

FROM THE SURGEON'S PRACTICE

Rudolf Flückiger

One glance at the X-ray is enough: fractured head of the fifth metacarpal bone – in layman's tongue, a break slightly above the end of the fifth bone in the mid-hand region. The piece of bone near the joint is usually bent toward the palm. Amongst young men, the "R" or "L" printed on the image is enough to surmise whether they are right- or left-handed; the question as to the cause of the accident is answered, and one can immediately ask after the cause of frustration: Been fired? Has she found someone else? Lost a game or a bet? Forgot an expensive cell phone in a bar? Been tricked? Mugged? The other party is rarely mentioned: a well-built wall is not likely to collapse when hit, and had the victim been a window, the bone would be intact, while skin and sinew would hurt and bleed.

Here, the talk is of a collision, force against force. It must hurt, and as the enemy was doubtlessly harder and less sensitive than bone, the pain is in his own hand, his own body. Some people can stomach a defeat, a loss, without flinching. Others at least pull a grimace before proceeding with business as usual; some begin to worry and question what they might have done wrong; reactive depression leads to doctors' visits. Daily, we receive transmissions on television featuring thousands of variations of how young athletes react to their mistakes. We see them make faces, relive the details of the misstep and not understand how the ball could miss. Not infrequently, they then destroy the instrument with which they failed, for example the tennis racket, as if it was responsible, or they kick the ground, giving it responsibility for the ball's lacking bounce.

The wall is fate. It is that invisible, all-powerful en-

emy, which decided in the unfavorable outcome of the lot. It is unbreakable and unbendable, blocks the way toward one's preferred direction, says no, says tough luck, you guessed wrong, acted wrong, lost. It isn't a conversation partner whom one can disagree with, one can bargain with, like the girlfriend who left would be, or the soccer team that lost the cup would be. So one must communicate differently, nonverbally, with force, with violence. One must take a stand against this fate, one cannot be flattened by it as if one were a nobody, a nothing. One is young, male, endowed with hormones, body hair, bodily power and power of assertion. One does not let oneself to be brought down by things like this. The reaction fulfills itself, quick as lightning, virile and accurate.

And then comes the pain, the consciousness that he has committed violence against himself. It is the wall, fate, which has hit back and broken the bone. The pain in the soul has changed to physical pain. And this fierce, misfired bodily sensation leads to enlightenment. Therefore, the story the patient tells in the emergency room is not long, not detailed. He simply says, "I screwed up." Treatment then focuses on the organic. The bone is righted, usually needing an operation. The pain is medicated. Instructional words and warnings are not needed. The wall has said everything.

Note

Thanks to Helen Bendix from Göttingen for the translation.

Rudolf Flückiger, MD, is a specialist in general surgery and traumatology, living and working in Basel, Switzerland. (flueckiger@bluewin.ch)