

## **The Strength We Have** by Joel Metzger

### **----- The Thread of Life -----**

Imagine yourself in an unknown, unlit place. You are restless, but unable to move with control; alone, but unaware of what surrounds you. You have no desire to know where you are, your concern is of immediate senses. More than the pain you feel is the intense discomfort you suffer. You try to move to relieve the distress and need to move again. And again.

You are an infant, just born, but with a body full-grown. You are beginning life -- no past, no memories, no knowledge. Every sensation is all-encompassing: there is your body, and that's all; there is your arms, and that's all; there is your discomfort, and that is all. You do not know the day; you have no concept of time. You are not in blissful ignorance -- far from it, all awareness is of the physical. In the physical exists only physical pain. The mind which could know of any other thing is lifeless.

Anyone else would see you are in a hospital bed, bandaged and barely conscious. Tossing. Groaning. A nurse walks in the room. The nurse leaves. Time stretches on. For you, there are no thoughts and little awareness outside of total concern for body. You have no purpose, nor do you wish for purpose. There is only immediate distress.

Yet part of you is safe...

This is where I have been. I know only what others have told me: a late summer night, driving alone down my street, going home, my car passing over a bridge. I was going thirty-five, the other car ninety. I must have seen it coming, they have said, as I crossed over the bridge.

Perhaps I slammed on the brake, perhaps I had no time. The other car jumped the median, flew across the bridge, and collided with me head-on, tearing off my roof, and dragging it a block. The other driver was killed instantly, along with his passenger. I was pulled from my car -- broken jaw, lacerations, and severe head trauma.

An existence without conscious thought was the best my family was told to hope for, "The rest of his life in a nursing home ... irreversible brain damage ... never speak again ... no functional activity." My mother was told, "Pray for a miracle." One friend fainted on seeing me lying amidst the medical instruments, tubing, and support systems. The brain injury would most likely be fatal, coupled with the high fever and brain fluid infection. There was little hope. My wife was given the remains of my wedding ring -- bent metal, glass, and blood.

For two months I lay unconscious, while my wife lived in the waiting room. People brought her meals and comforted her. Friends gathered around my bed and sang songs to wake me. The small party was an unusual sight for the ICU.

So people tell me, but I recall nothing. Once my home was in another city, I know, and my career was different. There are even vague memories of that past lifetime: my wife and daughter, my job, our house and backyard pool.

Again, imagine: you are alone, far alone and solitary. There is sadness here, with no thought; pure emotion, with no concerns. Here is heartbreak without the story, a single frame from a

movie. Every second gauges your distance from every person and every care. Far from you is the mass which is your body. All has been taken, you are left with nothing, and you are impotent to act. You have no thoughts, and cannot know of the lack. The cry from a sad song is heard with no music or lyrics. You are left with only your life's skeleton. The flesh that had filled your moments is gone and you are in a vacuum, unable to think even one comforting thought. Each thing that has given you joy, and all you cared for, has gone, but the caring has not.

Imagine: you are sightless, falling from an airplane. You do not recognize the contents of the large pack on your back. It is heavy and massive; you are far too frightened to wonder.

You are a lone diver, deep in the sea. You are in the black, with no glimmer of light. The ocean's floor stretches without end, and water fills all space in all directions. Your depth underwater is not known. Life hangs on a tether stretching to the surface, the thin line carrying air.

You are lowered further into the unknown darkness, leaving the cares and the people who have accompanied you every minute of your life. You cannot cry. Your heart sinks as if weight pressed your chest. Slowly you are dropped to the ocean floor, and there you are deserted.

This is the bedrock, where each person will come, as the movement of life winds down. Here the action turns slower until its motion is imperceptible and all else is taken away. Once you were happy that people befriended you. Now you have no company. The people are over there -- far away. You stand alone as if abandoned. But it is not they who leave. It is you. You go where no one can follow. You are alone.

Yet a baseline remains that can never be taken, the common ground of all moments and events. A part of you is safe...

I slowly recovered. The miracle came. After two months my coma lightened and I drifted in and out of restless dreams. I was flown to another city for rehabilitation and there my earliest memories begin. They are not the recollections of a joyous blessing. I remember pain. In my memory, I was pushed and dragged. In reality, I was nursed and cared for.

I could not sit in my wheelchair. I had to be tied into it so I would not roll out onto the floor. I hated that -- unable to speak, accustomed only to bed, forced to sit. Nurses left me to go about their business. Frustrated and furious, I banged my feet against the floor. Let me out! Let me lie down. I beg you.

