

Third place, Non-Fiction  
**Field Notes on Surviving a Brain Injury**  
by Joseph Huerta

## FIELD NOTES ON SURVIVING A BRAIN INJURY

In March of 1998, I went on a vacation with my brother, my sister, and a friend to a popular ski resort in Colorado. Up to that point, I considered myself a decent skier. I wasn't a great skier, but instead more of a good skier. I had been going once or twice a year since I learned how to ski in Ruidoso, New Mexico, when I was 19 years old. The first time that I skied I went with my college roommate. I remember that it was cold. We took ski lessons and by the end of our first day, we were making it down the beginner runs with some confidence. We laughed about being heroes of the black-diamond slopes though we never went down them. After a few more trips, I became comfortable skiing the blue, intermediate runs. During the subsequent years, I took a few minor falls, but nothing serious ever happened.

At the time of the Colorado trip, I was thirty-one and had been practicing personal injury law for five years. As apart of my job, I had encountered individuals who had been hurt in a hundred different ways. I'm not talking about just car wrecks. I'm talking about injuries of crewmen on shrimp boats. Injuries related to defectively designed space heaters. Even an intentional shooting by the cops who trying to bust a guy for possession of a bong. I was on my way to becoming a trial expert. I worked for partners in my firm who developed injury-related cases for trial. I met with clients, doctors, and liability experts. I often listened to my clients, shook my head, and said, *That's awful*. It was like being backstage when a severe injury occurs and then a legal case follows.

On Friday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, after lunch on the mountain, we decided on one of the intermediate trails for our next run. It was a perfect day for skiing—sunny with unbroken blue skies and the dramatic snowcapped mountains on the horizon. This particular run was bordered by a steep gulley. Apparently, the designer of the run thought it would be good idea to leave the cliff's edge bare, so you could ski up to the rim and pose with family and friends for scenic photographs.

I was the first one to ski down. To be honest, I don't remember anything from that day and the many days and months that followed, but here's what I've been told by others: As I started to traverse the steep, icy slope, I suddenly picked up speed and lost my balance. I tried to recover, but it was too late. I slid over the edge of a fifteen-foot cliff and hit my head against a tree. When my brother and sister reached the trail's edge, I was lying face down and motionless in the bottom of the ravine.

I had fallen about fifteen feet from the cliff's edge and hit a tree when I landed on the snowy ground. Later, my surgeon told me that I cracked my skull into twenty-three pieces. It was the kind of accident that killed Sonny Bono three months earlier when he struck a tree while skiing at a resort near South Lake Tahoe, California. Less than a week earlier, during his last run of the day, Michael Kennedy died from severe head injuries after hitting a tree on a mountain in Aspen, Colorado.

Immediately I was taken to the local hospital. The paramedics and doctors had no idea if I was going to live.

I was flown to the Denver Medical Center, where a team of doctors performed a complicated, nine-hour surgery to save my life. This is what they did: Two one-centimeter holes were drilled into my skull and tubes were inserted in order to relieve the pressure of the swelling in my brain. The surgeons drained the excessive blood from the initial impact of my brain bouncing against my skull. They removed some of the fractured bones and inserted a titanium plate and screws in order to hold my brain together.

After the surgery, I fell into a coma that lasted for twelve days.

During this time, a very well respected doctor visited my hospital room to evaluate my condition. He was a visiting professor and a brain specialist from Johns Hopkins Medical School in Baltimore, Maryland. He brought a few medical residents along with him into my room so he could provide some firsthand experience on the front lines of the brain-injury war. Obviously, I was still unconscious. My head was the size of a watermelon. A machine was breathing for me. A feeding tube inserted into my stomach delivered liquid sustenance to my system.

The doctor examined my charts. Later, I was told that he had a sad expression on his face. There was a quiet moment like in a confessional in a church. The doctor looked at my parents.

“I wish we could do more,” he said, “but your son will not wake up.”

My mom sobbed.

The doctor nodded and left the room with his medical entourage.

My parents went to have lunch, talked, and cried.

A few days later, my parents got a call from a nurse that they should come to the hospital immediately. During this time, they were staying at a hotel in Denver not far from the hospital.

“What is it?” my dad asked the nurse.

“Just come!”

