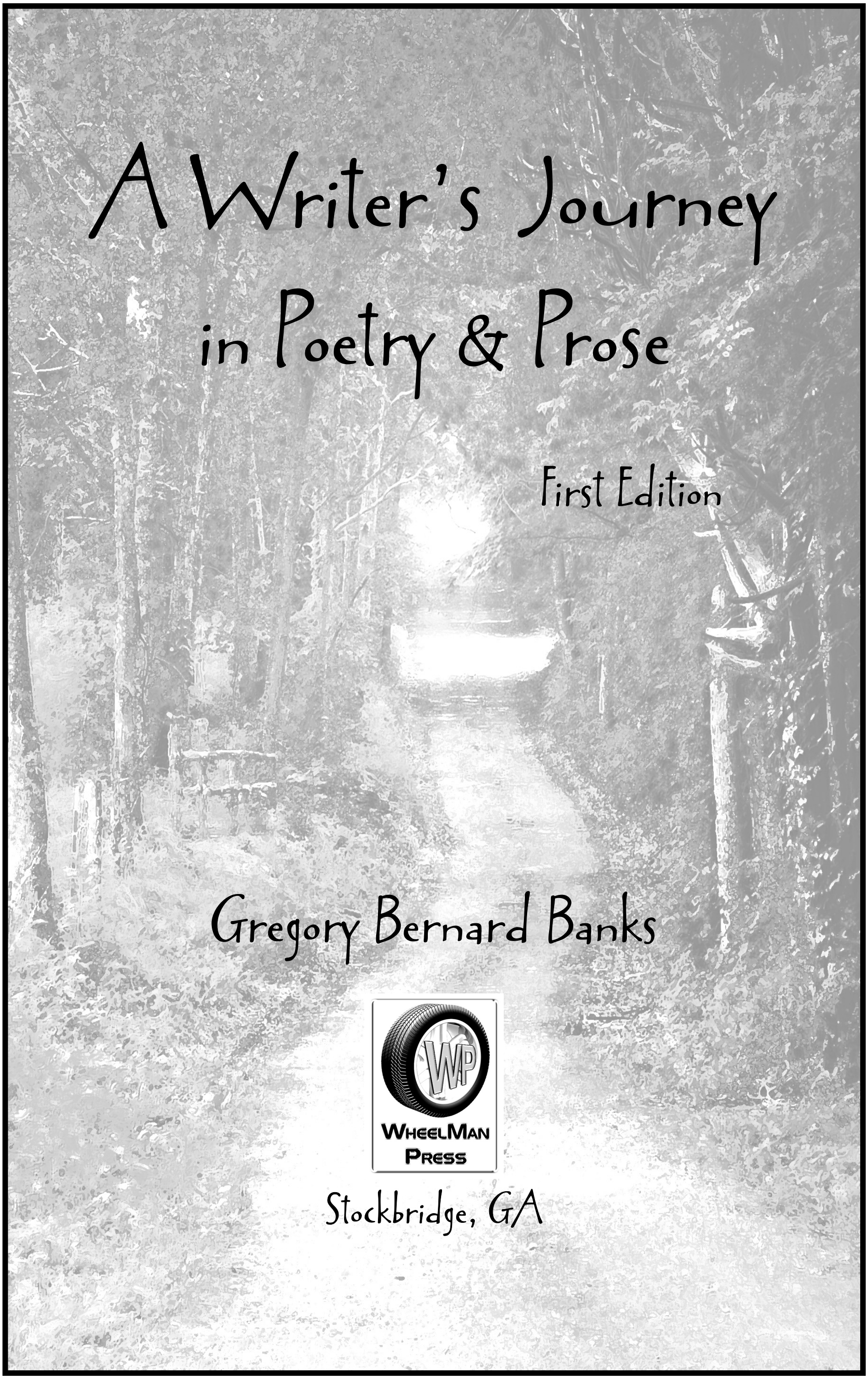

A Writer's Journey in Poetry & Prose

First Edition

Gregory Bernard Banks

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Other Publications by Gregory Bernard Banks

- *Crossroads and Other Tales* - WheelMan Press
- *Phoenix Tales: Stories of Death & Life* - WheelMan Press
- *The Summoner* (ebook) - Amazon Shorts
- *Two By Two* (ebook) - Amazon Shorts

Foreword:

A Journey in Words

Writing is a spiritual journey. And in my case, my 10-year long writing journey has very much paralleled my life, often reflecting what was going on inside my head and heart even more so than I may sometimes care to admit.

