

11-15-2023

Falling Into Action

Kent Hoffman

n/a



Part of the [Disability Studies Commons](#), [Nervous System Diseases Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Hoffman, Kent. "Falling Into Action." *The Goose*, vol. 20 , no. 1 , article 24, 2023,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol20/iss1/24>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Falling Into Action

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to all the members of Diswrites for their continuing editorial and personal support.

KENT HOFFMAN

Falling into Action

My first memory is about falling. I was four years old, so the memory is a series of flashes: taking part in a playground group. Falling onto a concrete arena floor. Hitting my head. Trying to sleep it off. Waking up vomiting blood. An ambulance ride. An overnight stay in the hospital. The fall itself was unremarkable, but it's all about the landing. I hit my head that day and ended up with a mild skull fracture. Over fifty years later, the traces of that injury are long gone and even the memory barely resides inside my head. But that injury was the first indication that falls would play a significant role in my life.

During the bleak days of the COVID-19 lockdown, the early morning stroll was the “rock star” of rituals. It was a safe, physically-distanced outing that offered exercise, a time for contemplation, and a way to move about when many aspects of life were at a standstill. A morning walk in a nearby park on the shores of Lake Ontario became my go-to ritual in that first spring of the pandemic. Living close to one of the Great Lakes is something I've often taken for granted, and it took a crisis for me to appreciate it again. I walked in the unimaginatively but aptly named Lakeside Park, a hidden gem tucked away in a mostly industrial part of Mississauga. The wide, paved trails make the park and the lake accessible for walkers, strollers, wheelchair users, and bikers. I'd begin my walk on the path beside the leash-free dog zone. Watching the dogs run freely through the field filled me with a sense of joy tinged with just a hint of envy. It's hard not to get caught up in the happiness of dogs bounding through an open space. The envy came from my inability to remember what it feels like to run like that. As I moved past the dogs, the path turned to reveal a beautiful view of Lake Ontario. There's something about a big body of water that makes me feel connected. Lake Ontario flows into the St. Lawrence River and eventually into the Atlantic Ocean. I often went on these walks alone, but I never felt lonely. During a time of isolation, those walks got me outside so my inside voice didn't take over completely.

Despite the restorative qualities of these walks and their celebrity status in the pandemic, almost three years later, my feelings towards what's seen as a safe and low-stress activity are now complicated. I view my movement through the lens of disability and sometimes see the world outside my house as a problem. I think about the many barriers that may disrupt or limit where I go. I have Becker muscular dystrophy. I'm not a wheelchair user, not yet, but my walking is now becoming increasingly unsteady. I rely on my cane even more to get around, and I can't get up and down most sets of stairs. Spontaneity is almost nonexistent, as going anywhere requires careful planning. Walking itself requires focus: where I place my feet, how to keep my balance, how to avoid falling. On long walks, there's no “getting in the zone” like an

Olympic athlete. If I don't pay attention, I end up on the ground. But falling is not that bad, really. I've always done my own stunts. It's getting up that's the problem. Like some veteran boxer who's taken one too many punches, it takes everyone in my corner to get me back up.

I was diagnosed with Becker muscular dystrophy (BMD) when I was 18. Unable to Google it in the late 1980s, the information I had was limited. I had to rely on what I learned in brief appointments with specialists and the few pamphlets they handed to me at those appointments. One leaflet said, rather casually it seemed, that most people with BMD walked until the age of thirty-five. As a young man with an immature understanding of disability, that line haunted me for years. The progression of Becker muscular dystrophy can vary widely, and the age when a person with Becker's would stop walking was emphasized as an end point rather than a transition. At the time of my diagnosis, I was still walking fairly easily. The only early indication that there was a problem was that I was really bad at sports. It wasn't because of any actual symptoms, but rather an unusual result that came up in a blood test that made doctors take notice. After that, I didn't really consider my future with BMD too carefully. I naively imagined that one day, maybe on my thirty-fifth birthday, I would just stop walking and start using a wheelchair. I never thought of a wheelchair as something I would gradually move towards and that there would be a lot of changes to my mobility along the way. I didn't know that some of these changes would involve falling.

