swallowing my pride
The sharp pains in my stomach told me something had gone horribly wrong.

After years of performing as a professional sword swallower, was this how my career, or worse yet, my life would end?

"Are they sharp?" someone had shouted from the back of the audience a few moments earlier.

"Of course not…" I replied with a smirk. “You can only swallow a sharp sword once!"

Sword swallowing is a difficult and extremely dangerous art that requires razor sharp focus and pinpoint accuracy. A lapse in concentration could mean a puncture, internal bleeding, or even death. The audience always seems to grasp the obvious physical perils in swallowing a 24-inch steel sword. But they rarely suspect the unseen but deeper danger I wrestle with internally whenever I perform – swallowing my pride. After years of defying death, had my pride finally gotten the best of me?

As President of the Sword Swallowers Association and one of the last true sword swallowers left in the world, I’ve been blessed to perform for millions of people around the world. A multiple Guinness World Record holder, I’ve been featured in Ripley’s Believe It or Not cartoons, books, and museums worldwide, on artist tours opening for award-winning Country artists Rascal Flatts and Brooks and Dunn on their national Neon Circus tours, on multiple episodes of NBC’s reality show “America’s Got Talent,” “The Today Show,” and in hundreds of other TV programs, documentaries, newspaper, magazine and radio interviews around the world. As one of less than a few dozen sword swallowers in a world population of 6.8 billion people, I felt a certain pride in knowing I
was unique at being one in every 225 million people. The first part of my show had gone as smoothly as it always had. Little did I realize how differently it would end this time.

Both of my grandfathers were Lutheran pastors, and my mom was born on the mission field in Papua New Guinea. After attending Waldorf Lutheran College in Forest City, IA, I felt called to the mission field myself. As a member of the first Lutheran Youth Encounter team to India, I had witnessed sword swallowing first-hand in the land where it originated. I now have a unique ministry where the whole world is my mission field and sword swallowing is my tool. I enjoy performing at churches and large youth events around the world where I use my extreme form of "cutting edge innertainment" as a way of touching audiences in a profound way that other ministries might not be able to reach.

But this was not a church show, and something just didn’t feel right. In my morning devotions, two verses had jumped out at me, “Pride comes before a fall” and “Humility comes before honor” (Proverbs 16:18, 18:12). I had swallowed swords hundreds of times over the years without a problem, so I was confident in my sword swallowing abilities and never expected that my pride would cause me to fall. But somehow these verses stuck in my mind all day, and I had an uneasy feeling about today’s show.

This was a small performance for a select group at a local restaurant in Hartselle, AL. I knew there were some prominent business owners in the audience, and being new in town, I was eager to make a good impression. Little did I realize what a memorable impression this performance would make, not only on them, but also in me… literally.

The time came to swallow my 24-inch double-edged sword. “He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword,” I announced to the audience, quoting Jesus in Matthew 26:52. Little did I realize how close to fulfilling this verse I was about to come.

Like a child licking frosting from a butter knife, I drew the 20-inch blade lengthwise across my tongue from hilt to tip to lubricate the metal with my saliva, while at the same time warming and checking the blade with my tongue for signs of snags or burrs.

Placing the tip of the blade carefully into my mouth, I closed my eyes and bowed my head in silent prayer, then slowly lowered the hilt down to my belt buckle, appearing to the audience as if I were going to thrust the tip of the blade upward through the top of my head. I pressed my eyes tightly closed in an attempt to block out all thoughts of the audience, a vital step that was accomplished when the sounds of the crowd were drowned out by the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. After adjusting my stance, I took a deep breath, and with a gulp, swallowed the remaining saliva in my mouth so it would not run down my open esophagus and into my lungs.

Without warning, I quickly raised my arms and head together at once, lifting the hilt directly over my head. The audience gasped at the sudden motion, and through the slits in my eyes I could glimpse the anticipation on their faces. I carefully guided the warm blade over my tongue to the back of my oral cavity while repressing the gag reflex in the back of my throat. Even though I’d performed this maneuver hundreds of times over the
years, this part of the procedure still felt uncomfortable, making me feel queasy and almost always making my eyes water.

When I got to the point where the sword tip hit the back of my throat and felt like it would go no further, I widened my neck like a croaking frog and hyperextended my jaw to thrust my chin forward in an underbite, creating an odd gargoyles-like smile on my face. I knew I had to be careful here, as this is a crucial area where the esophagus can puncture easily, causing some of the most serious injuries. While repressing the gag reflex, I pressed the blade down on my tongue like a large tongue depressor, flipped open my epiglottis, and navigated the tip down past what we sword swallowers call “the bump”. The next step is to repress the 22 pairs of muscles in the peristalsis or swallow reflex in the esophagus. Harder yet is to mentally repress the pride reflex in the ego.

