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The Splinters We Carry

IN CONVERSATION WITH:
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FEATURED PHOTOGRAPHY:
NATURE IS OUR MIRROR AND OUR HEALER BY SAM OSBISTON.

Cognitive Distortion

by Rob Rogers

For as long as I can remember, I have carried a large shard of glass in my face and skull. It's surprisingly light and pierces my face right below my right eye, penetrating my palate just behind my nasal cavity, then runs past my left tonsil and pokes out of the back of my head just below my hairline. Translucent and flush with the base of my orbital bone, it can be hard for others to see even in daylight. When you first meet me, you probably wouldn't notice it. But I can always feel it. As much as I'd like to remove it, it is as much a part of me as my skin and bones and blood, and I can't imagine living without it.

It doesn't hurt as much as you might expect; you get numb to it after a while. Sometimes I barely feel it at all, forget that it's there inside me, interfering with every thought and every word I say. But every time I meet new people, it shifts and sends waves of jabbing pinpricks into my brain, throbbing with each beat of my pulse. And whether anyone else notices it or not, it always hurts.

I only vaguely remember the day I got it. Playing alone in my backyard, too shy to talk to other children if any were even around, I was lost in fantasy as always. I remember that something was bothering me that day, as something often did back then. I recall climbing through the junk in our stand-alone garage, pretending to be Indiana Jones searching for long-lost relics, or for anything to relieve my endless boredom. And then a slip, a fall, a crash, then darkness. When I came to, I noticed that an old mirror had shattered and left one of its tentacles inside me. There was surprisingly little blood, or any mess at all, other than the icicles of broken glass. All the blood from my injury seemed to have spilled down my throat.

I tried to pull the blade out of my head, but the razor-sharp shaft had broken right beneath the surface of my skin, and I couldn't get a grip. I tried to push it through the back of my head, but each vibration of its jagged edges shot fire through my jaw without jarring it free. Eventually, the blood and bile inside my mouth congealed, and the pain subsided. So, I sat in the dark among the debris, silently crying, accepting that I was helpless.

I was used to being alone and finding my way through my own troubles. So, I just waited there in the darkness. Before long, that blade inside my head began to feel like it belonged, like it had been there for a long time. It felt like something that deserved to be inside me.

I closed my mouth, picked myself up, and returned to my solitary diversion.

My parents didn't notice. They were preoccupied that night with work and external responsibilities. I complained a lot, they said. I liked to exaggerate. I lied to get what I wanted and was an untrustworthy child. I was not what they expected, not what the world expected. A hyper-sensitive, melodramatic child, always seeking attention. My job was to pay attention in school, go to church, wear the right clothes, and not complain.

I thought my parents would see my discomfort, that they would be able to tell something was wrong and care. But my theatrics that day were apparently no different than they were on any other day. So, I kept my wound to myself.

I soon got used to carrying this secret splinter around my head. Somehow, the distraction of elementary school and recess and television helped me forget that it was there. It was only in those

awkward spaces of silence that its ridges dug into my mouth and neck. Every time I met a new person, I was crippled with the realization that something was wrong with me. That I was ugly, even if invisibly, and I was different. You never know how people are going to react to that sort of thing. I didn't want to know what other people might think if they saw what was lurking beneath my skin.

It became more painful as I grew older. Puberty and its hormones seemed to intensify the throbbing, especially once the kids in junior high and then high school began shuffling off into their cliques. Mountains of acne rose around the severed tip beneath my eye, and its shaft seemed to ensnare my tongue every time I tried to make new friends or talk to girls. I avoided the beach and high school parties, knowing that the stress of informal social interactions and the shame of the scars I bore would magnify my discomfort. Better to just avoid the risk of embarrassment.

When I got to college, unshackled by the scrutiny of my parents and desperate to test my boundaries, I learned to medicate. I bathed my wound in smoke and drink, tranquilizing the social anxiety as best I could and forcing myself into oceans of superficial social connection. It was there, at fraternity houses and keg parties, that I encountered the ostracism that I had avoided in high school. Weightlifting meatheads seemed to enjoy nothing more than sniffing out weakness and showcasing it for public ridicule. It was first-class entertainment. Several memorable lessons forced me back into the shadows. I could only find relief buried in textbooks, or lost in the anonymous darkness of nightclub dance floors and arena mosh pits.