I could not drink. I had no swallow reflex, so doctor's orders: no liquids. A spelling board was brought to me, to point out letters. My first word: "THIRSTY." That spelling board was my only communication. Once I asked a visiting friend to pass the urinal. He interpreted the letters as, "You are in a hell?" I laughed so hard that my request was almost too late.

My condition improved. I learned to speak and would soon be walking and learning a new career. Finally I was to go home to live with my family. The seven months in rehabilitation had seemed forever.

Then came a second tragedy, as devastating as the car accident: two months later, my wife left me. To her I was a different person. I was awake by this time. Wide awake and conscious, and I remember it. For weeks I wept. I was a new person, alone and barely recovered. More than ever I needed help.

But the crying was not endless. Mine is the opportunity that everyone wishes for: "If only I could do it over again knowing what I know now!"

Now I can walk. This is new, a dance of triumph -- hard to learn, harder to relearn. I must consciously synchronize weight shift, gait size, foot placement, balance control, and arm swing. How many people recall the delight that is every baby's? I remember the day I took my first three unaided steps. Now, every step is a celebration.

The prognosis was wrong. Never speak? No functional activity? More than ever I talk and function. They said I'd live in a nursing home the rest of my life. Ha! One friend said, about the prognosis that I would be like a vegetable, "You're doing better than any broccoli I've seen." No one who sees me has any idea from where I have returned.

A favorite joke of mine: "You only live once." Truthful is the sentiment, ironic is the statement. I have lived twice. I began my second life after the two accidents: of my car and of my emotions. I have come to the edge of death, then to the brink of emotional ruin -- closer than almost anyone to experiencing reincarnation in the same lifetime.

In my life, suddenly, the rug was pulled from beneath me and life was stripped of thought and action. There remained only the necessary: myself alive. I was without a body I could command, a personality I could call my own, and a memory I could retain.

And all the while, a cord held me. I watched life rebuild someone, myself almost dead, into a real living person, my new self fully whole. I fell to the bottom, where I lay flat, and saw time stretch out in the distance, and said, "No one can go lower. From here one can only climb uphill." As I ascended, I knew this lifeline. Now I have returned.

Once again, imagine yourself: a newcomer to this life, isolated and vulnerable to surroundings. You are exposed, open to harm, yet part of you is safe...

Along with your fragile condition imagine the vital thread that will continue. You feel its unbroken cord sustaining you. You stand on a foundation of stone, the life in your body, but now without the physical and mental capabilities that were yours. Still you feel the power that will persist. As you fell, you recognized the massive pack on your back to be a parachute. It broke your fall, letting you down gently. In place of your identity, you now lie on ground common to all. A bed of rock supports you, warm and smooth. You are able to stand and walk.

Here you go, right to the edge of existence. That thread will follow you to the end, as always. The thread defines safety: that which survives intact. Now, for all your days, for all you do, for however long you exist, you will know. You are held by life and you are safe. You are safe.

## ----- The Strength We Have -----

*The Thread of Life* is my story of almost 40 years ago. Yes, that is a long time, and in that time my life has changed on many levels. I get busy for a while, then not. People come into my life, then go out. Beliefs are adopted, then dropped. Moods come, then go. My drama continues.

But a constant does not change. These times are tied together, by that same thread my article highlights. This is also the center of all my efforts, inspiration and direction. Every morning I put time aside to reach for it inside myself. Even though my focus is scattered and lazy, this brings a feeling that flavors my day with strength and clarity.

This is very personal stuff I am talking about here. But I do not want to keep it private. Instead, this talk deserves to be front and center. It's a voice that may sound strange because it is so rarely heard. It may seem naïve and uneducated, idealistic and impractical. However, it is actually the starting point for any optimism I have, and the core of any strength I hold. This all comes from a direction I began walking long before that story.

Every person is a whole, live, self-aware being. Therefore, every person can be aware of their own aliveness and follow it to a basic and essential level. And therefore, they can spend time with this source of energy, clarity, strength, and support. This is not limited by religion or beliefs, goals or lifestyle.

Inspired by this direction, Piece We Need is an online video series about the quality I know well: inner strength. "Inner Strength is the piece we need to face serious challenges." This is a time in history when serious challenges seem inevitable, on many levels. People everywhere need to learn and hold their inner strength. Starting with the many levels of my traumas, PWN highlights the inner strength we all have.

PWN is friendly and casual, for every age from young adult to elder. It is based on a selection of 12 animated videos I made. These make up a series of "Pieces", each with an intro statement and a few messages.

I am not creating PieceWeNeed with a hazy wish. Clear or bright for others, helpful or inspiring? I do not know. That's not my first priority. I seek to be a conduit, listening as the message comes in and hearing again as it goes out.

--- Joel