

Chris Hill

An open letter to anyone who wants to understand why I've checked out. It's very personal, pretty horrible and perhaps a bit shocking. I hope that those of you who knew me well enough find it unnecessary to read this.

Well, this is it – perhaps the hardest thing you've ever had to read, easily the most difficult thing I've ever attempted to write. To understand my overwhelming sense of loss and why I chose to take my own life, you need to know a bit about my life before and after my accident. Let's take a closer look.

I was born at one of the best times in one of the world's best countries – Australia. I had more than the proverbial happy childhood. Great parents, world travel, a good education and fabulous experiences like Disneyland, swimming with a wild dolphin in the turquoise waters of the Bahamas, riding across the desert sands around the Egyptian pyramids and much more.

Later, after the travel bug had bitten good and hard, I set out on my own adventures. I can remember only a fraction of them, but many rich images come flooding back. I stood on the lip of a live volcano in Vanuatu and stared down into the vision of hell in its throat; I watched the morning sun ignite Himalayan peaks in a blaze of incandescent glory; smoked hashish with a leper in an ancient Hindu temple; danced naked under the stars with the woman I love on a tropical beach that left a trail of phosphorescent blue footsteps

behind us; skied waist-deep powder snow in untracked Coloradon glades; soared thermals to 8000 feet in a hang-glider and have literally flown with the eagles. In Maryland, on midsummer nights redolent with the smell of freshly ploughed earth, I rode past fields lit by the twinkling light of a billion fireflies. I've ridden a motorcycle at 265 km/h on a Japanese racetrack and up to the 5000 metre snowline on an Ecuadorian volcano. And speaking of riding, what haven't I seen from behind the bars of a motorcycle? More than 200 000 kilometres in over a dozen countries embracing everything from some of the world's most spectacular wilderness areas to its greatest cities and vast slums containing millions of impoverished souls.

Along the way I picked up a decent education, including two university degrees, and learnt another language. All this and so much more – more than most people would experience in several lifetimes.

Perhaps most importantly of all, everywhere I've been I enjoyed the support of a caring family, the company of good friends and, more than once, the rewards of being involved in a caring relationship. They – you, if you're reading – are ultimately what made my life as rich as it was, and I thank you.

I was lucky enough to know love, and I indulged in lust. I enjoyed exotic erotica with perhaps more than a hundred women of many different nationalities in places that ranged from the bedroom to a crowded ship's deck on the Aegean Sea, fields, rivers, trees, beaches, cars and motorcycles. There's been a *ménage à trois* in various combinations and even a few outright orgies. How wonderful to have been sexually active in the pre-AIDS

era. I record this not as an exercise in testosterone-fuelled chest-beating, but to point out that sex was an important part of my life, and so that you can better understand my sense of loss.

In short, I once lived life to the max, always grateful that I had the opportunity to do just that, and always mindful to live for today because there may be no tomorrow.

Just as well, it seems. After my hang-gliding accident – how ironic that something I loved so much could destroy me so cruelly – tomorrows were nothing but a grey void of bleak despair. I was paralysed from the chest down, more than three-quarters dead. A talking head mounted on a bloody wheelchair. No more of the simple pleasures I once took for granted. No walking, running, swimming, riding motorcycles, the wonderful feel of grass, sand or mud underfoot, nothing. The simplest of everyday tasks – getting up, having a shower, getting dressed – became an enormous hassle and the source of endless frustration. That in itself was completely shattering physically and emotionally, but I lost so much more than mobility. I lost my dignity and self-respect. I would forever be a burden on those around me and I didn't want that no matter how willingly and unthinkingly family and friends assumed that burden. Every time I had to ask someone to do something for me, every time I was dragged up a damn step, was like thrusting a hot blade into the place where my pride used to be.

All that was bad enough, but there was so much more. No balance. My every action was as graceless as a toy dog nodding in the back of some beat-up car. No ability to regulate my body temperature properly – in a sense I was cold-blooded, more like a lizard than a human being. And without abdominal muscles I couldn't cough, sneeze, shout, blow out a candle or even fart.

Worse still, I couldn't shit or piss. Those body functions had to be performed manually, which meant sticking a 30-centimetre-long silicon tube up my willie four times a day so I could drain myself into a plastic bag, and sticking a finger up my arse every second day to dig out the shit. Sometimes both procedures drew blood. They always made me shudder with revulsion, but I had a powerful incentive to persevere. Autonomic dysreflexia it's called, the potentially fatal rise in blood pressure and excruciating headache that occurs if body waste isn't properly removed and backs up. I had a taste of it in hospital once, and that was enough.

