

## Restoration

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2021 May 31;193:E809-10. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.210218

“This is a really tough one,” his colleague warned. They’re all tough, the consultant psychiatrist muttered to himself. *What awfulness do they want me to see now?*

“She’s still in the burn unit, but she’s conscious and seems lucid. We thought if you met her now, you could get a head start with therapy — she’s going to need a lot. Bed 5.”

As he walked through the hospital with mounting dread, he reflected, *You did this to yourself*. Early on in his career, he had become fascinated by the unpredictable variability in response to sudden catastrophic trauma. Some patients shook off the most devastating injuries and went on with their lives, whereas others could not, their psyches irrevocably damaged. He had written scholarly articles on factors that augured recovery: ego strength, the nature of the unexpected violence, absence of previous traumatic events, support systems. But in the end, each person’s path was unique, an internal drama that he tried to guide to its best possible conclusion.

His expertise came with a steep cost. He had witnessed some of the most horrific tragedies imaginable: a face ripped away in a dog mauling; arms torn off by a tree-chipper; legs amputated because of sepsis; eyes melted by an acid attack; intestines blown away during a home invasion. But like a lineman protected from electrocution by thick, insulated gloves, his training and clinical objectivity had always protected him from the emotional impact of the physical destruction he saw and the horror stories he heard.

Until now. Now his armour was wearing thin, corroded by years of listening. He had become impatient, irritable. A phone ringing, a pager sounding, a knock on his office door — they all made him want to scream *Leave me alone!* He had begun to



doubt he was doing any good. Some days he felt he no longer cared. He had read about primitive healing rituals where the afflicted would grasp the tail of a goat and the shaman would lay on hands to drive the illness into the animal. He had always seen himself as a shaman. *Maybe I’ve been the goat all along*, he reflected with uncharacteristic self-pity.

At the nurses’ station, he reviewed her chart: Alycia Lane, 24 years old, helicoptered

in from Highway 40. He had seen the headlines. A liquid propane truck had caused a chain-reaction collision that killed 17 people. Her car had been far enough away from the leading impact to be out of the kill zone, but not far enough to escape the fireball. In the perverse ways of fire, the airbag and her clothing had miraculously spared her face and body from all but first- or second-degree burns. But not her hands. Her hands had

been completely burned away — only charred bone remained. She had required bilateral mid-forearm amputations. Oh God! She was a student at the music conservatory, heralded as a brilliant, upcoming concert pianist. *How can I do this anymore?* he thought.

“Alycia? I’m Dr. LeBeau. Your doctors asked me to come visit you. I’m a psychiatrist.”

She turned toward him, her face covered with an elastic burn mask. “I am a pianist.”

He regarded the bandaged stumps that had once been her hands. *Was*, he thought, as the tragic irony of their absence filled him with a deep despair. But even so, he pushed himself to continue. “How are you feeling? Are you in any pain?”

“They’re gone, aren’t they?”

Her directness took him by surprise. “Yes.”

“I’ll still play my music,” she declared.

*Denial*, he reflected: the most primitive defence.

He had a method. First, establish rapport and trust during the initial period of shock; support them through the mourning of their lost faculties; finally, guide them to a vision of a new, albeit radically altered, future. The key to this journey, he had found, was processing the narrative of the traumatic event. Like Jung, he believed in the power of archetypes and symbols to buffer the retelling of his patients’ awful moments of terror and loss. “To gain the grail, the knight must first confront the dragon,” he would tell them.

But visit after visit, his time-tested approach failed with her. She remained strangely distant, as if guarding a deep secret, and refused to speak of the event. She would say only, “I’m going to play my music again.”

After her discharge, he was haunted by his inability to reach her, which he took as a sign that his healing powers had finally left him. Acknowledging this was the final blow in the gauntlet he had run. He stopped taking on new patients, talked to a financial adviser and began clearing out his office, all the while berating himself over the failure that would mark the end of his career.

He did not settle well into retirement. He pattered about his garden, worked on a couple of unfinished manuscripts, travelled

a bit, but nothing could allay a soul-sickness born of the pathos of the handless pianist who wistfully insisted she would play music again.

Several years had passed when, one day, he found a large, ornate envelope in his daily mail; within was an invitation to a black-tie sculpture installation at the city museum. *They just want another donation*, he said to himself, and was about to toss it out when he noted the name of the honoured artist: Alycia Lane! Could this be her?

Wandering through the installation amid a swirl of couples in tuxedos and gowns, and waiters bearing champagne, he did not see her quietly approach him from behind.

“You know, I hated you at first. I just wanted you to go away and leave me alone. But you kept coming back again and again with tales of knights and dragons. While everyone was busy treating my injury, you were the only one who attended to my wound.”

He looked at her. She was almost unrecognizable in an elegant gown with long sleeves that reached down to ... her hands!

She caught him staring. “Oh ... these are my everyday prosthetics. I have bio-mechanical ones for my work.”

“How have you been?” he stammered.

“I’ve been well. After six months in rehab, I moved to New Mexico to apprentice with Arturo Salinas, the master sculptor. I found a hidden talent. He thinks I have promise. Can I show you the featured piece of the exhibition? It wouldn’t be here without you.”

Taking his arm, she led him to a large central gallery. In the middle rose a massive bronze sculpture. They stood together before it.

“I faced down the dragon,” she said. “I watched them cast it.”

And she told him: deafened by the howl of the foundry furnace, buffeted by waves of searing heat that penetrated her thermal suit, she had watched ingots of bronze melt into a molten mass in the crucible; felt the sudden shock of silence when the blast furnace was cut, just like the moment of the crash; saw the glowing crucible lifted by a crane and tipped to spill its incandescent contents into the mould; heard the hissing as the liquid

metal vaporized away the wax, just as her hands had been. Then, as the mould cracked open, there, still radiating intense heat, stood her music, birthed into solid form by fire.

“That was the moment I became whole again. The sculpture is called *Restoration*.”

He slowly circled it with growing fascination: from the base arose two giant sets of hands, one slightly larger than the other, enfolding one another, intertwining, digits flowing from one hand to the other, reforming, changing with every angle, so that one could not tell which pair was holding which, conveying at once succour, compassion, healing, love.

Once again by her side, he dared to ask the question that had insistently crept into his mind. “Are those ...”

She nodded. “Yes, they’re my hands — and also yours. You were my model.”

“Mine? Me? How could ... ?”

“Every time you visited me in the hospital, I studied your hands as you took notes. They are strong, but gentle, caring, filled with love. I came to believe they could guide me.”

He blushed. “You can tell all that just from looking at someone’s hands?”

“I’m a pianist,” she declared, taking his in hers. “I know hands.”

And in that still moment, his unrelenting soul-sickness fell away from him. “It’s a masterpiece,” he whispered.

She smiled back at him. “And perhaps I am yours.”

#### **Richard B. Weinberg AB MD**

Wake Forest School of Medicine,  
Winston-Salem, NC

This article has been peer reviewed.

This article is fiction, although loosely based on true events. Changes have been made to the narrative so that there is no possibility that the characters described herein could recognize themselves in this story.

**Content licence:** This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original publication is properly cited, the use is noncommercial (i.e., research or educational use), and no modifications or adaptations are made. See: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>