

The Day It All Changed

by Jeff Bell / www.MyHealthOptimizer.com

The morning of August 7, 1989, did not seem particularly different from the previous 14,311 days of my life.

Being in financial stress, we did not own a car. That day I rode my motorcycle, our only means of transportation, to meet a new consulting client.

As I was approaching city limits, I noticed a car in the opposing lane, slowing to make a left turn. His turn signal was on and he had nearly come to a stop. I had the right of way, and I was sure that we had made eye contact.

Just as I entered the intersection, the car accelerated right into my path. The driver of the car had not seen me, after all. There was no time or room for me to do anything to avoid the collision. I looked up just before impact and knew I was going to die. The impact was so great that it drove my helmeted head halfway through his windshield before flinging my body over the roof of his car. My flight lasted for an additional seventy-five feet and ended in a field of dirt. Just before that rough landing, I lost consciousness. I remember nothing about the next little while.

I regained consciousness for a few seconds before a special contraption like two huge, hinged spatulas scooped up my body and loaded it into the ambulance for the dash to the nearest emergency room. I was so badly injured that the paramedics could not safely load me onto a conventional stretcher or a gurney.

In the ambulance, I remember one of the two paramedics ministering to me, cradling my right hand – one of the very few parts of my body that was still intact. As my body quieted, I felt very cold. That was unusual for me; I had been one of those people who almost never felt cold – a Bermuda shorts in the snow kind of guy.

Soon the cold melted away. I felt less and less sensation at all as a complete numbness and paralysis gradually spread throughout my body. My vision dimmed as if someone were turning down the lights. Soon I was surrounded by complete darkness. I couldn't see or feel anything, but I could still hear the paramedics talking and some other sounds around me.

The last thing I remembered was the paramedic saying to me, "You are pretty badly banged up. We will be at the hospital soon. If you want to hang on I think you can make it, but if you need to go, that's OK."

I faded into nothingness. It was serene and still. I remember floating along a few feet above the ambulance. I could see right down through its roof and was fascinated as I watched the paramedics working on my body. The siren wailed, the ambulance rushed, but I was at peace. Years previously, I had been an Emergency Medical Technician, so

what the ambulance crew did made perfect sense to me. They were doing everything they could. But I felt completely detached from the outcome.

I don't remember the next little while. A chunk of time seems to be missing. Then I was again floating above my body, this time in the emergency room. I looked down at my body and took a quick inventory of the damage. I could see that my right leg was ruined. The tibia was shattered into so many pieces that it looked like a handful of popsicle sticks twisted, snapped and dropped in a random pile. Splinters of bone stuck out in all directions. Shredded flesh surrounded the bone fragments. I knew that my bicycling days were over.

My pelvis was crushed in at least three places. My left hand was broken in numerous places. No more guitar playing for me. My liver was torn nearly in half. Both kidneys were badly damaged, torn from the connective tissue that had held them in place. I could go on with the list, but you get the idea – my body was a wreck. It did not look capable of sustaining life.

Calmly, I continued watching the trauma team at work as they tried again and again to re-start my heart. As the number of attempts passed five, I wondered why they didn't stop after three, which I knew was standard procedure. I felt totally indifferent about whether or not the trauma team succeeded in bringing my body back to life.

I decided to let go. My body's life or death seemed quite unimportant. As soon as I let go, I found myself floating on my back, gently gliding down a tunnel of pure white light. I was very peaceful and calm, but also a bit wistful. I remember thinking, "Well, here I am, dying. I am only 39 years old and would love to live some more. But if that is not to be, it's OK. There are still many things I would like to do, people to meet, places to see, music to hear and more. But if this is all, that's alright. I am grateful for the life I've had." I did not feel any fear. This seemed infinitely better than trying to go back into my badly damaged body.