Every now and then, I found someone who seemed not to mind my defect. Inevitably, it always seemed to be a girl, always someone totally unlike the woman who reluctantly bore me. Starved for attention, I often mistook kindness for attraction and fell in love quickly. On those god-sent occasions when my hunch proved correct, I showered them with affection, doing all I could to nourish the seed of a new romance to maturity. But in my inexperience and my rush to form a bond that would last, I overshared and emoted. I defied conventional conceptions of masculinity and wore my vulnerability too openly. Worse, I expected my girlfriends to be both lovers and nurses, to heal the old wound I had never treated myself. The relationships rarely survived the strain for very long, and they would soon become little more than fading images on photographs in a desk drawer. And then I would be alone again with my big glass shard.

The pain eventually got so bad that I had to be hospitalized. As I grew older, pieces of the splinter seemed to break off, burying deeper inside me and breeding their own new kinds of inflammation. Infection spread, and by the end of a particularly hard year, I worried that it would take my life.

The doctors tried to dig it out. They prescribed medications and consulted colleagues. But eventually they seemed to realize that the sliver could not be removed. Systems sustaining my brain function had been built around its presence. My body had adopted it so thoroughly that it relied upon the sharp, crystalline serrations to protect me from external pathogens. Its rigidity had taken on part of the burden of supporting my spine. My mind

"Poverty spreads like a fire,
untamed, spreading like a virus!
Millions suffer, their dreams
erased, their hopes dashed!
Every corner showcase a country
in pain!
Longing to be free, to breathe
once again!"
~ Anselm Eme

had built itself around this splinter and incorporated it so completely that it was not prepared to continue without it.

My physicians taught me how to live with it. Modern medicines helped numb the pain it caused and allowed me to sleep. Through those difficult months, my recovery was eventually achieved through adaptation rather than extraction. I learned to live with my broken piece of glass.

But still, I was ashamed of it. When I left college to begin my adult life and entered the professional world, I hid my injury. The same co-eds I had avoided in high school and been demeaned by in college grew up to become supervisors and colleagues. The world of business was competitive and cold-blooded. To survive, I had no choice but to conceal my weakness. The awkwardness and introversion it caused were presented to the world as mere eccentricities. Just like in college, I buckled down, studied, learned, and honed my skills. To almost all the world, I remained the hyper-sensitive curmudgeon, a loner who participated but always held others at arm's length, and who occasionally lost his temper and withdrew from the world for no apparent reason.

Eventually, a peaceful life found me. Over the years, I learned to treat the infections caused by my splinter and to limit the debilitating impact they had on my personal life. I learned to fall in love without forfeiting my ability to take care of myself. I sustained a relationship with one of those kind women who accepted my scars. A long, happy marriage blossomed, full of intimacy and travel and intellectual enrichment. In time, an equally kind daughter was born and grew into another friend. I have always shared my secret defect with them without shame. Sometimes it bleeds in ways I can't help but impose upon them, and sometimes they share the pain it causes. But afterwards, I always confess, apologize, and atone.

Throughout the decades since the shard first found me, I've gotten used to it, and in many ways, I've even come to appreciate it. I can now see that many other people have their own splinters and wounds that they hide, and that people don't always find mine all that ugly. I'm not so ashamed of my scars anymore. I don't even regret so much that the sliver of glass in my head has cost me relationships and professional opportunities because it has also protected me from danger. The pangs it triggers often ring like an alarm, persuading me to avoid unhealthy relationships and professional ambitions whose cost would exceed their benefit. My splinter has helped me hone a sixth sense that seems to zero in on authentic friends and reliable clients, and coworkers. My handicap has made me more careful and more attuned to my environment.

These days, I no longer hide the splinter of glass I carry around in my head. It no longer feels like a punishment or a deformity. It's just part of who I am. I still feel it digging into me every time I walk into a wedding reception or a cocktail party, or every time I receive a call at work from someone I don't know or meet new people while tailgating at football games. It still tells me that I don't belong, that I'm strange and that everyone in the room will exchange glances when I leave, confirming that I shouldn't have come. But it's just something my brain does, and it's most often a figment of my imagination, a voice to be refuted. I tell it to go to the corner and be quiet. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But I no longer worry that it will one day kill me.

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