

A dialogue with Torben Ulrich about starting from zero, finding room to unfold and going the distance

by Lars Larsen



Torben Ulrich and his wife Molly Martin in their home in California 2017.

Foto: Lars Larsen

THE CENTER FOR QUALITY OF LIFE

2018

A dialogue with Torben Ulrich about starting from zero, finding room to unfold and going the distance

by Lars Larsen

First published in the Danish journal “*Aldringens psykologi*” (“The psychology of aging”), Issue 1, November 2017, on: www.aarhus.dk/centerforlivskvalitet

English translation by **Angela Teresa Maríno** and edited by **Molly Martín**

“Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, the eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits.”

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Prologue: The idea and the preliminary steps

The idea for this article originally arose when my good colleague Anna Aamand from The Center for Quality of Life (Center for Livskvalitet) in the Municipality of Aarhus, Denmark, expressed a wish to speak with a senior citizen who had a distinctive way of tackling the challenges of aging and who was able to verbalize it. She had always wanted to speak about this with the Danish writer Benny Andersen. The psychologists at our center supported her in this wish, but quickly began contemplating whom they themselves would choose to speak with.

My choice quickly fell upon the now 89-year-old former tennis star and still highly active multi-artist and Buddhist, Torben Ulrich. As I myself am a ball player (table tennis), I already knew a little bit about Torben, and had recently read in a magazine a small interview that contained brief reflections about aging and continuing to live out and fulfill one’s entire potential, until you can’t anymore. In my opinion, these reflections really hit the central mark. Afterwards, I immediately decided to try to contact Torben Ulrich, in the hopes of getting him to elaborate on his reflections, in light of some of the main issues that occupy psychologists in the field of aging.

Full of inspiration and optimism, I sent an email to the address that was on his website and asked if it would be possible to get an interview. My mail was quickly answered by Torben's wife Molly Martin with the seemingly discouraging words: "Torben doesn't do email." Luckily this remark was followed by: "... but I've shown him your note and he says yes to your request. Perhaps we could start with a Skype."

When the first joy was over, I realized that I had never done an interview before. Usually I work quantitatively with psychological measurements in different areas, not qualitatively with the interview form. Instead of letting the ideas I had about interviews, and what I didn't know about them, handicap me, I chose to see the situation as an opportunity to start from scratch, at a zero point, as Torben calls it, and started to think about how I best could do it, so that it was in the spirit of the ballplayer, the writer, the painter, the filmmaker, and the jazz musician Torben Ulrich. So, I decided not to fix on a specific structure. It was obvious that I shouldn't narrow down the court before we had even put the ball in play.

Later Molly asked for some question guidelines, and I sent them. In our conversation, these questions were mostly not asked in a certain order, and in the subsequent editorial work I have put in the questions where I found it best for the reader's understanding. As we, in our conversation, in many ways dealt with the same main topic from different angles several times, the same way as a jazz musician improvises away from a basic melody and finally returns to it, parts of the conversation have been put together in a way where I hope it makes the most sense. I have, as well as able, tried to be true to the poetic language of Torben Ulrich.

The reader will have to excuse the verbal form in this text and Torben's unedited answers to my questions. It is my hope that the patient reader will find a reward in the profound and authentic voice of Torben Ulrich.

Dialogue: Together long distance

Torben: Hi Lars

Lars: Hi Torben

Torben: Yay

Lars: Thank you so much for speaking with me

Torben: Yes yes ... but of course. Good that you sent that piece of paper that I'm sitting with, and if I can help with anything from this paper or anything else, well then, we're together right now over long distance.

Lars: I have really been looking forward to our conversation.

Torben: Me too, yes yes. Hold on while I try and adjust the camera.

Lars: Yes, you're jumping around a bit. Now you're steady.

Torben: Yes yes, you're in the middle, but I'm a bit to the side.

Lars: First you were a bit to one side, but now you're in two versions. You're practically transcending space.

Torben: Well ... as usual I don't really know what's going on.

Lars: It's fine. I read an interview you did recently, where you said something important about getting older and finding "room to unfold" [in Danish, *spillerum*] despite the challenges. I'm fascinated by the idea of looking for opportunities and not fighting against aging, but fighting alongside it to try and find zero points, places where we can start from again. How would you like us to do this interview?

