

The Incipience of My Paralysis  
*from my autobiographical manuscript written in 1998*

*“I know you all, and will awhile uphold  
The unyoked humour of your idleness.  
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,  
That when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wondered at  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.  
If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work;  
But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.  
So, when this loose behaviour I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promisèd,  
By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes;  
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I’ll so offend to make offence a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.”*

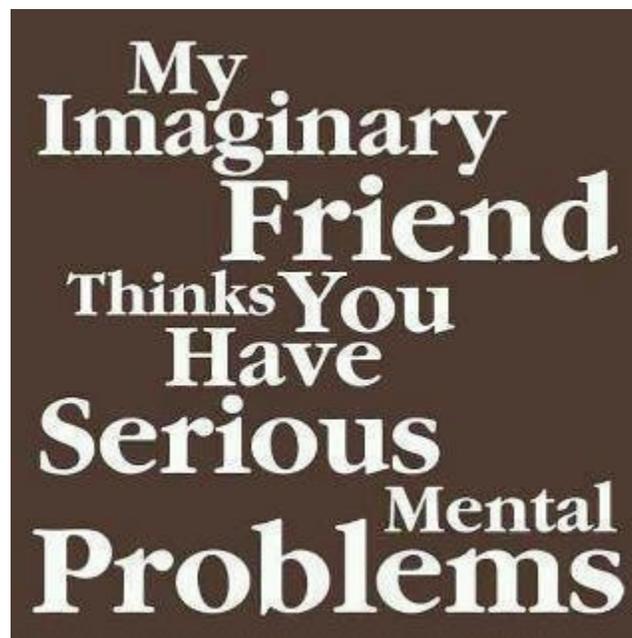
*King Henry IV, Part I (I.ii.173-195)*

I kept a fairly optimistic attitude after an automobile accident left me a quadriplegic. For the most part, my four months of rehab at the then named [Shepherd Spinal Center](#) was a positive experience, and the seeming lack of concern for my crippledom concerned some of the hospital's staff because they didn't think I was accepting the gravity of my situation with enough visible anguish in my physiognomy, so I was sent to a psychological counselor. Me! Sent to a brain-manipulator! I was only twenty-two! Barely an adult, with the accompanying egocentric infallibility. All I remember from my sessions with this man is that I was purposefully allusive, which probably didn't help matters any; although, I'm now pretty sure that the counselor saw more of me than I wanted him to see at the time. In retrospect, I've come to appreciate counselors more than I did as a young man, but I was young and virile, thought I owned the world, was strong both physically and mentally, and I thought that psychologists and their ilk were for losers and as such were superfluous pariah, the lowest forms of humanity, not even human but pseudo-human, an existence in the food-chain just above the ocean floor yet

just below cetacean feces.

Even now, I feel very strongly that I can overcome any mental frustration without encouragement from anyone else; hell, it's been my life's preparation to overcome some really shitty events, and I initially overcame my merciless, paralysis-induced frustration relatively quickly. I am, I think, a fairly earnest searcher for Truth (whatever that may entail). I have much time to myself with which to follow my most interesting musings, and I keep a journal, which allows me an opportunity to explore my feelings as if they were fictional, detached, less delicate. Embarrassingly, my journal has recently guided me through some fairly volatile emotional turbulence (but that's fodder for another time; my journal is a continuing, non-commercial rhetorical exercise I may only share after I've left this terrestrial experiment called Life); and I write poetry and fiction, which affords me an opportunity to focus my mind very aptly on the way things should be but aren't.

Be that as it may, I have seen people who need counselors, people (a few I adore) who are like baby birds, too young to fly but threatened practically every day to be shoved, by unknowable forces, out of their respective terrestrial nests to their sublunary deaths. For these people, and many more, psychologists are angels.



The fact of the matter is that I recently went to a counselor myself for about a half year just because I wanted to see what it was like. Now, dig this: TSYS<sup>1</sup> pays for its employees to visit a number of counselors at the Pastoral Institute, a local minimal security psyche ward for people who've lost only a few of their mental associations but not enough to be irretrievable, people who are not violently psychotic zombies laughing hysterically at a damp sponge. It's a relatively stress-free place unlike the maze-like workstations occupied by ruminating computer programmers whose faces shine with candescent luminescence eerily emanating from hellish monitor screens, which is believed by many people to be a highly stressful occupation, so this free counseling probably saves TSYS mucho dinero.

