

A Reflection on Pain, Patience and Discernment

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As many of you know, I recently underwent my second hip replacement. This was to remedy some ongoing pain I'd been dealing with for a number of years. When Michael first asked me to give this reflection, he gave me the prompt to think about pain, patience and discernment. His suggestion was, "maybe talk about your lousy hips."

My initial thought was that pain, for those who have felt it most deeply may not be physical, but emotional: of loss, heartbreak, depression. The type of pain with which I am most closely acquainted, however, is physical. My body, although the same marvel of engineering as everyone else's, wasn't put together quite right. As a result, part of it, my hips, simply wore out before their time.

I don't pretend that this brought me the same sorts of pain as others have known. Rather, I offer an account of how I and my family have encountered, responded to, and been shaped by the sometimes debilitating physical pain that has framed much of my adult life. Indeed, it's been a constant companion for Wesley and me since we've been together. And though it's certainly something I wish I didn't have to deal with, it has actually been a catalyst for positive change that we might not have undertaken otherwise – and it has indirectly played a role in bringing us to St. David's.

I remember the night I first felt the twinge. It was a clear winter evening and I was walking back to my dorm from Carmichael Gym at NC State. I had come from working out and my legs were slowly tightening up in the cold air. The parking lot I had to cross was flat and nearly empty giving me no reason to stop short, or to change direction. And yet, one step of the hundreds I needed to take ceased my progress and had me doubled over in pain, clutching my left hip. I was able to slowly walk it off, and after a few minutes, I was on my way, puzzled, and a little worried.

I was used to the discomfort of exercise and cool down, but this pain was new; this pain was different. Had I better listened to my body and heard the message of that moment, I might have fared better in the decade that followed. However, the first years of what I would later learn was osteoarthritis operated much like a slot machine. The pain was infrequent and unpredictable. And being physically active was so much a part of my life then, that I was willing to play the odds and deal with the occasional twinge and the slowly increasing, but still manageable soreness.

The progress of the disease was fairly difficult to perceive for several years. I accepted the subtle losses in flexibility when stretching, crossing my legs or tying my shoes. I was still able to be active for the most part – still able to run, one of my favorite ways to exercise. I was able to join a group of friends in 1996 in training for a marathon. Long training runs were usually tolerable after I warmed up. Even the race went well. There was some lingering pain for several days afterward, but my reading assured me that this was not uncommon.

So, naturally, I decided to do it again – later that same year. I had similar training experiences – all was well after I warmed up. The race happened, but did not go as well. This time, the lingering pain after the race didn't go away after a few days. It stayed. My flexibility was so deteriorated that I could no longer tie my left shoe after that. Unable to tolerate the pain, I scheduled my first visit to an orthopedist. The x-ray was telling – my left hip joint looked like a train wreck. The doctor showed me how the ball and socket of my joint were mismatched – they didn't fit together properly and they never had. This had caused the cartilage to wear away faster than normal. I was 30 years old at the time. His prognosis: "I bet you'll want this replaced before you're 40." He was right. I had my first surgery when I was 33.

Unfortunately, that first surgery didn't work very well. It was a hemiarthroplasty; a procedure in which the ball of the femur is resurfaced, while the socket is left untouched. This was known not to be a pain free solution. But, having read about the short durability of full hip replacements, I thought this would be a workable, but less invasive course of action. In fact, I didn't gain much at all. I hobbled around pretty much as before, felt throbbing pain at night, and was unable to do much in the way of exercise.

A lot of good things happened during these years too, however. My career as an engineer was advancing well enough. Wesley and I began dating and were married in 1998. We had a home we loved in a beautiful older neighborhood in Raleigh. And in 2004, we had Owen. From all appearances, we were doing great and could want for nothing. Still... something was missing. Wesley and I seemed to have frequent talks about what we wanted out of life, and what should come next: for some reason, where we were was unsatisfying. Having grown up in Asheville, we'd travel to visit family on occasional weekends. But we were genuinely sad when Sunday afternoon came and we had to head back east. I was secretly but half-heartedly looking for jobs in Asheville, and I wanted to teach. But we always had a perfectly logical reason not to do much to about any of those talks. The inertia of our circumstances seemed to cement us discontentedly in place.

In spring of 2004, at about the time Owen arrived, I applied and interviewed for a teaching position at WCU. But I wasn't that serious about it. I figured I had nothing to lose, and it was a long shot anyway. The interview ended up going very well - and I was offered the job. But, I had never expected that. The offer couldn't be real. It was too bold a move for me. It was, frankly, too scary to accept. I turned it down. And even while I was on the phone saying 'no', I knew it was the wrong decision. I kicked myself all summer long. Wesley and I now look back and laugh at a shouting match we once had in the car in which I irrationally blamed her for not pushing me to take the job. If only I'd known that she wanted me to take it - then I might have. Yeah, that was it. In truth, I was simply petrified to take the chance. And now, I was crushed with regret. I had blown what may have been the best chance I'd ever have to move in a new direction, a direction I dearly wanted to go in.