Torben: You maybe say something or ask, and then I can try and say something ... and then we have what you call a dialogue. That's a word that's useful in this situation too. I mean, we have, you could say, a dialogue with everything or the universe or what the hell we could call it. A dialogue where we try and see ourselves in all our smallness, you know. And if you open yourself to that word, then smallness is also about pain, you know, and existing, and sooner or later maybe falling for the age limit. And what does that mean? Smallness can just mean we're little or it can mean we're weak and suffering ... in the same way that aging can just mean to succumb to the age limit or it can mean to succumb to the idea that the age limit is a limit. But it could be an opening too. If you see it like succumbing, what does it take to reemerge in a new form, in a new phase, you know – we should try it – because in society we're quickly schooled to understand it all in contrasts, differences, where you either fail or make something, something is a success and something is a failure, and something is to the right and something is to the left, and something is those who are with us, and then there's the rest – trying to understand it all in a kind of schooling.

Lars: I have seen you quoted as saying that what you mostly work on these days is unschooling yourself – not like forgetting – but letting go of a lot of the ideas that you drag around, so that you’re not tied down, but where a zero point opens that’s free of constant divides. Can you describe the potentially frustrating thing about getting older and how we can better understand aging and its consequences, so it isn’t so frustrating?

Torben: Yes, what do we then need to unlearn? What I mean is that if everything is split up in one or the other, then you haven’t understood what it means to be born into a life that inevitably falls apart along the way, but at the same time is part of a process. If aging is frustrating, and that is not necessarily a word I use a lot, then it’s because we haven’t investigated the situation, so to speak, because when we get older, when we have lived long enough to understand that if something is frustrating, then we have to investigate why it’s frustrating and from which perspective or angle it’s frustrating. And then I think that if one has someone to help, one could learn from you, Lars, and if something is frustrating, where can you begin? Then I’d say, seen from my perspective, it’s in that room, where we unlearn opposites and contrasts. I have had the advantage that room to unfold isn’t just a metaphor. I have known the ball in the air, so to speak. *Spillerum*¹ has a concrete and also a very dynamic ring to it. Of course, I can’t run around on a tennis court the same way as 50 or 100 years ago, you know, but then I can make some other rooms where I can unfold, but at the same time this is an opening to see into something we never saw, because we were unfolding in other rooms. That is also a schooling in something. That “something” could then be to go the distance until you can’t anymore. And when you can’t anymore, that’s okay too. In the villages in Japan in old days you were there as long as it could work and you gave to the village’s activity and dynamics, and then if you finally couldn’t do it anymore, or you had had enough, then it was time to say goodbye and you could move out of the village in a ritual departure and find a place where you could sit down and stop eating or drinking. I kind of think there’s something beautiful in that.

Lars: Why are we so afraid of death in western society?

Torben: Yes, that’s a good question, because we don’t seem to have any trouble being born, you know. That’s easy. Of course, some people have had a rough time. I know that I could easily not have been here, because I had my umbilical cord around my neck when I was born,

¹ The Danish term *spillerum* is difficult to translate to English. If you understand the word more metaphorically it best translates to “room to unfold”, whereas it literally translates to “room to play”, in the same way that a tennis court is a room for playing a game of tennis. But the tennis court is also a room in which you can unfold as a ballplayer. Here the Danish word is used, as both connotations are implied.

and if I have understood it right, I was really blue in the face, but since then it's gone ok. You could say that if you get up this morning, it's in itself quite a wonder that we can live another day. In that sense there are enough zero points where you can start.

Lars: Every day is a zero point? Is that how you see it when you wake up in the morning?

Torben: Yes, but not just one zero point. There's zero and zero and zero and zero ... and you go on and on. There are lots of zero points to start.

Lars: Isn't the ultimate zero point death and the dissolving of oneself? In that case, what is the zero point?

Torben: I think it's really not fair to see death as a final zero point; instead you could choose to see a bunch of zero points that you can look into. One zero point is that we have just started a conversation – I see you on the screen and that's a zero point opening, and we meet, we have a dialogue, and when we're finished, that could be a zero point where you maybe have to edit and I then have something else to do – zero then has another value than nothing, so you understand that the zero is both nothing and everything, and a third, in-between, on another level.

