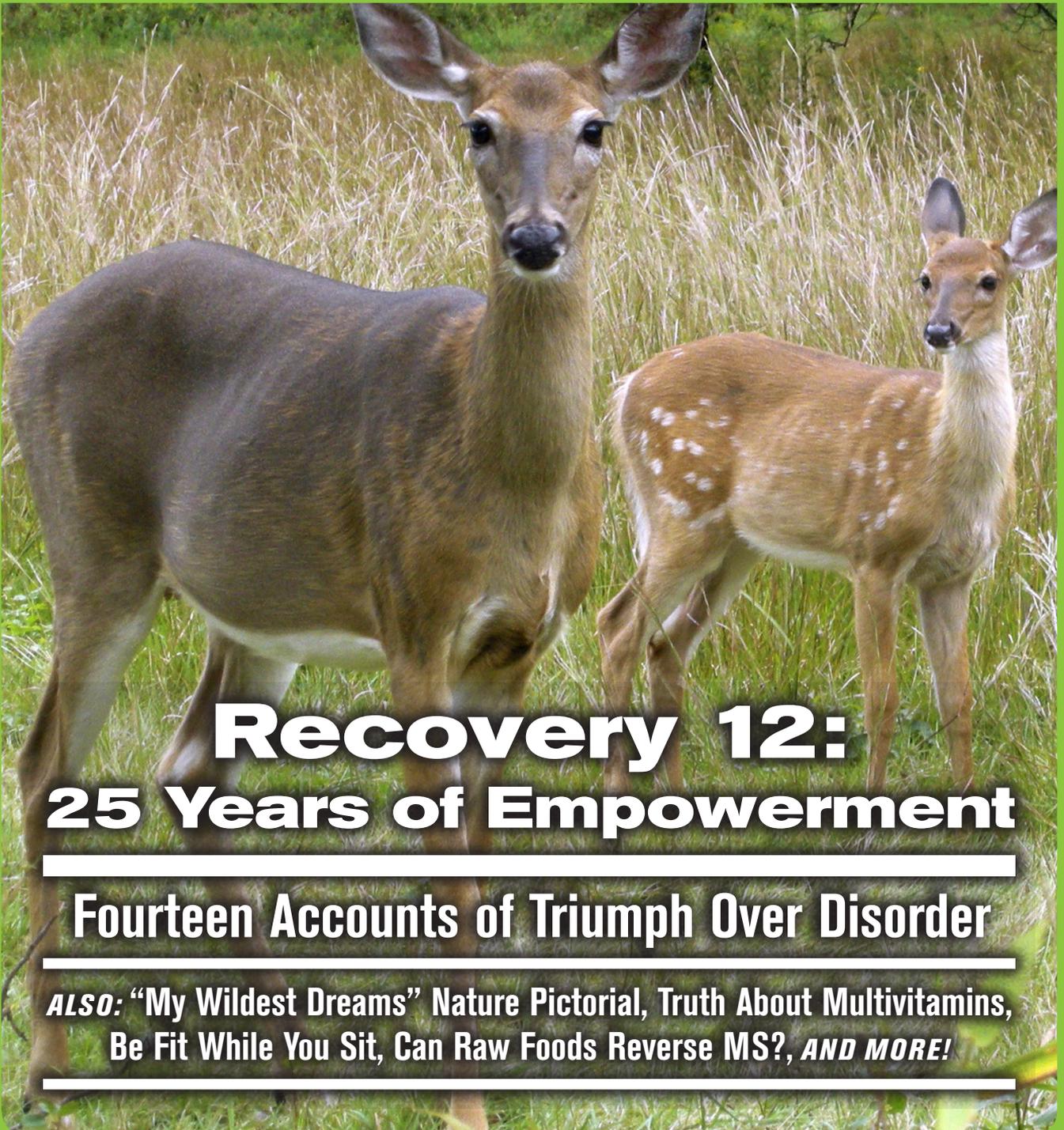


HEALING OUR WORLD



Recovery 12: 25 Years of Empowerment

Fourteen Accounts of Triumph Over Disorder

***ALSO: "My Wildest Dreams" Nature Pictorial, Truth About Multivitamins,
Be Fit While You Sit, Can Raw Foods Reverse MS?, AND MORE!***



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OPPOSITE PAGE, THIS PAGE:

*Deer photos by Mark Mathew Braunstein.
See the full pictorial beginning on page 40.*

A photograph of three deer in a grassy field. One deer is in the foreground on the left, looking towards the camera. Two other deer are in the middle ground, one looking towards the camera and the other looking to the right. The background consists of tall grass and a line of trees.

