What life’s thunderstorms taught me about putting one foot in front of the other

The day started out beautifully. My friends Shaun and Tina and I decided to take advantage of a sunny Saturday afternoon with a hike along Ontario’s Bruce Trail. We parked our cars at the trail access, laced up our boots, and headed out for a day of wandering through sun-dappled fields and forests.

A couple hours later, we agreed we had probably gone far enough and turned around to head back.

That’s when the weather changed. Fast. Ominous clouds rolled in, blotting out the blue skies we had been enjoying. The trees started to creak and sway as the wind whipped up. We picked up our pace, but even before the first thunderclap, we knew we wouldn’t be outrunning this storm.

It was a doozy.

We felt the first drops of rain while walking along the grassy edge of a farmer’s field. A moment later, we were drenched as the sky opened up and the torrential downpour began.

Soaked to the bone, kilometres from our vehicles, we pressed on through the howling wind. There was no sanctuary from the storm — nowhere to hide and no sense trying to wait it out, sopping wet as we already were.
The only option was to keep going; to put one squelchy foot in front of the other and hope the lightning bolts around us didn’t get any closer. As we made our way in single file along the now-muddied trail, my mind flashed back to a few years earlier, when I was navigating a much different kind of storm.

It was October 2008, and I was in isolation at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto after the bone marrow transplant I received to treat my leukemia. The incredibly complex medical procedure boiled down to the doctors decimating my defective blood-producing cells with heavy-duty chemo and radiation. Once the crappy stuff was destroyed, they transplanted new stem cells from a healthy donor.

There were some risky and unpleasant consequences of the transplant. Until my new transplanted stem cells engrafted, I was left with virtually no immune system and prone to all manner of infection. Hence the isolation. A simple sneeze from a visitor could spell disaster.

With no immune system, the usually harmless bacteria in my mouth were able to take hold and do some damage.

Large sores formed on my tongue, and every breath I took filled me with excruciating pain. I couldn’t eat. I had a hard time talking. The
nurses made me sleep with the head of the bed raised up so I wouldn’t choke on my massively swollen tongue.

When I saw Dr. Galal the next day, I begged him to do something about the mouth sores. He was, of course. I was being treated with antibiotics and a mouth rinse to speed recovery along, and they had my morphine jacked up as high as they safely could.

A warm and compassionate man, Dr. Galal looked at me and assured me that they were doing everything humanly possible. “The only thing I can do,” he said, “is promise you that you’ll be feeling much better when I see you again next week.”

In the midst of the pain that the medication barely seemed to touch, “tough it out” wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear. But sure enough, in a few days time, the swelling went down and the sores started to shrink in response to the treatment. Slowly but surely, day-by-day, I eased off the morphine.

And when I saw Dr. Galal the next week during his rotation, I smiled at him and thanked him for keeping his promise.

**Keep going**

Like our walk through the woods or my mangled mouth, there are times in life when the only thing we can do is keep going. Caught in that thunderstorm with our cars still a long ways away, we just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Stuck in the hospital with a mouth full of sores, I just had to endure and wait for the medications to work their magic.
Although there are challenges like these we simply can’t hurry along, I’ve found that there are always things we can do to make the storms more bearable. Here are some that have helped me.

**Surround yourself with the good stuff.**
Using little techniques to keep your spirits up can help a lot. Whether it’s a silly song you’re belting out while hiking through a rainstorm, a copy of Robert Service’s inspirational poem “The Quitter” taped to your hospital room wall or a list you’ve made of all the awesome things life has to offer, find ways to keep yourself motivated.

**Break it down and celebrate the little milestones.**
My journey from cancer diagnosis to recovery seemed to stretch on forever, with no end in sight. When you’re faced with an absurdly large problem, breaking it down into manageable chunks can keep it from overwhelming you.

Making a point to acknowledge the little achievements — getting through the first phase of chemo, remission, finding a donor, being able to do a push-up or walk up a flight of stairs — helped me see that I really was making progress. Set milestones for yourself along the way and celebrate your successes.

**Be disciplined.**
The best strategies in the world won’t matter unless they’re backed up with hard work. Find ways to stay focused. Learn to say no if you’re feeling stretched, get out of your house to study if you find your TV or roommate distracting or schedule a work date with a friend who will motivate you to stay on task.

**Come up for air.**
At one point, Shaun, Tina, and I found a good spot to take cover from the driving rains for a few minutes. Breaks allow you to regroup and recharge your mental, emotional and physical batteries. They’re an opportunity to check the map and think strategically. Stepping back lets you take stock of the bigger picture and remind yourself that you will get through this. Don’t be afraid to take a
breather. Whether it’s meditating, taking a little vacation or just turning off your brain for a couple hours to watch a mindless movie, balancing the “one-foot-in-front-of-the-other” grind with beneficial pause is crucial.