For a while, I continued down the tunnel of light. No one came to meet me. I don't know if someone would have had I gone further. But something was holding me back. My wife, Sue, and I had been together for only two years. I felt an overpowering need to re-enter my body long enough to tell her that I loved her; long enough to tell her how grateful I was for the time we had together. I wanted to thank her and assure her that she had my blessing to find a new partner when she felt ready. My body certainly did not look like anywhere I wanted to live. I was sure that if I did go back, it would be only for long enough to say a proper goodbye. Then I could die, knowing that I had completed this important final act.

Once I made the decision, I popped back into my body, emerging into a nightmare of pain and confusion. Nothing could have prepared me for the disorientation, pain and fear of being in my ruined body. I could not find any part that did not howl with agony.

Pain medication was not an option as far as the doctors were concerned. I was too close to death, and they were afraid anything that slowed my metabolism would prove fatal.

I later found out that my heart had stopped a total of eight times in the first few minutes in the ER, and that they were not even sure why they kept trying to bring me back. The head of the trauma team told me that for some reason he felt like it was the right thing to do.

My life hung by a thread. I did talk with Sue, so I was free to go, but I began to feel that I was still here for a reason, and that whatever it took, I was supposed to struggle to live. And struggle I did. Over the next two months I almost died several more times, suffering two more cardiac arrests. It was a rough ride.

About a week after the accident, my best friend and bicycling partner, Bruce, came to visit me. Lying in the hospital bed, I was full of tubes, splints, monitors and bandages, barely able to move any part of my body. I was wracked by pain. It was still possible that I would die from my many injuries. Bruce said to me, "At some point you will look upon this experience as a great gift."

I was outraged and shocked by his comment, which seemed cruel. We didn't talk after that and he soon left. I remained upset over his apparent lack of compassion. It took nearly two years for me to realize just how wise Bruce was. He was right. I am profoundly grateful for the experience. At the time I did not want to hear it, but it was honest, spoken with courage, and just what I needed to hear to begin opening the door to the rest of my life.

The accident was devastating on many levels, including financial, physical and emotional. I have never recovered the physical power and grace I was blessed with from birth. I had worked hard for most of my life to develop my athletic skills, only to lose them all in the blink of an eye. The catastrophic injuries have probably shortened my life, but I would not undo the experience even if I could. The gifts and blessings have far outweighed the consequences.

After several months in the hospital and five major surgeries, I was able to return home and start rebuilding my life. At first I was not able to do much but lie in bed reading, thinking and trying to figure out what to do with my remaining time. Each day I tried to spend a little more time in my wheelchair, but for the most part I was confined to bed.

Although physical pain was the constant background to my new life, it was emotional pain that was most difficult to deal with. My years as an endurance athlete had prepared me very well to manage physical pain but I had no idea what to do about the emotional and spiritual pain. Doing even the simplest tasks, like just moving my body down the hall to the bathroom, overwhelmed me with waves of sorrow and loss for the highly capable body I had lost. Learning how to deal with this less tangible pain was one of the great contributions to my growth. It took me a long time to discover the profound blessings hidden deeply within the disaster.

One of the biggest gifts was learning to ask for help. I was terrified of depending on anyone else, and took pride in never needing help. For the first few months after the accident I needed help for everything. I could not even use the toilet without help.

Having young nurses gently move my battered body on and off the bedpan several times each day was simply mortifying. I wept from the pain and sobbed from the embarrassment and humiliation. By the time I left the hospital after several months, I had learned to gracefully ask for and receive whatever help I needed. This has continued to be a profound gift in my life.

The doctors told me to make good friends with my wheelchair; they insisted that I would never leave it. They felt that it was just a matter of time before I would have to have my right leg amputated. I was furious at them for making such predictions. Looking back on it, I can see that they really did me a great favor. Their pessimism helped to strengthen my resolve to keep my leg and to heal it into full functionality. I was not going to let anything stop me from walking again. I still had a number of other serious health problems as a result of the accident. The extra motivation helped me with them, as well.