A voice from the audience suddenly broke my concentration. “That’s fake! That blade’s gotta curl up into the handle!...”

The heckler obviously did not grasp the gravity of the moment. I knew I needed a “conviner” to prove that the feat was really real. Yes, I reasoned, the maneuver known as “the Drop” would be perfect at this point. As the sword slid a few inches down my throat, I tightened my esophageal muscles to hold the blade, and carefully let go of the hilt with my hands, leaving the blade suspended partway down my throat, balanced straight up and held in place by just my esophageal muscles, a maneuver that had taken months to learn and years to master. I slowly stretched out my arms until I resembled Christ being crucified on the cross.

With a snap of my fingers, I relaxed my throat muscles and let the blade quickly drop down my esophagus between my lungs. The sudden drop caused the sword to bump into my heart at a point where the only thing that separates the two is a thin covering of esophageal tissue an eighth of an inch thick, about the thickness of a breakfast sausage. For a moment, the nudge to my heart sent a jolt like an electric-shock tingling throughout my entire body. The tip of the blade made its way to my lower esophageal sphincter, a tight rubberband-like closure at the entrance to the stomach designed to keep food from refluxing out of the stomach and into the esophagus. When the blade hit, I felt a dull pain, almost as if a piece of meat had gotten stuck in my throat. As I relaxed my esophagus, I felt the blade drop further and slide the last few inches until the tip rested on the bottom of my stomach and the hilt clinked on my teeth.

By now the heckler had stopped in mid-sentence, and a hush had fallen over the audience who stared in stunned disbelief. With the sword still in place, I carefully bowed at the waist so the audience could see the blade all the way down my throat. I held my concentration as long as I could until I felt the retch reflex in my stomach ready to spasm. I stood upright, placed the first two fingers of my right hand under the quillons at the hilt, and quickly flicked the blade out of my throat about ten feet up into the air, catching it in my right hand with a flourish. Without missing a beat, I threw the tip of the blade forcefully into the floor between my feet, a no-nonsense way of punctuating the end of the feat.
As the sword quivered in the wood, the audience burst into spontaneous applause. I
smiled proudly to myself, knowing that I had cheated death once again and successfully
converted another audience of skeptics into true believers in sword swallowing.

I continued my act with a smug sense of confidence, swallowing progressively longer
blades, including a 30-inch double-edged sword that I invited an audience volunteer to
pull out of my throat. I was beginning to feel proud of my performance so far as
everything in my show had gone smoothly until now.

After performing the death-defying feat of sword swallowing successfully hundreds of
times over the years, I had begun to let my guard down to the point that my attitude was
becoming casual and even a bit cavalier. This time I may have pushed it a bit too far by
attempting a new stunt I had just started to work into my act and had only performed
publicly twice in the past few weeks. Instead of focusing on impressing others, I should
have been concentrating on the feat I was about to attempt.

Sword swallowing is an extremely difficult and dangerous feat that takes from three to
seven years to learn, and longer to master. I knew from my research for the Sword
Swallowers Association that very few people in the world have successfully learned to
swallow a single sword – less than a few hundred people over the 4000 year history of
the art. Fewer still have managed to swallow two swords at once, and only a handful
have ever mastered the art enough to swallow multiple swords of five or more at a time.

Until recently, I usually just swallowed one single sword at a time, starting with a small
dagger and working my way up to individual bayonettes, sabers and longer double-edged
swords, eventually swallowing more complex swords such as curved sabers and the wavy
serpentine Flamberge blade. On a few rare occasions I had managed to swallow two
swords simultaneously, a feat that took me years to work to accomplish.

Only a few weeks before, I had set a new personal record by swallowing four,
then five, and eventually six swords at once while practicing in my living
room. A few days later, at our annual Sword Swallowers Convention in
Wilkes-Barre, PA, nine of us managed to set a new Guinness World Record
by swallowing a total of 52 swords at once, with me breaking my own
personal record by swallowing 7 swords at once. I don’t know which record I
was more proud of – my individual record, or the group’s.

As I stood there contemplating whether or not to attempt the multiple “sword
sandwich,” my pride got the best of me, and I decided to show off my new
feat to impress this audience. I pulled five full-length swords from my leather
bag and wiped each of the blades with a soft rag doused in rubbing alcohol to
sterilize the blades, carefully feeling the edges with my fingers for signs of
snags or burrs in the metal that could easily prove fatal if not detected.