Life is full of unexpected rainstorms. But the trick isn’t to avoid or try to hide from them. There are some you simply won’t be able to outrun. No, the trick is to find ways to cope — to bring the right umbrella so you’re ready when the storms do roll in.
What five farting men in a yurt taught me about the benefits of camping

Farts. The butt of so many jokes. The joke of so many butts. Growing up, I firmly believed that flatulence was infinitely funny; that cranking one out and laughter went hand in hand. Always.

But a winter camping trip with some friends proved I was wrong. Dead, stinking wrong. Emphasis on the stinking.

In 2012, my friends Jared, Tony, Darryl, Shaun and I gathered for a weekend of yurt camping at MacGregor Point Provincial Park. The sucky weather was not unusual for an Ontario March: too warm for winter fun like skating or tobogganing, too cold for the beach or other outdoorsy stuff. Which meant our quintet would spend the bulk of our trip squirreled away inside the confines of our yurt.

We didn’t mind. With a heater to keep us warm, a deck of cards to keep us busy and multiple cases of beer to keep us properly stupid, we were sittin’ pretty. Of course, there was also the ginormous pot of chilli Tony brought that would serve as the main source of food for the weekend… and our undoing.
With nothing but beans and beer in our bellies, it didn’t take long for the gases to build. Through the first few games of Euchre, we greeted each fart with a laudatory cheer.

But as the night wore on, the cheering was replaced with choking as the noxious fumes emanating from our gotchies assaulted our senses. Stench and shame hung heavy in the air.

We had done it. We had transformed our yurt into a furt.

We didn’t fare much better the next day. Jared kicked things off by waking everyone up with his butt trumpet. I found my way off the top bunk and through the methane haze to the door. Pulling it open, I breathed in deep the sweet relief of fresh air.
I made my way to the camp bathrooms a few sites down. While taking care of my morning business, a disturbing realization came to mind: the camp toilet was far less offensive than our yurt. Girding myself, I left the sweet-smelling comfort station and returned to the toxic wasteland that was our weekend home. I could smell the boys twenty yards out and half-expected to see the trees surrounding the yurt shrivelled up and dead.

The stinky weekend continued with more drama. A bold raccoon found his way into our cooler and ate some of our other food. We narrowly averted disaster when a gust of wind toppled a tree onto the BBQ shelter next to the yurt. A freak snowstorm whipped through the campground.

Despite all this, the five of us had a blast. Yes, it was smelly. Yes, it was snowy. Yes, it was silly. But man, was it fun.

**Natural remedies**

Camping isn’t everyone’s cup of tea. But each year, millions of people willingly trade their creature comforts for mosquito bites, sunburns and sore backs from sleeping on tree roots. Why?

There are a slew of reasons, but a big one for me is the opportunity to connect — with nature, with each other, with ourselves.

Our cars, cubicles and concrete jungles increasingly cut us off from our innate need to commune with the natural world. For me, spending time in the great outdoors is a sure-fire way to reduce stress and improve my outlook. Meanwhile, research points to all sorts of other health benefits, from improving depression symptoms to even increasing the number of cancer-fighting white blood cells in our bodies.

From a social point of view, farty camping trips can be a great way to engage with friends and family in a meaningful way. Tweets and texts may connect us at a certain level, but for me, nothing beats
spending quality time with people around a campfire or on an early morning hike.

Finally, getting away from your regular routine is a great opportunity for introspection. In the frantic busyness of our lives, it’s tricky to find time for self-reflection and personal development. Oftentimes, we need to step away from our day-to-day grind to reconnect with ourselves and wrestle with our place in the universe.

As Albert Einstein said, “Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”
What blood and glue fumes taught me about putting myself out there

With the never-ending stream of superhero movies flooding theatres these days, you may be growing weary of the genre. Then again, maybe you’re just waiting for something to blow your socks off. Something truly awesome. Something super. A “Super Something,” mayhaps? Resembling E.T. with a beak and cape, Super Something is a superhero I created when I was seven years old and the titular character of the award-winning short story I wrote in grade 1.

That’s right: award-winning. This impressive piece of literature picked up a first place finish at the 1987 Dungannon Fall Fair, alongside prized pigs and blue ribbon jams. And why wouldn’t it? It’s a tale of epic proportions, where Super Something and his teammates Super Monster and Super Noodle square off against alligators, giants and a castle wall armed with a million guns. The gang even ends up in space for some reason… I dunno, the third act is a bit of a hot mess.