Falling, in some ways, influences the way I move more than using a cane does. I move cautiously and carefully. I think about each step. But as much as I might try to prevent it, I still fall. The falls don't happen often but regularly. Often enough, though, that I've developed a bit of a fear of falling that shapes my gait, my walking speed, and my decisions about where I go or don't go. It's not an irrational fear, like worrying about alligators showing up in my backyard. It's a real fear because I have to deal with the consequences of those falls. Along with the bruises and the bloodied knees is the complicated process of getting up. If there's nothing I can lean on or climb onto to work my way up, I need help. There's a new awareness of my own body weight because I can't lift it up off the ground on my own. Now it requires two people who are prepared to lift eighty kilograms together and know enough not to pull my arms out of their sockets. Because of this, I rarely walk alone anymore out of fear of being stranded. I tell myself that I've instinctively figured out how to fall without getting seriously hurt, but maybe I've just been lucky. I haven't broken anything so far, but what if I'm one fall away from never walking again?

The fear of falling is common for disabled people and for elderly people. I can rationally identify the fear, but I'm not sure how to overcome it. Falling is always portrayed as something to avoid. People "fall from grace" and "pride goeth before the fall." Falling is also connected to comedy. There are comedians who've made entire careers out of pratfalls. I watched repeats of the old Dick Van Dyke Show when I was a kid and laughed every time he tripped over the ottoman during the sitcom's opening credits. It never seemed mean-spirited. But there's a big difference between laughing at a comedy routine and laughing at the stumbles of Joe Biden, an eighty-year-old American President. However, people laugh in both instances and don't seem to make the distinction. I struggle with the idea that what I used to view as funny and harmless slapstick

is another form of ableism. The comic premise is that falling is something to be made fun of. The ultimate in buffoonery. Hearing some politicians recently making fun of President Biden and questioning his competence after he fell at a public event sparked my own childhood memories of kids brutally making fun of my running and my subsequent stumbles. So when it comes to pratfalls, I'm not laughing nearly as much these days.

Do others worry about falling? Watching footage of the moon landing recently, I thought about how Neil Armstrong was picked for the lunar mission because of his reputation for grace under pressure. Documentaries about the moon landing often focus on Armstrong's first words from the moon, but was he also concerned that he might fall? Armstrong had to exit the lunar module backwards down a small ladder in a spacesuit and drop down onto the unknown surface of the moon. He must have felt a great sense of relief the moment his feet touched solid ground on the surface of the moon. There's nothing graceful about falling in front of the whole world during a live broadcast of one of the most significant moments in human history. Would anyone remember Armstrong's words if he'd climbed out of the lunar module and fell on his ass? If he's anything like me, the very first words uttered on the surface of the moon could very well have been "God dammit."

Falling in a public setting is distressing for me. While my falls are not being broadcast to the world like the lunar landing, I don't have the advantage of the gentler gravitational pull of the moon to make it any easier to get up. I need to rely on the help of strangers. A few years ago, when I was still working, I was on my way to the GO train for my commute home and crossing Front Street, a busy street in downtown Toronto. A winter storm had developed that afternoon. The snow was blowing and the howling wind was picking up, a combination that made my walking really unsteady. I was so wary in the winter months that I'd taken to checking the weather online before I left work to find out the wind speed. Through trial and error, I'd figured out that wind speeds over 50 km/hour were a danger zone for me. Winds at that speed set trees in motion and make walking difficult for most people. For me, high winds mean a greatly increased risk of falling. I always had the option of getting from my downtown workplace to Union Station through the underground mall system called the PATH. But in order to make it accessible, it required a meandering route involving seven different elevators to avoid stairs. This turned a fifteen-minute walk just down the street to the station into a forty-five minute underground journey. So even in the dead of winter, I would usually opt to walk outside to get home a bit earlier.