The last ten years have been a whirlwind of mental and spiritual growth, where I went from a 31-year old child-man mostly focused on his own little universe to one with a vastly heightened sense of self awareness in relation to the world around him; a person more contemplative of the world around him and desirous of becoming an active participant in it.

It is said that one should be "in this world, not of it." Many take this as an excuse to think of oneself as being superior in some way to those around them, to consider themselves "too good" to stoop down to the levels of others. But I believe that this simply means that each of us should strive to be greater than our physical selves, to strive to reach for the stars...to dare to dream.

Although I am an extremely liberal-minded person who feels that most every view is worthy of being heard and considered, my own personal views are strong. I've often been accused of trying to suppress other's views, when in fact it is my own strongly voiced views that others wish to suppress. I've never felt threatened by a differing opinion, and I feel that those who are threatened by another's opinion simply don't want to admit that they have doubts about their own views. I just don't believe that any one perspective alone is the whole truth, that the actual truth lies not at one end of the spectrum or the other, but somewhere in between.

These are some of the things I've learned about myself in the last decade. Although I do not believe that it's my place to teach or to preach what others should think, my own beliefs are an intricate part of who I am, and this often comes out in my actions and in my writing.

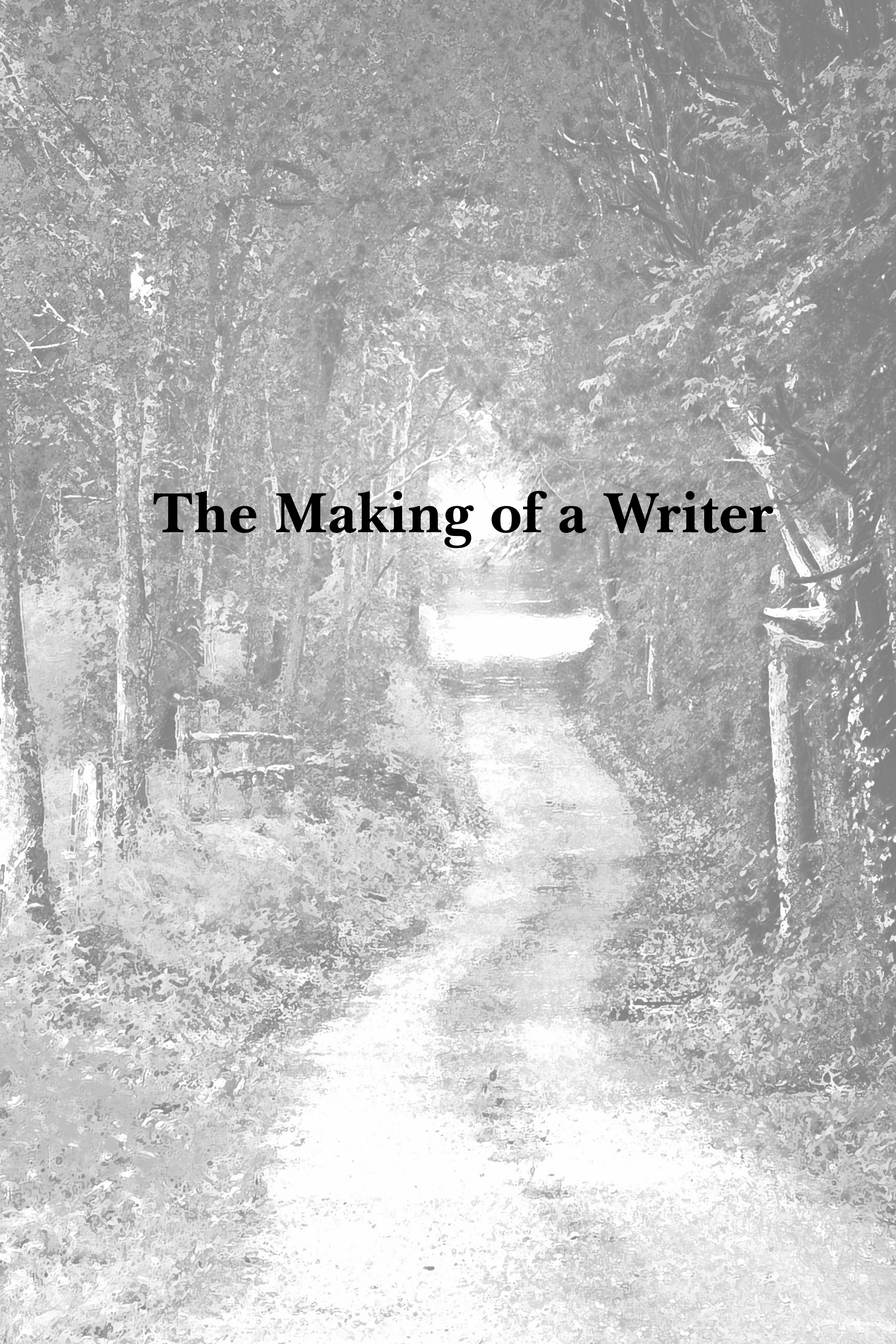
In this book I'll take you on an exploration of my own journey by examining both my writing and my art from both the past and present. I may not go as deep into some things as you'd like (gotta leave room for a potential book II, don't I?), but I hope you'll at least find it interesting, and hopefully entertaining. Maybe a few of you will even find it inspiring. Who knows? I've been told by many that it is time for me to share my story with others, which is a very hard thing to do. So consider this book round one of this new and scary venture.

