

Imprisoned

By Bruce H. Greenfield, PT, MA (Bioethics), PhD

At 9 meters per second squared, accelerate
Some trivial factoid from physics I, no matter
Mass, size shape or disposition, loud, crude
Shy and quiet, all the same.

I stepped to the edge of the rock
Plunged downward, breaking water
Until neck askew along the silty bottom
And the entire world lost vision, and sense.

At summer camp, years ago,
Five feet off the dock
Little Mary's watch fell in the lake.
I was tall and skinny,

My counselors
Gripped my legs, and flipped me
Over so my hands could scoop through
The silty mud for the lost treasure.

I felt like an explorer in search
Of valuables,
A feeling that passed when
My lungs pled for air.

No fail safe signal sounded to pull me out.
I tried to wiggle my feet, tighten
My calves when I felt the tug of hands.

Breaking through the surface, gulping
for air, sensation of movement, in the background,
something, a thump, a thumping
swishing, like air through the mouth
of a sea shell,
and somewhere in the distance
whirring coming closer, lights flashing,
door swinging open, ghosts
clad in white, blue and pink.

Then an acrid smell;
I dreamed I was in a small cement room
that smelled of death.
Holding my breath, while
something compressed my head.

This was not the dirty smell of death
but a clean metallic smell, like
the kitchen after mother washed
it with Lysol or ammonia.

The winter softening has come
 I forgot bees are frisky this time of year.
 I must have stepped in their hole.
 Their stingers pricking in staccato beats,
 I reach to brush them off
 but nothing moves.

I recall this time of year; we went
 to the nursery to search for plants -
 rows of yellows, blues, violets, pinks.
 We always were confused choosing
 perennials or annuals; I carried them
 in my arms to the car, and
 placed them in the trunk.

My eyes opened slowly, to the sad
 effect of metal contraptions; Of halo, hospital bed,
 air pumps, needles and networks of wires.
 Of impulses; those that get us in trouble
 and those, that have lost their way. Later,

when the full impact of imprisonment is
 re-defined from inside out, you reach
 out to me, but I close my eyes, because I can,
 And, not ready for touch, I can only stop
 the attempt through darkness.

About the Author



Bruce Greenfield, PT, MA (Bioethics), PhD is an Associate Professor in the Division of Physical Therapy and the School of Medicine and Senior Fellow in the Center for Ethics at Emory University. Dr. Greenfield is a well-known physical therapy educator and qualitative researcher. He serves on the APTA Ethics and Judicial Committee, and on the editorial boards of the Journal of Physical Therapy Education, the Journal of Orthopedic and Sports Physical Therapy and the Journal of Humanities in Rehabilitation. He wrote this poem, Imprisoned, as an experience of what it may be like to a heretofore healthy individual during and immediately after a spinal cord injury. The poem mixes memory with present reality as the narrator links immediate sensory experiences of hearing, sight, touch and smell to past experiences. In some ways, the poem reflects how memory is used to construct present meaning and understanding. The aim of the poem was to imagine the horror and the slow realization that one with a life changing injury awakens to. It is what Susan Sontag refers to in moving from the Kingdom of the Well, to the Kingdom of the Sick, with illness as the night side of life.



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