MY WILDEST DREAMS

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Born into the baby boom and raised during the housing boom, I grew up in a fresh new tract of suburbia which bordered an undeveloped state park. While boys my age played baseball and imagined batting themselves into major league stardom, I played in the woods and fantasized seeing deer. Deer embodied for me the wild in the flowery phrase wild animal, an adjective which barely befit the squirrels chewing up the attic, or the rabbits snacking in the garden, or the coons rustling through the garbage. Among local fauna, deer inhabited my wildest dreams.

As an early teenager bird watching in that nearby woodland park, I kept ever vigilant for deer. I envisioned that they lurked just around the bend, just across the field, just inside the next clearing, just beyond the forest edge. Same as a child on Christmas Eve anticipating the arrival of Santa and his reindeer, I hoped to see deer. Despite my vigil, I never saw any reindeer parked atop my roof, nor any deer reside inside my park.

I often did see deer in another undeveloped state park fifteen miles to the east, and in deeper woods still farther east, or along the highway as I rode to these destinations armored in

a car. But nary a deer in the park next door. Instead, deer inhabited my wildest dreams. Due to political climate change, deer hunters no longer do so, but when I was a child many homeward bound hunters tied their naked quarry to the roofs of their cars. The sight of road kill made me sad, but those brazen hearses made me cry, in fact cry twice, that second time when I was nearly nine.

Thirty years later, the pivotal day of my life was my 39th birthday. For most of us, our primary rite of passage is marked by our first wedding or our recent divorce, by the birth of our first child or the death of our last remaining parent, by that first sip of wine which began our descent into alcoholism or that final puff of smoke which emanated from the embers of our last cigarette or joint. My turning point was less familial and more singular, less sanguinary and more solitary. Sober but celebratory, I dived off a footbridge into a river and emerged awaiting a wheelchair. I shattered a vertebrae, of which a fragment injured the fragile bundle of nerves of my spinal cord. Diagnosis: paralysis, but not everywhere, just below the waist. Prognosis: paralysis, but not forever, just the rest of my life.

During rehab, I took a stand against spinal cord injury. A year later, I ambulated with crutches. I still wheel at home, and do nearly everything I used to do, just lower. And yet I continue to crutch elsewhere than at home, and go nearly everywhere I used to go, just slower. A born-again pedestrian, I eventually resumed most of my previous activities, including nature photography. But the world I now photograph has narrowed in focus. I photograph mostly my backyard. And sometimes, in an effort to explore new terrain, I photograph my front yard.

As a suburban teen who read Thoreau, my life's ambition was not to earn wealth or to father a family or to gain fame, but to live alone in a house in the woods. And that I now do. I live in a nature preserve, not quite wilderness, but nature nonetheless, and far removed from the suburbs of my childhood.

Every night, wildlife plunder my compost heap for its kitchen scraps. Little ever gets composted, but instead is eaten by many nocturnal visitors, among them deer. Yet for many years I rarely saw any deer, just their tracks in the mud or snow. One day in March an already frigid and snowy winter culminated in a blizzard that bestowed a foot of dense wet snow. ➡



Snowstorm or not, winter's critical final month tests the survival of all wild animals. Feeding wild animals is a thorny issue, but ultimately we do so for our own entertainment. Birdwatchers feed birds to behold them at their windows, and I decided to feed deer to commune with them at my door. Though informed of reasons why not to feed any wild animal, I seized upon the blizzard as an excuse to go ahead and dole out their rations anyway. Even though deer are better left unfed, I rationalized that I deserved to feed them. Thus with the aid of a cornucopia of cracked corn, I initiated my Year of the Deer.