Lars: How do you start at a zero point? What do you have to do to avoid bringing in all the disruptive understandings that we all carry around?

Torben: You sit down and you say "zero" ... ha ha ha...okay. Then you breathe in, and that could be a "one", but it could also be a "zero", and then you breathe out, and then we have a new zero point. You can do it in many different ways. I don't want to be too concrete, it depends on the situation. You have to find your own way.

Lars: How do you yourself do it?

Torben: Okay, the first thing I do is to try to open up the situation – disarm, so to speak. I'm not aiming to secure or arm myself in the situation, instead I'm trying to disarm, but it's not to make a discrepancy between disarming and arming. For me it is important to understand that we are deeply smeared in or anchored to understandings, or very quickly stiffens into a binary situation. I try to experience that at the end of the day, we are all people, but then we are also living beings and a part of this planet, and must open ourselves to the cosmic. In my view there is incredibly much to look at. You're actually sitting there with quite a good job, and also with a large task. It's good that Aarhus University supports such a project. I see it as a very important schooling in our entire educational system. At the same time as we are educated to grow up and

become productive citizens, I think that we also need to, as it turns out, establish another kind of schooling all the way through. The schooling that we have received from childhood is very negative towards aging, or collapsing, and everything regarding this. In cultures such as India and China there is another understanding and another schooling to begin with, if you take a Taoistic, yin-yang approach. Molly and I have been to China, where you see all these elderly people doing tai chi in the morning and in the evening together in the parks. It's almost a flowing understanding, and an education, so to speak. In the same way, I'd say that there is a yogic tradition in India that has its senses open to a yogic education in many different ways. There's a large task ahead, especially for you and your descendants, because it's clear that it can't be accomplished in one short life. Our entire culture must be seen in a new way, or see new openings. We can also get inspiration from Kierkegaard or in quantum physics, or in the quantum mechanics of Bohr, Heisenberg, Einstein and Bohm. Here there is also a schooling that can contribute to understanding things in another way than we have done till now. As soon as you look a little into quantum physics or quantum mechanics, you discover that things aren't definite opposites, or where A and not-A aren't two definite quantities. When we talk about time and space, we are still anchored in some Newtonian ways of understanding them as given quantities, but where we in Einstein's theory of relativity see that time is relative. For example, if I suddenly go to visit you in Denmark, I have actually used up a little less time than you sitting there. We exist and act in time, you and I. We met almost half an hour ago, but when we look into what time is, it quickly fades into nothing. Time fades into a conception of a given extent, a certain length. If you sit down and breathe, new time units occur, or time sort of disappears, where you begin to understand that you have been bound to those kinds of conceptions. As you may also have seen, I think it's a good thing to spend some time in total darkness, where you then begin to see how those inherent energies, which we don't normally see, start to show, and maybe we don't understand that when we eat and drink, it is converted into energy, because it all comes from the sun; it emerges as shining energies of some kind. Okay, so you can basically approach it, you know, Lars, in many different ways.

Lars: The Swedish geropsychologist Lars Tornstam has introduced the expression “gero-transcendence”. What do you think of the following description of the phenomenon?

“The gerotranscendent individual typically experiences a redefinition of the Self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental existential questions: The individual becomes less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in the choice of social and other activities. There is an increased feeling of affinity with past generations and a

decreased interest in superfluous social interaction. The individual might also experience a decrease in interest in material things and a greater need for solitary “meditation”. Positive solitude becomes more important. There is also often a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death.” (Tornstam 2005).

Torben: Absolutely. I agree, you know. The only thing I would add is that there is also an affinity with future generations. Seeing yourself as “grandparents” of future generations, but also to a certain extent being responsible for them, but also responsible for giving them the opportunity to look at life, like Lars Tornstam says, giving them an understanding of what he is saying, so you open yourself not just to an understanding of those who came before you, but also those who will come after you. In that zero point there is an open responsibility. That responsibility is enormous. How far can you reach? How much can you do? What you have to do is huge, but it must not become a feeling of guilt; then it quickly becomes difficult, if you see it as a big obligation, that maybe you haven’t had time to deal with; then it’s a big job.

