

*Passage Three:
Healing the Wounds*

Finding the Face Behind the Mask

Greg

Two years ago was a blurry, vague, and surreal time in my life. I missed the second semester of school because of depression. I experienced a seizure, the world of psychiatry, and more emotions than my brain and body could handle. I needed to understand who I was. I wanted others to understand how I felt. I just couldn't break through the mask that I seemed to wear.

I was putting a great amount of pressure on myself to make “weight” for wrestling and get good grades at the same time. I ran constantly, never satisfied with my physical condition. I was addicted to exercise. I developed a form of anorexia, eating little and exercising nonstop. Running became an obligation, a duty in my mind. Finally, just as a soda can explodes from rapid shaking, my body and mind gave in to the pressure.

I was driven to action by thoughts that didn't make sense: “I have to run. Maybe I can run for two days, 48 hours. Better yet, I could run across the United States and become President!”

My mind was racing, pounding thoughts like a broken record: “Your life stinks. Get away from everything. Go in the mountains alone.” I felt trapped. I wanted to run away.

I passed the time by mumbling, sitting on the couch, watching TV. “Am I ever going to get out of this?!” I was crying, not knowing why. My energy was low. I felt that I couldn't perform a simple task—like going to the store with Mom. I yelled and screamed at mom and dad, but didn't mean it. My dog lay on the floor looking at me with worried eyes.

I'm writing right now,
I'm not sure why or how.
Not for an assignment,
But to end my confinement.
My confinement in my head.
To write the things said,
In my head.

I have **depression**. Many people don't know what that means, sometimes I don't either. It is not comparable to the flu or a broken leg. It grows and eats away at the life inside. I've been asked "What is depression?" by lots of people. Now I ask myself. I ask: "What happened?" "How did I feel?" "Why?" It was a hard time to live. Rather, I existed, but I didn't live.

I remember sitting on the couch. I couldn't deal with life and emotions. I watched TV and ate cookies. I gave up. It was, for me, a form of suicide. I chose not to live because it was too hard.

At first, I wanted to run away. Actually, I wanted to run away and then come back. After a run, I would come back drained of my bad thoughts and feelings. I ran and ran before I finally collapsed. If I thought I was overweight, before I went to bed, I'd set my alarm for early in the morning. At first, I set my alarm for 6:30 a.m., and I would run for half an hour before school started. Gradually, my starting time edged back closer to midnight as wrestling season progressed. I wore sweaters, two pairs of sweat pants. Once, I ran for four hours. I ran at Rancho San Antonio Park. There's a PG&E road that meanders up to a summit and then down. I think it's about nine miles. My footprints might still be on the trail; I know the trail well. I know the Foothill College track well, too. I ran there in the morning. Frost covered the pole-vault landing pit. My face was numb from the chilly air. People say running is healthy, but I nearly killed myself.

I don't know the title, call me greg
I don't know where I'm going,
I don't know where I've been;
I'm a wanderer
Whose journey never ends.

I ate very little. A hard-boiled egg and two carrot sticks for dinner. No sugar at all. I weighed more in seventh grade than I did my freshman year. My birthday was not normal. My mom made a birthday cake for me. It was an oat-bran cake with honey. I told her to make me a healthy cake. There were a

few weekends before the collapse that hinted at the future. I was so starved and exhausted that I ate lots of food and lay on the couch all day.

Monday morning, I ran for a couple of hours and forced myself to school. I refused to slow down even though my parents and friends told me to; I was a machine. I don't recall much of my life outside of wrestling and running and eating. Scales were a large part of my life. I remember watching the balance needle bounce up and down and hoping it would stop. I weighed ninety-nine pounds at one time. One time I ran up and down the bleachers at lunch time. Everyone stared at the crazy guy who ran at lunch time. I didn't realize what I was doing. I couldn't stop and take a deep breath and relax; everything was go, go, go.

For a long time, I never made contact with people other than my parents and counselors. I ate, and the more I ate, the more I gave up. There was a time when I was so far down that I enjoyed it. I looked at life from different angles. I went to summer school that summer. I said a lot of weird things. I thought about the universe a lot. "Who am I?" I wondered.

gertrude smith (gertrude is my grandma's name,
grandpa calls her gerty)
Who am I?
Am I
Just a fly
On a wall
Hoping that I don't fall?