“This is extremely dangerous; it could kill me… I hope you enjoy it.” I said with a wink.
I stacked the five swords together and carefully arranged the blades to stagger the tips, then slowly lifted the bundle of steel to my mouth.

“One for fun
Two for you
Three for me
Four is more
I’ll strive for five
And if I survive,
You’ll applaud like crazy
That I’m still alive…”

I opened my mouth and carefully maneuvered the cluster of blades down my throat, hoping they’d all go in the same direction and not splay outward or scissor against each other. The thickness of the blades nearly caused me to gag, and my mind wandered as I wondered if the audience had noticed the reaction. I tried to open my jaw even wider, but it was extended as far as it would go and was starting to ache as the weight of the blades pressed heavily on my throat, prying my mouth open like a dentist’s clamp.

I carefully worked the mass of steel down my throat as far as I could, attempting to open my mouth even further while focusing on repressing the gag, peristalsis and retch reflexes. I was beginning to grow proud of the fact that I had managed to get the five swords down successfully, when my mind wandered again as I glanced at the crowd and wondered how the act looked to my audience.

Suddenly, before I knew what happened, my stomach retched upwards against the tips of the blades. I didn’t have time to react. The sharp pain in my stomach instantly told me something had gone horribly wrong.

I yanked the five swords from my throat as quickly yet as carefully as I could so as to not cause any more damage. “Stay calm,” I told myself, as my mind raced. I could already feel the pain welling up in my mid-section. I knew something was not right.

"That really hurt..." I mouthed to my wife Lisa as my stomach throbbed. My watering eyes quickly inspected the moist blades for signs of blood, a regular habit after every swallow. No blood. Good. But I knew from experience that a lack of blood on the blades could be misleading - an injury below the epiglottis would not show up as visible evidence on the blades, and a false sense of relief could quickly turn a serious internal injury lethal in a matter of hours if the deadly bacteria peritonitis set in.

The audience sensed something was wrong. After a few moments of awkward silence, an audience member nervously blurted, "We need to keep our end of the bargain and give him that applause we promised if he swallowed all five swords," followed by a meager smattering of applause that quickly faded at the audience’s obvious apprehension as they wondered if my grimaces were just part of my act.

“The sharp pain told me something had gone horribly wrong...”
Fortunately, the sword sandwich was the finalé for this show. Without speaking, I nodded in acknowledgement to the audience, and while still holding the five swords in my right hand, waved feebly with my empty left hand, staggered a few steps forward, and slumped down next to my wife Lisa, while grasping my stomach area just below my breast bone.

After studying sword swallowing and the physiology of the human digestive system for years, I knew just how serious an internal injury like this could be. The pains in my stomach signaled that something was wrong, and I realized that my situation could quickly turn deadly. Now while grasping my stomach, it occurred to me that what I had always hoped to avoid in my career as a sword swallower may have finally actually happened to me. The realization suddenly hit me: “Pride comes before a fall.”

I immediately drank several glasses of ice water to constrict any internal bleeding in my stomach. Feeling no additional pain and thinking I might have merely bruised some muscle tissue, I decided to head home to bed to heal and see what might happen next.

Two hours later, I awoke gasping for breath with severe pain and muscle spasms in my stomach. “Lisa, wake up... You need to take me to the hospital,” I muttered, barely able to whisper. Fluids had begun to leak around my heart and lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

Five hours later, we were still sitting in the emergency room of a nearby hospital waiting to be examined. Apparently the night duty nurse had not taken my injury seriously. “Just take me home,” I muttered to Lisa as the sun began to rise. “I need to get some rest.”

When I awoke at home several hours later that evening, I glanced at my swords leaning in the corner where I had slung them the night before. I looked at them with disdain, almost like a college student who’d had too much to drink the night before. “I have NO desire to swallow those swords ever again!” I mumbled to Lisa. I guess I didn’t feel quite so proud of myself now.

For the next several weeks, I could barely breathe or move my upper torso due to pain from the pleurisy in my ribcage. Eating solid food was out of the question, much less swallowing a sword. With the help of ice water, antibiotics, and several weeks of bed rest, I was finally able to mend to where I could begin eating yogurt again.

Four weeks later, I was scheduled to shoot an episode for The Food Network series “Unwrapped” that had been developed around me swallowing the “sword sandwich” of
five swords. After a month of not eating solid food, much less swallowing swords, I was beginning to wonder if this performance was going to be the most humiliating one of my career or if my career as a sword swallower was over. That morning, after four weeks without solid food, I had attempted to swallow my smallest sword. My esophagus was so tight that it felt like it was twisted in a knot and I could only get the short sword about halfway down with difficulty. “Get humble before you stumble,” I thought. I got down on my knees and closed my eyes.