Lars: I have just done a lecture for some young psychology students, and part of what we talked about was how life’s possibilities increase up until the middle of life and decrease from there, and therefore the connection between possibilities and age is like an upside down U. There is an anthropologist, Ruth Benedict, who sees the exact opposite: as a U, where freedom is biggest in the beginning and the end of life, where you are free from the immense amount of responsibility you have in the middle of life. What do you think about that in regards to the freedom of passing something on late in life?

Torben: Exactly. Firstly, I know Ruth Benedict and have read her many years ago when I was even younger than you, so I understand. There are phases in life. This U definitely occurs in the final part of life, where you are free of the daily responsibility of what they in India call “being householder” and everything that goes with it. Being householder in the sense that you have family and work obligations. In the last phase, life makes it possible to have time to open yourself to the cosmic, which you in a way end up in. Whether we are buried or cremated, we disappear into it all again. In my experience, some people naturally open themselves, without working hard at it. And some get more and more irritable. I can’t tell you how it works. For those who see it as a possibility, there are an amazing amount of things to do. As for finding room to unfold, we are also as beings a room for energies and forces, and I think that you can do a lot to keep that presence going as well as possible. And I must say that if I were in your shoes, I would also incorporate the physical aspects of that process. Remembering to breathe is very quickly neglected. When I have suggested to young people that I have worked with that

we should breathe together, I have experienced that it quickly went wrong. You know, you breathe for 5 minutes and suddenly someone starts crying and it all falls apart, simply by sitting down and breathing. That is where I think that the entire tension spectrum that you come into, when you explore breathing, is something that contributes to your state of mind. But it seems like we, in our usual and endless dualisms, constantly see it as body and mind. Breathing is like a center ground. That center ground also diminishes all the time. While we are quick to discover that our knees have known better days, many people don't realize that our breathing also shrivels up and stiffens, and this results in that the organs that otherwise could have been oxidized also begin to stiffen. If we inhale deeply and also exhale deeply, we immediately sense that the lower part of our torso opens, and as for me, in my own case, I'm sitting here now and feel the earth connection, and I'm breathing all the way down to my feet to get to that connection with the ground. Or stand up and just stand for a little bit or stand on one leg and hold your balance. There is a schooling there, a rich field of practice, a training ground. That leeway is both a training ground and a place or space for understanding.

Lars: I know that you meditate. Is there a connection between that meditative practice and the story that you once, over a period of more than 3 months, crawled more than 150 kilometers from Hellerup (north of Copenhagen) to Rødby (in southern Denmark)?

Torben: Absolutely. There was.

Lars: What was the reasoning behind that journey?

Torben: Firstly, I have worked on long-distance movement all my life. Since I was 12 years old I have been interested in the meaning of things – if there is a meaning, and so on with those themes. I went to the library to read Plato and what Socrates said according to Plato, and became interested in how different cultures viewed this aspect. Different cultures have different ideas about how you approach these things. In Tibet there is a tradition of moving in that way: crawling from one place to another, that is. And specifically, that movement was from Copenhagen, near Hellerup train station, and then down to Rødby. And which kind of distance was that? Molly and I have as our root teacher a Tibetan monk, Tenga Rinpoche, now passed away, and this long-distance movement was the connecting line from a certain place, that is, where our teacher first appeared in Denmark, the leeway, to use that term again, in which he was traveling all over, and so also down in Rødby, where he had built something that in Buddhist terminology is called a stupa; in Danish you could call it a beacon of awareness, or something like that. A stupa is a monument that symbolizes an enlightened or aware human,

like a Buddha – not necessarily like the possibly historical person Buddha Shakyamuni. It's seen as enlightenment or realization carved out in its corporeal aspects. The stupa is composed of the five basic elements: At the bottom is the symbol for Earth, above that is the symbol for Water, then Fire, Air, and finally the symbol for Space. In my opinion, and also as a ballplayer, my purpose was to understand the movement of these elements from the place where I first met my root teacher on Lundevangsvej in Hellerup to the place where he had erected the stupa in Rødby.

Lars: Is that the equivalent of a pilgrimage?