When my parents stepped through the door of my room, I was no longer in a coma. I gave them a thumbs-up. They were ecstatic. The doctors were also very happy that I was awake, but cautioned my parents that I would likely have the mind of a two-year-old. That there would be many things from my own life that I wouldn't remember. That I would never be able to take care of myself. That I would never be independent again.

This was thirteen years ago. Now, I drive. I live by myself. I work out at the gym three times a week. I share custody of my fifteen-year-old son, Tristan. I read and write.

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When you describe my story to others who want to know the motivations, the plot, and the characters, tell them that it's a story about luck. Admittedly, I don't know all of the elements of this story, but I do know that it's about luck. It's about good fortune. I am not in some mysterious trance, but I must tell you that some people describe my remarkable recovery in religious and moral terms.

When I talk about luck, I understand that I'm an American, hurt in America. I don't say this as some sort of a nationalist. It's just the truth: If I were hurt in Mexico or Zimbabwe or China, I would be dead.

My life happened at the right time. Examine the unexpected trajectory of my life and compare it to the advance of modern medicine. Who could have imagined that a guy could crack his skull into multiple pieces and go into a coma, would go on to live? I keep on thinking that I arrived on this planet at the right time, especially when you think of the awful things I grew up seeing on TV. If I were a knight in the Middle Ages or a soldier in the Civil War or even a protester for civil rights, I would be dead.

There's more. People acted to save my life and didn't look away. I'm not talking about the paramedics in the helicopter ambulance or the hospital personnel. I'm talking about a vacationing physician there who oversaw my grievous injuries. He intervened to save my life.

Some religious people observe that evil can triumph over good, but it didn't in my case. My answer is this: I wanted to live. So many others would have nobly lost, but I wasn't aware of the biology or the religion. I had no idea how the odds were stacked against me.

Medical students are still amazed when they meet me.

After I stabilized after the accident, the hospital in Denver discharged me and I was transported to The Institute for Rehabilitation and Research (TIRR), a neurological hospital in Houston, Texas, for three months. To this day, I still recall none of my stay there. My brain hadn't healed enough to hold memories again. I'm told that I was there for three months, and they kept me on a floor-level mat surrounded by a metal railing so I could move around without hurting myself. Every day therapists worked on my ability to talk and move. Other exercises and tests strengthened aspects of my cognitive, neurological, and behavioral rehabilitation. I'll always remember the blue vinyl upholstery that covered the soft foam in the main therapy room. Dr. Cindy Ivanhoe, a neurologist and the director of the Brain Injury and Stroke Program, oversaw my care. Despite all of this rehabilitation, it was unclear whether or not I would live with major neurological deficits for the rest of my life. My family still didn't know if I would ever return to the same Joseph that I was before.

Then, the hospital discharged me to another rehabilitative facility, The Unit, in Galveston, Texas. I thought it was so strange that the decision was made. I was in paradise at TIRR. Or at least I think that now. I really don't recall.

Admittedly, I was a strange boy.

Let me give you an idea of my limitations: I spoke like Godzilla, with his guttural, inaudible roars. Now, I talk more like a middle-aged drunk. Bouncers at bars frequently ask if I have had too much to drink, not knowing that I gave up alcohol twenty years ago (more on this later). I learned a bit about my talking problem after I met with two different speech therapists in Corpus Christi. When you are a grown adult, your therapists can take aggressive action to help you talk better, otherwise it is talking like a two-year-old. Before the speech therapy, I used to say the F-word a lot. But I don't think it mattered all that much because no one understood me.

My eyes were already nearsighted, causing me to get glasses in first grade because my inability to read the blackboard. But now I had double vision. I saw out-of-focus things doubly. My left arm and left leg were weak and limited due to lying on the floor as I was getting rehabbed. My brain functions were limited. I was just a toddler coming back to life.

I remember white sheets and green grass and my heart feeling heavy. I remember the outside courtyard of The Unit, and sitting there on a bench and watching the birds dart through the late-fall breeze. I dreamt of growing wings, so I could fly home.

I had a lot of questions: Why? How? What was being done to improve my condition? Why I was there? Where was my family? Why did I feel so alone?

What do I remember? I couldn't follow any of the conversations about my life or future. I had no idea where I was. I didn't know how old I was. I knew something had happened, something bad. I had no memory, voice, or ability to argue. I was bored, being there. I wanted to become a bird and fly away.