

Knee Deep

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 12 July 2016 15:45



Wounded Holly Johnson soldiered on... *"It was all uphill, and steep, and it was hard work. She used her crutch like a boatman uses a pole, planting it securely in the soil and thrusting herself upward against it. In a way, her [smashed] knee helped her. It made her climb slowly and carefully. It made her quiet. And she knew how to do this."*

Lee Child, "Die Trying" (NY: G.P. Putnam, 1998)

Two long months ago, our sons returned to Boston. Recharged from their visit, I woke up frisky and decided to act like a 50-ish whippersnapper. Rode my bike. Did some fishing, took a walk, noodled around in the garden and hustled some yard work. No big deal, maybe four hours of extra activity.

Hold it right there, buster, signaled my conscience. I woke up the next day with a miserably sore right knee. Here we go again, I thought. The strong side blues keep on hammering away... macular pucker in my right eye, arthritic right ankle. The knee pain dug in like a Wisconsin badger and kept me hobbling around the clock. Cold packs offered mild relief but nothing else seemed to work at all so our ice machine went on overtime. Amazon came through again, sending me an ice bag in a most attractive shade of pink. Probably just like the ones that linebackers or their trainers use after bruising practices and games. No?

Not really knowing what to do, Mr. Cool icily cranked up a plan.

Step 1: Soldier on like Holly. Sure she's a fictional character but one sees so many heroic people in real life who grit their teeth and just deal. So I dealt. More ice, ibuprofen. Lidocaine creams. Hugely curtailed activities. A cozy electric blanket made by Sunbeam felt soothing, though it seemed to mostly help with my arthritic back. A nice side benefit, though, so we ordered a couple more for around the house. Weeks went by and the knee pain persisted.

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Ouch

. Now what?

Step 2: Call my pain management doctor. She prescribed a prednisone pack which for once didn't keep me awake at night but otherwise made little impact. Then she ordered an X-ray which revealed... nothing unusual. Is that good? Time staggered along.

Step 3: Mental gymnastics. With my regular gym routine tough to follow, a trip to the mental gym seemed safe enough. This was fun, actually. It started modestly when Dixie, no longer luxuriating in frequent walks with good old dad, searched the house for stuff to entertain herself with. Lo and behold, she collected a pile of old toys and rawhide chew bones from under the furniture. Proud as punch, she paraded them for me one after the other. Good girl, Dix, hey that's a nice one! Where'd ya get that little guy, huh? What's that ratty thing, girl dog! I tried to remember where we got some of the better toys so we could order new ones.

Newly cheered, I convinced myself that surely I wasn't *completely* useless and invented small bore to-do lists. Modest, even trivial tasks that once accomplished at least proved that someone did *something* that day.

Sorting through loose change, filing old bills, organizing insurance papers, answering a mountain of fan mail (just kidding). My finest hour revolved around cleaning up an old chair with black paint that turned up during a fast-track rummaging trip. Turns out we had three tiny cans of similar paint, who knew? Get to know your garage, Jiminy Cricket intoned.

It's no secret that I *love* to read. I rounded up lots of books and magazines and hunkered down on the couch with my manly pink ice pack and heated blanket and went to town... so to speak. It felt good knowing that busted knee or not, my brain was still working. I plowed through Michael Kinsley's wonderful "Old Age: A Beginner's Guide" after seeing him interviewed by Charlie Rose. Learned a few things about the author's Parkinson's disease in the process and reminded myself how many worse things there are than a bad knee. This was reinforced in spades one night when we watched Ken Burns' documentary "The Dust Bowl." How many of those poor souls who lost their homes and many loved ones had the luxury of complaining about a bad knee, buster?

Bolstered even further, I plowed ahead with more simple chores and more books. Got to stay sharp, right? It actually felt good finding typos in books by famous authors like Lee Child, including several in "Die Trying." It also felt smarty-pantsy knowing "Jeopardy" answers when

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the three contestants drew a blank. Reading “Town and Country” magazine, almost out of desperation, I came across an article about funny lady Tina Fey. She looked great in the photo they ran, and no big surprise. Her outfit totaled over \$8 *grand*, including a Michael Kors trench cape for \$1,995 and pants for \$950, a Ralph Loren watch for \$2,100, a Cartier ring \$2,270. No wonder she was smiling. Knee deep in luxury duds, did her joints feel ok? Was she wearing a DonJoy knee brace for another hundred bucks under that cape? Nah, that would have made the ensemble just too expensive. Straw that broke the camel’s back.

I even tried writing some blues lyrics...

My knee feels all broke,

Can't get around no more,

My knee just feels busted,

Gotta crawl across the floor...

Having no luck with an accompanying melody, my song writing career ground to a halt. Ouch, this knee *still* hurts. Going to the bathroom, getting a snack, walking ANYWHERE. Deep breath. Remember the dust bowl, Jack, and Parkinson’s, pal. What would Holly do? Launch a joint effort?

Step 4: Enter the MRI. The normal X-ray prompted an MRI at the hospital. I met Orana in the registration area. She is 83 and delightful. Serene. She told me about how her faith served her so well in tough times. It made me feel a little better. The imaging process was predictably noisy (clang, clang, beeeep, *bong*) but there had been a good omen. When they asked what kind of music I preferred to offset the machine’s racket, I requested “blues.” They actually had some. Hmm.

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My pain doctor's office called soon after with preliminary results and recommended I see an orthopedic specialist right away. Days later, I limped into his office on Ribaut Road. A little anxious, but hopeful. I had heard he was excellent. And he was. He walked me through the MRI images and handled a plastic model of a knee. Several times he said I had a "problem." Worn cartilage was the underlying culprit. OK, but now what?

As if he'd done this since childhood, Dr. Salzer stuck a needle in my knee and drained off about 45cc of synovial fluid. It looked like olive oil. In went some cortisone. He asked me to walk down the hall. Walk, not limp, was the word he used. Optimistic.

Sakes alive, THE PAIN WENT AWAY. Must have been a good plan after all. Ye of little faith, stand back. Should I sign up for a hockey league now? Soccer? Square dancing?

Well, maybe just hit the couch again with another good book, but hold the ice. Is it too early to laugh all this off? Go ahead and tell me a real knee slapper.