It took me more than eight years, but with the help of many great healers, various health care practitioners, and the dedicated support of friends and family, I did it. I walk with only a slight limp. I am able to bicycle, hike and do many other things that were a distant, seemingly unattainable dream when I first set about regaining my health.

My friend Bruce was absolutely right. The gifts that have come to me from this difficult journey have greatly enriched my life. The gifts and blessings far outweigh the pain and costs. I couldn't even consider it when Bruce first made his infuriating comment, but I am actually grateful for the accident.

For years before the accident, I was a student of various branches of holistic health and alternative medicine, reading many books, attending classes and workshops. I practiced holistic health and alternative medicine as an avocation for myself as well as friends and family. My holistic studies were layered on top of my significant background in and acceptance of conventional medicine. Originally, I had planned to become a physician.

In the aftermath of my accident, the conventional doctors had done an amazing job of keeping me alive and helping me to heal up to a point. I am grateful for their expertise and the extraordinary efforts they put forth to help me to survive and to recover. Once I was stable and ensconced in my wheelchair I was profoundly thankful that they were honest enough to tell me they had nothing left to offer. I realized that if I was going to regain my health, it was up to me.

Now I had all the motivation I needed. Rather than a casual student of holistic health and alternative medicine, I became fanatical in my studies. Nothing was going to stand in my way. When I was not working to pay off my medical bills, I spent most of my time researching every possible way to regain my health. I taught myself to be a skilled researcher, able to find new methods and technologies. I studied everything I could find, old and new, from all parts of the world. I developed a laser-like discernment, distinguishing real solutions from those that were merely wishful thinking or outright scams. (Sadly, there seem to be at least as many of those in the holistic arena as there are in conventional medicine.)

Fortunately, the Internet was then emerging as a powerful research tool. Anyone with a genuine desire could access a world-wide array of healing and health strategies, technologies and modalities. One could read research papers, study results and dig to find out just what worked and what did not. We have the gift of a giant, world-wide, neural net to help us achieve a critical mass in consciousness in just about any area we choose.

I have continued to research holistic health and alternative medicine techniques, information and modalities. For the past year or so I have been moving steadily forward in the direction of practicing holistic health and alternative medicine on a full-time basis. I am grateful to have helped a number of people overcome difficult health challenges. I look forward to doing this blessed work for the rest of my life.

I have shared this part of my biography with only a small number of people. Nearly all of them have asked me the obvious question – do I know what happens when we die? I usually offer a slight adjustment to their question: My version of their question is: “What happens to us after our bodies die?” I make this distinction because my experience convinced me that we are not just our bodies. Rather, I have come to believe that our bodies are just one manifestation of who and what we are. I am not sure what happens after our bodies die because I did not complete the transition – I came back.

A wonderful part of the gift of this experience for me was being relieved of the crippling fear of death. I do still want to live on in this body for as long as I am able, provided the quality of life is still good. I'm reluctant for my body to die. I will not casually walk into death's arms. When I think of all the people and things that I will miss by dying, I feel sad and wistful. But the disabling fear left me the day I watched my body die, and it has never returned.

This experience, along with many less dramatic yet powerful experiences I've had, leaves me convinced that our consciousness persists after our bodies have died and that it most likely is “reborn” in some new form. Before the accident, I was in denial about the meaning of my other “spiritual” experiences. The same impact that nearly knocked me out of my body and into my next lifetime also blasted my denial into some other Universe. I have never been able to find it since, and frankly, I don't miss it.

There is no more I can say about this deep topic. I believe it is important for each one of us to do our own investigation, ask our own questions and come to our own conclusions. I can share my most significant beliefs, but I cannot tell anyone else what to believe. That is not my place.

My sense is that what happens is not the same for all of us. There may be many paths and many different experiences. Where we find ourselves at this crucial point in our lives may depend on how we have lived up to the point of transition. Perhaps our views of reality influence the experience and maybe even the choices we might have.

