

DAN CLARK

DAN'S 'SIGNATURE STORY

I played American football for thirteen years - and was a projected #1 Draft choice into the National Football League by the Oakland Raiders, confirmed in a letter from owner Al Davis and Ron Wolfe Director of Player Personnel. However, on the first day of practice, when my lifelong dream of playing both professional football and baseball were alive and well, we were running a tackling drill where two of us ran into each other at full speed. From fifteen yards apart my teammate's helmet violently crashed into my helmet, my right shoulder was smashed into the cutting edge of my fiberglass pads, and we slammed to the ground momentarily knocking me unconscious.

When Lyle got off of me my eye momentarily drooped, my speech was suddenly slurred, my right side was immediately pierced with the penetrating pain that felt like my body was on fire, and my right arm continued to dangle helplessly at my side. I had suffered a grade level two concussion, which explains the immediate drooping eye and speech loss from which I immediately recovered. I compressed my 7th cervical vertebrae (discovered in tests long after the accident) and severed the axillary nerve in my deltoid, which left me numb for fourteen months I went to sixteen doctors, fifteen of whom projected that my arm would always dangle at my side, telling me I would never get any better.

Yes, it was a physical injury, but it affected my whole life. I was an athlete and got a lot of attention because of it. I was somebody because I played football and baseball and enjoyed free food at restaurants, status at celebrity galas, fame and glory. I was going to be an overpaid NFL superstar. But in a single moment, a freak accident took away my identity. Suddenly I was nobody to my coaches and nobody to my teammates and fans. Even more devastating, I became nobody to myself. I was lost, lonely, and confused.

I couldn't write - I was right-handed. I couldn't concentrate on work or education because it constantly felt like some wild animal was biting my neck and shoulder. I used to get electrical, shocking nerve impulses in my shoulder that would shake my arm like it was plugged into a light socket. This made me afraid to go out in public, especially on a date, because my arm might suddenly blast her in the chops.

One time I was sitting with my family at dinner when my arm flipped out and knocked a bowl of mayonnaise off the table. The next morning my younger and a batting helmet!:) Needless to say my reality quickly spiraled down, and life as I knew it was nowhere to be found. I didn't know if I even wanted to live.

Having battled back from this career ending paralysis to a 95% recovery (my shoulder is still numb), I am often asked three questions:

Depressed?

#1. Why did I quit and stay paralyzed for so long? I gave up because I thought I was depressed - paralyzed both physically and emotionally! And what happens when you think you are depressed? You are depressed. My recovery began only when I realized there is a huge difference between being depressed and being disappointed - a giant difference between being depressed and being discouraged and sad. When you are disappointed, discouraged or sad you don't need medication that flat lines your emotions and dries out your human spirit to fight and survive! What you need is clarification on who you really are and a compelling, emotionally stirring, motivating reason to get better! Luckily I had friends and coaches you emphatically reminded me: 'You can't quit, it's a league rule! Hold on and keep fighting - in two more days tomorrow is yesterday!'

Turns out that playing football and baseball was what I did, not who I am as a man. And when we identify ourselves in terms of what we do instead of who we are, we become human doings instead of human beings - unacceptable if lasting happiness and a life of significance is truly what we seek.

#2. Why did I go to so many different doctors? Simply, I kept going from doctor to doctor until I found one who believed I would get better! He was #16 - Dr. Brent Pratley. Having a reputable expert believe I would recover was a game changer because he explained that 'recover' and 'getting better' would not just be physical. It first and foremost had to begin with an emotional mind-shift and honestly, shifting my priorities was the hardest thing I've ever had to do! In a single moment, I was faced with the emotional pain of giving up my life's dream and the identity I had grown up with. Outside, I was an athlete. But inside, I knew it was time to find a new game.

#3. The third

reason I stayed paralyzed for fourteen months was because I was asking the wrong questions. I was asking the doctors, "How to get better?" when I should have been asking myself, "Why should I get better?" Once we answer and identify "why," figuring out the "how-to" is simple. Not easy. If it was easy everybody would do it. Learning to do hard things is what makes life significant.

Science Based Recovery

I started getting better physically and emotionally only when I started focusing on purposes instead of just setting goals. I stopped focusing on having fame and started focusing on being whole. Focusing on how to get better had set me up for failure because each doctor had a different theory, and the pain was so excruciating that quitting before fully recovering would have been easy and reasonable.

Most importantly, my recovery was not because of a 'raw-raw - you can if you think you can' mentality. It was because of science based biology. Doctor Pratley taught me there are two major sections of the brain: the limbic part of the brain that controls my feelings and decision making. And the neocortex part of the brain that controls my rational thought and my language.

Notice that the decision making (why) and feeling (want) function of the brain reside in a completely different place than the rational thought (what) and language (how) function of the brain. This is why it is oftentimes difficult to explain why you buy something or do something simply because it 'feels right.'

Biology proves that a clearly defined 'why' coupled with a compelling 'want' (goal) have a gigantic impact on behavior because they engage more than simply the brain. They also engage the heart. Research proves that a clear, concise, personally meaningful and challenging goal causes our blood to pump more rapidly, our brain to fire, and our muscles to engage. When I have only a 'what' and a 'how' without a 'why' and a 'want', no such effects take place.

For this reason, the most significant truth Dr. Brent Pratley (doctor #16) taught me that has had the longest life changing impact on me, is that I can't motivate myself and inspire others with just what I do. I must be able to articulate why I exist and the purpose of every task I am asked to perform. Why is the source of my ambition and motivation and the emotional fuel that drives me to persevere until I recovered.

Career?

As I started to get better I was asked to speak and I parlayed it into a full time profession where I get to share the philosophical lessons I learned including: the greatest mistake you can make in life is to continually fear you will make one; When you are no longer able to change a situation, it's time to change yourself and move forward, because the best way out of fear is through it; adversity introduces us to ourselves - we can never know how strong we are until we are tested and being strong is our only choice - pain is a signal to grow, not to suffer - 'No Pain No Gain' really means 'No Heart, No Chance' - when your 'why' is your own and it's bigger than your 'why-not,' you will persevere, not because it is expected by others, but because it is demanded of yourself; you can't quit - it's a league rule!

My conclusion? This football injury is clearly one of the best things that has ever happened to me. Don't misunderstand. My paralyzing accident isn't one of the best things that has happened to me - but what I learned about life and priorities and who I have become as a man as a result of going through this setback, makes it one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I learned that no matter what we break in our bodies, when we go through the proper steps of rehabilitation, the part of our body we injured becomes stronger than it was before we injured it - which includes shattering our dreams and a broken heart. I now know that when you identify your 'why' you make winning personal and definitely discover 'how' to turn every stumbling block into a stepping stone, and every setback into a comeback!