In 25 years I've been to at least 1,000 press conferences. World Series, Super Bowls, prizefights--huge rooms full of tough guys. But the most gripping press conference, the most unforgettable   
one, was last Thursday in a little room in Grand Junction, Colo., starring a guy as skinny as a two-iron.

That was when 27-year-old adventurer Aron Ralston described for the world how he had saved his life by cutting off his lower   
right arm with a dull pocketknife.

For five days Ralston's arm was pinned by an 800-pound boulder--after he'd lowered himself off it, the boulder had shifted onto his arm--in a forbidding three-foot-wide crevice in the remote Bluejohn Canyon in southeastern Utah. He tried everything to move the boulder, throwing his body at it, chipping away at it. The thing didn't budge.

On the third day, out of food and water and ideas, he stared at his cheap multiuse tool, the kind you get free with a $15 flashlight, and realized what he had to do. He used a pair of cycling shorts for a tourniquet, picked up the knife, took a deep breath and began sawing into his own skin.

The blade was too dull to even do that. "Wouldn't even cut my arm hairs," he said.

Still, for two more days, he kept at it--through skin, muscle and agony. As he spoke, his parents, Donna and Larry, sitting on either side of him, wept quietly. Donna held Aron's left hand under the table. Hardened members of the media, people who'd covered wars, were crying, but Aron didn't cry. He told his story like

a man describing how he had fixed his lawnmower.

But imagine it. How do you keep slicing into yourself against unthinkable pain, when you know it's you inflicting that pain? "I felt pain," he said with a half smile. "I coped. I moved on." Then he stopped cutting. He had to. He couldn't get through the bone.

Now, even for a Carnegie Mellon honors grad, a former mechanical engineer for Intel, a man who has climbed solo 45 peaks of at least 14,000 feet, all in winter, often after midnight, usually without oxygen canisters, GPS or radio, this seemed a problem he couldn't solve. "I needed a bone saw."

Alternating between depression and visions of family members, friends and dreams of "tall, tasty margaritas," getting a "kind of peace" from the idea of death and yet willing himself on, a revelation suddenly came to him: "It occurred to me that if I could break my bones up at the wrist, where they were trapped, I could be freed."

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*It occurred to you? It occurred to you that if you snapped the bones of your own arm, this would be a solution?*

Sorry, but if it's me, I'm dead. Bring on the wolves and the vultures. Let the winds spread my remains over the sandstone. In fact I'm pretty sure I don't even saw into my arm. I weep when   
removing a Garfield Band-Aid.

But not Aron Ralston. He found a way to live. "All the desires, joys and euphorias of a future life came rushing into me," he said. "Maybe this is how I handled the pain. I was so happy to be   
taking action."

It took him most of the morning, but--and how often do you get to write this sentence?--he was finally able to break the wrist bones in half. Yes, he did. Using torque and the strength he had left, the man purposely broke two bones in his already flayed arm. As he described that, everyone in the room forgot to blink, scribble, breathe.

Though he declined to describe what he had to do next, there is only one thing Ralston could've done--and a hospital official later explained this: He would've had to stretch his body away from that trapped hand to separate the broken ends of those bones. That would be the only way to make a path for the pocketknife to pass through.

Who's hungry?

That done, "it took about an hour," he said, to finish the amputation. Amazing. The man sawed off a body part and timed himself.

Finally free, the mountain-shop worker from Aspen crawled through that narrow, winding stretch of canyon, rappelled 60 feet down a cliff and hiked about six miles, all with one arm and one profusely bleeding stump, until he met what had to be two horrified Dutch hikers.

Ralston may never play concert piano again (he minored in performance piano composition at Carnegie Mellon), but he vows to keep exploring every inch of the West, as did the great John Wesley Powell, for whom Lake Powell is named--the great one-armed explorer, John Wesley Powell.

They call Ralston an extreme athlete, but the courage and will he displayed over those five days is not extreme, it's legendary. Don't care who you meet, you'll never find anybody tougher than this guy. After the press conference, back in his hospital room, he said, "I wish I could've been funnier."

Yeah, Aron. Next time, can you do something to liven it up?

*If you have a comment for Rick Reilly, send it to  
reilly@siletters.com.*