“Lord, if it be Your will that I should use this talent for You, then I give You my gift to use for YOUR glory, not mine,” I prayed. “Please forgive me for my pride, and help me learn to be humble. From now on, I’ll swallow my pride and give YOU the glory.”

Miraculously, my performance that evening went without a hitch. I was able to swallow each of my individual swords repeatedly for multiple takes, even managing to swallow my most difficult wavy flamberge serpentine rapier.

Finally it was time for my finalé, swallowing the “sword sandwich,” the same five swords that had nearly killed me a few weeks earlier. Before putting the blades into my mouth, I glanced at my wife Lisa, then paused and whispered a quick silent prayer, “This is for YOUR glory, Lord, not mine!”

Even though my healing esophagus still felt sore, I managed to swallow the five swords without the audience ever suspecting the injury or complications I’d been dealing with over the past few weeks, not to mention the doubts and pride I’d been struggling with all that time. The swords went down quickly, and the injury healed within several weeks. But the wounding of my pride took longer to heal.

During the healing period I spent a lot of time reflecting on my pride. Out of this process evolved “The Sword I Call My Pride,” a poem that compares swallowing my pride to swallowing the first sword I ever swallowed, a saber I call “My Pride” (Sidebar). This poem has not only become an important part of my church shows and the way I look at performing, but it has also become an important reminder in my daily life of what can happen when I let my pride get the best of me.

Jesus said, “Whatever goes into the mouth goes into the stomach, ...but what comes out of the mouth, comes from the heart.” (Matt 15:17-18) When I perform, audiences can obviously see my swords go into my mouth and down into my stomach. But I also want them to hear that whatever comes out of my mouth now comes from a humbled and contrite heart.
Ten weeks after my injury, an endoscopic procedure revealed a puncture wound half an inch long near the entrance to my stomach that was still in the process of healing.

The deeper wounding of my pride has taken longer to heal. It involves a day-to-day process that causes me to grow in my life as a Christian as I work on humbling myself and swallowing my pride every day.

In February 2006, just a few months after the injury, The Learning Channel filmed an episode on my accident for their documentary “99 Most Bizarre Self-Inflicted Injuries”. Then on May 18, 2007, I swallowed my pride in a different way -- as the first person in America to swallow a sword while submerged 20 feet underwater in a tank of 80 sharks and stingrays at Ripley’s Aquarium in Myrtle Beach, SC. This time, I spent a lot of time on my knees in prayer swallowing my pride in the weeks before the stunt. I’m glad I did, as the feat was filmed by several film crews and witnessed by over 40 million viewers on over 400 TV stations including CNN and ESPN. This time, my pride was not an issue.

God has continued to bless me with tremendous opportunities and honors that remind me to swallow my pride. In October 2007, I was honored to receive the Ig Nobel Prize in Medicine at Harvard University for a research paper I co-authored entitled “Sword Swallowing and its side-effects” published in the British Medical Journal and discussed in hundreds of other publications. As I stepped onstage before world media to accept the award from Nobel Laureate Dr. William Lipscomb, the thought ran through my mind, “Pride comes before a fall; But humility comes before honor.” The notoriety generated by the paper and the award have resulted in more honors and opportunities to perform at Harvard, MIT, Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College, at science festivals, and other events around the world.

In 2008, I was blessed to be featured heavily on NBC’s hit reality show “America’s Got Talent” from my first auditions in Nashville to the Atlanta regionals where I decided to try swallowing the 5 swords for the second time since my accident. At the last minute, while waiting to go on, I changed my mind and decided to attempt swallowing all 7 swords at once. The words came to mind, “Pride comes before a fall. Get humble before you stumble!” I found a quiet area backstage, knelt down
next to a chair and prayed that I might be humble and that God would be glorified. A few moments later, I ran out onstage with a sense of humility and peace in my heart.

The first few swords went down smoothly. The time came to swallow the sword sandwich. As I heard my music ending, I grabbed the 7 swords, prayed a quick prayer that they’d all go in the same direction, and quickly slid them down my throat. When I removed the swords, the audience jumped to their feet in a standing ovation. The feat propelled me on to the semi-finals in Las Vegas where I swallowed a flaming sword, a curved sword, and juggled six clubs while a sword was whipped from my throat from 8 feet away, earning me a spot in the top 50, followed by two appearances on the Today Show and the live finals in Los Angeles. Before each show I was reminded, “Get humble before you stumble.” And each time, I knelt down on my knees to swallow my pride and give God the glory.

