

# **Neurology & Pain Management**

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This Bloody Pain won't go away!!!

6 months to the day  
Is that a coincidence?  
To the day!  
Once more I am attacked  
This time lower down, the left flank and the quads  
The aching deep gnawing quads never letting up  
Day and night  
Cannot find a comfortable position  
Unresponsive to the usual pills  
Pain killers anit-inflammatories, and this and that, useless.

So in the midst of the night  
The usual ruminations return  
Why 6 months to the day following my accident  
Why similarly on the left side *only lower down!*  
What is the diagnosis?  
Why me  
What sin could have triggered this?  
What is being asked of me?  
Why the left *sinister* leg  
Does it parallel a sin of the "legs?"

My colleague sees me almost feint in the clinic and orders a 60mgm shot of toradol  
What a miracle!  
(We need to create a new blessing for such relief just like we bless after voiding.)  
Then a KUB X-ray showing that little 2 mm stone  
How could something so small cause such pain, but that is what he thinks is causing all  
this and orders lots of fluids cranberry juice etc.  
3 days later no better...a urologist finally comes to my home on Memorial Day no less  
(And I thought medical chivalry was gone!) And brings a portable ultrasound device no  
less (and I thought technology was good but never this amazing!) only to find no  
hydronephrosis and no ureteric colic nor this nor that. So he thinks it may be diverticulitis  
and prescribes 10 days worth of levaquin and flagyl ugh!

Another 5 days and still no better nights of agony and writhing -no comfortable position possible- so I submit to a CT of the abdomen and pelvis and lo and behold the 2mm stone has not changed since the accident and there is no evidence for diverticulitis.

It is suggested I see a neurologist!!! A pinched nerve you assume!!

But I am a neurologist and I have been blind to the possibility that this maybe a pinched nerve.

Why!

Of all the diagnoses I chose to ignore and an obvious one in the differential of course; despite my back and non-radiating quads pain. But then I am blind. In the sense that I do not wish this to be something so incurable or something so mundane. I want a hot sexy diagnosis of course, one which people can relate to...how many have sympathized with their own tale of stones and passing and procedures to blitzkrieg it with ultrasound, stents etc. or maybe I was blind because I assumed it was worse, not something chronic, or even I wished to avoid thinking about an epidural!!

Last night I went to my diabetic doctor to make sure it was not some amyotrophy or necrosis. He again suggested a pinched nerve and recommended a muscle relaxer. Valium I exclaimed! Why I wish not to be sedated all day!! “But it is a good muscle relaxer” he responded.

And so I took a valium 5 mgm last night and had the first good night’s sleep in 2 weeks. Today I feel refreshed for the first time. Not sick. I feel I can take on the world again. And as I reflect on the last 2 weeks of hell and misdiagnosis on my part I wonder as to what I have learned from this.

Pain overtakes everything. Every conscious minute and disallows for thinking beyond, the next day week or planning. It disallows attention to be drawn away from it. It is all consuming and a demanding mistress.

Pain does not allow for reflective thinking. It casts a pall over everything you might be already thinking. It is pessimism in the ultimate. It sees no light at the end of the tunnel.

Pain does not even allow for sincere prayer. It is so selfish and childlike in its demands. All it wishes is for its own cessation nothing more or less. It narrows one focus of the world down to a tiny island of physical sensations whereby bodily movements and relief become the tools of survival and if it means walking the block at 3 am to work out a spasm so be it (in pajamas of course!).

I have a newly found respect for pain. In my work I walk a fine line between patient and regulatory agencies. Aware of abuse and the legal consequences of prescribing yet following my oath to relieve pain and suffering I live on the knife edge between following my sometimes faulty judgment and seeming cruelty or stinginess regarding prescribing practices. Yes at times I do need to appear cruel. When prescribing for pain and the patient’s demands for relief must be tempered by the knowledge of habituation even addiction or the recent literature suggesting increasing needs for opiates may well originate from the artificial suppression of the brain’s own descending pain inhibitors.