Hopefully, while sharing in my recent journeys, you'll find something that will help you understand your own journey as well.

- Gregory Bernard Banks, author, artist and friend.

To everyone who has supported
me throughout this life journey...

The Making of a Writer



A Creator Born

I don't remember much about my early years. Although I was born here in Atlanta, at Grady's Memorial Hospital in October of 1965, I spent my first three years living in New Jersey, where my Dad had moved to find work just prior to marrying my Mother.

Although much is known about Osteogenesis Imperfecta (a.k.a. Brittle Bone Disease) now, little was known back then. I was born with several fractures, and I think the doctors felt I had little chance of surviving. It took time for my family to learn how to handle such a delicate child, though my Grandmother stepped in right away. She seemed to naturally understand what to do and I think she did most of the handling of me for the first couple of weeks, until my Mother returned to New Jersey with my Dad.

There were many tough times, which included several bouts of chronic bronchitis and pneumonia, times when I suffered fractures at the hands of others who were well-intentioned but just unable to understand how fragile I was. Even nurses at a New Jersey hospital, against doctor's specific orders, once passed me around like a plaything, an incident that left me with numerous fractures. Of course I don't remember any of these things, but somehow, some way, I came through them all relatively whole.

This brings me to something that bothers me greatly. People who have never experienced a disability often think that we lead a life of sadness, of inadequacy, and are deserving of everyone's pity because our quality of life is so poor. And I know there are a lot of parents of O.I. kids out there who also feel similar things toward their children. But my parents never treated me in such a way, and I grew up feeling like any other happy child.

What people don't understand is that one person's perspective on life isn't ruled by how you yourself may see things. I grew up suffering, on average, at least one fracture each and every week up until the age of 16. And yet I never felt depressed or deprived, or thought of myself as different from any other kid. When an able-bodied person thinks of such things, they think of it from the perspective of what it would be like to go from what is normal for them now to a life with a disability. But when you are born with a disability, that disability, and all that goes along with it, *is* your version of normal. The only times I ever felt strange or different was during those times others treated me as such.

And that brings me to something else I still do not understand today. How is it that human beings, who are supposedly the most advanced and intelligent beings on this planet, stand before you and blatantly stare down at you as if you are an alien with three and a half heads, or something that should be stuck to their shoe? Do they think that because I may look strange to them, that I don't have feelings? It's thoughts like those that led me to write the essay below, which appeared in *Audacity Magazine* (audacitymagazine.com) in April of 2005:

The Happiest Place

It's funny how some things from your past can fade into oblivion, while others become shadows that dog your footsteps for the rest of your life; or how things begin to take on more significance in retrospect than they ever did at the time they occurred. My last visit to Disney World in Orlando, Florida was one of those times.

I've loved Disney since my first visit, when I was seven years old. My parents were concerned that I wouldn't be able to enjoy Disney because of my fear of loud noises. And an amusement park, especially one of the magnitude of the "Happiest Place on Earth," surely isn't the best place to avoid noise.

So my parents bought me earplugs. It all seems stupid now, though I'm unsure if my lessened fear is because I'm an adult now (I'm still not comfortable with explosive sounds like fireworks and such, however), or because I've just grown deafer with age. Either way, those little rubber divers plugs proved a Godsend. As soon as I put them on, the joyful din of crowds and rides were muted, and the Magic Kingdom worked its spells on me.

