been.

Now that I understand more about myself, I have learned that the big attraction for me was me. I was the one stoking the fires. I stoked the relationships with whatever it took to keep them going. The big draw for me was my attraction, enthusiasm, and happiness, which I poured into the relationships. But no one can give you what they do not have. My attraction, enthusiasm, and happiness are for me to use for myself, but when I superimpose my hopes and wishes onto others, I make them not who they are but who I wish they were.

The man sighed a deep sigh. He petted the spirit of his dog, lying on his chest as usual, and smiled. With everything he was thinking and feeling, there were two absolute truths and two absolute loves in his life- one was the little dog who had died fifteen months before. He laughed because he realized that he already loved again, or perhaps he had overlooked or forgotten this love and that this love was excellent and safe.

Recently he noticed that it was only when he brought others into his life that he became unhappy. Other people brought out anxiety about many things, and he finally became too uncomfortable around them.

But the two loves he now knew were for himself and his spirit dog, and those loves were unbroken. There was no anxiety in either of those two loves. He didn't need to do anything with those two relationships except participate.

Participating in his relationship with himself created the love that powered the relationship.

Participating in the life of his now spirit dog was the fuel that powered that love.

He was not broken within himself, and he now realized that his love, enthusiasm, and happiness had never been broken in himself. He finally realized that he was broken only with the outside world, and it was only when he tried again, or even again, that he realized how broken things were. He knew he couldn't run or kneel on his bad leg, and finally, he realized he couldn't love again outside of himself and his spirit dog.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © November 24th, 2022