

The Day of the Snowstorm

I was sitting on the floor, shivering in soaking wet clothes, and I couldn't stop crying.

I was in a state police holding cell, an ankle chain attached to the wall.

I had been photographed and fingerprinted. The summons, with misdemeanor charges of "disorderly conduct" and "resisting arrest" and a felony charge of "interference with a rescue scene," lay on the cell floor, where it had dropped from my fingers.

The arresting officer, a state police sergeant, entered the cell and went down on one knee to speak to me gently.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"No, I'm not okay," I answered. "I never had someone die under my hands before."

"You can't blame yourself," she said. "You did everything you could. Her head injuries were just too severe."

There is a word that comes from the name of writer Frank Kafka. "Kafkaesque," meaning a situation in which its parts are wholly illogical and create a bizarre outcome.

It introduced me to the meaning of trauma in our lives, what it can do to us, how it can be misunderstood, and how understanding it can change how the world responds.

It was a day of one of Vermont's giant spring snowstorms, with heavy wet snow covering the Interstate and blinding drivers. I came around a curve in the road and saw a tractor-trailer jack-knifed on the median. In that nano-second of time that it takes for what the eyes see to get to where the brain interprets it, my mind was already telling me that something was terribly wrong.

The truck hadn't just jack-knifed, because it was sitting there with its hood smashed in. Seconds later, I saw the car it had hit, rolled on its side and precariously leaning downhill. I was only the third person to arrive on the scene. There were two people trapped inside the car, and one person was in the snow, already receiving CPR from the first passers-by who had stopped. I took over from one of them.

Everything that happened in those next 30 minutes is a jumble. When the ambulance arrived, I was still doing the chest compressions as the woman was being loaded onto the stretcher and into the rig. I heard the other rescuer say, "10 minutes." The length of time we had been doing CPR in the snow. I remember leaning deep into the half over-turned car to support the head of one of the trapped victims and crying out in fear when the car suddenly shifted downhill towards me. Thank God – it was the fire department, finally arrived, hooking up a chain to keep the car from tumbling further. I remember the heavy blanket that only partially protected me from the flying glass chips as a fireman cut through the car door to reach the victim. Finally more firemen and the second ambulance arrived and I called out, my arms aching, for a relief person to take over.

But there are two things that I cannot shake from my mind, and that have continued to haunt me for years. One was running through that deep, heavy snow to get to the car wreck. I had called out that I knew CPR, and one of the men already there had called out, "hurry, we need you." But the thick snow grabbed at my legs and threw me down, again and again. Like in the nightmares when you are trying to run, but you are trapped in slow motion. I needed to run, and the snow kept trapping me.

The other was the count.

"One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand..."

Pumping on her chest, keeping the count, urging the other rescuer, "more air."

"One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand..."

Yes, I was well trained in CPR, even was a trained EMT many years earlier. I was afraid I would forget how. But it was like riding a bicycle. I knew immediately I was doing it right.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand...”

Her ribs went up and down under my hands. I was pumping her heart for her. I was forcing the blood into her brain, keeping her alive.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand...”

I became her heart. I became a part of her.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand...”

Live, please live!

Yes, I was trained in CPR. But I had never actually done it before on a real person. I had no idea how intimate it would be, how deeply personal. I was her heart.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand...”

When my role was finally over, and the fire department was swarming over the wreckage, I was told that I had to leave. Move my car; it could be a danger where it was left parked in the opposite break-down lane.

Your part is done; you need to leave now.

But I couldn't just walk away, as if this was just a little blip of life and I could go back to normal. I guess it's what they call the “fight or flight” response. Every neuron was firing. My adrenaline was pumping. I had become a part of it all, and I couldn't just walk off into the sunset.

I said, “no.”

There was an exchange of words with the state police. They say I was yelling and swearing. I don't think I was, because that isn't my normal style of speech. But I do remember yelling out, “If she f-ing lives, it's because I was here to save her. Leave me alone.”

They arrested me. We all slipped in the snow. (That was the “resisting arrest.”) I was handcuffed and left in the back of a sheriff's car until the sergeant was free to go down to the station to process me. The sheriff was the one who told me that there was “a fatality.” The woman had died.

“You can't blame yourself,” the state police sergeant told me, in the jail cell. “You did everything you could. Her head injuries were just too severe.”

What was wrong with this picture?!

The days went by, in a fog. I had to come up with money for a lawyer. I was facing a felony.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand...”

Trying to run through thick, heavy snow.

“Hurry, we need you.”

My hands, becoming her heart, squeezing the blood to her brain.

And one night, a few weeks later, it all became too much.

I was curled up on a sidewalk in Barre, sobbing and completely unresponsive. I had been trying to see my lawyer, but his office had closed before I got there, and it became a last straw that threw me over the brink.

Spring had arrived by then, and it was a mild evening, but when the fire and rescue workers who responded to a citizen 911 call tried to talk to me, all I could mumble about was a snowstorm. “No sense of time or place,” obviously.

Later, after hours of waiting in the emergency room, I poured the whole story out to the psychiatrist on call.

My severe depression had returned, I said. I was having a serious relapse.

But finally, I had reached someone who knew better, who understood what had really happened the day of the snowstorm.

“You are experiencing the continuation of an acute stress reaction to what happened at that car wreck,” he said. “This isn’t your depression. It’s an outcome of the trauma you experienced.”

When I saw his admission notes later, with a brief description of the events, he had triple underlined the words, “and then they arrested her!!!”

My underlying depression may have made me more susceptible to the trauma, but whatever I may have said or done that afternoon was beyond my capacity to control. In the legal translation of what the doctor told my lawyer, and what was then sent to the prosecutor, I was someone “unable to appreciate the wrongfulness of her actions or conform her conduct to the requirements of the law,” in the grips of a trauma-induced brief psychotic break. In lay language, temporarily insane. The charges were dropped. Extreme trauma can do that.

Having it recognized was the beginning of climbing out of it, of recovery. It is probably what prevented it from turning into a long-term reaction, what we call post-traumatic stress disorder, when the reaction doesn’t go away and recovery is so much greater a struggle.

That doctor became the hero of my personal drama, because I know that not every doctor would have understood what happened. I certainly didn’t understand. He got it.

And maybe, just maybe, a few other people learned something they didn’t know and should have recognized... the police, the attorneys involved.

It gave me an insight into the effects trauma can have. It is a lesson that many others have yet to learn. It is a vital lesson, because it can change the way the world responds, and that can make all the difference.

This is a true story. It occurred in the spring of 2001. Many details that add further context have been omitted for reasons of space.

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