Despite this regimen, there was no guarantee I wouldn't shit or piss my pants in public or wake up wallowing in it. Can you imagine living with that uncertainty? Can you imagine the shame and humiliation when it actually happened? Unbearable abominations that made me feel less than human. For me, it was no way to live.

There's more. I wept every morning when I saw myself in the mirror. I'd become a hunchback with a bloated pot belly above withered legs with muscles as soft and useless as marshmallow. It was an unbearable sight for someone who was once so grateful for being blessed with such an athletic and healthy body. Paraplegia meant that I also had to live with the constant possibility of pressure sores, ugly ulcers that can require months of hospitalization to cure. They're common. So are urinary tract infections and haemorrhoids. I suffer from both, and they also usually lead back to hospital sooner or later. I would rather die than return to hospital.

Then there was the pain in my shoulder. A damaged nerve meant that two muscles in my left shoulder didn't work and they wasted away, leaving the others to compensate and me with a pain that frequently made simple actions difficult. Then there were swollen ankles, which once meant sleeping with pillows under my feet so they could drain overnight. My chest became hypersensitive, which may sound like fun but meant that I felt like I was wearing an unbearably scratchy woollen jumper over bare skin. And after sitting in the chair for a few hours my bum, which shouldn't have had any sensation, felt like it was on fire. There were also tinea, crutch rot, headaches . . . The list of horrors was endless, and I haven't even mentioned some of the worst ones.

While at Moorong [Spinal Unit] I began to wake with pins and needles – loss of sensation – in my hands and arms. Sometimes it took hours to pass, and I began to fear losing what little I had left. That was unbearable. Tethering, nerves pinched by the scar tissue formed around the broken bones in my neck, I was told. The doctors talked about tests and surgery on my neck, wrists. Forget it. There was no way I'd return to hospital, let alone for such delicate, radical and debilitating surgery.

All my many pleasures had been stripped from me and replaced by a hellish living nightmare. The mere sight of someone standing up, a child skipping, a bicyclist's flexing leg muscles, were enough to reduce me to tears. Everything I saw and did was a stinging reminder of my condition and I

cried constantly, even behind the jokes and smiles. I was so tired of crying. I never imagined that anyone could hurt so bad and cry so much. I guarantee that anybody who thinks it can't have been too bad would change their mind if they lived in my body for a day.

People kill animals to put them out of their misery if they're suffering even a tiny part of what I had to put up with, but I was never given the choice of a dignified death and I was very bitter about that. I could accept that accidents happen and rarely asked 'why me?', but I felt that the legislature's and the medical profession's attitude of life at any cost was an inhumane presumption that amounted to arrogance. And what of the dollar cost? My enforced recovery and rehabilitation cost taxpayers at least \$150 000 by my rough count, money that wouldn't have been wasted had anybody bothered to ask me how I felt about the whole thing and what I'd like to do.

I had one good reason for living, of course, and her name is Lee-Ann, the best thing that ever happened to me. Wonderful Lee-Ann, without whom I would have gone insane long before now. But I wept whenever I thought of us together. What future could we have? No matter how hard I worked and how much I achieved, she would inevitably be a nursemaid in a million different ways, and I hated that, no matter that she so willingly and lovingly assumed the burden.

Nor would I condemn her to spend her nights sleeping with a sexless wooden lump twitching with spasm. That's right, sexless – impotent. Stripped of my sexuality, I felt that I'd lost part of my essence, the very core of my masculinity. I was even denied the sensual pleasure of embrace, because from the chest down I couldn't feel warmth, didn't even know if someone was touching me. I love Lee-Ann, but she deserves better than the pointless life I could offer, and I believe that I'm giving her another chance at happiness no matter how much pain I cause in the short term. Someone so desirable – open, honest, natural, loyal, with a great sense of humour and a figure the desire of men and envy of women – has a better chance than most of finding the happiness she deserves, and I hope with all my heart she finds it.