I think about cruelty a lot. As the large needle enters my patient's spine, at that very moment I am plunging a steel object into a patient's spine something inside me must become steeled, my resolve to help this patient the *chesed* archetype moving to help this patient racked with pain must be tempered with the steely resolve the archetype of *Gevurah* in this case a cruelty albeit in this thoroughly contextualized medical surrounding with green drapes, X ray technicians nurses etc. it is precisely my ability to remain calm and coolly steeled as the needle plunges deep into the spine between the two vertebrae I have chosen, through the ligamentum flavum into the epidural spaces and sometimes (if it be a spinal tap) into the sub arachnoid spaces at which time a hopefully colorless fluid will emerge (the cerebrospinal fluid) for analysis. What is being asked of me in this situation beyond my compassion is a certain cruelty.

In the last two weeks I also have meditated on the meaning of affliction. Being nailed to the cross is the metaphor given to me over and over again by my patients. What does this mean for me a Jew? Images of the *white crucifixion by Marc Chagall*, hanging in the Art Institute downtown Chicago. A Jew is hanging on the cross in his white tallis and a swastika on his left arm barely visible (they say Chagall had scratched it out when the Gestapo interviewed him prior to his leaving Paris).

Because Chagall fused paintings of the Bible narrative with his own life it is essential to take the context of his life into account when understanding why he painted images of a crucified Jewish Jesus. Chagall used Jesus to portray the suffering of the Jewish people at the hand of Nazi Germany especially in the context of the Holocaust. In a series of paintings dealing with the atrocities in Europe through depicting Jesus as a Jew on the cross, Chagall first painted *White Crucifixion*. In the background the Pogroms rage on, houses burn, and Jews flee a variety of persecutions. In the center of the painting, off balance though, Jesus embodies in himself all the suffering surrounding him as he hangs on the cross, the "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" as portrayed in Isaiah chapter 52.

In *Yellow Crucifixion*, Chagall again portrays the crucified Jesus as a Jew. He wears on his head, phylacteries, and prayer straps on his arms. Jesus is a prophet crucified next to the scroll of the law, the requirements of which he must die to fulfill. Chagall also shows Mary and Jesus in the bottom of this painting, fleeing from persecution to Egypt, a typology for the multitudes of Jews who were fleeing their countries during WWII. Chagall began this painting upon hearing about the sinking of a refugee boat carrying almost 800 Jewish passengers.

Other paintings coincided with horrific current events that impacted Chagall and other Jews. He painted *The Martyr* in 1940 when the Nazi invasion breached the French lines. Fleeing Nazi controlled France; he completed *Decent from the Cross* upon arriving in New York. *The Obsession* and *The Crucified*, also resonating with the suffering of the Jewish people, coincided with the crushing of a Jewish uprising in the Warsaw ghettos. In all these paintings Chagall used the symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ to align with the suffering of the Jews. This operated in two significant ways. It gave Jews an icon of suffering to identify with and it made the Jewish suffering relevant to Christians.

In my pain I have meditated on affliction and being *nailed to the cross* as symbols that have helped me through the agony of this week. Rather than the old self defeating hitting on myself for past sins (I did enough of that too!) I concentrated on the pain itself and what it had to teach me and what message it had for me. Again I focused on the left side being that aspect of my soul's architecture representing the hidden divine, that past of creation that appears to be absent of God. In the agony comes the realization that God is truly present too. At no time did I feel His absence. But it still hurt! It has become clear to me that without this agony and suffering there can be no spiritual progress. We are just too inattentive to the ultimate issues being caught up in the daily grind and routine.

Now that piece by piece of me has been stripped away like Job, concentric rings of stripping, from possessions to books then the body's health, I must become open to new possibilities and avenues. I am being led albeit kicking and screaming to a new path. A 90 year old blind pastor walked into my office on Friday. He is blind yet said "doc your voice sounds unwell, what is ailing you!" having told him I had been in agony for 2 weeks he proclaimed "did you not get the message" whereupon I relied...from where this came I do not know! ..."oh yes I do! I just don't want to heed it!" and all of a sudden I realized there *was* a message. That I was being called however reluctant I had been all along!

I have learned from this how blind I was to the diagnosis all along, how much denial I live in, how much kicking and screaming I do before being forced into seeing the truth, and finally how much lack of faith I really have!

So I need to start all over... step 1 once again. Today I begin a new... Where do I find the faith...?