Life might have continued like that, except for my lousy hips. Wesley and I were packing the car to take Owen on her first camping trip in October of that year. So much activity always left me sore in the hips. But, I had Vioxx - then my painkiller of choice, and it never let me down... except this time. As we headed up the highway toward the mountains, the soreness grew progressively worse until, around Charlotte, I was in genuine agony - the worst pain of my life. We cancelled the trip en route and headed for the ER, which afforded me relief through narcotics and sleep. But still, I couldn't move, and I was running a fever of 103.

We made it back to Raleigh. I called in sick for a few days. One evening, while I sat on the couch, groggy and half asleep, my longtime friend Chris, a physician, called to check on me. I told him what was going on and how I thought that my hip prosthesis might have failed or that the bone had cracked. Hearing my lack of sensibility, he asked to talk to Wesley. "There's something going on here besides his hip" he told her. "Get him to the ER now, or he may be going in an ambulance." I rolled into the ER with a fever of 105. Nurses shoved ice packs under my arms. My lab work revealed a staph infection. I wasn't going home for a while. Furthermore, since a hip prosthesis can shield the infection from antibiotics. It had to come out so that the area could be disinfected, a procedure called 'debridement.'

The day before Thanksgiving, I underwent the debridement and preparation for a full hip replacement. However, before the replacement could take place, I faced eight weeks with an antibiotic-impregnated cement ball in the joint cavity to help me overcome the infection. While I was lying in recovery after the surgery, the surgeon appeared and placed a small plastic bag next to my arm.

I had, somewhat jokingly, asked him if I could keep the old implant. He had sterilized it and given it to me. Wesley passed it along to my brother Dave who, being a craftsman, fashioned it

into the top of a hickory cane that I used during my convalescence. It's become something of a family heirloom that reminds us of that difficult time.

Since my leg was no longer attached by anything but soft tissue, I was on crutches until the infection was gone and the ball could come out. Unfortunately, at the end of eight weeks, my blood work still showed evidence of the infection. I had to repeat the process: another debridement, another eight weeks on crutches, a lot of sitting around, and a lot of pain. The months of that winter persisted with me mostly immobile. I had time to let sink in, even burn in, all of the blessings I had, and the small gifts that I had overlooked.

My family helped at every turn. Wesley lovingly mixed my daily IV infusion of medicine, waited at Dr.'s appointments and in hospital rooms, and listened - or was simply present. Wesley's mother spent months displaced from her home to stay with us and help out. I was connected with a brilliant and caring infectious disease specialist who waded through the complexities of my case - which turned out to be challenging. I was allergic to some drugs, nauseated by others. And, during this time, Owen took her first steps. I couldn't really do anything but watch. This was one of the quintessential moments where I realized that small things were so very valuable - to walk, just to walk the street in front of my house with my baby girl would be such a gift. It was maddening. I longed to have the final surgery just to get my life back.

While I was laid up, WCU posted the job again - the same one I'd applied for the year before. Apparently the person who'd been hired hadn't worked out. Was it possible? Did I have a second chance here? The painful events of that year had had a clarifying effect on me. I had come to realize the tenuous nature of health and that I couldn't put off deeply held goals, and that the trappings of a good life were not quite the same as living well, as living intentionally. I couldn't face returning to a job I had no passion for. Both Wesley and I realized that there was really no question of how we should play it this time. I applied without hesitating. Only this time, I was not just musing about a crazy idea, I was hopeful, I was eager.

I was invited for yet another interview. Again, it went well and I was made an offer. I was still nervous - more nervous than I'd ever been about a job. Could I really teach University students? Could I go back to school to earn a doctorate? I'd have to they said. Ultimately, I wallowed simultaneously in fear and excitement. I was unsure of everything except that I couldn't stay 'no' this time.

My hip replacement surgery took place on June 9, 2005. The pain was gone. I could walk again. Perhaps as a reminder of past struggles, and that I shouldn't take the fix for granted, the ceramic surfaces of my prosthesis produce an audible squeak when I walk, but I'll take it. I

started teaching at WCU that fall. And, although it was a shaky start, I found my voice as a teacher.

So, it has been through the pain of my lousy hips that I have felt the most pronounced evidence of God at work in my life, getting my attention. Not a push, but a shove toward what I was too cautious to do on my own steam. The call from a friend that quite literally may have saved my life. The severity of an illness that helped me realize that I should take a chance in order to avoid missing one. Gifted physicians. A loving family. And the move to a way of life where I no longer ask what's next, but realize that this is what's next, and it feels as though it should be just so.

Just to close the loop: as this was happening for us, Wesley was blogging about it. It turns out that future friends in Pennsylvania were reading her while considering a move south. Those were Steve and Pat Steinbreuck – who invited us to St. David's, and to whom we are grateful.

After my most recent surgery this past May, the surgeon showed me an x-ray of both hips in one image. It was immediately obvious to look at it, but he described it anyhow: "This is your new hip on the right, and this is your earlier one – it looks kinda funky, doesn't it?" he said. And it did. The older implant is set differently, in a way that makes my gait asymmetrical. It may cause problems later. Maybe it's God's ace in the hole for the next time I'm not paying attention.