



An excerpt from Tom Regehr's Biography; "29 Times: A story of Trauma and Recovery"

The day I lay down in a snow bank to die:

It was the quietest time in the middle of a night after the bars had closed but before early morning traffic began to roll, one of those cold winter nights with no clouds, a light breeze and extremely low temperatures.

I was walking alone in downtown Brampton, Ontario.

I have no idea where I'd been but I do know that I hadn't slept in a couple of days and had been drinking and using various drugs for at least two, maybe three or more days. I was very high, very drunk and extremely tired. I had no money and nothing positive on the go. I was utterly homeless, with not even a couch to surf upon anymore.

Of the various ways to die, I generally obsessed on the painless; I wanted it to be instant and painless, most likely in a drugged state of mind. I'd thought about this often, and I was also extremely concerned that my body not be found. I have no idea why this obsessed me so much; I don't remember any rationale then and can't think of why now, but on this cold and terrible night, my thoughts were there on death.

I was so tired from walking and walking and the various effects of homelessness and it was so cold, so cold and so utterly fucking lonely. I had heard that freezing to death was relatively pleasant and painless, just like going to sleep, and it made sense to me in that crushing loneliness.

In Brampton at the time there was a parking lot behind the buildings of the four corners we called the Queen Square parking lot. It was bound on the north by a large railway embankment that rose about thirty feet in the air. The snow from the area was pushed up against the embankment creating a grand icy barrier and there, between the piled snow and the embankment, is where I thought would be a great place to lie down, give up and die.

And so I did, I lay down and waited for the silence to take me.

“Hey how’s it going down there, pal?”

I heard this voice in the distance and for a moment didn’t even have the wherewithal to be confused. The voice just hung there in the frozen air before it came again.

“Hey pal, how’s it going down there?”

This time I could identify the individual’s voice and think about it.

It was gentle, but not the voice of a young man.

I felt myself snapping back into my body, like I’d been spread out over a billion small points in the distance and snapped back into this singular point in my body and awareness. I have to imagine that I breathed or moaned or groaned because the fellow with the voice shifted and said something else. I started to become aware of my body all of a sudden. I was not aware of the cold but of the general pain in my body, the burning in my face that was growing, though not horrible yet. I became aware slowly of my body and the pain.

The guy with the voice was talking to me gently. The next day I had no recollection of what he said, but the calmness of his tone stayed with me. It willed me back. Eventually I opened my eyes and was shocked to see the entire parking lot behind a pair of black, shiny boots. I could see the man’s legs and down each side a black flashlight and a baton while he squatted down on his heels to talk to me. Behind him was the entire parking lot and I thought: ‘shit– I lay down on the wrong side of the snow bank. What a Fucking loser – I can’t even die properly.’

Being back in my body I found a depth of cold that is not even describable. My very soul was aching and inside I was screaming with pain.

As I started to shift and move my legs, the boots, baton, flashlight and voice stood up and moved back about five feet before squatting back down. He gave me space but all the while he kept talking in that gentle tone. Eventually he asked me pointed questions and then he asked me if I had a place to go. I told him I did and he asked if I could get there on my own.

I did everything on my own so I said 'yes.'

My destination was a rooming house where I had used to live. I knew how to break in quietly and would find an empty room there, but I didn't tell the cop this.

He stood up and then moved off again, maybe another 5 or 10 feet away, and he just stood there. Eventually I got up and started to walk in the direction of the rooming house. It was then that I saw the second younger police officer standing about 20 feet away. My guy, the man with the calm voice, said something gentle to me as I began to shuffle off into the cold: 'take care' or the like.

As I was walking away I heard the younger officer challenge the older one about his choices. 'He's just a drunk,' he said aloud. "What's the matter with you, this is such a waste of time.'

Then I heard the older officer, all tone of gentleness gone, use a very stern voice and strong language to tear a strip off that little fuck and talk to him about compassion.

His voice faded as I walked away.

This memory stands out in a winter with no other memories that I could discern and be sure were actually the same winter. In early recovery I scratched around those ideas for memories and maybe a timeline and there are a few memories that blur, but I have none of that winter, except for that officer and the night I laid down to die.

I've often thought about trying to find that fellow, because he saved my life that night and I love my life.

Looking forward to sharing more with you,
With Gratitude:

Tom Regehr - CAST Canada

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