

When the Pain Stops

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 15 October 2019 15:03 - Last Updated Wednesday, 16 October 2019 05:58



"I think men who have a pierced ear are better prepared for marriage. They've experienced pain and bought jewelry."
— Rita Rudner

Recently I dug into the bottomless subject of what teenage girls think about. Progressing from knowing nothing to knowing next to nothing was a big step for me. We threw a party in celebration. It was very small.

When it comes to chronic pain, however, I am a hostile witness. Like everyone else, I hate it. The MRI's alone are probably bankrupting Medicare. My back pain is the result of spinal osteoarthritis, bone spurs up and down, paired up with the Killa from Manila, lumbar stenosis. (Just kidding, Philippines.) I've tried physical therapy, pain medications, heating pads, back and ankle braces, acupressure, acupuncture, multiple cortisone injections, radio frequency ablation, losing weight, you name it. OK, no trying to Zen my way out with incense and a rubber ducky. The bottom line, though, is frustrating. Ten years of trying various regimens and nothing works very well. Simply walking down the street or crabbing my way out of a car is slow and difficult. Yep, woe is me. Cue the violins.

Unfortunately, I'm not alone. The 2012 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) estimated that 23.4 million adults, over 10% of the population, experience chronic severe pain. This was defined by daily pain over the last 3 months. An estimated 56% of adults reported some type of

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pain during that period. Women, non-Hispanics and older individuals were more likely to report any pain, while Asians were less likely.

I see them out there on the street every day, folks who stoop, use a cane, or just sit in their wheelchairs, weariness etched in their faces. Those who have lost their legs cause sympathetic pain for anyone caring enough to glance their way. Should we stop and say hello, maybe ask if they could use some help? Offer them a happy tail and a few licks from Dixie? Maybe run into Dunkin' Doughnuts for them? *No* Starbucks. Last week in Harvard Square the place was jammed as usual. Blueberry muffins and almond croissants were selling like hotcakes.

My request for a medium decaf took them twenty minutes. Finally, out of patience and with my back protesting, I tore into the baristas, calling out their ineptitude in colorful language. No one behind the counter or behind me in line peeped. It felt good, getting that off my chest.

Often, my back pain dissipates overnight. This means that when the girls and I go for our morning stroll through lovely Peters park nearby, my mental bandwidth expands past simple AM and FM and begins to include radar and sonar. Maybe a couple of carrier pigeons and a soup can on a waxed string. Chicken noodle works fine, just remember to rinse it out for best reception.

Uber lady Glenys later pulled me into a conversation. Most Uber drivers speak with an accent and stick with a simple "hello, are you Jack?" and "thank you, have a nice day." Glenys was different. I asked about her work and learned that she drives every day from 6am until 9pm. And loves it. With nearly her entire life spent behind the wheel, she meets interesting passengers and encounters some prized jerks on the road. They cut her off, tailgate, ignore the law blasting through a red light. One man blocked her car on the street for two hours, keeping her from work. Joe criticized her for parking in front of his house. She replied that there was no sign, other cars all around, nowhere else to park. He barked back with self-serving nonsense.

When Joe finally let her drive off, she said have a blessed day and reminded him that blocking someone else might interfere with an emergency trip or someone who positively could not afford to be late. I wondered aloud at her serenity and goodwill. She explained how lucky she had been in life, that we are all God's children, he may not have known any better, perhaps he was having a very bad day.

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More signals reached my consciousness, beckoning me to pay attention. A four year old Asian American boy, holding two balloons and dressed in blue and orange sneakers looked up to his mother as they waited for a light to turn green. "You're joking me," he announced. She shrugged him off and continued to watch the light. "You're tricking me," he responded. "You're trying to trick me." No response from mom as she stared down that all-important light. I wondered why she didn't take the opportunity to talk with him, ask a question. Not my child, not my problem, but still. C'mon, lady, wake up, lean over and talk to your child. Are you really tricking him? Why does he think that? After a tortuous *two hours and fifteen minutes* in the dentist's chair having a difficult tooth extracted that afternoon, I gasped for relief. Pretended the CIA had been torturing me and began to confess to a series of bogus crimes. Buried two bodies in Detroit; burned down city hall. I hugged Dr. Benigno and kissed her afterward, as I chastised the staff. When the pain and stress began to subside, my senses were on high alert. Code red. Break glass and remove fire hose. The sunrise out my window the next morning flicked me awake. ' Hey

, Jackie, it's a new day. Make some coffee and welcome me. You may or not get many more. C'mon, man, wake up!

Two hours later, six frisky large dogs in the dog park scurried after each other in sheer joy, minded by their doting parents. Balls were tossed, tails wagged relentlessly, laughter and admonitions filled the air. Life was good. That afternoon I noticed my friend's friend exhibiting strong signs of schizophrenia, not PTSD as she'd been diagnosed. Karen was incoherent, talking in circles, mumbling to herself, starting three tasks (she was helping to prepare dinner) and finishing none. Her emotions were out of place, she was delusional. And the diagnostic coup de grace: she was hearing voices. Our next steps with Karen screamed into focus. We went to see Joker later on in reclined, heated seats. No distraction from my mouth or back, the pills they gave me were working. Joker penetrated every pore. His decline into madness resonated all too well, as my brother was schizophrenic many years ago. I've visited mental hospitals. A real circus is more fun. At dinner I again tasted the ocean while eating perfect raw oysters.

The next afternoon was gorgeous, sunny and warm. I watched my dear friend Romula work on a painting for me in a little park on Columbia Avenue. A friend joined us to chat. We had dinner on a patio, silverware clinking brightly, the seasoning of our dishes just right. Salmon, veal, roast beef. Our skeletal, lipless, shivering blond server Kaylie was flawless.

Back in the park the next morning, a six year-old black girl dressed in a white T-shirt and pink pants made it to the top of the jungle gym and cried out, "I can see everything from here!" Me too, sweetie, me too.