On that day, the winds were supposed to be 40 km/hour, so I risked it. But the winds apparently didn't read the weather reports, and the gusts were much stronger than predicted. Suddenly, I was struggling to walk in the wind along with everyone else commuting home. Halfway across the street, a particularly powerful gale took me down like a leaf. Flat on my back on Front Street during rush hour traffic, I found myself looking up at the blowing snow. Stunned, my first thought was that I might get run over by a car because I couldn't get up on my own. The situation required quick action. Without me even saying a word, a group of people gathered and worked to get me back up. I was aware of being lifted upright by many hands. The

motorists saw what was happening and thankfully didn't start honking their horns when the lights changed.

Once I was back on my feet again, I was still only halfway across the street, and the wind was still blowing. I felt even more unsteady and knew there was a good chance I was going to fall again. One of the people who helped me must have sensed the look of fear on my face. He put his arm around me and told me to hold on to him. We walked across the street, arm in arm, until he got me to the entrance of a building that would allow me to walk the rest of the way indoors. He asked me if I was okay. I quickly tried to offer an explanation to him about why I fell. He stopped me and told me not to worry about it. He wasn't interested in being held up as my rescuer and offered help with no conditions. I thanked him and we both went on our way. I never found out his name and I never saw him again.

I'm grateful to that complete stranger who not only instinctively understood how to help, but also how to offer that help. I didn't like that a fall on the street forced me to rely on him in the first place. He seemed to understand the humbling nature of that. Falling feels like a disruption to my independence that shows up suddenly, much like those winds that caused my unsteadiness in the first place. I've struggled to accept that needing help is just another adaptation. It's much like the compensations I've developed over my lifetime to overcome the weakness in my skeletal muscles. I've shifted the way I move and learned to adjust my balance and centre of gravity in order to keep walking. I try to listen to my body even though it sometimes refuses to listen to me. Much like the wind and offers of help, a lot of it is out of my control.

My backyard still feels safe to me. I used to complain about yard work, but now it's like another ritual. I used to spend entire Saturdays out in the yard working to create a small garden oasis. We look forward to the yearly return of our colourful perennials like poppies, coneflowers, and peonies. To me, gardening is about knowing when to allow things to grow and when to trim them back before they get out of control. It's similar to how I see my own muscles and my understanding of how to keep them active without overdoing it. Knowing when to cut back on my activities. Over the years, a whole day of gardening turned into half a day, then a couple of hours. Now I'm only good for about an hour before fatigue sets in and the danger of falling becomes too great. While I still consider my yard to be a safe haven, I've managed to build up a collection of "I've fallen and I can't get up" texts to my wife. Getting up from a fall in the yard is a long process of working my way up using small steps, garden wagons, and then leaning on chairs, lawn furniture, the fence, or my wife to gradually get to my feet again.

On a warm November day, I was home alone and decided that raking some leaves was a good way to spend part of the afternoon. The small accomplishment and the fresh air felt good, and my usefulness quotient for the day was fulfilled. About an hour in, I felt tired and knew it was time to stop. I turned around to head towards the house, but turned a bit too quickly. My knee buckled and I fell. I knew there was no way to stop it, so I let myself fall softly onto the lawn, almost in slow motion. Once I knew that nothing was bruised or broken, I felt quite comfortable

lying on the grass. But I forgot to bring my phone with me and no one would be home for hours. I needed to figure out a way to get up on my own.

There was a big difference between this fall and the one on the city street. It was a warm sunny day and I was on home turf. There was no urgency to get up, and I knew it would take some time to figure it out, so I stayed calm. That serenity allowed me some time to really take in the world from ground level. Since I try hard to avoid ending up on the ground, I had forgotten what it was like to really see the land from this point of view. Being low to the ground offers a view from a child's perspective. I just took in my surroundings. I saw each blade of grass up close. I noticed the ants moving around. I saw the leaves of the flowers move. For a few moments, I allowed myself to see the world through a kid's eyes and with a childhood sense of wonder. But eventually, my adult instinct to solve this problem kicked in and I began to consider how I was going to move in order to get up.