Quantum mechanics teaches us that observing phenomena alters the phenomena. It does not seem far-fetched that our views of reality may alter our experiences of this

dramatic and important event that we call death. Our views of reality play a role in determining how we experience the deaths of our bodies. I am not sure what happens next. But I feel sure that the death of our bodies is not the end of all that we experience or are meant to experience.

There is far more to reality than what we commonly accept and interact with on a daily basis. Phenomena exist which in our literal and “rational” minds, we might classify as magic. If we have a big enough picture to let us envision the larger context of reality, these “magical” events may seem quite natural.

Ever since I had the chance to watch my body die, I have felt that the separations between the physical, spiritual and even mystical worlds are artificial. Often there are practical reasons to act as though these separations were real. Yet, it seems crucial to understand that they are merely mental constructs to help us negotiate our daily lives, and not ultimate reality. My life is much richer for understanding this.

The accident and all that directly followed from it also served as a strong catalyst for personal growth in teaching me the art of forgiveness. It seems to be common knowledge that carrying anger and resentment suppresses the immune response, can interfere with physical healing, and is in general bad for one’s health. With the massive infections that I needed to overcome and the tremendous physical damage that needed to be healed, I could not survive with either my immune system or my natural healing ability limited by anger or resentment.

I am grateful for the people who came forward to coach me, teach me and to role model forgiveness. Previously, this had hardly been one of my stronger skills.

My first lesson was to forgive the driver of the car that hit me. This was surprisingly enough, much easier than I thought it would be. It simply did not take much for me to realize that he had made a mistake that I could just have easily have made. Dare I say, “There but for the grace of God go I...”.

I am still working on the art of forgiveness. It seems that each time I practice it successfully enough times to get to a deeper level, I see that there are yet more levels to master.

I still have much to learn about the art of forgiveness. But this amazing experience has given me a huge push forward. Having watched my body die, and having been blessed to come back with retention of the experience, I somehow find it much easier to let go of the many small resentments and angers that so easily build up in the course of day-to-day life. My expanded view of reality makes it so much easier for me forgive myself as well as others for whatever slights or shortcomings I perceive. I find it easier and more important to express the love, compassion and joy that is in my heart. This enables me to be a much better and more effective healer.

In general, I am much more open to “the possible” in most areas of my life. When my skepticism rears its head, I remind myself that today’s magic is tomorrow’s science.

Just because we cannot quantify something does not mean that it is not real. It may indicate that our methods for measurement are not sufficient to the task.

One other thing I have learned: No matter how hard you try, you cannot hide a stalk of broccoli in a glass of milk. (I got that piece of precious wisdom from my 6-year-old nephew and just thought I ought to share it with you.)

To your health, love and joy,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeff Bell".

I would love to hear any comments you wish to share. Please feel free to contact me at: jeff@myhealthoptimizer.com

To learn more about my work and more about self-empowerment for health, feel free to visit:

www.MyHealthOptimizer.com

Afterword: I am profoundly grateful to all the people who helped me survive this experience, to overcome its many challenges and to learn to thrive in the adversity it brought into my life.

Perhaps some of you reading this are among the blessed folks who gave so generously of the help and healing that I needed. I am not naming you here, as the list would be too long to include. Also, I would be afraid of accidentally omitting someone who played a crucial role. But please know that all of you are forever in my heart.

I am overwhelmed by the love and dedication shown to me throughout my journey back to life and health.

I thank you from the deepest parts of my heart and soul. I can never repay you for what you have done for me. So, I humbly accept your many gifts and do my best to pass them on to those in need. It is my honor to pay it forward.

Copyright © Jeff Bell and MyHealthOptimizer.com 2010 – All rights reserved.

This article may be copied and/or freely distributed, as long as the doctrine of "Fair Use" is maintained in the course of such distribution or re-distribution. It must not be altered without the written consent of the author, Jeff Bell. Compensation, monetary or otherwise must not be required as a condition of its distribution or its receipt.