Now, fast forward to around 16 years later. I was older and more mature (at least I didn't wear earplugs this time), and my youthful love for Disney World remained. The first thing I wanted to see again was The Enchanted Tiki Room, the dark circular hut where cheerful birds and stoic totem poles tell a musical tale. I get chills when I think of the dark clouds slowly overshadowing the stage as the room dims, the ominous chanting of the totems as the tension mounts, and the sudden clap of thunder at the height of the haunting song.

Unlike the first time, when I was so small that my parents carried me, this time I was in a wheelchair. Because of this, we didn't revisit the creepy "Haunted Mansion," or get reminded why "It's a Small World." Nor did we travel "20000 Leagues Under the Sea." But honestly, I didn't miss them. I'm still not much for crowds or rides, especially now that getting on an attraction means abandoning the safety and comfort of my wheelchair. But the vocal stylings of those Tikis more than made up for that. Besides, EPCOT Center had been built by then, and touring the science, history, and agricultural exhibits were much more fascinating.

On my first visit to Disney, I had been smaller, able to ride in a stroller or be carried around on my Mom or Dad's hip. I was just another little kid in a cornucopia of kids. Sure, I'd met Mickey, Minnie, and the Big Bad Wolf, and came away from the experience as scared/awed as any other child. But I wasn't treated any more special than the others. But as my family and I toured the park this trip, stopping at various venues to wait in disgustingly long lines, park attendants began to approach us. They would say "Hello!" with bright teeth flashing, and ask if we wanted to go inside. Once we said yes, we were escorted past the long lines of hot and gaping patrons, led through rope barriers, and taken inside and given prime seating in perfect view of the show. We didn't see many shows, but "Jim Henson's Muppet Vision 3-D" was the one attraction that stood out in my mind. The show itself was excellent, but the look of annoyance on the faces of all those patrons as we were led past them like royalty was totally priceless.

The treatment continued as we climbed aboard the "Living with the Land" boat ride, where I sat at the front of the boat next to the driver. But for me, the crowning glory of this star treatment was when we prepared to get aboard the Monorail. The attendant got on his walkie-talkie just like a Secret Service agent, and when the train arrived, a special key was used to unlock a seat and lift it up to make room for my chair. Even now I feel the thrill of having my wheelchair treated as a sign of utmost respect rather than the normal equivalent of a scarlet letter worthy of stark pity or scorn. As much as I'd enjoyed Disney World before, I think that it was during this visit that I truly fell in love with the place. Life's not all roses, however, and beneath the sweet scent of the deep red petals, the stink of fertilizer is sure to linger.

After years of being the public spectacle, a sideshow attraction that's not supposed to have the sense or sensibilities to know when I'm being stared at, I've got a built in radar that allows me to literally feel any gazes directed my way. But I didn't need the radar as we left the EPCOT Geodome. The kid who was walking ahead of us, maybe around ten or so with sandy blonde-hair, made his views painfully obvious. The moment he turned and laid eyes on me, he jumped up and down and pointed as he tugged his mother's sleeve, shouting "Mom! Look!" The mother, who seemed uninterested after probably having had this very routine repeated a thousand times that day, finally turned around. As soon as she saw the object of her son's hysterics, she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away as she bent over to whisper admonishments in his ear.

I tried to shake the event off as if it were no big deal. "I've been through this hundreds of times before haven't I?" I said to myself. But somehow, this time was different. After the exquisite treatment I'd enjoyed all afternoon, it was as if I had been unmasked and my secret had been revealed. Now everyone knew that in truth I was merely a freak all dressed up in a nobleman's clothes.

On the outside it was no big deal, and the sun continued to shine as our day at the "Happiest Place on Earth" went merrily along. And yet in the back of my mind, in the well of my spirit, that moment lingered. As I think back on it now, the real reason it troubled me so much was that my own fantasy had been shattered. Until that kid came along, I was feeling a stronger sense of belonging than at any other point in my life. For once, I was in a place where I was truly welcomed and appreciated, and this child had taken it all away in the thrust of a finger.

I don't know if such a nasty sounding word as "fester" is the most appropriate here, but lacking a better word, that incident festered inside me for days after, hurting me more than I understood then and even find it hard to admit now. As our vacation continued, we visited our other favorite place, Sea World, and all was seemingly well. And yet I can't recall what happened from that moment in Disney World until we headed back home a few days later. The only thing I see in my mind is the gesturing boy, except in my revised version of events he's shouting, "Look at the freak! Look at the freak!" All the others who'd in some way, shape, or form treated me in this way were embodied in this one moment, as if this child had taken on the role of spokesperson for the rest of the world.