I had other reasons for living, of course – my family and friends. I remember, many years ago, lying on the verandah roof of a colonial mansion in the mountains of northern Burma. A shooting star streaked through the clear night sky and I made a wish. I wished for health, wealth and happiness for

all those I loved and cared about. I repeated that wish several times in the following years and was enormously gratified to gradually see it come to pass for most of my family and friends. I'm not suggesting that my wishes had anything to do with their various successes – that was largely the result of their own efforts and the occasional dash of good fortune. But after my accident, even the joy I derived from seeing the happiness of those I cared about went sour for me. Seeing others get on with their lives, doing what I no longer could, was terribly distressing for me. I couldn't live my life vicariously through other people's satisfactions and achievements. I was a self-centred person and I'd always done what I wanted, had my own reasons for living.

Mum and Dad, you often said that you didn't care what I did as long as I was happy. I expect that many of my friends felt the same way. Well, I was terminally, unbearably unhappy with no way out – except death. I know others have come to terms with paraplegia, or even quadriplegia, and managed to lead successful, apparently normal and happy lives. I've met and been encouraged by some of them. I tip me hat to them, for they have done what I cannot. Then again, perhaps I have done what they could not. Four attempts taught me that it takes an enormous amount of courage to commit suicide. Unfortunately, I didn't find the examples of others in my position motivating or inspirational. For me, life as a para was so far from the minimum I considered acceptable that it just didn't matter. It's quality of life, not quantity, that's important.

It's a challenge, many of you said. Bullshit. My life was just a miserable existence, an awful parody of normalcy. What's a challenge without some reward to make it worthwhile?

Despite that, I gave it a go. I worked hard – harder than I ever have at anything – to try and rebuild my life. I tried picking up the threads and doing whatever I was still capable of. I went out to shops, theatres and restaurants, even a concert. I learnt to drive again, and worked. I hated every second of it with a passion I'd never felt before. What good is a picnic when you can't play with the kids and dogs and throw a frisbee? What's the point of going to a gig if you can't dance when the music grips you? I used to be a player, not a spectator, and my new existence (life seems too strong a word) was painful, frustrating and completely unsatisfying.

At least you can still work, some said. Great. I liked my job, the caring, talented and generous

people I worked with and especially where we worked. But it was still just a job, and as you all know, I worked to live, not lived to work. Work was never a reason for living for me. And what of the future? Where would I go, what would I do? There's no future for a wheelchair-bound journalist, not one with my interests anyway. I'd never be able to do any of the things, like travel and adventure, that drew me to journalism in the first place and ultimately made the long office hours worthwhile.

I accepted death – embraced it eagerly, in fact, after so many months of the nightmare – without fear or regret. I had a full, rewarding and successful life by any measure, and in my last weeks I couldn't think of a single thing I'd always wanted to do but hadn't yet done. Well, actually, I guess I can think of a few things, but they don't amount to much. I'd always wanted to ride a Harley or drive a convertible Porsche, and I would have loved to have been 'stoked in the green room' – ridden a tube. Surfing would definitely have been the next sport I would have taken up. I've got a pretty good idea of the buzz it offers, and I think I would have liked it. Anyway, death is the last great adventure, and I was ready for it. I wasn't religious – how could anyone believe in a just, compassionate and almighty God after seeing and experiencing what I have? – but I felt quietly confident that whatever lay beyond had to be something more, something better, if anything.

I had one enormous regret, of course. I didn't want to hurt anyone the way I know I have.

I wish it didn't have to be this way. I didn't want to make those I love suffer, and the knowledge that I would bring awful grief to those I least wanted to

hurt in the world compounded my own misery unbelievably. I'm so sorry. I hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me. I wish you could see death as I did, as a release, something to celebrate, and be happy for me. I would rather have thrown a raging party and simply have disappeared at dawn with your blessings and understanding. Of course, it could never have happened that way. At any rate, I thank you all for making my last months as happy as they were, for your optimism and support, for the rays of light with which you pierced my gloom. My condition was permanent; I can only hope your grief fades quickly with the healing passage of time.

Chris Hill
10 February 1993

Statement

I have decided to take my own life for reasons detailed in the accompanying note. It is a fully considered decision made in a normal, rational state of mind and I have not been influenced or assisted by anyone else. Suicide is not a crime and I have the right not to be handled or treated against my will, so I absolutely forbid anyone to resuscitate or interfere with me while I continue to live, unless it is to end my suffering. Anyone who disregards this notice will be committing a civil and criminal offence against me.

In the event that I do not die, I wish to be placed under the care of Dr George Quittner at Mosman Hospital.

Chris Hill