It was frustrating trying to rebuild my life. At times I was impatient. I took the all-or-nothing approach. No gradual climbing out of my hole; I was going to jump out all at once. I was going to change the world. There was a time when I thought everyone was stupid except me. I thought: "War is bad. People are hurt and some die. Am I the only one who realizes that war is not a good idea?!"

Self-Destruction
Lemmings march forward
Into the water.
Cows stand in line
For the slaughter.
Humans build the path
Into trouble,
And just laugh.

I hated going to psychiatrists. I didn't want any help because that would prove that I couldn't help myself. The mornings were the worst part of the day. I got up and pounded the walls and yelled. I kicked things and mumbled and stomped. My dad checked out the movie ***The Great Race*** from the library. Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon watched me from the other side of the television screen.

For a while the TV was my only escape. It distracted me from reality and gave me simple, but temporary, pleasures. I went right from breakfast to the family-room couch. I became a regular watcher of the morning talk-shows. Sometimes I just ignored my parents when they talked to me. I covered my face with a pillow and pretended that they weren't there. I remember hating medication.

I wrote a note one day. My mom thought it was a suicide note. Actually, the note was a farewell note. I wrote that I was running away to Washington, D.C. to become President. I was going to end war and save the world. I said, "I'll be back in twenty years." I wanted to get away. I wanted to go away and live alone, survive a great struggle and come back refreshed. I wanted to go on a vision quest in the woods without food and find a purpose for life. I wanted to run away. But, also I wanted to stay home. I wasn't able to decide, so I did nothing.

During Winter Break, our family went to the Grand Canyon for a week. That was the first time I had left the house in a couple of weeks. It was hard. I

remember Phoenix and some cacti. One day, I refused to leave the hotel room when everyone went sightseeing.

I can't write. I feel strange and it is hard to remember. Exactly two years ago today, I had a seizure. The seizure was caused by my doctor's error. I was taking **Norpamine**, which wasn't the right drug for me to begin with. Then he added **Prozac**. The **Prozac** and **Norpamine** had a chemical reaction which gave me the seizure.

My dad bought me two computer games. My mind needed something to soothe it, like computer games or TV. I remember that I was playing **Joe Montana Football** on the computer. I walked into the kitchen to get something to eat. My dad told me later that I fell on the floor and started shaking and twitching. He said that it lasted for about thirty seconds.

When I got up I couldn't talk. I tried to talk, but no words came out. I had hallucinations of spiders dancing towards me. They were green and got bigger and bigger.

The BOMB
Everything was calm.
Then came a bomb.
And everything was gone.
Good-bye and so long.

My dad had called an ambulance because he didn't have a car to drive me to the hospital. The ambulance came and the paramedics stuck oxygen tubes up my nose, and then I could talk. They also put an IV needle in the front of my forearm. The needle fed glucose into my veins. At the hospital my brain got scanned. I lay down on a board and they slid me into a huge tube. They couldn't find anything wrong with me, the medicines just had a chemical reaction and that caused the seizure.

I remember the mental hospital in San Jose. My parents literally dragged me there. I was clinging to doorways in my bathrobe screaming and crying. My parents had packed an overnight bag for me. My dad carried my shoes in his hand. They are abandoning me, I thought. The hospital checked me for razor blades and lice. The person who checked my hair suggested shampoos to get rid of my dandruff. The shower I took there was the first one I had taken in months. There was a net like the ones used for tightrope walkers below all the upstairs windows. The building was a square with a hole in the middle. The net was where the hole was. The windows facing the outside were barred.

I received a small tour when I arrived. The guide showed me a room with no windows. The room was solid steel. It was called the **Quiet Room**. The hospital put people in there who were angry and who wanted to yell. The room was soundproof, so a person could yell as loud as they wanted. The room scared me; the hospital scared me; it all felt so foreign. But life inside the hospital could not compare to what I was going through inside my head.