As my family and I headed home from Orlando, we stopped over for an hour at our old stomping grounds of Daytona. I once loved Daytona Beach, with its quaint and beautiful boardwalk overlooking its white sands. It was a place of peace and relaxation that even as a kid I'd come to appreciate.

But times change, and as big business recognized the potential boon the place held, they bought up the area and erected skyscraping hotels right along the shore. While the boardwalk remained, as did most of the tiny shops and stores, it was all overshadowed by those buildings that stuck up like concrete middle fingers expressing what they thought of my beloved memories. The once family-friendly domain had become party central for the waves of spring breakers who descended upon the place every year, leaving the hangover of their youthful debauchery behind. They say that you can't go home again, so maybe the above perception is merely in my head, brought on by my change in perspective as I grew older. But I don't think so, or least it's not the only factor. If a place is capable of having a spirit, Daytona Beach's spirit had been corrupted from what I remembered. Beach bums and panhandlers ruled it now, one even approaching my Dad for a handout just minutes after our arrival.

Whatever had changed, this discovery only added to my melancholy. The cosmic/spiritual forces were attempting to drown me, and although I was keeping my head above water, I wasn't making much progress swimming toward shore.

As my family and I continued to walk along the boardwalk, we passed several beachfront hotel bars. The long strip mall-like building housing the old amusements looked like a run-down shack compared to its modernized neighbors. And yet it held on stubbornly, an old relic keeping nostalgia alive. Meanwhile, that boy and his pointing finger kept haunting me.

We soon arrived at the old arcade, which hadn't changed one bit. It was still dark and noisy. Skee Ball machines still lined the walls. Kids of all ages stlll crowded the place. When we entered, the room was as stuffy as ever. Even though being there brought back fond memories in one sense, I also remembered how much I hated being in that hot, raucous, and crowded room.

After a few minutes, I spotted a kid of around the same age as the "look at the freak!" boy, though perhaps he was a year or so older. He stared at me, but not with agitation or fear. He didn't grab someone's sleeve, nor did he jab fingers in my direction. The look on his face was mere curiosity. He left his game and approached. Cries of “Look at the freak! Look at the freak!” echoed in my head.

The boy walked up to me. He knelt, his head cocked to the side. He waved his hand in front of my face and simply said “Hi!” I said “Hey” in reply.

I wish I could remember exactly what else we said to each other. I know he told me his name and I’m sure I told him mine. He asked where I was from, and I think he was a local kid, not a tourist like myself. Whatever we said to one another, our encounter was brief. But once it was over, I felt a lessening of the weight on my shoulders. The thick clouds blotting out my normally sunny view thinned a bit. I’d like to think that I experienced a life altering moment, a true epiphany in which I became a new man with a new outlook on life. Wouldn’t we all like to drag our inner demons out into the light and beat them into submission, then banish them from our sight forever? I know I sure would.

Too bad life’s not that easy, especially for a living, breathing, thinking human being. There are days when I feel invincible, and other days when I feel naked and defenseless to whatever hurts life throws my way. But what I have come to understand is that without the valleys, the peaks have little meaning. Without periods of sadness, you wouldn’t understand how miraculous those precious moments of joy really are. Doesn’t make those valleys any easier to climb out of, but at least it helps me keep a balanced perspective when I find myself staring up out of that deep, expansive bowl longing to reach the cool peaks high above.

As much as I want to say that the “Skee Ball Kid” totally changed my life forever, it just isn’t true. But what he did do for me is make my life a little better at a time I was feeling particularly low. I'm sure he has no idea the impact his simple act of friendship had, but I hope whoever and wherever he is now, that he's happy, healthy, and continuing to share his positive spirit with others. He's probably forgotten me by now, but that's okay. It's enough to know that I'll never forget him or what he did for me. As for the other kid, I'm sure he's grown up to be a kind and generous man. I have no hard feelings toward him, and wish him well.

After all, it's not his fault that for that one defining moment in time, he behaved like an idiot.

Scottish Rite Hospital

In 1970, my parents learned about Scottish Rite Hospital located in Atlanta (they have since merged with the former Eggleston's Children's Hospital to form Children's Healthcare of Atlanta), and they took me there for evaluation one day.