You guessed it, I took six free visits to a counselor name Steven Sabom, and he was really cool, man... Snoopy's *Joe Cool* kinda cool. He stood about six-feet-six; he had gray, fairly long hair, and an equally frosted, well-groomed beard that framed his face. What struck me most about him was that he listened very intently, and he appeared wizened. The beauty of it all is that his oral rhetoric did not belie my slightly venerated image of him in my mind's eye. So I went a few more times after my free sessions, but I stopped because I didn't want to pay for my sitting around and chatting with Steve.

Obviously, during the incipience of my paralysis, my revelation about the communal validity of psychologists and their associates had yet reached fruition. I was, admittedly, embarrassingly, a bit more puerile in my thinking at the beginning of my life as a quadriplegic, back when I was ready to take the necessary steps to expedite my paralytic manifestation, speed up my recovery so as not to interfere with my plans to resume my life with as few changes as possible. I told everyone that I was going to walk out of the hospital, but I knew that I wasn't; I just didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me, and quite honestly, it really doesn't bother me that I can't walk; although, I'm not particularly felicific about the fact that I need help with my bowel movements or urine waste removal, but I deal with it. The only other worrisome theme I must endure is the phenomenon of shallow people, and there are quite a few in the world. Most of them are just plain ignorant, and, depending on my mood, I can become quite vitriolic when I retaliate against an ingenue who casually suggests that she would rather die than experience life as a cripple. Generally, however, I laugh at this kind of ignorance, but what really makes my visceral organs swell is the unintentionally cruel person, especially if she is cruel in the name of Zah (or whatever celestial appellation is used to denote a single, omniscient, omnipotent deity of any religion).

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<sup>1</sup> Where I once worked a lifetime ago. Keep in mind that this was written in 1998.

There are some people who honestly think that if I have faith in some unknowable omniscient puissance, I will walk again, and, quite honestly, it surprises me these shallow people even care. Why should they? Salvation, if it exists, is a strictly personal affair. Not even one's spouse of sixty years can positively affect her partner's post-terrestrial destination. The only reason I can think of for these unsolicited demands on my personal salvation is that these people think that by mentioning God's name aloud unto a decrying public, they will be rewarded with untold treasures. (Isn't that avarice?)

Maybe it's to justify decadent lifestyles, maybe to obtain sexual favors with a fellow believer who might overhear feigned good intentions, or maybe it *is* genuine concern for my salvation, but I lose patience quickly when a woefully misguided servant of Insipidity accosts me as I wheel through his ecclesiastical parking lot, ready to tell me how much joy I'll have if I unquestioningly accept his ridiculous premise (whatever it is) but then he's ready to bolt the scene without waiting to hear my rebut, which I would'st presently share with him, so he stands before me, spasm-tense and ready to leave with the celerity of a cheetah on performance-enhancing drugs, the key of his car slowly, almost imperceptibly, entering the locks of his luxurious automobile with tinted windows that outwardly reflect the ragged poverty he indifferently passes as he cruises the streets while classical music from eight speakers drowns the cries of injustice, and he so desperately wishes his ten-ton decadently adorned, gasoline-glutted suburban vehicle would immediately, surreptitiously take him home, silently passing the immigrant-manicured garden that bucolically hums on the other side of a ten-foot high brick wall that protects his grandiose illusions from stark, naked-hungry reality.

It may sound crazy, but here's a message to the morally myopic people who incessantly bombard me with insincere, haughty yet banal rhetoric of this ilk: *I can't feel my genitals! or any other part of my body from the chest down. What the hell do I care about walking if I can't feel the earth beneath my feet? My life is pretty damned good, better than many of the ambulatory corpses I've seen struggling through the city with jerky gait, so leave my part of life alone and start worrying about the skeletal inhabitants that reside in your own closets; otherwise, I will be forced to hop out of my wheelchair and open up an industrial-strength, 55-gallon drum of whup-ass and put you out of your politically correct misery.*

