

Travelling Hopefully

Foreword

This is an extraordinary account of a very personal journey of loss and re-adjustment. As the title suggests, *Travelling Hopefully*, is both a statement about a journey and an expression of self determination. The ambiguity implicit in the title alerts the reader not expect to find in its pages some well defined place of arrival, but rather a description of work in progress. The book is not about 'a road less travelled' as such, but more about the road travelled by lots of people. One has to spend but a few minutes at the neighbourhood shopping mall to observe that a surprising number around us live lives carrying the results of personal injuries of one sort or another.

The accidents we suffer are bad enough - occasionally made worse by the lengthy and convoluted processes to recovery, but some individuals choose to add to the pain by writing about the experiences. The process of writing about one's journey entails delving into the past, re-living one's nightmares and digging into memories better forgotten. However, those who have done so also have discovered that telling the story to a friend or putting it in writing is itself part of the process of healing. More than this, psychologists reassure us that a person has not fully recovered until they have found the words, narrative structure, and emotional courage to tell others what they have been through. Narrative is a signpost on the road to recovery.

Indeed, a literary genre has been established of some famous and many not so famous people putting to print their recovery stories. Anthony Moore, an Australian doctor who was victim of a driver who ran a red light at an intersection, describes his personal journey of recovery

following the near-fatal car accident.¹ In *A Leg To Stand On*, Oliver Sacks describes being gorged by a bull on a desolate mountain in Norway that severely damaged leg, and recounts his medical journey and coming to terms with his injuries.² The popular fiction writer Stephen King recalls the traffic accident that nearly killed him in June 1999 and left him in critical condition with injuries to his lung, broken ribs, a broken leg and a severely fractured hip.³ At the request of university colleagues I too wrote about my car accident and my time as a hospital patient and on traction.⁴

A characteristic of recovery stories is that authors draw on their own experiences to highlight a particular aspect of the journey from injury to recovery. Moore presents an account with the insights of a doctor so as to demystify the journey. In his typical style of philosophising personal experiences for which he has become renowned with *Awakenings*,⁵ Sacks capitalises on his professional skills as psychiatrist to present the journey as one of self-discovery. Stephen King takes readers through the awful sequence of events, from the moment he was struck by a van near his home in Maine, through his emergency medical treatment and long rehabilitation, to the moment he sat down at a typewriter and began writing again, to illustrate the craft of writing. Interestingly, in describing his experience King produced an abbreviated reality-based version novel that he wrote ten years earlier, but substituted the demonic Annie Wilkes with a nurse-angel role played by his wife.⁶ Despite the individual differences of auto-narratives, however, a common thread unites them. An underlying theme is that injured people don't get 'back to normal' following surgery, but come out of the anaesthetic to the harsh reality of needing to make sense of what happened to them and the implications of their injuries. Common to all is the challenge to 'turn adversity to account'.⁷

¹ Anthony Moore (1991) *Cry of the Damaged Man: A Personal Journal of Recovery*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.

² Oliver Sacks (1998) *A Leg to Stand on*, Touchstone, New York.

³ Stephen King (2000) *On Writing: a memoir of the craft*, Scribner, New York.

⁴ Harry Ballis (1994) 'Bedfast and Dependent: On being a patient in a hospital ward', in B. Furze and C. Stafford (eds), *Society and Chance: A Sociological Introduction to Contemporary Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 155-168.

⁵ Oliver Sacks (1991) *Awakenings*, Pan Books, London. The book was made into a film by the same title, starring Robert de Niro and Robin Williams.

⁶ Stephen King (1988) *Misery*, Penguin Books, New York.

⁷ J. A. Roth (1974) 'Turning Adversity to Account', *Urban Life and Culture*, 3(3): 347-361.

In the present recovery story Stuart Tripp takes us on a very personal journey. He writes from the heart. He is less interested in producing a generalised account of recovering from a car accident, but more in describing the reality of being crushed and the long climb of learning to live his life within the new limits defined by his injuries. He lays bare his soul so to speak by describing his state of mind, recalling the contradictory emotions and personal anguish, months of hospitalisation and adjusting to the loss of his leg.

Travelling Hopefully, in fact, details two journeys. In the first part of the book Stuart Tripp recounts his *rite of passage* from adolescence to young adulthood, including his travels around Australia, working in the United States, time in London and also in South Africa. In this section he takes us on his journey of growing up, and this involved acquiring trade and TAFE qualifications, working with friends, and learning from the travels. The early sections of the book presents someone who is full of vitality, keen to respond to challenges, and eager to explore the world and live life to the full. The first half of the book is a foil for making sense of what Stuart Tripp describes in the second half which focuses on his time in hospital and rehab.

The tone of the second half for the most part is sombre; it is as if the lights in his ward had been partially turned down. Whereas his pre-accident life had been about gaining knowledge en route to becoming an adult, the second half is about learning about life and discovering who he was. At 24 years of age, and in less than 12 months Stuart Tripp had learned more about life generally and himself in particular than the average person discovers over decades. The contrasting halves are hinged by a detailed account of the days and weeks following the accident, drawing on the recollections and words of those closest to him.

The book is simply written but its narrative style makes for powerful reading. It is jargon-free, uses simple language, and draws on first-hand accounts of friends and family including his

mother's sketchy diary notes that she recorded daily in the days and weeks immediately following the car accident, to piece together what happened to him. The book makes a telling point that friends and family play a key role in the journey to recovery, if for no other reason that they provide some of the detail of what happened.

In places the book makes for harrowing reading. It is as if in it Stuart Tripp takes the bandages off and allows us to see the actual wounds that resulted from the accident. We feel some of the pain that he experienced. We identify with him on his journey of adjusting to being a different person.

However, the real point of the book is not to recount how hard everything has become. Its primary goal, I suspect, is more to highlight that it is possible to have hope even if some of our journey has taken us to despair. This is a book for people who are tempted to feel sorry for themselves, or who have felt that life is too hard and are ready to give up. It reminds us that by mastering the small steps – even with a prosthetic leg – one learns to take giant leaps.

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