I remember parts of that day well. As soon as the doctors saw me, with my severely deformed arms and legs that looked like little pretzels, they admitted me to the hospital for further tests. That was the scariest night of my life, the first one I can remember being away from my parents, spent in a strange place with strange people in a big, noisy hospital ward. This was the beginning of a new chapter in my life, during which I had at least seven operations on my legs to straighten them using a technique called "rodding."

To those not in the know, rodding is the process of inserting internal splints into the long bones of the arms or legs, The bones are usually cut into several sections and threaded onto the rods, which are made to telescope or stretch out as the person grows. After my legs were done, I lost flexibility in my knees. Although my arms were twisted as well, it was feared that I'd also lose flexibility in my arms. As I had adapted to using my arms, and was capable of doing anything I wished with them, the doctors decided it was best if they left my arms as they were.

While I do think they made the right decision now, sometimes I wish I'd been older and could have decided for myself. Because each arm twists in different directions, I can't bring my hands together because I can only reach a limited way to the front with my left arm. This makes typing with two hands nearly impossible for me, so I type with my right hand only, and I do other things (such as feeding myself) with my left. It works well for me overall, but still there are times I can't help but wonder what it'd be like if my arms were straight.

I have what's known as *Type III* Osteogenesis (which can include such things as brittle bones and teeth, short stature, bone deformity, blue sclera (white's of the eye) at birth, respiratory problems, etc.). I have, or have had, most of these in some form. I dealt with chronic bronchitis as a child, and I have to keep close watch on any colds I get and the allergies to pollen I've developed because they tend to lead to chest congestion. But despite all of these things, and numerous times when I was very sick, mostly while I was a baby, I feel good today and greatly blessed to simply be alive.

Scottish Rite became a second home to me. I met many doctors and nurses who became very good friends, as well as making friends with other kids who were patients as well. I remember how once, after lights out, another kid and I (his name escapes me now, unfortunately) had a checkerboard stretched between our beds playing a game until the board eventually fell to the floor. I remember the overnight male orderly who preferred to call me by my first name rather than my middle name (as all of my family does), because he said he didn't like Bernard. I remember the doctor who used to intentionally make me mad, even on the way to the operating room, just for fun, and who probably did more to keep my nerves calm and my spirits high during those scary times than I ever understood. I remember Dr. Rothenberg, who at the time was "the man" when it came to treating patients with O.I. He was a man of compassion and understanding who helped my family through a very trying time. And I remember nurse Becky with her special handshake who once sneaked me French fries during lunch time. Best French Fries I ever had!

Of course there were bad times, like the bratty kid who threatened to pull me out of my bed and throw me on the floor. Now I'd probably try to kick his teeth in (or at least have the sense to scream for help), but back then I was young and scared. Fortunately a nurse or someone came along in time to stop him. And there were the many times when I had to visit the clinic for checkups, and had to wait all day in a crowded room to see the doctor. I used to get so nervous that I grew sick to my stomach almost every time.

I also remember the night, after a surgery, when both my legs and lower torso were wrapped in a cast. I had trouble breathing, and the doctors soon came and cut a section out of the front of my cast to give me more breathing room, and then ran a tube down my throat. I didn't understand until much later on that I'd had a collapsed lung. I remember waking up the next morning and hoping that they pulled the tube out before my Mom got there because I was afraid it would scare her to see me like that. I felt fine by then, and as I said, I didn't really understand how serious the situation was. And yet I came through it all a happy kid who liked to play with his Wheel-O and Legos and his Fisher-Price play sets. Life, as far as I was concerned, was good.

Throughout my first 16 years or so, I suffered a fracture on an average of about once a week. I've also had many bouts with bronchitis and pneumonia along the way. Most of those times are hazy or totally forgotten to me, but I have no doubts that its all helped to shape the person I am today. Writing, in all its forms, is an exploration of self. When I was younger, I wasn't ready to do this, and so I resisted the opportunity to write which was presented to me while in school by my home-bound teacher and friend, Carla Denney.

Life Journeys

In life, everyone has their struggles and trials. Those who are disabled aren't especially different in that respect. The forms of our challenges may be dissimilar, as are our views of them, but otherwise we're pretty much the same. I've grown a lot in the last ten years or so, and I hope that by exploring this in the following pages someone else will get inspiration or encouragement from my story. Again, other people tell me that I'm special, that it's important for others to hear what I have to say. Personally, I think I'm just another human being like everyone else who's dealing with situations that in themselves may be unique, but which result in basically the very same problems that all people face.

And you know, maybe *that,* more than anything else, is the message the world needs to hear.