

# anthro<sub>pology now</sub>

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## The “New Normal” after Brain Injury

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*Back Walking Forward.*

**Directed and produced by Kavery Kaul. River Films. 40 minutes.**

**A**s a medical anthropologist who regularly teaches courses where the body and personhood are prominent themes, I struggle to locate visual materials that can complement the insights embedded in ethnographic, theoretical, or clinical texts. Occasionally I might consult websites of humanitarian or patients’ rights groups, hoping to locate a short clip or a lengthier video for classroom use. Such productions, however, are limited in scope because they are designed primarily to generate potential donors, underscoring the heartache of kin, set alongside the impressive—nay, even somewhat miraculous—recoveries of carefully selected patients. The mainstream film industry, too, features, at least from time-to-time, the daily struggles that plague the lives of those (sometimes suddenly) confined to wheelchairs or dependent on prosthetic limbs in stories where, invariably, a major triumph must occur (they walk again, they find love, they experience passionate sex). This range of media depends heavily on real-life personalities or fictional characters whose thinking remains intact, such that their restrictions in life are rooted in the body but where (thank heavens!) their minds still function. The success of such stories relies on a simultaneously melodramatic, gut-wrenching, and heart-warming approach.

**Back Walking Forward** is none of these things—there is no melodrama, it does not romanticize, nor is it voyeuristic (or horrific). This fairly brief (40 minute) and wonderful film focuses on the life of Eric Michalowski, a young man from Brooklyn, New York, who sustained a massive brain injury at age 19 when, just prior to entering college, he was hit by a car when riding a bike as he was delivering pizza. The filmmaker Kavery Kaul pulls us through the quotidian practices that make up Eric’s life several years later. We witness the efforts of a team of experts—comprised of his doctor, Kathryn Ko, various unnamed physical, occupational, and speech therapists and, more importantly, his parents Susan and Isaac, alongside his adult brother Jeffrey—as they assist Eric in remastering both cognitive and physical skills. It is, in essence, a film about the heroics of everyday survival and support within a family, where the drama, so to speak, is incremental.

Several things make this a truly marvelous film. First, Kaul focuses exclusively on the mundane, where key scenes include such moments as when Susan cooks eggs for Eric, or Isaac gives him a shave, when Jeffrey tells his brother of his engagement to his girlfriend, and during various physical therapy sessions when Eric is encouraged to try to move, walk, converse, and so on. For me, one of the most memorable moments occurs in a swimming pool, when a below-surface camera catches the

gracefulness of Eric's dancing feet as he is led around the pool by his father. This moment is in stark contrast to Eric's struggles (when on land) to stand, steady himself, and take a few hesitant steps. Second are the interactions that Eric has with those most intimately involved in his care. This is, unquestionably, a person who is both loved and respected, where all persons, regardless of relationship, training, or level of authority never exhibit a hint of condescension and who always speak directly with him, not through him.

The third and most striking aspect of the film is the fact that Kaul has resisted the trap that most films of this genre fall into: there is no overvoice, no detached or disembodied narrator directing our view or our thoughts on Eric's life. Instead, much of the film is narrated by Eric himself and, as a result, his subjectivity comes through loud and clear. This is achieved in several ways. For one, the camera is frequently handled as if we are viewing the world through Eric's eyes. In turn, Kaul relies heavily on Eric's own personal reflections as a powerful way to move the film along. Because Eric's speech can be difficult to follow, rather than having someone else translate for him (and thus render him a passive protagonist), Kaul provides us with subtitles so we can always follow what Eric is saying. As we quickly learn, Eric is prone to spell out words (interestingly, he is encouraged to do so sometimes by his mother during stressful moments, as when he undergoes medical procedures). Kaul's insistence that Eric should speak for himself helps us realize early on that he is profoundly cognizant of his predicament. As Eric puts it at one point, "I am Eric Number 2, and I used to be Eric Number 1" (the latter being a person who once inhabited his bedroom but who is now dead). Kaul relies on a very tight narrative style so that Eric's statements help to unfold for us the nature of his current life. Eric thus comes through as a delightful man and as someone who longs to walk but who is clearly terrified of this, too. His outrageous sense of humor is both entertaining and poignant (as when he spells p-e-n-i-s and jokes about masturbation, or when asked by a therapist "What's your name?" and he replies "George Bush").

One consistently finds delight, too, in his propensity to rhyme words and his overall charm and candor. Finally, the film provides a moving portrait of a family where both parents are clearly devoted to their son's well-being and halting progress. As one might expect, we witness Eric's mother doing the lion's share of the work, but it is clear that Eric's survival, happiness, and seemingly constant therapeutics together require a carefully choreographed routine of daily care that involves many people. Noteworthy here is that both parents work (the mother is a teacher, the father an electrical engineer), and, as the father explains, this has helped them acquire (and pay for) certain services for their son that extend beyond the boundaries of Medicaid. This is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a well-to-do family, however, and thus their ability to maintain such a high level of care for their son offers evidence of how hard—and constantly— they must lobby for services for their son.

As should be clear, this film would make a wonderful addition to any course concerned with the embodied self, disability studies, or mind-body therapeutics, be it in anthropology, psychology, bioethics, neurology, occupational therapy, or healthcare policy. More generally, it is a film everyone should see because it teaches so much in so short a time about brain injury recovery, the struggles of family- and home-based care, and in its most basic form the value of a human life.