

My Lessons with Pain

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As we age, we have an unbelievable range of aches and pains as well as deterioration of organs, bones, and senses. Whether we remediate, remove, or replace, pain will be part of the process. Recently, I had my second hip replacement and was shocked by its ferocity and lengthy recovery time. Perhaps my experiences with pain, both acute and chronic, will resonate or prepare you for managing a similar experience.

Pain is the doorway to here and now. It is a form of alertness and particularity, a way in. There is no place other than this place, no body but this body, no other limb or joint or pang or sharpness but this searing presence.

—David Whyte

The experience of pain is all-encompassing. It creates a self-focus like nothing else, and we want it to be GONE! Whether a stubbed toe, a bug bite, or getting knocked on the head, we experience “nociceptive” sensations: a response to a noxious physical stimulus from the real world. Our brain interprets that ‘something’ as a threat or an annoyance. The experience of pain—what it feels like—takes place in the brain.

Our bodies have a natural system of pain regulation. In acute pain, the body saves the day with a stimulated immune system and inflammation/swelling that leads to healing. This registers in the sensory part of the brain. Chronic pain shows up in the emotional part of the brain. Some of us may even have unhealed past trauma that triggers physical pain. One of my friends said, “Linda, 65%



Don Hourigan, Anna
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of your pain is your 10-year-old.” I wanted to deck her. I had already done enough therapy on that inner child! Did I mention that pain requires humility?

For pain management, it is common to prescribe seven days of opioids, which induce a mental high to the brain. The pain is still there, but you don’t care because you’re above it all. No brain, no pain! Our bodies have their own natural system of pain regulation called beta-endorphins which work to block signals from heading to the brain. These beta-endorphins are linked to how we handle extreme stress, *and* they also facilitate feelings of connection and belonging. Opiates can dysregulate the body’s natural system and reduce the user’s pain tolerance which requires *more* drugs, often leading to addiction.

With my doctors’ approval, I chose to decrease my opioid dosage those first seven days by cutting the pills in half or switching to Tylenol. One recent randomized trial showed pain intensity was worse in U.S. veterans who used long-term opioids for moderate to severe back and joint chronic pain than those using acetaminophen and ibuprofen. In 2021, although physicians limited prescriptions, over 71,000 people died from opiates.

In deep pain, we have energy only for what we can do wholeheartedly...

Because our beta-endorphins are hooked to connection and belonging, a text, flowers, a preferred food, a friend’s visit, or a hug might just do wonders. Make it brief and simple! Your desire for companionship may vary (I wanted solitude at first). Send an email letting people know when a visit is appropriate. Include your wishes such as “no food,” “no gifts,” etc. It helps to have someone act as your “gate barbarian” to let people know when it’s a good time to visit and how long to stay.

In real pain, we have nothing to give back other than our gratitude, or a smile that looks halfway like a grimace.

What made the most difference in my healing was a skilled team of body therapists. I am grateful for Adrienne Hardt, a massage therapist, and Laura Schopen who did Reiki and bodywork to release my dream-like images of flying arms and legs induced by anesthesia. Their efforts had a positive impact both physically and psychologically. The right physical therapist could do the same!

Pain is the first step to real compassion as it helps us understand those who struggle with their existence. Difficult bodily pain also calls for a bigger, more generous sense of humor for ourselves and for others watching us lean here or limp there.

When I could explore the world again outside my bedroom, I was drawn to those bandaged, in braces, or holding onto walkers like me. My heart opened to their difficulty. I so feared long-term dependency. I am thankful for the people who held doors, fetched things, and gave me space and time to navigate.

Eventually, I was walk-waddling like a duck but getting around. When I met visiting relatives at the Coffeebar, I parked in the disabled spot and prayed for invisibility, but a friend saw me and hugged me over my walker! She said, “I’m sorry for my lack of communication.” I was so touched I would almost go through this again just for that healing moment. Can dependency make us more approachable? It dawned on me that pain and vulnerability can be keys to friendship.

Pain is an appreciation for the little things, like help watering the plants, picking up a cup of coffee, or answering the doorbell. How easy it is to take things for granted... until we lose them. My mobility was so appreciated when it returned.

Pain is a lonely road...

Pain has been a harsh teacher, but I am grateful for the experience. Despite the hardships, it taught me to engage in physical activities despite fears of injury, manage anxiety and depression with positive self-talk and perseverance; and connect with uplifting people and endeavors.

Previously, I taught behavioral sciences to doctors at UNR Medical School, helping them deal with their pain and burnout. Rather than turning away or shutting down, they learned to recognize their situation, receive support, and demonstrate GRIT. After two years of Covid and increasingly high-stress medical procedures, some doctors have chosen to limit their practice or willingness to connect.

How do you deal with pain? Are you able to reach out and ask for help? You don’t need to do it alone.

The ultimate touchstone of friendship is not improvement, neither of the other nor of the self. The ultimate touchstone is to witness the privilege of having been seen by someone, and the equal privilege of being granted the sight of the essence of another. To have walked with them, and to have believed in them, and sometimes just to have accompanied them for however brief a span, on a journey impossible to accomplish alone.

–David Whyte

Helpful Reading: *The Song of Our Scars* by Haider Warrach or *On the Brink of Everything, Grace, Gravity and Getting Old* by Parker J. Parker