Just before stepping onstage for the live Los Angeles episode, I gathered several contestants together backstage to pray. Some prayed for success, others for peace for their nerves. The words came back to me, “Pride comes before a fall; Humility comes before honor.” Instead of worrying about the elimination, I prayed for humility and that God would be glorified. When I stepped out onstage, the realization that God was blessing me with honor brought a sense of peace to my heart and a smile to my face throughout the entire episode in spite of being eliminated.

In July 2009, I was honored to speak at the IAEWP World Peace Conference in Huntsville, AL. For my final point, I proposed that in order to create world peace, we all need to swallow our pride. As a visual metaphor of coming together to create peace, I invited delegates from three different continents to come together to remove a 40-inch “Sword of War” from my throat to transform it into a “Sword of Peace.” When the illustration was over, I was honored with a standing ovation. This time, I wasn’t overcome with pride. Before giving my speech, I had remembered to get down on my knees and thank God with a humble heart for the honors and the lessons He’s taught me since the day my pride almost got the best of me: “Pride comes before a fall; Humility comes before honor.”

Memories of that injury still haunt me every day. But now before every appearance, I make it a point to humble myself, get down on my knees, and swallow my pride, before that double-edged sword has a chance to come back and bite me again.
The Sword I Call My Pride

My saber is my joy and pride
I wear it proudly by my side
Shined and polished, it marks my stride
The sword I call my Pride

I wipe the blade with one smooth glide,
Lean back my head and open wide
Slide it in, down deep inside
The sword I call my Pride

Their mouths aghast, eyes open wide,
The crowd stands gasping mesmerized
No grasp of hazards deep inside
As I release my Pride

Standing there arms open wide
My Pride exposed, it's hard to hide
Discomfort I feel deep inside
While swallowing my Pride

My saber’s sharp, hard as my Pride,
The danger cannot be denied
One slight move cuts deep inside
The wounding of my Pride

Which hurts worse, I can't decide
Cold hard steel or burning pride
What's plain to see or hard to hide
While swallowing my Pride

The hardest part, I must confide
Is not hard steel or sharp carbide
The sharpest pain stabs deep inside
As I adjust my Pride

Standing there arms open wide
My tarnished pride gets crucified
As something pierces deep inside
While swallowing my Pride

Their mouths aghast, eyes open wide,
The crowd at last lets out a sigh
As I remove with one smooth glide
The sword I call my Pride

I stoop to put away my Pride,
Wipe it clean, make sure it's dried
Pack up, lay down, and set aside
The sword I call my Pride
A multiple Guinness World Record holding sword swallower and Ripley's Believe It or Not performer best known for swallowing swords underwater in a tank of sharks, Dan Meyer (Swallowing My Pride, page 60) gives The Lutheran readers a glimpse of what goes through his mind while two feet of steel is going through his body.

As President of the Sword Swallowers Association Int’l (www.swordswallow.org) and winner of the the 2007 Ig Nobel Prize in Medicine at Harvard University, Dan is internationally recognized as the world's leading authority in the field of sword swallowing. Known for his high-profile stunts and performances on shows such as America's Got Talent, the Today Show, Discovery Channel, Travel Channel, Learning Channel, Food Network, CNN and ESPN, Dan is in demand as a speaker and one of the top sword swallowers in the world.

Dan grew up attending St. Paul Lutheran in Michigan City, IN where both of his grandfathers were Lutheran pastors. After graduating from Waldorf Lutheran College in Forest City, IA, Dan served with Lutheran Youth Encounter on the first LYE team to India, where he witnessed sword swallowing first-hand in the land where the art originated. Now Youth Director for the Thrivent Board of north Alabama, Dan performs at Christian youth events around the world, and was recently presented the President’s Distinguished Service Award at Waldorf’s Homecoming in October 2009. (see: News)

Dan has a special nickname for the first sword he ever learned to swallow, a saber he calls “My Pride.” When a serious injury nearly cut Dan’s career short, it gave him a new perspective on swallowing his pride. “I’ve come to learn that ‘swallowing my pride’ can be a double-edged sword, but I have to do it or face the consequences,” Dan says. “Pride comes before a fall, and I certainly don’t want to fall when I’m swallowing a sword!”

When he’s not performing at science festivals, medical events, Ripley's attractions, colleges, corporate or church youth events, Dan and his wifeLisa raise Arabian horses on their Hartselle, AL farm. For more on Dan’s Cutting Edge Innertainment, visit www.cuttingedgeinnertainment.com and danmeyer.org