

Two Essays

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The Balancing Act

I have watched my life change as I became overwhelmed with the chronic pain. In my case it was not a sudden event stemming from an accident. Pain has been a part of all of my adult life, or perhaps I should say more accurately I lived all of my adult life despite the pain. I followed all the rules of an upper middle class society. After graduating from high school I went directly to college and then to graduate school with only a few interruptions for surgery along the way. In fact there were more than eleven operations during those years. The operations were never seen as anything special and so I did not allow them to interfere with my life.

I remember wryly thinking that I should not choose a profession such as field biology or the Peace Corps because I would not be able to handle it physically. Instead I chose teaching a profession in which I would be standing most of the time. That did not deter me from pursuing it. My philosophy had always been that pain was something to live with. If an activity or my profession caused me to have more pain I felt it was a reasonable price to pay. After all, it was only pain. I had lived with it all of my life.

This philosophy eventually got me into much trouble. The body does not allow itself to be mistreated forever. At some point it became impossible for me to ignore the pain any longer. I had to acknowledge that pain was not just something I could just sweep under the rug.

My life had to change. I had spent too much energy and anger denying the pain and fighting the consequences. Initially when my body and mind rebelled I was not able to do very much. I was in chronic pain and in rare moments I would recognize what this meant to me. I found if I stayed in bed and did not move, then it was better, but as soon as I did anything even getting out of bed, the pain got worse. Logic would dictate that I not move. However I am not one to stay stagnant for very long and staying in bed quickly lost its appeal. I get bored and start to feel my brain turning to mush. So I got up and reinvented my life.

Obviously I could not return to all of my old existence. I had to learn to choose what I could and could not do. This has been a long and arduous process. Many times I have wanted to give up and go back to bed, but I did not. It seemed like a constant battle between what I wanted to do and what I could do. These battles were initially heart rending and often left me in deep depression. Over several years through the help of many professionals, friends, and family members I have learned to treat this dichotomy as a balancing act rather than a battleground. I think of what needs to be done, what I want to do and what I can do. Admittedly these often seem far apart but with meditation, medication, and realizing that I deserve to take care of me I get by. Sometimes I do drop the ball and end up with more pain. Then I try very hard to accept what is and deal with it rather than chastise myself for what I did. Especially when I am involved in something that I enjoy I am liable to overdo it. Sometimes the activity may be worth the cost, but not always. I am always striving to learn new ways to enhance my control of the balancing act. I will continue to fail, but I will continue to try.

I wrote this in 1993 and at the time I did think I had my life under control. Unfortunately this was not the case. I am still doing a balancing act, but the tightrope has become thinner and longer. What I discovered was that I was not taking into account the effect long term chronic pain has on the human body. Years of neglecting the pain took their

toll. But neither the doctors nor I were aware of what was happening. Now my pain has limited my life to a point that I had to reinvent myself. Where that journey will take me is still unfolding.

Pain in Social Situations

The problem with chronic pain is its invisibility. Imagine standing at a party. I wander over to someone I want to talk to. A conversation begins. If the conversation is just a "hello" and an exchange of a few pleasantries then it is possible for me to stand there and participate. The problem comes in when the conversation is interesting and shows signs of being somewhat protracted. The ever present pain begins to intrude. From long years of practice I am able to hold on to the thread of a conversation, but the pain is there. Something must eventually be done.

There are several options all of which have consequences. I can do nothing and endure it. This results in my "paying" for it later and often losing the true value of the conversation. My focus is often on finding a place to sit down and not on what I am thinking. I try and get comfortable where I am. I lean up against the wall, shift my weight from foot to foot, but eventually I must do something. Ideally there is an empty chair available and I can sit. I have been known to sit on the floor, but only if dressed appropriately and the situation is casual. My decision to sit inadvertently affects the person I am in conversation with. The person must decide whether to sit and continue or go on to talk to other people. They can choose to remain standing which may be awkward. I prefer to speak to someone face to face rather having to look up.

Sitting is more of a commitment than just standing and talking. If they choose to sit they have committed themselves. Another solution is for me to begin by sitting down, but this only works if there are empty seats. In addition, it forces people to come to me for a conversation. I have sometimes found myself sitting alone while everyone else stands and talks. This is especially uncomfortable if I do not know anybody at the particular gathering.

My usual solution is to stand. At some point I have to sit down. First I discretely look for an empty seat. I must then interrupt the conversation. I usually say "Excuse me, I want to continue our discussion, but I need to sit down." This may be relatively painless if a chair is nearby, but still the other person is again forced to decide what they want to do. If there is not a chair or we have to move to find one the flow of the conversation is definitely interrupted. Now, admittedly this interruption may give someone a chance to escape if the conversation is boring but still.... More often it elicits a question. "Oh, are you in pain?" or for people who do not know me "Is there a problem?" The conversation is now about pain which I do not want to talk about or about health or someone's back. Everybody knows somebody with a bad back. Unless I deliberately return to the original conversation it may be lost.

Parties and social gatherings are a challenge which I still struggle with. Each time I am confronted with this, all of these thoughts flash through my mind. I enjoy good conversations, but I dread the decisions.