Torben: Yes, yes, it basically was, and it was also quickly understood as such. A man named Moses Hansen, whom you might remember, wanted to cleanse the soiling that I stood for. From a Christian perspective, according to him, I had indulged in an un-Christian deed by completing that movement, that journey. He wanted to wash it off, so the good Christian could once again walk on that road. But then he found out that it would take quite a long time, if he had to walk all the way, so he rented a truck and stood on it with a cross and demagnetized the road. Another time we met a priest near Maribo, who kind of stomped over and she stopped us and asked if we realized that Christians had done the same thing as us back in the 13th century. And then we said that we already knew that, and that we had great respect for it. We met lots of people every day, who had heard about this pretentious fool who was now crawling around on the ground and on the roads. At the time we didn't know if the police would say: "Under no circumstances" or "You're under arrest". We were prepared that we might end in the lock-up. So, there was also a lot of comedy in it.

Lars: I have read about your crawling journey on many occasions, and it is usually portrayed as a funny story about an eccentric project, but the "why" is not often addressed. But the interesting thing is: What was the idea and why did you do it?

Torben: Meditation is a very worn-out word. It was actually about performing a movement ritual. And that is what I tried to do. If it is a fantastically big room and a fantastically big task, naturally it must be made concrete. In "Indian country" – that is, over here (in the United States) – the Indians ran the so-called Indian Run that was a rite of passage, a ritual act that was about running for days and being exhausted by nature, but also experiencing nature's closeness and becoming absorbed, so nature was central to the run. Anybody who does what I did will have a great experience. It was a fantastic experience lying in the dirt, but also being close to grass and fields, to lay down under the cows that are standing there thinking: "What the hell is that guy

doing?” And that is basically what they did. And you could communicate with the birds, but also with the people who showed up and asked what the idea was. And at night, when we were crawling through Copenhagen in the beginning, for example when we had to cross a wide street in one green light. Of course, it wasn't always possible, so you know; red light, okay, let's stop, and then there is a green light, and then there is a yellow light, and you have to stop there, but we can't stop there, so we have to go back again you know. And in that way, it was both forwards and backwards. And to experience the city night in that way, where I in my youth had run around, and re-live those places in a different tonality, tempo – from that point of view, quite some experience also.

After a small pause, where we both are silent.

Lars: Thank you Torben. You have been very generous in sharing your experience and thoughts, and it has been exciting to hear you convey them with regard to my field of interest.

Torben: It hasn't really been a secret to a certain extent. As you know, I have been interested in all of this since I was a child.

Lars: So, you have basically been prepared for this throughout a long life?

Torben: In a way, yes, because I have been interested in these thoughts. I have often been in your shoes, where I had to try to say something to someone about my view on life, and even if I was supposed to say something about ballplaying, it would quickly be something like this. I have also been lucky, because I could basically do the things that I wanted. Of course there were people, when I was 18 years old, who said that it was all fine and well with tennis and ballplaying, but what will you do for a living when you grow up? That still applies. What will I do for a living, when I grow up? Absolutely no idea, ha ha, but I'll probably think of something. I have been lucky to be able to kick around, more or less as I wanted to. I have been grateful, but if it could not be one thing, it could be another, so that it might be worth doing, kind of well enough, until it wouldn't hold up any longer.

Epilogue: The writing on the wall.

The conversation continued about, amongst other things, Torben's views on publishing and editorial freedom, which resulted in me deciding to publish our dialogue in our own web-based

journal, where we were free of the many limitations one as a manuscript writer often meets with different magazines and publishing houses, and thus gave our dialogue more room to unfold. As we at the time, when the dialogue took place, had just started The Center for Quality of Life in Aarhus, Denmark, where I was the newly-appointed center chief and was therefore very busy, the writing of the article unfortunately had to wait a while. The following year, when I had been invited to participate in a scientific conference in San Francisco, and had finally finished the first draft of the article about our dialogue, it became an obvious idea that I should write to Molly, to hear if I could pass by, seeing as I was in the “neighborhood”. Molly was very kind and invited me to afternoon tea at their house the following Sunday and ended her mail with the following remark: “Please dress comfortably, since we sit on the floor”. I was already looking forward to it. On the Sunday I drove from my airport motel in southern San Francisco over The Golden Gate Bridge towards Marin County to visit Molly and Torben. In the house at the top of the high hills, a little bit outside of the idyllic little town where they live, Molly warmly welcomed me at the door and led me into a bright and simple living room with a beautiful view of the bay. On the floor, Torben was sitting in the lotus position at a round table, having a bite of bread and a chat with another guest. Torben got up, put out his right arm and got ready for a “fist-bump”. I was a little surprised and I don’t think I fist-bumped back, but instead gave him a hug. We sat down on the floor on the zaisu chairs around the low round table, and I was introduced to the other guest, who quite appropriately turned out to be Lene Vinding, the granddaughter of Torben’s mentor Terkild Vinding, who inspired Torben to follow the path that would lead him to the awareness that became the central topic of our dialogue.