Being typically human, I harbored selfish motives. I plotted to lure the deer with bait, and then to shoot them. I mean with a camera. Initially, if I merely appeared at a window, the deer would spook and head for the hills. Smart deer. But slowly, slowly, they allayed their well founded fears of humans, and they began to accept the sight of me from behind my window. The sweet temptation of my judicious allocation of cracked corn provided them with a powerful incentive. My offerings continued for two months. Then one day early in May, one very pregnant and very hungry doe lingered long enough for me to shoot from my opened window the first of her family photos.

One day in June, while puttering around outside in my wheelchair, I happened upon two fawns. Or rather they happened upon me. The two fawns stood transfixed, I sat spellbound, and time's clock stopped. They were the first fawns I had ever beheld so newly born, and though old and decrepit I surely was their first human. Then I blinked, and poof, they disappeared. They left me bewildered in the wilderness. When I had cried at age nine, I was awed by the mystery of death. Now I again cried, awed by the miracle of birth.

Between accidental birth and inevitable death, lurks life. We humans observe relatively little of deer's waking hours, as deer are primarily nocturnal.

When we do see them during daylight, they are merely grabbing quick snacks between long naps. So picture this. The time is early evening just after sunset, when deer begin their workday in earnest. The place is a meadow which abuts woodland, except where it borders my home, a decaying old house with a view of a fecund young meadow.

Now picture one doe and her two fawns every early evening making their rounds to this meadow, expectant of their daily allowance of cracked corn, assured of easy egress into the adjoining woods. And last and not least, picture one lone crippled human, crouched in a wheelchair, hunkered over a camera mounted on a tripod, day after day wheeling his tripod closer to the ever wary deer. Rather than arm myself with a cannon-like 300mm telephoto lens, instead I practiced patience and fortitude, took up arms with merely 180mm, and instead of a single burst of buckshot I daily purveyed small portions of cracked corn.

Thus I began to document the doe's family for three seasons, spring through fall. I started in May from indoors, peering through a window from 150 feet away. Testing their tolerance, day by day I inched forward until they backed away. By July, I wheeled into the field, sitting and shooting from 100 feet away.

Twice in late July and once in early August, I witnessed the doe suckling her young, a very vulnerable position for both generations, so seldom seen by humans and less seldom documented by photographers. Like a jealous lover, I was envious of her fawns, as I wished that I, too, could crouch under the doe and suckle upon her. Adherents to a conventional American diet might respond to my confession with either revulsion or regurgitation. But as a radical vegan since my teens, it is I who is appalled by humans who daily commit the same hungry act upon a diseased Cow Mother. Oh, poor abused cow, tethered to the ignominy of a milk-

sucking machine. Oh, poor exploited calf, condemned to the incarceration of a veal crate. As veal floats invisibly inside every quart of cow milk, I choose my Earth Mother more wisely, and seek mine among the wild and the free. Hence my now not-so-secret desire to suckle upon a Deer Mother, but just once, as not to deprive the fauns of their birthright.

During this entire summer, rain was abundant and frequent, vegetation was plump and lush, and with plenty to eat the deer had a field day, indeed many field days. Yet no matter how well nursed or well fed, deer retain an appetite for cracked corn, a dessert for which my human presence was worth tolerating. Deer find corn so irresistible that they raid cornfields despite the threat of being gunned down by farmers and hunters, compared to which being shot by my camera was far more benign.

In the ongoing human war against animals, I was a turncoat who long ago had sided with the underdog, the scapegoat, and the sitting duck. One September day, in a long delayed response, nature reciprocated and embraced my truce. On this day, sensing that my unwieldy tripod intimidated them more than did I, I left behind my camera and tripod. I wheeled forward, a bucket of cracked corn on my lap. I discerned no divine calling, felt no deep premonitions, harbored no ulterior motives, instead I simply sat and watched and waited. I dispensed a line of corn onto the ground, wheeled back barely twenty feet, and in a few minutes my familiar family of deer appeared, ventured forward, and began to eat. As though tables were turned, perhaps they had invited me to join them at their dinner table. So there I sat, bucket on lap, my arms outstretched, and to assure them I held no projectiles I turned my palms upward. I did not realize until later that Renaissance painters, for instance Giovanni Bellini, posed St. Francis as such for receiving the stigmata. ➡

Halfway through their meal, which typically lasts but ten minutes before they reach their full and retreat, my deer family was joined by another neighboring family of deer, a doe with two fawns too. I had learned to recognize and differentiate mature deer, usually by the distinct scars or wounds bestowed upon them from earning a living in the wild. Fawns, however, not yet having acquired such injuries, prove harder to identify. I did recognize this second doe as an infrequent visitor, as though on a guest pass. I dispensed a second line of cracked corn for her family, and then again sat perfectly still, my stillness perfect.