There were many times when I resolved to change, to get up and take a shower. Sometimes at night while lying in bed, I would say to myself, "Tomorrow, it's going to turn around. Tomorrow, I'll take life by storm." But, it didn't happen. I was impatient. It was hard to deal with a slow, gradual recovery.

Mornings were the worst. I'd wake up and see that my life was the same. I had the same feeling every morning. I hated the sunshine. There was light outside, but nothing inside. Mornings are supposed to be new beginnings, but mine were reminders of my pitiful existence.

When I returned home from the hospital, my dad and mom desperately wanted me to see a psychiatrist. "I don't need help! I'm better!" was my usual argument.

My dad countered, "Well, then I guess you're well enough to go to school tomorrow." For that I had no retort. That hurt me.

School was the kicker, the final step. The step before school was making contact with friends. I didn't have many close friends. I had acquaintances, but no one came to visit me. I was glad for that because I didn't want to be bothered. Part of me wanted to sulk around the house forever. At the same time I wanted to recover, but I didn't know how, and I was scared.

I knew basically what I needed to do. I needed to go outside. I needed to take a hike in the park, maybe shoot some baskets. And maybe, just maybe, if I had enough courage, I could call a friend. Or maybe answer the phone. I never answered the phone. I didn't want to talk to anybody I knew.

I hear the sounds of a dismal drizzle,
My plans for basketball just fizzle.
I shouldn't pout,
We need water to end the drought.
Why can't it rain another day?
A day when I'm too sick to play.

I went to a Spanish tutor for a while. I felt like an outcast. I quarantined myself. It was hard to get back in the swing of things after being out for so long. Getting back was like going on stage. I needed the mentality of a performer. "Go out there and do it," I thought.

I came back to school my sophomore year. I acted in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** and I also acted ***life***. Sometimes I had stage fright and I stayed home and didn't want to be on stage. I wore sweat pants and a sweat shirt every day. I slept in my clothes and I never brushed my teeth. I remember eating raisin toast with peanut butter. I watched Regis and Kathy Lee and all the other morning talk shows. When I was really out of it, I watched soap operas.

Brainlessness is Bliss
I think I'll put my brain in a glass jar
And throw it somewhere really really far.

Away from me
My brain would be.
Yeah, it would be cool
To be a complete fool,
Unaware
Without a care.
And I wouldn't have to worry
About wearing clean underwear.

My rear ached from sitting on the couch. My once strong legs had become jelly from being inactive. I had disintegrated not only mentally but physically as well.

I had no facial expressions. I looked at myself in the mirror. I smiled to see what it would look like. I grouped my experience in one glob that I called: ***the depression***. Now I'm trying to break down the general term and understand myself more deeply.

One day my mom asked me to help her move plastic garbage bags full of leaves to the front of the house. "What if anyone sees me? I don't want to be seen!" I thought. I told my mom, "I can't. I just can't do it." I couldn't leave the safety of the couch, the TV, and the solitude.

Eventually, I dragged myself outside. I complained and worked slowly. It felt strange, real strange. It was the first time I had broken a sweat for a long time, aside from sweating out of anxiety or panic. I should have been proud of myself. I was proud to some extent, but I was also afraid.

I began doing things. I needed to move again. Everything took effort. Nothing came easy. My mom took my pulse once and it was pumping ninety beats a second. My dad tried to do some meditation with me, but I resisted. I tried to relax, but I was too tense.

I struggled to go to school. I was enrolled in regular classes and I was taking **Zoloft** a lot, so I was pretty high most of the time. Still I struggled. One day, a group of students came into my English class and made a presentation. They said I could learn more about myself and take charge of my own education. It was something different from the regular school. After sitting at home for so long doing nothing, I needed something that I could plunge into—The Learning Community sounded like a good way.

After coming out of my depression, I was feeling idealistic and wanted to change the world and grab something, do something. But I was still afraid because it was something new to me. It was hard for me to go to orientation meetings. My parents went before I did. When I finally attended a meeting, I was impressed by the closeness of the group, so I thought I might as well give it a shot. I enrolled for my junior year and stayed in the program for two years.

After school started, I was just there. I didn't go up to people and make friends. I was especially glad that no one tried to force me to do something or say something or be something. I was able to spend a lot of the time just watching and getting used to things.