I was offered some tea and a bite to eat, and we talked for about an hour, amongst other things about my first draft of the article. Torben had read it thoroughly and seemed to be satisfied with my happy-amateur approach, which he clearly preferred to a very intrusive editorial “professionalism”. He suggested a few minor adjustments, amongst other things an expression that he couldn’t recognize having said in the written way. Later on, when I checked the sound recording, it turned out that precisely that sentence was one that I had put in to bind two text pieces together. This exact thing showed me why it was completely crucial to let Torben’s words be written like they were said. This precise version also demonstrates Torben’s manner and verbal style.

After a while of conversation, where we revisited the main themes of the article, I chose to return to the question of death, as I sensed that it was here it might be necessary for more details. I told Torben about another interview that we, at The Center for Quality of Life, had done,

where the conversation fell upon how the person being interviewed would like to die. I used this as an example, and then asked Torben how he wanted to die. It seemed to me that he didn't quite find the question meaningful, and he answered that it depended on the situation, and then he repeated his main points from the interview. I was left with the feeling that I hadn't quite understood the depth of his previous answers. After the conversation, when I was on my way out, Torben said that there was something he wanted me to read. I was shown into the next room, where a text was written on a big part of the wall. The text, or the writing on the wall, you might call it, said:

“One day Puhua went around the streets of the town begging people to give him a one-piece robe. But although people offered him one, he refused all their offers. The Master sent the director of temple business out to buy a coffin. When Puhua returned to the temple, the Master said: “I’ve prepared this one-piece robe for you!” Puhua shouldered the coffin and went off with it. He threaded his way through the streets of the town, calling out: “Linji has prepared a one-piece robe for me! I am going to the east gate and take leave of the world.” He did this for three days, till no one believed him anymore. Then on the fourth day, when no one was following or watching him, he went alone outside the city wall, lay down in the coffin, and asked a passerby to nail on the lid. In no time, word spread abroad, and the townspeople came scrambling. But when they opened the coffin, they found that all trace of his body had vanished. They could just catch the echo of his hand bell sounding sharp and clear in the sky before it faded away.”

I imagine that one day, when Torben feels that he can't do it any more, or that enough is enough, and then decides to say goodbye, we will briefly in the distance hear a “swoosh” and the drip of a passing tennis ball dipped in paint ... then it will get quiet ... a new zero point opens.

