

Swallowing My Pride

Written by Jack Sparacino

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A terrific former boss of mine at United Technologies, a brilliant mechanical engineer and lifelong auto enthusiast, recently wrote from Florida as we were discussing life and our medical status. He wryly noted that "for people, the warranty runs out after age 65 or so."

The trouble is, I'm not quite 65, yet find myself increasingly hobbled by arthritis and all the aches and pains that go with it. So maybe I need to dust off that warranty and see if anything can be done. Where's that customer service number for Bob's Everyday Car and Body Parts?

The first step was having cortisone injections in my spine. These have been highly effective in relieving back pain. Another step involved getting a handicapped parking tag (for only a dollar, such a deal); this has also been helpful as it minimizes the steps required to complete errands and often gets you closer to a ramp. But more recently, with the pain in my feet mounting, I had to take an ever-closer look in the mirror and ask myself if it wasn't time to take a bigger step and actually declare myself handicapped. Yes, the parking tag acknowledges that status, but it's a passive declaration. You drive with the tag hanging from the rear view mirror, park, then limp into a store and do your business. There's no sign hanging from your neck or decal on your forehead pronouncing a disability. It's like being a stealth cripple, almost like it doesn't really count.

The bigger step was to start using the electric carts that are conveniently provided to shoppers at large grocery and department stores such as Publix and Costco. Frankly, although we've all seen our fellow shoppers using them, I had barely paid any attention and didn't even notice where they were kept (alas, Sherlock Holmes or Lucas Davenport I'm not). Now that I've been using these wonderful carts, my question is, what in the world took me so long!

Wonderful really is the word, along with super convenient and—dare I say it?—cool beans. Oh

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yes, and low emissions. I just had to tell the Publix store managers how much I appreciated them having the electric carts available. They were happy to receive the feedback, which almost seemed to take them by surprise. Apparently my road test experiences in learning to drive these things hadn't yet come to their attention.

Let's start with specifics. Publix offers a fleet of popular vehicles made by Amigo Mobility International, Inc. located in Bridgeport, Michigan. (My only serious auto accident happened in Bridgeport, Connecticut—was this a warning light? One wonders, and of course handicaps the prediction.) Amigo proudly notes that "With more than 40 years of expertise, all Amigo Shoppers continue to be manufactured in the USA. Amigo carts are 100% recyclable while providing fewer moving parts and increased safety features." (Boy, that's what I need, fewer moving parts and maybe a can of WD-40.) You sit down in it, flick on the power, and pull the lever on the right to go forward, perhaps as fast as a mile or so an hour (watch out, sister!). For reverse, you simply pull the lever to the left and activate the beeping signal. Learning to drive these little buggies is fast and easy. Just don't count minor crashes.

My first accident took place near the scene of my fondest early Publix memory, right where the amazing Maria from seafood escorted me when I asked where the muffins were years ago. Yes indeed, in attempting to back up out of the busy bakery area and head down the juice isle, I slammed into the muffin table and sent a dozen packages scurrying for their lives. Out of nowhere, a nice young man appeared—not a store employee unless he was undercover—and insisted on helping me to pick them all up. Hmm, I thought, perhaps I really do look like someone who needs a little help. But I can get used to this. A hearty 'thank you' later I was happily motoring away and completed the day's shopping with no further incidents or points off my license.

A week afterward, in practically the same location, I backed up into a waste bin and knocked it over. Again, there were no injuries and no one asked me to pull over to check my insurance or registration. This time, I really felt like I was actually getting to be a better driver, more confident and relaxed. And lo and behold, good things started to cascade over me like fresh strawberries and whipped cream heaped on a parfait (did you cover that one already, Debbi?).

It turns out that good samaritanism is alive and well, thank you everyone. While checking out colanders one day, based on a hot tip from a commercial crabber about how to steam crabs properly, a delightful older woman who could have been Mary Poppins' grandmother stopped to ask me what I was doing. My explanation prompted her to offer some interesting advice, including how to determine if the colander in question would fit into my favorite crab cooking pot. When I remarked on her helpfulness, she promptly announced, "I'm amusing, too!" Turns out

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her name is Barbara and she is 75 years old so I am apparently still a youngster. Thank you, Barbara.

Lots of other customers and employees have gone out of their way to offer assistance. "Can I help you reach that?" one asks. "Can I help you find something?" inquires another. I've also received a couple of "hey what happened to you?"s from people I know.

Encouraged mightily by my entry into the old grocery shopper's version of NASCAR, I proceeded to getting a cane. Not just any cane, mind you, but the vaunted HurryCane. Without delay, I ordered it through Amazon. This device is brought to you by the kind folks at Marketing Architects of Minnetonka, Minnesota. It's strong, durable, and weighs next to nothing, yet can serve the dual role of self-protection should one encounter dangerous strangers or over-aggressive holiday shoppers: "En garde, monsieur!" It can also stand up on its own should you need to step away to grab something, or someone. With said cane, I am able.

My only suggestion to the manufacturer is why not consider a variant that includes a claw or gripper as a shopping aid? Am I asking for the moon or has this whole handicapped business simply gone to my head? Maybe it just feels nice to be on a "roll" and my newfound comfort lets more creative thoughts escape like so many fire ants fleeing hot water.

Who knows, it's still too early in my conversion from a person who did practically everything for himself, starting with learning to tie his shoes and ending . . . well, let's hope there's no end in sight. But here's one thing for sure, there does come a time in life when swallowing one's pride is the right thing to do. In this spirit, please stay on the lookout for the old guy in the cart or with the cane. Stand back from the muffins and the trash bin. And ask him how that new colander is working out.