My path
High on a plateau,
I gaze down below
On the path I have traveled.
Oh, how my life has unraveled!
Like a ball of string,
Twisted,
Turned,
Around everything.

As I watched people the first few days, I got to know what they were like. They were all so different, yet the same. Andy loved to play basketball and he was really caring of others. Joe liked to ride his bike and hike in the moun-

tains. Janna was really wise, really easy going, and I never felt out of place with her. Tamika brought laughs and light—light that I saw outside myself and wanted within.

I was happy just sharing the feelings of warmth and togetherness in the group. I liked our two-day retreat at Venture Lodge. I liked the simple things—like preparing meals and eating together, sitting out on the deck in the evening, standing outside in the morning in the fog. It might sound strange, but I liked going to sleep on the floor in a big room with a bunch of people at night and waking up together the next morning. It made me feel closer.

I remember Jenny's and Wendy's story of coming to the United States from El Salvador. I admired the struggle they had gone through and was interested in their history. I remember how good a listener Wendy was and how easy she was to talk to.

I liked Joe. I shared his interest in the outdoors; I went hiking with him a couple of times after school. One time we joined Kristie in the foothills near our school to help plant oak trees in a reforestation project. We were sent to look for acorns that could be planted. We didn't find any, but we had a good talk. I remember I talked to Joe about his summer trip to Idaho with the Student Conservation Group. He said he chopped a lot of wood; he also told me about a book he had read—*Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. I borrowed it and read it.

Paki and I just happened to connect at the EV's (Environmental Volunteers) meeting. I liked Paki; he was so mature and friendly and accepting. We teamed up to teach science lessons to little kids at Beechwood School, an all-black elementary school in East Menlo Park. Paki and I were two tall, skinny white guys; I guess we were quite a sight walking up to that school. When the kids saw us coming down the hall, they would all jump up and down and yell in excitement. They really liked us and it wasn't long before they gave us nicknames, ones that stuck with us for the next few months that we taught there—Beavis and Butthead. I liked the kids and I felt that we

were doing something really useful there. Paki was the straight man and I taught using goofy characters that I made up. When we taught about birds, I painted my elbow like a big beak and pranced around like big crow.

Technology scares me. Well, what really scares me is that my brother has fused with the computer. I'm afraid that the whole human race will fuse with technology and existence will be incomplete without computers. I've always wanted to be a clown. I want to go to little kids' birthday parties and juggle and make a fool of myself.

Sometimes, in our high school classroom, we would take time away from our usual discussions about the world to talk about ourselves. I liked the safety of our class; I could really be myself and no one judged me. Sometimes we would meet in small support groups outside the classroom after school. A support group is a group of four or five Learning Community students who help each other emotionally and academically and also have a good time. The small group makes our larger group more cohesive. We can take the time to get closer, to communicate, and to care about one another. Tamika was in my support group and I had special feelings for her—but she didn't know.

Now or never / gerG htimS

Maybe it was the peculiar tasting Mountain Dew I guzzled at Taco Bell. Or maybe it was the phase of the moon or some wacky astrology thing. Whatever the reason, today was a strange day. A strange, but a good day. Today was a Saturday, and it began just like every Saturday of my young life. I stumbled out of bed and staggered into the kitchen. I then proceeded to inhale enough waffles to wallpaper Buckingham Palace. Still asleep I collapsed on the family room couch. I surfed through the channels in search of cartoons. "Hello today we are going to learn to cook a duck à l'orange," ... flip! "Cobra Commander! The Joes are attacking headquarters in quadrant number seven!" ... Uh, I don't think so ... flip!

Today was a support group meeting. Tamika, Wendy, Andrea, and I decided to meet at Printer's Inc. It's a bookstore with a clever name that doubles as a coffee shop. I peddled my Peugeot to Tamika's house. I go everywhere on that bike. It gets about thirty miles per gallon—thirty miles-per-gallon of the soda that I drink. We cruised down El Camino in a car that looks like a large pregnant roller skate. In a unanimous decision, we agreed to stop at Taco Bell for some grub and beverages.

