If I Could Live Life All Over Again

From middle school to high school somehow no curriculum committee ever found it fit for us to learn about our bodies.

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I think if I could live my life all over again, I would want to be a dancer. The physicality and expressive freedom. So in tune with my body from a young age, I'd understand immediately and in infinitesimal depth exactly how each limb, joint, digit and unseen deep abdominal muscle locomoted and supported me.

Of course as a child and young adult I had no idea that such knowledge (let alone the possibility of earning one's living dancing—at least for a few good years) even existed. I feel like I received a pretty good middle school and (excellent) high school education. But somehow no curriculum committee ever found it fit for us to learn about our bodies. Civics and sex ed? If you were lucky. (Even if the latter focused on abstinence until marriage, mentioning little about pleasure, pleasing a partner or prophylaxis.) But how a kind of nerve-rich Saran wrap envelopes all our muscles, tendons, ligaments and organs? (Fascia, anyone?) Or that our bodies have built-in shock absorbers? That our bones never stop breaking down and rebuilding? That our arms are basically held into their socket by four muscles and an O-ring? That where you feel pain is almost never the site of its origin. Unheard of.

> Had I not been reared in a religious tradition that offers up fairy tale claptrap to address life's most complex questions, maybe I'd have learned to think more critically.

And that to me is the number one problem with sussing out and addressing muscle and joint pain.

I of course immediately blame Anglo-Saxon skittishness about anything body. And then I blame religion: more specifically, a Christian tradition in which I grew up (and was actually whipped on sabbath mornings for merely intimating I'd prefer to pass on the sermon and ceremony that

Sunday) that insists on fairy tale answers to complex, unsettling or even unanswerable questions and values blind obeisance over intelligent inquiry.

Then I blame capitalism. Or, more to the point, the profit-driven nightly news and profit-driven health care. I realize it borders on heresy to utter much less print (although I'm told many 20-somethings are now on board with me), but spend a little time watching television in Canada or France or even Spain for christ's sake, and you'll quickly be asking yourself how and why we've put up with for so long the network television programming paradigm foisted upon us decades ago that seems to create new disease states for us year upon year and insidiously inculcates in our subconscious the seductively simplistic thinking process that "I have X" (more and more that "I am X") and that to escape this or to become whole again I need to take Y.

Were it not for our revenue hungry corporate healthcare system, perhaps we'd be offered the best treatment for our well-being as enthusiastically as we are the best treatment for the company bottom line.

Then I blame the food supply. (And the virtual absence of anything resembling a competent agency to protect us from those who willfully poison us for profit.) This includes the high fructose corn syrups, the emulsifiers and stabilizers (did someone say carrageenan?), the canola, soy and other highly refined seed oils, the laboratory made artificial sweeteners, the blue/red/yellow dyes that seem only to grow daily in their ubiquity, the GMOs and pesticides that have permeated just about everything most people can afford to eat and about which we are only now beginning to learn how day by day they wreak their slow, unnoticeable (until it isn't) havoc on our bones, joints, moods and sex lives.

These then also are the problems with pain.

We learn nothing about how our bodies work; that is, muscles, tendons, ligaments. What they control, how they malfunction, and the pain patterns they produce.

Certainly 99% of doctors and nurses don't. Probably 95% of acupuncturists. And from my experience, way too few physical therapists (even now when it seems everyone is a "doctor" of his or her profession!) and chiropractors. Although maybe give the chiros a break since in theory their ambit is skeletal.

Even now, when it seems that just about every allied health professional under the sun is a “doctor” of his or her profession, almost none receives a solid education.

Call me crazy, but I’ll never forget how thrilled I was the day I discovered I could crack my own back.

It wasn’t a matter of money. One of my best friends was a chiropractor with a posh if minimalist office just a block or so around the corner from my office on the fourth floor of the Bigelow Pharmacy building. I would swing by during his mid-morning or late afternoon lull, and he’d take care of me in a New York minute: cervical, mid-thoracic, sacroiliac joint. He wasn’t one of those chiros who loaded you up with Standard Process supplements you more than likely didn’t need on your way out the door. No, he stuck to his knitting—subluxations of the axial skeleton—and I appreciated that. But was this what I had to look forward to: maintenance care for life? De-kink my neck & back, un-torque the SI joint-- month after month, year upon year? Turns out it wasn’t.

My self-care discovery happened completely by accident. We were on the floor stretching after, what was it, an “Abs of Steel” or “Botsu Booty” class at my gym. All this lying on the floor and exhalation stuff was kind of new to me, but once I gave into it cool things started happening. The de-kinking adjustments he’d done on me were happening all by themselves—with just a bit of informed guidance and relaxation on my part. I was fixing my own body. But why hadn’t he ever told me I could learn to do this?

This, I’ve come to appreciate over the years, is one of the principal problems with our approach to pain: as kids, as young adults, as seniors, most of us never really learn how our bodies work.

And shamefully, neither do most of our caregivers.

The sharp pain in the arch of my foot actually comes from tension in a muscle (fibularis *aka peroneus*) of my lateral lower leg. The intolerable, aching big toe in my coworker stems from an over-stressed muscle (plantaris) behind her knee, much as her sister’s plantar fasciitis is fixed once she releases a little-known muscle deep in her calf (soleus). A patient’s sciatica magically goes away after making a few trips around the block at night with her husband or learning to care for the *piriformis* and *glut minimus* muscles in her butt. Leg length discrepancy (and even bulging discs of the lumbar spine) not so mysteriously vanishes once the notorious “hip hiker” *quadratus lumborum* is shown some love. The TFL is always a prime suspect in many cases of emotion-

frustration mediated front hip pain (as is the psoas). And we haven't even gotten to the neck, arms and shoulders!

Once we discover that our joints and limbs are but a discernible system of pistons, cords and pulleys, we can pinpoint and iron out the source of just about any musculoskeletal pain. *We have the power to feel well.*

Once we see that our joints and limbs are but a discernible system of pistons, cords and pulleys, we can pinpoint the source of pain and immobility—and either support or soothe it.

Unfortunately for some, we also have to consider the Frankenfood world in which we now live. Oh, what we've done to our dairy cattle, our poultry, our hogs, water and wheat. When friends from Europe or Canada visit, they always seem to marvel at the colors and content of the packaged foods and drinks (not to mention the packaging itself) companies are allowed to sell here. Add to that what we've done to what used to be the staples of daily life—bread, milk, eggs—and it's little wonder the parallel plagues of cognitive and autoimmune disorders have overtaken us. There is compelling albeit anecdotal data that many of our migraines and fibromyalgias and rheumatoid arthritises can be not only ameliorated but banished by simple if sometimes disorienting changes in the way we eat.

Woven throughout all this, too, are the everyday stresses (and our responses to them) of modern life: traffic, noise, financial pressures, coworkers, deadlines, disappointment. Studies have shown that even a stressor as simple as forcibly coaching someone to count backwards both unearths and amplifies previously low-grade or even unnoticeable pain. It's unlikely many people need to be told this, but toxic situations and relationships—and our adeptness at managing them—can often make the difference between an otherwise quiescent pathology and a roaring lion.

It's hardly surprising given our culture and heritage that we employ militaristic imagery in our approaches to pain management. (Is it human nature or uniquely Anglo to be such suckers for quick fixes?) We pop pain *killers*. We *deaden* nerves. We *excise*, laminectomize and fuse. But with something as interconnected and interdependent as the human body (all hail myofascial planes), is it any wonder these reactionary responses rarely work? If we could just take the time (or if our

caregivers and educators would) to actually understand our bodies better, I dare say we'd all be our very own Houdinis of pain.

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