

Poem and commentary: “falling through”

by Rick Belden

The poem below is from part two (“eating stones”) of my second book [*Scapegoat’s Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within*](#). I believe this is one of my better examples of writing from the body: tuning in, following the physical sensations, and letting the images and words come through. This is one of the purest forms of expression I know.

falling through

*these last few days
I feel myself
skimming the surface
of some monster sadness inside.*

*sadness about
 rejections and betrayals of trust
sadness about
 starving through the days
 without passion or sweetness
sadness about
 forgetting what it's like
 to love and be loved.*

*I keep trying to avoid it
but I can feel it in my body
if I pay attention.*

*it feels like
a big bulge growing in my chest
a throbbing pocket of grief
 that's swelling and getting close
 to breaking through
like a boil under the skin
 before it breaks the surface.*

*when I touch it I see
a boy standing all alone in winter
on the surface of a frozen lake
while below the ice
a dark mass rises from the depths
 not menacing
 not malevolent
but very primitive
with the consciousness of
one of those strange sea creatures that lives
 in the coldest blackest deepest water*

*massive blind and silent
it moves up toward the surface
and the ice is getting thin.*

*nothing frightens me more
than feeling my own grief
 falling through the ice
 into the deep unknown
I always feel like
 it's gonna kill me
I always feel like
 it's gonna swallow me whole.*

The subject of the poem above is grief, or more to the point, my fear of feeling and expressing my grief. Actually, *fear* is much too mild a word for what I feel when I get close to my grief, sadness, and pain. A far more accurate word would be *terror*.

The source of this terror is not a mystery. I clearly remember the words I heard countless times as a child: *Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about*. This was not an idle threat, as I had the great misfortune to discover many times when I was unable to “control myself” in time to avoid the consequences of my own tears. Crying only brought more pain. Tears only meant more tears. Any open expression of grief, sadness, and pain was a potential threat to my very existence, and over time I learned to hold those feelings tight, deep inside myself, to survive.

This conditioning against explicit expressions of grief and sadness didn't end with home and family. It continued in school, with teachers and coaches, on the playground, and with friends. Like every other boy, I knew that crying was the worst sin I could commit in public. On those few occasions when I was unable to avoid doing it, the shame, the isolation, and the horror I felt were beyond words.

By the time I was into my teens, I pretty much had the crying thing well under control. It just didn't happen anymore, not around others and not when I was alone either. But I still had one more defining experience ahead of me.

When I was almost 23, I was going through a very long and difficult breakup with my first girlfriend. We'd moved across the country together when I was 19, from New York to Texas, and lived together for several years, but now we were each living in our own places for the first time, and I was finding it very difficult.

One evening she came over to visit, and as we were talking, I began to cry. I'd never cried in front of her before, not even when she'd cheated on me, but this time I simply couldn't help myself. I missed her, I was struggling with school and finances, and I was just so damn lonely. Her response was immediate: “If you don't stop crying, I'm

leaving.” The last thing I wanted in that moment was to be left all alone, so I buttoned right up. And I stayed buttoned up for years afterward.

Those were the lessons I learned about feeling and expressing grief and sadness. I learned that crying brings pain, punishment, violence, shame, rejection, isolation, and abandonment. I learned that crying only makes things worse. I learned to fear my own grief. I learned that tears can be like death.

Many years of hard personal work have shown me that allowing myself to feel and express my sadness and grief is a healthy and necessary part of being fully human. It is liberating. It’s completely natural. It’s cleansing. It brings peace and perspective. It is a source of great strength, an answer and an antidote to anger, and a door to forgiveness.

I’ve cried, wept, sobbed, moaned, and howled through tears many, many times, and it hasn’t killed me yet. To the contrary, I always feel much better, much freer, and much more present with myself afterward. And yet that deep conditioning I described still holds some sway over me. I’m still afraid to cry.

Sometimes that fear stops me and sometimes it doesn’t. As expressed in the poem above, the key to accessing my grief and sadness, to moving it up and out, is always right here with me in my body. The challenge is to feel the energy below the surface and let it rise even as I am feeling my fear. Maybe someday my tears can come without having to struggle through all that fear. That is my hope.

To watch my video readings of "falling through" and other poems, visit my YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/rickbeldenpoet>.

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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](#).