Super Something was an early indicator that I was a fan of the creative arts. While other kids my age were getting into hockey and dirt bikes, I was writing stories in my bed. Over time, my interests
morphed into making board games, which became my obsession in life. It was a great creative outlet for me (and I’m sure all the glue I inhaled while constructing my elaborate games only served to enhance the experience).

My family was always supportive, but then something happened. More precisely, puberty happened, and with it came a whack of self-consciousness and insecurities. I convinced myself that making board games was a weird hobby best kept to myself. More and more, my creative pursuits took place behind closed doors (which, in hindsight, probably made the glue fumes more noxious).

In Grade 8, at the peak of pubescent awkwardness, I was told an evaluator from the school board was visiting to do an assessment on me. Mom told me it was for the “gifted program.” However, considering my penchant for sticking my head in pits of clay and
launching fireballs into houses, I have to wonder if I wasn’t being assessed because they thought I was “special” for other reasons.

Either way, during the interview, I let it slip that I liked to make board games in my spare time. Intrigued, the evaluator pressed me for more information. What kind of games did I make? What did I like about the hobby? Could I show him one of my games?

I felt exposed, vulnerable, embarrassed.

I started fidgeting, picking at a hangnail as he peppered me with questions. My heart was racing as I mumbled sheepish answers. Before long, I ripped the dangling nail off completely and blood started pouring out of my finger. Best. Interview. Ever.

“Looks like you’ve got a bit of blood there,” the interviewer said.

“Ha, ha,” I stammered, blood running down my hand. “Yeah.” At least we had changed the subject.

Looking back, I’m sure the man was genuinely interested in my hobbies and wanted to see how the school could support my extracurricular passions. At the time though, sharing my creative work was terrifying, the very prospect of which caused me to bleed all over my Giant Tiger blue jeans.
Despite my insecurities, I kept making board games. Usually my creations didn’t go further than my official game tester/baby brother Nicholas. But every now and then I’d swallow my fear and force myself to share my work more broadly. The biggest and scariest milestone happened in 1996. I was 16 years old and had mailed a letter to a board game company, telling them about my work.

A few weeks later, I returned home from school to find an envelope waiting for me on my dinner plate. It was a letter from the board game company, inviting me to come to Toronto to pitch one of my ideas. I didn’t eat much supper that night due to equal parts excitement and fear.

Mom drove me to Toronto for my meeting, and I kicked myself for not bringing a spare pair of gotchies. I was terrified. Sharing my inventions with Nicholas was one thing. This was quite another.

In the waiting room, I did my best to look calm, cool and professional. Mom didn’t make that easy. “Do you have to go pee?” She asked. Two minutes passed. “Are you sure you don’t want to go pee before your meeting?” Another two, tense minutes. “I really think you’d feel better if you went pee.”

“I’m fine,” I hissed between clenched teeth as the secretary tried her best not to laugh.
The meeting itself was terrible. I hadn’t prepared anything by way of a sales pitch. Hell, I didn’t even know what a sales pitch was. But it didn’t matter. I faced my fear and put myself out there. For the moment, that was enough. I rode cloud nine the entire way home to Port Albert.

Move over, glue fumes, there’s a new high in town.

Sharing your creative work

I’ve been blogging for years now, and I still get butterflies whenever I click that big, blue Publish button. Same goes for whenever I step on stage to give a talk. Whether you’re a writer, artist, videographer, photographer, actor or any other type of creative, sharing your work makes you feel exposed. It opens you up to criticism and judgement. Putting yourself out there is poop-in-you-pants scary. Period.

But coming out of the creative closet has a slew of benefits as well. For starters, it’s the only way you get better. I cringe when I look back at my earlier writing (except for Super Something, of course. An army of Popsicle stick warriors that can assemble into a buzz saw? That’s pure gold), and I know I have a lot more growing to do as a writer. The old adage “practice makes perfect” is true, and sharing your work is an opportunity to hone your craft, gather valuable feedback and learn from your mistakes.

Secondly, it gives others permission to embrace their creative side. How many kids my age were secretly sketching or hiding short stories under their beds? Sharing your work inspires others to do the same. And now thanks to the Internet, no matter what you’re into, you’ll find a community of like-minded folks out there who are into it too.

Finally, creative expression is an awesome outlet. Research shows that art therapy can be an incredibly effective stress reliever, while crocheting a scarf or snapping some photos can get you out of your head and into the moment.
Yes, putting yourself out there is scary. But in my experience, the pros outweigh the cons by far. So sign up for those guitar lessons. Join that creative writing group. Audition for that play.

Air out those glue fumes, and let your creative side shine.