Necessity dictated that I stay in a childhood frame of mind to deal with my predicament: actually, an infant's frame of mind. I had no choice but to crawl. I needed to move to a place where it would be easier to get up. It didn't feel undignified. Just like an infant, I had to think about crawling as the way I needed to move to get where I wanted to go. I crawled across the lawn, underneath our rose trellis, across our smooth flagstone sidewalk, and up onto our deck. I crawled my way across the wooden deck to the aluminum threshold ramp up to our patio doors. I hoisted myself over it and made it inside the door onto the carpet of our living room. Once inside, I took a break. My knees hurt. I had very little strength left, and I still wasn't on my feet. I felt a brief sense of frustration that my body wouldn't do what I wanted it to do, something I knew I was capable of before. After a few minutes, I started moving again. I made my way across our living room and turned into our front hall. I crawled and climbed up the first six steps of the stairs leading up to the second floor. Using my arms and the posts that hold up the handrails, I finally managed to get on my feet again.

This is the first time I've shared this story. I wasn't injured, so I didn't even mention it to my wife when she got home. She has helped me deal with many of these falls, and I didn't want to add to her worries. I took it easy the day after I fell to recover physically. But in the days following a difficult fall, I know I tend to keep to myself and get much quieter. Still, I don't dwell on it and I move on. I refuse to be afraid of my own backyard. There are a lot of days when I don't fall, so I can't let the fear of falling stop me from living my life. My family doctor once advised me to "just do what you can until you can't." It's a simple piece of advice that I like because it acknowledges that I will have to adapt to my changing mobility. The frequency of my falls lately is an indication that what I'm doing right now isn't really working.

I've used a cane for a long time. There's nothing stylish about it. It's industrial grey, rather clinical looking, and it's become a bit beat-up over the years. Yet my cane is a part of me, and I'm somewhat attached to it. But while it's served me well for many years, lately it hasn't been enough. Using two canes together may offer me some extra stability, but the time has come for me to explore walkers, wheelchairs, scooters, and other mobility devices. Regularly using one of these devices could help keep me safe from falling but also create new concerns. I sometimes

don't know where to begin. What device do I need? How will I learn to use it? What about affordability? Can I rely on a device that could potentially break or break down, leaving me stranded? I think about ableism and worry about the way wheelchair users are treated by others. I'm troubled by my own internalized ableism that causes me to be concerned about what other people think about me using a device that could help me. But mostly I worry about accessibility.

It's impossible to discuss the idea of moving on land without considering accessibility. It's accessibility that determines who is welcome to move or pass through specific spaces and who isn't. Accessibility determines if a space is welcoming or unwelcoming or if it's safe or hazardous. So why aren't we doing a better job to make places accessible to everyone? Even as a cane user, I know that not enough effort is made to give me the same access to spaces as everyone else. A public space that is only accessible to some is not a public space.

Accessibility is also about effort. About five years ago, my family and I went on a vacation to Wales and England. In the trip planning stages, one of the options we came across was a tour of Stonehenge offering a private viewing at sunset. It sounded like an amazing way to finally see Stonehenge for myself. I really wanted to go, but I worried that the bus tour to get there would be too difficult. I could still manage some stairs at that point, but it really depended on the height of the steps, the number of stairs, and the railings provided. I started to think that my ability to get on and off a bus would be what would keep me from seeing an over five-thousand-year-old monument. These worries started to play out in my head, so I needed to look into what was possible.

