

The Key to Growing Thick Skin

A minefield. That's the only thing to which Rutabaga Wayne could compare the world outside. A 43-year-old Iguanadile, the veteran shut-in lay on his bed, trembling over the laundry mountain of traumatic memories. Most of the things that happened the last few times he stepped outside weren't even that dramatic - a slight allusion to animal cruelty, a negative opinion about one of his favorite movies - yet they all hit him like an atomic bomb. He could rebuild maybe a few tree-houses worth from the fallout, only for another bomb to go off in his direction.

You're a middle-aged man, he told himself. Well... a middle-aged iguana/crocodile hybrid, but a middle-aged sapient creature. You're too old to have hurt feelings over all of this. If you were any more of a light weight, you'd be in orbit. Which I suppose wouldn't be too bad. The empty quiet of outer space would be a hell of a lot nicer and more peaceful than this rotten planet.

Oh wait, sorry, you're not a light-weight. You got a sixty-eight pound gut keeping you grounded from all that stress-eating. A chonk of which is not even food.

And so Rutabaga found himself back in a cycle of never ending thoughts with a diabolical clutch on his brain. Perhaps the heaviest one of all was the proverb spoon-fed to him by the man on the crisis hotline - "Feelings come and go - nothing stays permanent." Unadulterated bull. Even if he did experience a respite from these thoughts, they always came back in legion. Amazing how they didn't trip over one another in how numerous they were.

That's when it hit him - he needed to overload his brain waves with trauma. They'd fall apart under the weight, and then he wouldn't feel anything anymore - nothing but sweet relief.

The best place to find traumatic experiences was Screw-YouToo-bro, the online video sharing platform where contentious opinions and drama flew like flies around a fresh heaping manure pile. Yes. Rutabaga needed an emotional workout. He set out on his mission to completely demolish his emotional barrier. If life was a minefield, he'd go ahead and set them all off.

The experience took 8 days to get started. It wasn't hard to find take-down videos criticising his childhood favorites, pointing out their flaws, calling them utter crap, even cancerous. Yes. First it was the childhood movies.

But he wasn't done, not by a long-shot. The movies were only the membrane of hell.

Next came the celebrities, people he'd looked up to in lieu of a solid, consistent role model. And boy... did they ever have dirt on them. Adulterers, hypocrites, backstabbers, criminals. Mighty cedars collapsed as he watched the people he used to admire crumble in his mind, it was like a swarm of bees stinging him from the inside.

"It's okay," he told himself. "That's exactly what is supposed to happen. Like Steve Miller said, you have to go to hell before you get to heaven."

What a hell it was, though. The conflicting reports over whether or not they were guilty, whether or not what they did do was all that bad or consequential... that was the worst part - the fluctuating reports.

That wasn't the point, though. So long as he was in pain, he'd be exorcising himself of it.

Wouldn't he?

Next, he looked at torture videos. Gross-out videos. He couldn't leave any ounce of emotional weakness unchecked.

He didn't take a single break. Four straight days of watching, getting more and more numb to it all.

He'd be invincible. Completely exhausted, but invincible...

He woke up. The daylight... yes. He'd completed his emotional workout. He'd attained invincibility.

Then... why did he find it so hard to leave the room?

Invincibility, a heavy, slogging weight to carry. He realized as he heaved himself out of his chair that he'd nearly blinded himself to all the objects in the room. Not visually - he still could see them, his door, his bed, his carpet, all his furniture, but he didn't recognize them as actual objects. They were just random solid entities with nothing to attach to them.

Everything felt pointless. With no sorrow or grief, he had no direction. Life was now just a meaningless jumble of experiences. In fact, the only solid thing was the thing inside him. He collapsed to the floor, and hurled.

He must have lost half a ton with the sheer torrent he unleashed. For eight days, he'd gorged his brain on nothing but misery in order to get stronger. He wasn't stronger. He was just exhausted.

The stress was gone, the anguish. Now that they were all dried up... then came the void. The realization that, having everything he'd ever believed in torn down, his whole life was a void. It was not worth pressing forward. The trauma may have been gone, but so was his confidence. There was nothing, nothing to do, but lie there, devoid of anything awful, devoid of anything wholesome.

He woke up to some soft prodding on his scalp. Little pink fingers lightly digging into the scales, playing with them, like a child exploring the sensations of a pile of checkers for the first time. Rutabaga was still weak, too weak to lift his head or haul his own body up, but the least he could do was open his eyes to discover the source of this new phenomenon.

His mouth drooped open, and in went a few fish sticks.