Actually, I've come to a part in my life where I wouldn't trade the experience of my paralysis for anything in the world. I've grown so much from it, and, although it's shameful for me to admit, I now realize how shallow I was before I was allowed an opportunity to see what I had been. I've also learned to see others who remain as clueless as I had been: women who say *I love you* with the sincerity of a gilded butterfly all the while adorning the seeds of another flower; men who proclaim loudly their spiritual

superiority but who are unable to help me tuck my shirt into my pants for fear that the simple, humane act would somehow condone homosexuality. I've also been shown homosexuals who have treated me with the love of Mother Theresa; upper- and middle-class drug addicts who have acquiesced to the undeniable power of disinterest; Catholic priests who are more concerned with financial quotas than with human salvation; and a middle-aged divorcee with a libido greater than the sums of her previous collective intimacies combined with a newly found freedom to experiment ad nauseam with unprecedented lascivious musings.

Of course, I have also found friends and family who will remain beside me no matter what comes to pass, true friendship that I dare say will survive beyond the terrestrial prison of our corporeal bodies. All the cerebral cognition that I've gained has been the gift for losing practically all of my physical capabilities, but it has been a learning process from day one, and yet I continue, even now, to listen to my body and my environment in order to learn what they're trying to tell me. It has been my duty to try to understand the world around me, and the incipience of my paralysis witnessed my transformation into a more kindred spirit. In the beginning, however, I was much less tolerant. My sincere apologies to the decent counselors on the planet, current, past, and those to come. My ignorance decried your honorable profession, but, again, I was dealing with a fairly new albeit calloused paralysis, trying my best to discover what I was going to do with the rest of my life.



Kudzu: Georgia's State Invasive Vine

It wasn't really difficult to figure out that as a potential career opportunity, manual labor was out, jobs for which I was best suited before I decided to do my imitation of Superman by flying head-first through the car window (a joke that has since obtained greater significance with the paralysis and subsequent death of Christopher Reeve). I had been an English major at Georgia Southwestern College when the accident occurred, so I decided then, while staring at the ceiling at Shepherd Spinal Center, that I would go back to school, get my degree in English, and become a teacher. Even then I realized that with a teacher's salary I was going to need financial assistance with my attendant care and other sundry health issues, but at least I would be employed and it was, at that time, the only feasible option I could think of. If I could dunk the basketball or hit a baseball or catch a football or swing a tennis racket or golf club, or if I were a member of Congress, I would never have had to worry about how I was to financially support my life of paralysis, but I was young at the time and quite naive, too ignorant to realize that what I wanted for myself, self-sufficiency, was ridiculous.

The really crazy thing about my life's journey is that I've still not learned my limitations; I still think that I possess many positive qualities that overcome my woefully limited physical capabilities, which hover just above absolute zero, although with none of the magical connotations involved with temperatures at which substances produce no thermal energy. I don't suppose Emily Dickinson would mind if I borrowed her *zero to the bone* as a metaphor for my lack of prowess. Of course, the most disconcerting aspect of paralysis is the confusing expectations of sexuality.



I've had two lovers as a quadriplegic, so I know intimacy is possible and still very beautiful, and although I really miss the warm, floral fragrant nearness of a woman, I am currently very pleased with my bachelorhood, so pleased, in fact, that I am reluctant to give it up for just anybody. She must be what is called a *soul mate*, which is something that I've never experienced and is, therefore, an intangible magical dream that is hard for me to believe in. This, however, has been a lesson that has been years in the discovery. During the incipience of my paralysis, however, I was like a wide-eyed newly born baby, trying to retain any energy I could absorb, regardless of its potential danger.

Before I left Shepherd Spinal Center, I was assigned a rehabilitation counselor by the state of Georgia's Division of Human Resources. Her job, stated simply, was to get me employed as quickly as possible. Belinda Hudson was a fresh graduate from Fort Valley

State with a Southern drawl that would melt the polar ice caps in the middle of winter, and she was politely importunate to do whatever it took to get me back to living a life that was to be as close to normal as possible. As there is no set definition to normalcy, especially where life is concerned, and more especially where life with paralysis is concerned, she tried just about anything.

The Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation offered an independent living program for those who were *physically challenged*—an appellation I've come to abhor, preferring the term *crippled* simply because it makes so many people feel uneasy.