I emailed the tour company and asked some questions about the bus and the accessibility of the trip. Almost immediately, I received a reply from one of their agents: "with regret I have to inform you that our vehicles are not wheelchair accessible. Our customers have to be able to get on the coach and climb the stairs." I was disappointed, but I appreciated the honest assessment. She also expressed regret that the lack of accessibility made it difficult for me to participate. But the email exchange didn't end there. When I asked for more specific details about the steps on the bus, I received this reply: "I managed to get some pictures of the steps on the coaches we usually use. I'll attach them so it'll be easier for you to decide whether there will be any issue with climbing them." She attached a close-up picture of the stairs from each of the buses they used. I got a really good sense of the height of the stairs, the position of the railings on the bus, and the amount of space available. I could see that they were reasonably modern bus coaches that could be lowered into a kneeling position when stopped to make it easier to board. I didn't ask for these pictures, but someone at the tour company made the time to take them for me. It was incredibly helpful to see exactly what I would be dealing with. It reassured me enough to go ahead with the tour booking.

When the day finally came, getting on and off the bus wasn't easy, but with my cane and a bit of help from my son, I managed to get up and down the steps of the bus. The Stonehenge site itself is welcoming and accessible. It's located on a plain. The paths are level and hard surfaced. There are ramps in areas where they are needed. The shuttle bus out to the stones is

wheelchair accessible. I had no problem enjoying it alongside everyone else. So with the sun setting on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England, I walked amongst the stones at Stonehenge, something I wasn't sure I would ever experience in my life. It matters that a significant prehistoric monument that has stood since 2500 BCE is accessible. I like to think that even the Neolithic people who built the monument over five thousand years ago knew that more people would be able to access the monument if it was built without steps.

Stonehenge was much easier for me to visit than some stores that are fifteen minutes from my house. Accessibility is always a work in progress, but there needs to be more willingness to do the work. Even with help, I don't know if I could take that tour now and climb the stairs of that bus. There is still a need for more wheelchair-accessible buses. If the ancient Neolithic builders of Stonehenge could find a way to lift twenty-five ton rocks to create the prehistoric monument, we can continue to find ways now to make the world more accessible.

Recently, I returned to Lakeside Park for a rare early morning stroll by myself. That week, I noticed a community Facebook posting about a red-winged blackbird attack in the park. Blackbirds can be quite aggressive. During nesting season, they are known to swoop down and peck at the heads of pedestrians. It can be quite startling, but they're really just protecting their young. It was about 7:30 a.m. and the park was almost empty. At the halfway point of my walking route, I heard the distinctive musical song of a red-winged blackbird change to more of a screeching kind of alarm call. Sure enough, a moment later, I felt the wings of a bird whoosh behind me as he tried to dive-bomb my head. Twice. Being forewarned, the Hitchcock-like bird attack didn't take me by surprise. I calmly lifted my cane over my head, not to harm the bird but to use my cane as a metal scarecrow. I kept moving and yelled to make a bit of noise and the bird lost interest. Had I been surprised by the attack I might have taken a tumble. I joked to my wife later that she almost got a frantic text from me saying, "I've fallen and I'm being attacked by a bird."

The rest of my walk continued without incident. But maybe that blackbird has a lot to say about how we move through spaces and who has the right to do so. I have the right to walk through that public park. The decision to pave the paths and provide accessible features means that I am welcome to do so. A red-winged blackbird has a right to nest there and to protect their home. A minor bird attack reminded me that any movement through the natural landscape is not completely without risk. But there's also a dignity to risk. Accessibility isn't about mitigating all risks. Accessibility is about providing me the same access as everyone else to move on land and experience all its joys, pleasures, and occasional risks. That means a red-winged blackbird nesting beside Lake Ontario might choose to remind me, in its own unique way, that nature needs to be protected and sometimes experienced from a distance.

KENT HOFFMAN is a CBC Radio producer who recently retired after a thirty-three-year career in radio with the public broadcaster. His work included time behind the soundboard, the

keyboard, and the microphone. He produced interviews and documentaries for many CBC Radio programs including *The Doc Project*, *Tapestry*, *Spark*, *White Coat Black Art*, *Outfront*, and *As It Happens*. He co-created and produced the 2012 CBC Radio summer series *Fear Itself* along with writer Christy Ann Conlin. He advocates for improved accessibility through his writing and gentle activism approach. Like many retirees, he is now working on his memoir. He is a charter member of *Diswrites*, a writing group and community for disabled writers.