Wouldn't it be weird to be completely honest for a whole day. Like if your teacher asked you why you're late you would say, "I stopped to talk with a friend," instead of saying, "As we waited in the left turn, I watched an elderly man leaning on a walker, inching across the street. He moved like an inchworm, putting his walker six inches in front of him and then very slowly pulling himself to the walker. His process of motion was methodical and mechanical. He reminded me of an ancient machine, rusty and deteriorated, with the junk yard close in its future. Without warning, the man stopped. I could almost hear the wrenching and screeching of gears grinding to a halt."

"Give that man some oil!" I pleaded, for his gears could no longer mesh and turn without some lubrication. His stopping was contagious. Everyone ceased whatever they were doing and turned to stare at the frozen man in the crosswalk. He ignited a bolt of lightning, which flashed down my spine and into my soul. This bolt of lightning was the realization of my own mortality. Life is not something eternal. I could die at anytime. My adrenalin increased and I told myself to savor every moment."

Tamika was so **out there** all the time with her "Good morning, everybody!" I wanted to tell her what I thought of her, but I didn't know what to say to a girl. I had never had a crush on anyone before Tamika. One day, out of nowhere, I told her my feeling in front of the whole class. Tamika listened and said that she was touched by my words; no one made fun of me.

Untitled #7654: Call me Greg, my parents did.

I told her it was she

To whom I was attracted.
I had no expectations
On how she reacted.
The words
“I'm attracted to you,”
Came out of the blue and
I had no idea what to do.

Those words
Had been sitting on my shelf,
But when I said them
I surprised myself.

The Learning Community offered us a chance to build trust and overcome our fears. One of the ways that we did this was to take part in a ropes course. We took a bus several miles from school to the mountains. The place looked like a guerrilla encampment. Rope ladders hung from trees; logs and cables were suspended between trees fifty feet in the air; one tree was topped and had a small platform bolted to it. Rope belays hung everywhere. The people running the course wore hard-hats. They were inner city kids—boys and girls—enrolled in a continuation school near San Francisco. They were real supportive and friendly to us. We didn't know what to expect; our group was wide-eyed, intimidated by the height, but ready to climb! We spent several hours climbing trees and balancing on cables and logs suspended between trees. After a day of grueling, yet exciting activities, we approached our final group event.

I walked slowly along the trail; it was sprinkled with leaves, acorns, and snapping sticks. My left shoe was filled with dirt and I could feel it in between my toes. I took off my safety helmet and shivered as the wind chilled my sweaty scalp. I carried my helmet on my hip as an old lineman would after a grueling football game. We came upon a wall. Green wood, fifteen feet high, loomed over me. I joined the horseshoe of people forming at the base of the wall.

“Well here we are. The last event of the day, The Wall.” For some reason the television show *American Gladiators* crossed my mind. Glenn, our instructor, sat on his haunches. He explained that, somehow, we had to get our whole group over that wall. It was high. Our group came in all sizes; it didn't look as if we had a prayer to get our little band of players over that obstacle!

We had three minutes to plan. Then we were expected to do the entire event in silence. At first everyone tried to talk at once. Then Joe and Shawn concocted a plan. We would let them stand on our shoulders and form a human pyramid so that I could get to the top and then pull them up. From there Andy and Paki would direct the people on the ground, one-by-one, to be pushed and pulled to the top. Once we had our rhythm, people started up the wall—Alma, Paula, Mike, Jeremy, Andrea, and then Ali. Some of the bigger students were suspended in the air; we all stood below to spot our comrades—Janna, Angel, Joanna, Jenny, and Wendy all made it to the top. Soon it became clear that we were going to make it—Kristie, Adrienne, and Brenda were up and over. Oops, we almost forgot little Tamika—up and over she went!

We got so caught up in getting people up and over that we almost forgot how we were going to get Andy and Paki over. That was the hard part, Paki was last and had to back up, run toward the wall real fast, and leap with all his might. I barely caught his hand as I hung precariously from the top of the wall with my hands stretched out. “Caught him!” I said to myself, as the strain of his weight tested every muscle, tendon, and ligament in my right arm. Joe joined me in pulling Paki by the arm as he hung suspended over a sea of raised hands in case he fell. Then we felt Shawn's strength join ours and we knew we were going to succeed. Up came Paki and he scurried over the top of The Wall. I felt connected! I belonged! What joy! We had supported the entire group to a great moment of shared victory!