Torben Ulrich, The Musician



Foto: Molly Martin

Torben Ulrich, The Painter



Foto: Molly Martin

Torben Ulrich, The Tennis Player

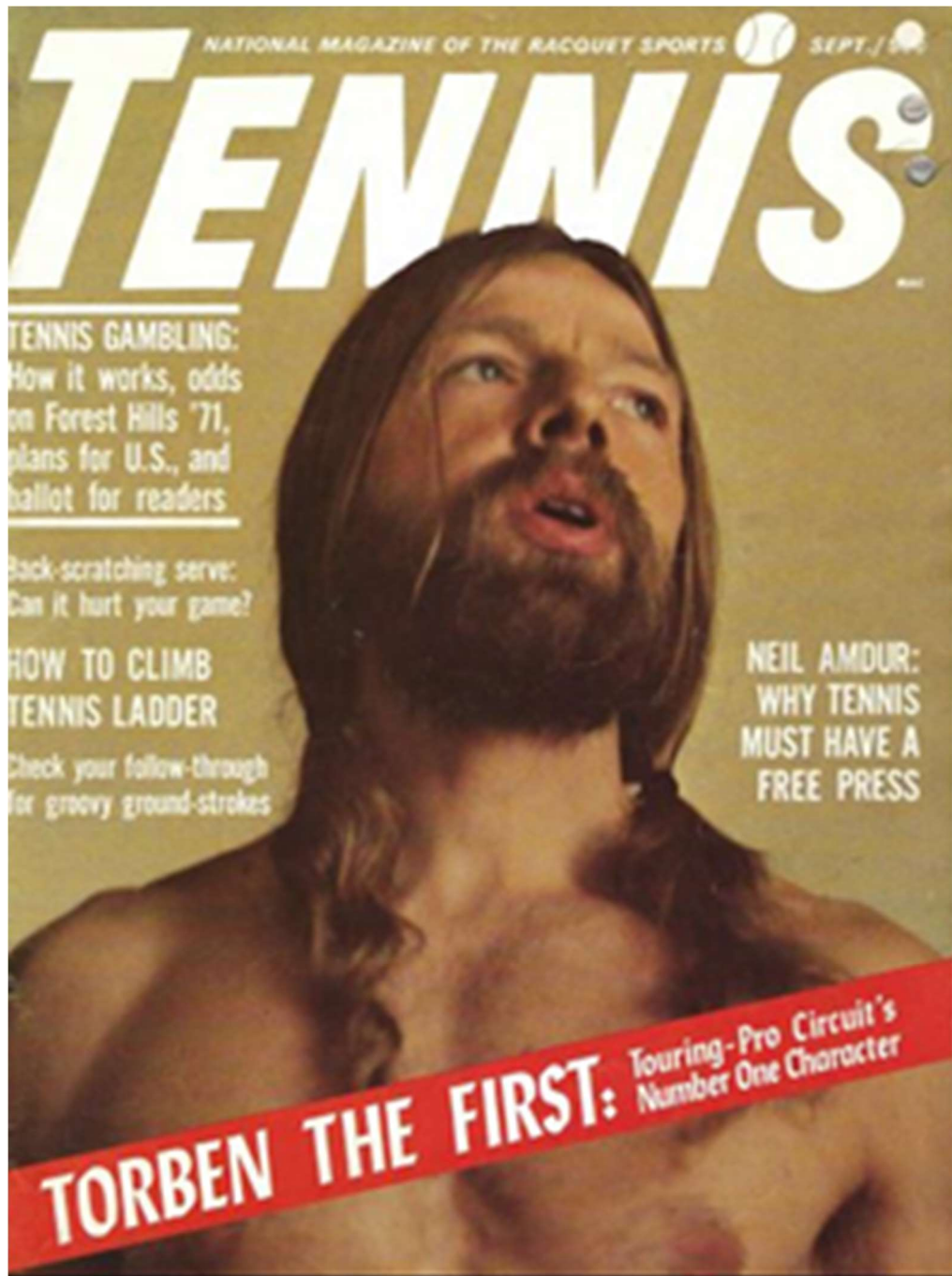


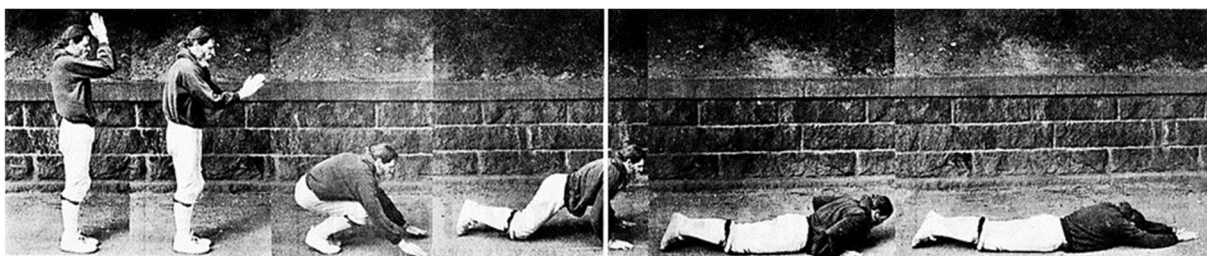
Foto: Tennis, 1971

The crawling journey



Source: Newspaper clipping from *Jyllandsposten*, October 4th, 1987.

Illustration of prostration



Torben Ulrich and Lars Larsen , California 2017



Foto: Molly Martin