The neighboring doe hesitated, and looked to my own neighborhood doe, as though to ask her, "What's with this human?" Mine must have answered, "He's okay, he's with us." So the neighbors stepped forward and began to eat, while I sat solemnly still. Then things got really hairy.

A buck antlered in full regalia, whom I saw only twice before, briefly before dawn, emerged with an entourage of four yearlings, none whom I recognized. I dispensed a third and longer line of cracked corn, and then again I sat still, while in my head I took a head count. Three plus three plus one plus four. That's eleven locals and one closely watched intruder, a solitary member of the human horde in the middle of a deer herd. I was surrounded. No exit, nor did I seek one.

I was close enough for my dulled olfactory nerves to discern for my first time their deer scent, whereas all these months the deer much more deftly had smelled my human scent. But more than mere deer odor abounded here. The air was abuzz with energy, mostly deer energy, maybe some human energy, and a morsel of corn energy, because plants, too, are living beings. Soon the corn energy vanished, and too soon so did the deer. "Wait! Take me

with you!" I wanted to implore. But I just sat in silence and in contemplation of what I knew thereafter would rank as my life's most enriching moment, and exciting moment too, exceeding my excitement the first time a chickadee, winter hungry for my sunflower seeds, perched upon my hand.

In early October, from 40 feet away, I attained my goal of idealized family photos amid classic fall foliage. So I discontinued regular feedings, and during winter doled out corn only when our paths crossed, maybe twice a month. Though they continued to plunder my compost heap, Jane Doe and her two fawns survived the ensuing winter mostly without my intervention, as is meant to be.

While I may have forsaken the deer, they did not take leave of me. They took up residence in my dreams. Throughout fall and winter, at least once a week I recalled dreams about deer, and surely dreamed more than I recalled. Indeed,

I remembered more dreams about deer than about anything or anyone else, than even about human women. My heart already was taken. My dear deer.

With spring, the fawns grew into yearlings. By March I could sit within 15 feet of the yearlings, thereby both bridging a generation gap and surmounting a species barrier. In April, one of the yearlings developed two protuberances atop its head, so I could deduce that the other yearling displaying no imminent sign of antlers was a doe. A year for a deer often is half a lifetime. Were the yearling doe to survive another year and give birth to fawns, my photos potentially could chronicle one full life cycle. But I declared my photo project completed, thankful for the photos I had gotten. And people who are not happy with what they've got, are never happy.

In May, in preparation for her next cycle of newborn fawns, the again

pregnant doe drove off her yearlings. Growing up in my presence, the yearlings were far more tolerant of me than was the doe, so I too sent them away simply by my no longer dispensing corn. Thereafter, they did not flee me, but neither did they invite me into their family or into their world.

The peaceful evenings I had shared seated among the deer remain in my memory as more spiritually enriching than any other experience of my life. I shed being merely human, and while seated among them I entered into their world as deer. The endeavor needed much planning and patience. It also required several bushels of cracked corn and exactly one wheelchair. The wheelchair is crucial. Deer recognize it and me from a mile away. Seated, I'm their height, and so less intimidating. Indeed, I could not have entered into this communion afoot. I could attain it only in a wheelchair. 🪑



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Dr. Wayne Pickering faced the prognosis of death at age 30. Now, at 63 years young, he is an award-winning triathlete, double nominee for the Healthy American Fitness Leader Award, nutritional performance coach and disease prevention specialist. He's authored 21 books; 22 audio learning programs; two DVD series; 10 health systems and over 400 articles on fitness, stress and nutrition. Learn more at HealthAtLast.com.



Katherine C. Powell, EdD, has written many articles and books investigating how people develop confidence, a strong sense of self, and openness to discovering their true self or potential. Since 2004, Dr. Powell has taught graduate and undergraduate courses at FAU as a fulltime instructor. Her classes prepare teachers in the psychology of teaching, learning theories, classroom management and self-assessment.



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