The kind of support and teamwork that our group created that day would be repeated over and over again throughout the entire year in our group's

triumphs—in brainstorming, in our academic pursuits, in “interpersonals,” in service.

Around Thanksgiving, I lapsed back into depression and stayed home for a few days. It was easier to come back to The Learning Community. I came on the day that we all went to Alma's to make tamales. Alma was from Guatemala and her mother agreed to have the whole class come to their apartment so she could teach us how to make tamales. People were glad that I was back, but no one freaked out about my absences. I just fit back in. I felt comforted getting back with the group.

I learned a lot about a lot of things. Hard to say what or how, but looking back at myself before and after, Learning Community made a big impact on me. It was one of the first times I had had real heart-to-heart communication. I learned a lot about myself, given the opportunity. When we started the book-writing project, I got to write about myself. ***I got to observe myself as well as be myself.*** And when we read and discussed Rene Dumal's ***Mt. Analogue*** I got into the symbolism so much that Gary had me lead the class discussions.

Support was the glue that held our group together. In one of our weekly “interpersonals,” one of the students was sharing some painful experiences that she was having in her life. She got so emotional that she started to sob and to shake. Gary went over to her and stood behind her chair; he simply put his hands on her shoulders while he spoke to her; he seemed to calm her with supporting hands. I was surprised that he knew exactly what to do in the situation. After she had a chance to experience her emotions and the flood of feelings, we began to talk. Things became clear and, after a while, I could feel her healing in the circle. We were all a part of it. We were all there for her. As she healed, something healed in me—in each of us. I felt the process draw us closer as a group.

It was at that point that I realized just how caring humans could be. Also, I learned that when someone is down, he or she may simply need someone to be there for him or her. I realized that I could give another person this kind

of support when he or she was having a tough time. This was an important lesson for me; this was something that I could do, just offer my hand or show someone love. It seemed so much more effective than giving psychological advice.

While my true face came out more and more in The Learning Community, I continued acting on stage. I got the part of David in ***David and Lisa***. The story is about a young boy whose parents put him in a mental institution where he attends a school with other kids who are also having emotional problems. I felt close to the character and wanted to portray him as a ***real*** person. It was an easy role for me to play, although it was a little painful. David wasn't close to people; he was very isolated. He kept telling his parents and psychiatrist to get off his back. Playing the role of David was therapeutic for me. The experience was profound because I could share the character ***and*** myself with the audience. In many ways my actor's mask wasn't so foreign; maybe it was less of a mask than the audience knew.

David finds his recovery by working with others. He begins to relate to his psychiatrist as a friend. Then he falls in love with a girl, Lisa, who has a split personality. Through her, he gets over his fear of physically and mentally touching people. Eventually Lisa runs away from the institution; David goes out and finds her being harassed by some boys. The play ends with David and Lisa returning to the mental institution hand-in-hand. Playing David was the exploration of another mask for me: a vulnerable teenager, acting in a role, and pretending to be a vulnerable teenager. My parents came to the play and supported me. So did my friends in the Learning Community.

The ending of the play reminded me of our Learning Community "interpersonals." I always felt good whenever we had interpersonals and could support each other. I felt connected with everyone when things got resolved. It was satisfying for me to witness other people as they grew to understand and accept themselves. It was healing for me to feel the support of the group. Before Learning Community, I was just a lonely robot that no one

could understand. It was impossible for me to know who I was. I couldn't express myself. I couldn't be myself.

Through my experiences in The Learning Community, I was able to express myself and show compassion for others. People listened. They accepted me. I learned that I am not completely alone in the world; other people out there understand me. ***I am not alone.*** When I could reach out and feel a connection with others, I gained the confidence to look inside. I recognized that ***knowledge is inside me***—the sense of my inner knowledge feels like a wise old man. Even when I am unable to express it in the moment, I know it is there. Now I know that I have a greater wisdom inside me. In it lies my true face.