*I believe that the current obsession with Political Correctness has been initiated by a sect of our society who are disinterested in reality. In order not to acknowledge potentially painful situations, someone with a weak mind and loud mouth has offered the insipid solution of verbally disguising that which can make one feel uncomfortable. The really sad part is that practically everybody has taken the idea and run with it, uncovering a different angle to communal absurdity. I can't walk or use my hands! No matter what flowery phrase one uses to connote my physical status, the denotations are the same: I'm crippled! But I digress...*

The Independent Living program was a six weeks adventure in the mundane. Other than offering me knowledge of different resources that were available to me, the program showed me other crippled people in various stages of social development. I remember one social retard who was so egoistic and puerile that he wasn't going to marry unless he married a virgin. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that other than the probable implausibility; however, there might exist in the world a very attractive, intelligent virgin who is saving herself for a young man who has an IQ of a damp sponge and the social skills of a troglodyte; what do I know? I'm just a poor, little, innocent cripple boy. However, this dude proclaimed with the conviction of a monarch that he would test his would-be bride to make sure she was a virgin but would refuse to be tested himself for AIDS even if his future wife demanded it.

I learned fairly quickly that arguing with some adults is like arguing with a three-year-old about the veracity of Santa Claus. Anyway, the Independent Loving Program came and went, but I did learn of a nine-month program called The Georgia Computer Programming Project, and it was on the Georgia Tech campus in Atlanta. This program taught people in various degrees of crippledom how to program DEC mainframe computers in COBOL, and since my rehab counselor was itching to begin my journey into life as a quadriplegic, I started the program the following summer, just a little over a year after I had broken my neck.

I lived eleven months in Decatur, southeast of Atlanta (and home of Emory University),

and I inhabited living quarters at the Columbia Apartments. We used to joke that it was the drug capital of the world; one could visit any apartment in the complex and leave with the drug she desired or at least get information on where to get it somewhere else on the complex. A sad story involving this unpleasant subject involves an acquaintance of mine who became so fond of the drugs she was enjoying that she let a decent job slip dreamily away, a job for which I was turned down, and she became paranoid of me because she thought I was spying on her; I slowly transmogrified into a soulless enemy in her diluted eyes. But let's not call her addicted; that wouldn't be politically correct now would it? Instead, let's just say she was *somnolently possessed*.

During the nine-month learning period of the Computer Programming Project itself, I was sent on many interviews but was denied employment every time. One company (the same company for which my *somnolently possessed* friend was shortly employed and to which she turned up her white-powdered nose) told my professor that they were impressed with my mental acuity but were concerned because I couldn't physically answer the phone (this is way before bluetooth). I'm not trying to seem pessimistic about the interviewer's sincerity, but that truly does sound like a crock of malodorous fecal waste! For those of you not familiar with my vulgar vernacular, that means he lied, aggressively and without remorse. Anyway, he wasn't the only one to blackball my attempts at employment.

After the nine months of classes, I was granted an internship at a software company that wrote packages to help teachers facilitate grade management for their respective students. As I'm not a business man, I can't possibly tell you why this company failed, but it did; however, during the two-month internship, I was introduced to the life of computer programming, and this introduction wasn't all that unpleasant. After my internship abruptly ended with the company's bankruptcy, I went back home to Byron, Georgia, where my parents lived, and I resumed my college courses at Mercer; however, the Computer Programming Project did show me that I could be an effective computer programmer, so I chose Computer Science as my major.



Mercer Bears

I did fairly well with my computer courses, but I smoked my English courses, and to this day I would like to thank Dr. Stephen Bluestone for showing me the magic of Shakespeare. Toward the end of my collegiate career, I thought that maybe I'd become more financially independent if I were to become a lawyer. To that end, I closed out my college life, getting my degree in English with a Computer Science minor. I graduated in 1991, ten years after I got out of high school. I applied to law school, but before I was accepted into the Walter F. George School of Law at Mercer University (the acceptance letter still hangs proudly from my bulletin board), I was hired by Total System Services, Inc. in Columbus, Georgia, the Fountain City and my home town. I had found full-time employment, and I liked the adventure. Plus, if I wanted to, I could always go back to school...

Peace Through Music