

BOOK REVIEW

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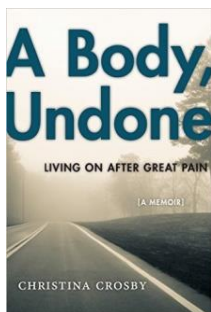
Pennsylvania Bar Association Workers' Compensation *Newsletter*

(July 2016: Vol. VII, No. 126), and

Lex & Verum, August 2016

(monthly of the National Association of Workers' Compensation Judiciary)

IS HEROISM THE STANDARD?



A BODY, UNDONE:

LIVING ON AFTER GREAT PAIN

by Christina Crosby (NYU Press. 212 pp. 2016).

A common theme in workers' compensation disability literature is that injured workers should be expected to rehabilitate themselves and eventually return to work, regardless of the severity of disability. We look forward to workers' recoveries. This idea is passively recognized in the Pennsylvania Act where, beyond specific loss/double amputees, we have no categories of permanent disability, either partial or total. The most seriously disabled worker can always be subject to reduction to time-limited partial disability (500 weeks), by the employer showing job availability.

In the pre-compromise settlement days (before 1996), one vendor of job placement services proudly announced that he could place total quadriplegics in work via the provision of voice recognition software and work-at-home arrangements. When workers did not pursue such efforts, insurers would petition for forfeiture of total disability and resolution to partial. This type of strategy generated significant backlash. Judge Pellegrini, of Commonwealth Court, harshly rejected the idea that individuals' private homes should be turned into employer field offices. Meanwhile, a distinguished physician addressing the assembled WCJs wondered out loud, "is *heroism* the standard?"

That was a memorable admonition. After all, advocates of rehabilitation and return to work routinely promote the examples of the actor Christopher Reeves, and of catastrophically-injured wounded soldiers, who show astonishing resiliency, never complain, rehabilitate themselves, and are restored to productive lives.

These individuals are indeed heroes. As the doctor's admonition inquires, however, is everyone who is catastrophically injured expected to respond in this courageous manner?

In this new memoir, *A Body, Undone*, this expectation is questioned. The author, Christina Crosby, sustained a severe spinal cord injury at age 50, in the midst of a vigorous bike ride. Now 61, she is paralyzed from the chest down and is wheel-chair bound, though she is able to move her arms and can grasp items like the pages of a book. Crosby knows all about the heroism narratives, but she is intent on setting aside that model and telling the reader what it is really like to live as a quadriplegic.

What unfolds is a literate, memorable account that will edify anyone who, like workers' compensation professionals, operate on the margins of the struggles encountered by those with serious impairment and disability.

Crosby, an English Professor at Wesleyan University, and a lesbian with a dear long-time partner, before her 2003 injury led an active – no, downright *robust* – life. She was a serious bicyclist, motorcyclist, and an academic leader at her university. Her memoir is a literate reflection on *loss* – of physical prowess, sexual pleasure, and mobility and independence. In addition, as the book's subtitle foreshadows, hers is an account of living with chronic neuropathic pain which never leaves her, and which is a constant reminder of the catastrophic injury which forever changed her life. Her description of chronic pain (always a challenge, given pain's subjective nature), tells it all: it's found in the chapter, "Falling into Hell."

The book has strong Pennsylvania connections. Crosby grew up in Huntingdon, a mountain town 120 miles due east of Pittsburgh, where her parents taught at Juniata College. She undertook her undergraduate studies at Swarthmore, and her brother was a lawyer living in Lititz and practicing in Lancaster. Although Crosby now lives in Middletown, CT (where she returned to part-time teaching two years after the accident), Pennsylvania is a major referent throughout the book.

The author's relationship with her cherished brother is a major subject of the book. And an overwhelming irony in this connection exists. In this regard, when her brother, Jeff Crosby, was in law school, he developed multiple sclerosis, and while he enjoyed a productive legal career (at Gibbel, Kraybill & Hess), and family life, he ultimately deteriorates and becomes crippled and wheelchair bound. At about that time, Crosby experiences her own catastrophic injury, and the two are wheelchair bound together. Crosby, who always lamented her brother's situation, now experiences it herself. He dies just a couple years later, at age 49, causing further grief.

Crosby reflects on her life and losses from multiple angles. She considers the early death, from melanoma, of her friend John (a fellow competitive bicyclist); the working conditions of the devoted African-American CNA who, along with the author's partner, assists in her care; her upbringing as a member of the Church of the Brethren; her enjoyment of alcohol; how her sexual life has been altered; and even the life-long pleasures – now restricted, like everything else – that she has enjoyed from the company of her beloved dogs.

Through it all, Crosby carries out the promise of telling the reader what it's like to be quadriplegic. Much of this account, as I have noted above, is about loss, and how strange it has been to go from an over-the-top lifestyle to highly restricted mobility. She also reviews the chronic lack of hope, and anxiety about the future, from which she suffers. The prospect of geriatric life as a quadriplegic is something that haunts her constantly. (It is notable to this writer, however, that the word "depression" does not seem to appear in this memoir.) Crosby also does not mince words: her book features an

entire chapter on what it is like to have no control over one's bowels, and the physical and mental discomfort that such a malady causes.

While Crosby is back to work, an essential element of her life and being, and has hence experienced some level of recovery, I am not sure she considers herself a hero. In fact, her whole point is that the heroism narrative is largely flawed. In any event, her message throughout is that she has had immense support, paid and volunteer, from the first day of her accident to the present. She also had the solid grounding of family and religion (enabling philosophical reflection); and an education (permitting return to sedentary work); that better equip her to deal with her dire situation. Finally, she had, and has, the devoted care of her partner, whose love and sacrifices are invaluable.

Of course, all catastrophically injured people don't have this advantageous profile. It is for this reason that the heroism narrative of resilience and recovery is so challenged.

The book ends on a note of optimism, as the author depicts her first realization, during her 42-week-long rehabilitation, that she is able to turn the pages of a book. That development was a critical one for the author – an English professor – and it led her to exclaim, “I have my life back!” She, along with her partner and caregivers, burst into tears. Perhaps this scene will move you like it did me.

Is heroism the standard? I don't believe so myself. Some individuals have advantages and extraordinary mettle, while some do not. Yet, as far as I am concerned, Crosby is, indeed, a hero. She has endured and enlightened us all in authoring this unforgettable memoir of disability – and yes, of recovery.