

Pain in the Neck

One of the many chapters in my upcoming book, Dumb Things I Have Done, will be the story of how I almost broke my neck. My athletic prowess, if you could call it that, developed very late. Perhaps I should say that my interest in sports developed late.

A friend of mine and I used to try to make our backyard into a gym without any real equipment. We wanted to practice the high jump, so we drove nails at one-inch intervals into two trees and used a wire wrapped between them as the high bar. To cushion our fall, we laid out an old sleeping bag. What else could we possibly need?

Brains would have been nice, and perhaps an ambulance on standby. Anyway, we took turns running and jumping over the wire. Having no supervision, we just jumped flatfooted like we were diving into a pool of water. Later I learned that this was not a legal technique.

It was sort of fun, for a while. As the wire got higher and higher, you had to concentrate on getting the upper half of your body over the bar, and then folding over and flipping your legs over. Then you used your hands to help you roll through the end of the landing.

The height of the wire eventually got to chin level, I remember, and it began to get harder and harder to get the first half of my body over it. In trying so hard to clear the wire on my last jump, I put all of my effort and concentration into the first part and pretty much forgot about the flip and the landing. I ended up coming straight down on my head, with only my arm support keeping my neck from folding over.

Well, my neck hurt so bad I had to use my hands to pull my head up to sit up. Every time I twisted my head to one side, the muscles on that side of my neck cramped up and further jammed up my pinched nerve. Our medical plan in case of such a crisis was that the clinic where my regular doctor worked was only a couple of hundred yards away. And the hospital was across the street from that.

So when I was able to walk, my friend and I went up to the clinic. Every time my neck cramped up, I was weakened further by the pain. When I got to the grumpy old receptionist, I informed her in earnest that I thought that I might have broken my neck. I'll never forget her compassionate words: "The doctor won't be back 'til one o'clock!"

That was it. I would have to go back home and come back later. And like an idiot, that is what I did. I didn't want to tell my mother, because I knew she would be all upset. Much better to find out how bad it was and then tell her. By the time I had returned to the clinic, I was really a wreck. I was worn out with all of the cramping and the pain.

This trip, however, I got to see the doctor. After a brief examination (no x-ray that I remember) he declared that I had a "wry neck", as though this was not much of a big deal to him. He sent me to another room for "ultrasonic therapy". For this I had to take my shirt off and embrace a freezing-cold examination table (the shock, of course, causing my neck to cramp). Then he put one electrode at my lower back and applied another to my shoulder. The jolt nearly sent me to the roof (and made my neck cramp again). I asked him to turn the power down and he said that he would. When he put the electrode to my shoulder again it felt like a repeat of the first episode. I once again asked for lower power, and with the third touch I could feel my muscles responding in a gentle massaging action.

It made my neck feel better, but by this time I felt like I had been wrung out like an old dishrag. I'll never forget what happened as I was walking home, unable to keep myself from continuous sobbing. My Dad was just coming home from work and recognized me. He could see that I was really hurting. Naturally he stopped and took me home.

It has been many years since that event, and I have not had much trouble with my neck except for odd cracking and popping now and then. Now I have my own son, who has shown himself to be much smarter than me in athletic matters. But when I look at what happened from the perspective of a Father, I sense something very gripping about the moment that my Dad saw me in such pain that day. I know now what it feels like to see my own son suffering. It makes me extend that thought to the way God feels when He saw His son on the cross. And it makes me remember that God is our Father too, and He has compassion on our suffering as well.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

James 5:11c