"It's not wise to go so long without food." It was a woman's voice. A soft, aged, calm voice. His senses trickled back to life. He realized he was no longer on the floor of his bedroom, but on the living room couch. He was covered in a few layers of blankets, looking up into the tender, gray face of a giant Chinchilla.

"Wil... Wilby-Mira...?" He said.

"And it's not wise to look at rubbish on the internet for that long. I swear your hard drive was moments away from catching fire." She wagged a finger. "There are safer ways of keeping warm, you know."

Her finger slowed as she studied his face. His worn-out face. She knew there was something besides thirst and hunger he'd put himself through. She'd been his imaginary friend from kindergarten to second grade. She became estranged after his teacher told him, "You're here to learn, not lie." He'd resisted her at first, until she'd caught him doodling in math class, and she'd shredded the drawing on the spot and sent him to the principal's office. Wilby-Mira had been estranged ever since then as the first refuge that was taken away from him.

"I know that look... after 35 years, I've never forgotten it. It's the look you get when you've lost something dear..."

Rutabaga drooped. "I meant to lose everything. With nothing left, I would no longer be carrying any trauma with me."

"What do you mean?"

He told her his emotional workout - his marathon of Screw-YouToo-bro videos, demolishing everything he'd ever sought comfort in. Preacher videos, calling everything he'd ever loved idolatrous. How he'd taken himself apart. He didn't have to tell her what the aftermath was. She'd manifested herself into the real world and saw him sprawled on the floor in his own vomit.

"You must think I'm a freak... I really thought I'd be okay if I got rid of everything that held any meaning for me."

"But why? Why would you ever think that would make you okay?"

"Because..." Rutabaga's voice cracked. "I'm sick of waiting for my life to start, and I can't start it because I'm always on edge. Everything I hear and see upsets me, it has ever since..."

"...ever since your teacher said you had to learn I was a lie."

Rutabaga stopped talking. Yes. That was the thing that started it all. The academic authority branding his one refuge with sheer disapproval. Yes, that was the seed from which a whole hell kudzu of insecurity and shame sprouted. He sobbed. He buried his face. 35 years he spent not knowing why he could never develop any confidence - because he'd had the base yanked out from under him. And here he was, middle-aged and having developed no emotional strength whatsoever. Where was there left to go?

Wilby-Mira took his chin in her claws and lifted his head. "I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to protect yourself from ever getting hurt again. This isn't the way to do that."

She crawled onto the couch with him and covered his body in her soft gray fur.

"Honey... nobody has absolute confidence. All those people scorning the things you love? That's not what a confident person does. That's what scornful people do. They don't even have the strength to forgive the things they don't like. They are no stronger or more accomplished than you are."

"As for your teacher... well... it's true that art and math aren't the same discipline, but that was an act of destruction, not instruction. There was no reason she couldn't have just put it away until the end of class. You don't teach discipline using out-of-control behavior."

"Wilby..." Rutabaga's heart was breaking, but in a much different way than he would have expected. His heart had been frozen into a block of ice by the time he'd spent trying to make it stronger, but it was now cracking as it dethawed into the organ it was supposed to be.

"Hon. For more than three decades, you've been carrying the idea that being sensitive is something bad. You've had to face the philosophy that all men are supposed to be strong all of the time. If you try to be strong all of the time, you will never be strong at all. The manliest men are those who can man up to their insecurities. Try to bypass that, and all you will have are insecurities."

She was getting through to him in a way nobody ever had before. Tears were spilling down his cheeks, but these were tears of recovery. He was actually glad he was crying now.

"Listen... I know you feel like you've wasted your life, but you haven't at all. You just haven't had the resources to build a recovery plan. In fact, they've been obstructed from you. But it's not too late. There are

people out there who will love you for your sensitivity. You just have to take it a few steps at a time, and find the right people to confide in. I will help you find them."

"Wilby-Mira..." Rutabaga wiped a tear from his eye. "You're strong... strong enough to give even a burn-out like me confidence... I don't want to be pathetic anymore. I want to get better."

"Don't push yourself to exhaustion, honey. Exercise a little effort, then give yourself time to rest. You'll get more confident, you just need to find the smallest thing that upsets you, and slowly develop an immunity to that. Don't expose yourself to it all at once. Give yourself time to unwind from it."

Rutabaga was feeling much different now from how he'd been feeling an hour ago. He didn't feel like he was empty of everything, but he felt like he could develop confidence, like planting a tree and taking care of it, rather than setting it on fire. He knew he had a lot of work ahead of him, but somehow, it didn't feel like it would be a burden anymore. It felt like it would be a journey, and one with a traveling companion who'd bolster him every step of the way.

He felt... meaningful.