



## Broken bones and the Father Wound

by Rick Belden

***Note from the author:** This post was originally published in late November 2009. It was my first major written work after breaking my right shoulder and wrist, and thereby losing the use of my writing arm, in September of that year.*

Eight weeks ago, I broke my right shoulder and wrist in a bad fall. Shortly before my accident, I'd completed the manuscript for my second book, [\*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within\*](#). It includes a poem called "[use everything](#)" in which I wrote:

*Bad luck is the language of the unconscious.*

In the days and weeks since I was injured, I've had plenty of opportunities to ponder and explore the meaning of those words, and they have led me back, in a most unexpected way, to the connection established with my father during childhood around physical pain, and to the significance of that connection for me as an adult.

For the first few weeks after my accident, I found myself struggling with powerful feelings of shock, disappointment, and despair. The fall, the injuries, the devastating effect on my life, everything about the situation in which I found myself seemed so cruel, so random, so meaningless. But the words I'd written only months before, my own words, kept coming back to me: *Bad luck is the language of the unconscious*. And those words challenged me to find some meaning, something useful, in what I was experiencing.

Prior to breaking my wrist and shoulder, I'd only broken a bone at one other time in my life. I was very young, just learning to walk, and one of my lower legs was broken somehow while I was outside in the yard with my dad one evening. My memory is that he was walking away from me, leaving me behind, that he was angry with me (just for being there with him, as he so often was), and that I fell trying to catch up with him, breaking my leg. Given my father's anger problems, I've sometimes wondered if there was more to the story of my injury than that, but I'll never know.

What I know for sure is that I was with my father when I broke my leg, and that regardless of how I was injured, the experience formed a point of deep connection with him around physical pain. I wrote about this connection, and its origins in the broken leg story (as best I understood it at the time), in the following poem from my first book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#):

**charley horse**

*leg hurting tonight reminds me of how my dad + I used to  
run across each other in the dark  
when I was little + my leg would hurt.*

*he had a lot of leg cramps at night  
he called that a goddam charley horse  
I used to wake up with intense pain in my leg  
the leg I broke  
trying to catch up with him  
when I was first learning to walk.*

*sometimes we'd both wake up at the same time  
on the same night  
I liked this because I got to spend some quiet time  
alone with him.*

*I never wanted to go back to bed on those nights  
we'd sit in the living room or the kitchen  
in the dark or with a dim light on  
he seemed more open in those moments  
I didn't feel like he hated me then  
maybe it was because he was sleepy  
or in pain.*

*those were special occasions for me  
nothing to accomplish or be judged on  
we each had our own pain  
similar but not the same  
he was empathetic  
I felt connected to him.*

*in those brief moments  
I always felt that I was just like him  
just like I always wanted to be.*

My father and the men of his generation were masters at controlling and denying the pain in their bodies. In many ways, this was a necessity. He worked in a factory, in brutal, exhausting, dangerous physical conditions. He had a family to support, and he didn't make that much money. He couldn't afford the luxury of surrendering to aches and pains, or even injuries. He had to work, and he had to sacrifice his body to do it.

A few years before he retired, I asked my father to take me inside the factory where he'd worked and spent most of his adult years. It was a complex of connected windowless buildings I'd only seen previously from the outside at the employee's entrance, where every eight hours, the men walked in big and walked out small. In the following excerpt from another poem from *Scapegoat's Cross* called "the father I knew", I described what it was like on the inside:

*I was in the belly of that steel and concrete monster  
that eater of men  
of lives and bodies and families and marriages and dreams  
where he spent most of his life  
it felt like the heaviest place on earth  
no windows no sun no plants no sky no trees no animals  
just steel and concrete and oil and chemicals and fire and smoke  
and a big machine that swallowed his left arm  
all the way up to the shoulder ...*

The "big machine that swallowed his left arm" is another major element in my father mythology and the mythology of my childhood. When I was still small, my dad's left arm was sucked into the huge steel rollers of a machine at work while he was cleaning it. The doctor told him the damage was so severe that he'd never have full use of his arm again, which was especially devastating given that he was left-handed. My dad's response, as the story goes, was "Like hell I won't." He then went home, built some sort of device with pulleys and weights on the front porch, used it to rehab his arm on his own, and recovered the use of that arm completely.

I finally saw that big machine for myself almost thirty years later when my father showed me the dents that were still there in the steel rollers where the bones in his arm were squeezed through all that unforgiving metal. His injuries must have been severe, but somehow he recovered, and I don't doubt that it was largely through his own determination and efforts, given that there probably wasn't a lot of help in terms of skilled physical therapy available to him at the time.

Now I find myself connected to my father once again through injury, pain, and the struggle to heal. Bad luck, the language of the unconscious, has spoken, giving me yet another opportunity to explore the depths and the subtleties of the father wound, and to revisit that mysterious connection through physical pain that was formed so strongly with him when I was a child.

My father was left-handed and lost the use of his left arm for a time due to injury. I'm right-handed and now I've lost the use of my right arm for a time due to injury. He must have struggled to recover, just as I have, but he also had the additional pressure of a family to support and he didn't have the benefit of the excellent medical care and physical therapy I've had the good fortune to receive.

Frankly, I don't know how he did it. And I don't know how I would have done it had I been in his shoes at the time he did it.

My father turns 75 today. He was not a good father to me in many ways. He was distant, demeaning, neglectful, abusive, threatening, angry, and violent. He did a tremendous amount of damage to me emotionally and psychologically during my childhood, and his mistreatment continued into my adulthood. But as the years have passed and I've gained in life experience, I've found it easier to see him, not just as the father I knew and not just as the father I needed and didn't have, but as a more complete human being who had his own struggles, strengths, and burdens, as we all do.

I haven't seen my father in ten years. Haven't spoken to him in five. I believe this is for the best. He hasn't been able to hurt me physically for a long time now, but he was never going to stop hurting me emotionally and psychologically, no matter what I did or how hard I tried. The moment when I finally realized that fact, in a flood of tears and pain and anger and grief, was the moment when I finally knew for sure, once and for all, that it was hopeless for me to keep trying to make our relationship work somehow.

Still, his life continues to influence mine, even across the distance of time and space, in ways both obvious and mysterious, as I continue to work toward resolution and completion of my relationship with him, that distant point on the inner horizon of my psyche toward which I am always aiming and always moving, but may never reach.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of

masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [\*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within\*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).