

Hammerheads at the Crossroads

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 10 July 2018 11:02 - Last Updated Wednesday, 11 July 2018 06:31



*I went down to the crossroads
Fell down on my knees
Down to the crossroads
Fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord for mercy
"Take me if you please."
□□□□ – Robert Johnson*

"Data junkies" like me, as we used to jokingly refer to ourselves in Chicago, earned the rap of seldom trusting their gut as opposed to going with "just the facts, ma'am," as Sergeant Joe Friday used to deadpan many years ago on the iconic TV show, "Dragnet." Perhaps quite appropriately, my gut has again been seeking revenge on me in the form of another bout of *Clostridium difficile* (*klos-TRID-e-um dif-uh-SEEL*), alternately referred to as *C. difficile* or *C. diff*. We're talking about a bacterium capable of causing a range of unpleasant symptoms. These can span extreme diarrhea to life-threatening colon inflammation. Serious unplanned weight loss may often rear its head, in my case nearly fifty pounds in six months. Yep, 50.

1. *C. diff* is highly contagious and often hard to overcome for sustained periods of time. It likes to loiter, living for long periods on hard surfaces and only seriously susceptible to bleach as hand sanitizer bounces off its back. Yikes and egad.

So there I was, back in the hospital amidst my growing cadre of friends and acquaintances. 'What, you again, old timer?' 'Yeah, me again. What's for lunch?' 'Well in your case it's got to be a liquid diet. What flavor Jell-O can we get for you and how about a nice cup of broth to start?'

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The abdominal pain I experienced, along with frequent bathroom visits and forgetting my reading glasses, confined me to surfing the TV for something interesting but not too challenging, especially since the pain medication made me more comfortable but undermined my normally towering intellect (ahem). As such, Turner Classic Movies and National Geographic proved entertaining and just challenging enough. Three o'clock a.m. would find me deeply focused on a cool reality show, "Swamp People" with Troy Landrey, 57, a native Louisianan with a face like a crushed beer can and an accent slathered with bayou-speak. 'Weze hongray, Buck, whachu got to eat in this here roadhouse, buddy?' Landrey's mission is straightforward—help beleaguered locals deal with threats such as pythons, gators, pacu (think giant piranha-like fish on steroids) and wild boar.

As the hours wore on and I reached vitals check #5,000, a terrific old movie came up out of the fog, "Armored Car Robbery." Here it was, a 1950 (my birth year!) film noir starring Charles McGraw, a native Iowan who died at 65 from a fall (from high quality acting roles?) and William Talman, an actor best known for his portrayal of Los Angeles D.A. Hamilton Berger in the iconic TV series, Perry Mason.

A hyper reality show on National Geographic about super-competitive bluefin tuna fishing caught my eye for about eight hours (i.e., about two pain management cycles). The title? "Wicked Tuna," naturally. The toughest part to watch? Not the rogue wave that nearly slammed half the crew overboard. No, it was the fried sausage and pepper sandwiches and other hearty fare the fellows were eating. Boy, I can practically smell the garlic and onions and that chili looks so good, why you could . . . Gee, is this another crossroad?

With time, movies and Jell-O cups drifting by on the tides, I took notes on my treks back in time and cultural space. More reality checks, the term defined rather loosely, appeared to the tune of James Dean's classics, "Rebel Without A Cause" and "East of Eden." Absorbing the 1950's appeal of the remarkably good looking Dean and Natalie Wood, some initial conclusions began to sink in. First, I'm really hungry for real food. Could someone get me a club sandwich, coleslaw and . . . oh wait, there's this liquid diet thing. How are we fixed for (ugh) more Jell-O? Could I get some on or maybe just near that sandwich?

Second, no wonder this child of the 50's is feeling so unmoored as he follows the news closely. Networks and news magazines struggle to salt in "good" news, e.g., The Week magazine's "it wasn't all bad" feature and NBC's nightly series on "see, people are still doing remarkably

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decent, brave deeds demonstrating that all is not lost.” And yet, as one follows CNN as a middle ground between the absurdly rightward, our president-can-do-no-wrong Fox News and the president can do no right MSNBC . . . there are hard-to-ignore drumbeats of misery. Those pitiful illegal immigrant families trapped between frightening conditions at home and the ICE capades just for starters. The America of my youth, with five-star General Ike sitting in the White House, at least when he wasn’t playing golf; the courageous if womanizing JFK on his heels; the socially conscious LBJ struggling to advance civil rights at the expense of losing the south to Republicans for generations; the “real” America.

Back then, with James Dean movies playing to entranced audiences and gauzily blissful “Ozzie and Harriet” charming TV audiences along with endless westerns (Wagon Train, Wyatt Earp, The Rifleman, etc.), good was irrevocably good and bad was irredeemably bad.

Returning to immigration, all my grandparents were such. All of them, from Italy and Germany and Hungary. My dad’s father pushed a fruit cart in New York City, laid railroad track and ushered fans at Yankee stadium; my mother’s dad built battleship components on a greasy drill press. Today we have families split apart indefinitely under a “zero tolerance” policy. No amount of pain killers can kill that pain for me, even across thousands of miles and the notion that my ilk are personally immune, inoculated to comparable misery. What’s really going on here with all the immigration panic? Is it older whites like myself confronting the census folks’ projection that America will be a minority white nation by 2045? If it’s a job competition fear, what about the fact that employers are now scrounging for employees as unemployment practically disappears?

As The Economist notes this week, “America’s immigration system offers something to displease everyone. People such as Jeff Sessions and Stephen Miller . . . think it far too permissive. Employers find it rigid and unresponsive to their needs. The asylum process is, in the words of a case manager in Houston, ‘set up so people fail.’ This is what happens when decades of congressional kludges are piled on top of each other.”

Ultimately, I suppose, it’s a matter of precious few of us giving up. My bluefin boys, bless their souls, pound the waves in all conditions against rapidly dwindling schools to support their families and fish-fueled customers. Every hour spent hauling in a hammerhead shark that must be cut loose is an hour wasted. Every hour spent un-fouling fouled equipment is another down the drain. Yet they persist. They resist. Their ragged beards wave in the wind like salty talismans.

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Perhaps any Olympic athlete would echo parallel observations. My fine friend Mary, a dedicated senior health care professional, offers me related encouragement: “the antibiotics, unfortunately, destroy the microbiome, which is why the C diff doesn’t go away. The antibiotics kill C diff’s competitors for space in your gut at the same time that it kills C diff. Since C diff is more aggressive, it repopulates your gut faster than the “good” bacteria do. So you end up with C diff symptoms again and more antibiotics, and it becomes a vicious cycle.”

I’m not going away either. Nor are the hammerheads, the real ones edging out the bluefin and those bedeviling America’s immigrants and those plaguing officials just trying to do the right thing.

How does that old expression go? When an irresistible force meets an unmovable object . . . we get stunning TV and stress related diseases. We get big time crossroads and Johnson and Clapton.

We get life.